



CHELSEA DEBRET

How It Ends

DEBRET

A seal carcass lay at the ebb of the tide where the ocean marked its natural boundary of churned white froth and clumped sea weed. Its body was covered in a layer of coffee-stained yellow foam and dried sand. The usual army of seven legged sea crabs and swollen black flies scuttling and picking through the carcass, weaving in and out of its rotted holes like a horrid amusement park in hell, were oddly absent. An elderly couple stood a safe distance from the remains, fingers intertwined, scrutinizing intently and muttering into one another's ears. Even in death the creature was raped by the eyes of curiosity only finding peace at the bottom of the sea where it would eventually be picked apart by the prying teeth of deep sea creatures. But for now, in these last moments of solitude, the tides finger like tendrils calmly pulled the seal towards its depths.

My feet shifted on the bottom rung of the wooden fence as I patiently watched the couple circle with

vulture-like intensions. Their foreheads bobbed, their chapped lips forming words drowned out by the constant breaking of waves against the tide pools, each expressing their own personal revelations to the other. Eventually, cheeks pinked from the whipping wind and their curiosity fulfilled, the only other occupants on the beach left the scene without a single glance in reflection. Sliding from the fence at their exeunt I let my bare feet sink into the cold, damp sand, enjoying the sensation of the rough granules between my toes. As I neared the carcass I smelt the tainted sweet aroma of decomposing flesh. Its breath having been extinguished by some unseen force.

Like the others.

It had started with the bees. Summers spent barbecuing tenderized ribs and meat patties or dipping into the cool waters of carefully chlorinated pools became reminiscent of the small winged predators that plagued the outdoor activities that filled hot, sun filled days. While most were unmoved by the hundreds of yellow and black deaths others took careful notice. Their demise registered with the entomologists, the science aficionados, and honey distributors but still went unnoticed and unexplained by the rest of the world. Scientists conjectured and politicians snubbed as the honey makers and winged buzzers slowly disappeared into darkness.

Domesticated pets followed. Cats and dogs, mice, rats, and caged birds began to die, slowly at first, then with the speed of the bubonic plague. A siege of invisible death choked the globe, infiltrating the very homes where our Fidoes and Fluffys slept, preened, spoiled the carpet, and drank out of the toilet. Children woke to find motionless cages, pet salesmen to deathly silent shops, and vets to cages of friends and companions stiff and cold. The carefully pruned backyards of suburbia became cemeteries, grass lawns decorated with childlike tombstones.

Next hit were the zoo's. Corpses littered cages, a fauna of vibrant tropical feathers and glassy black eyed faces. Lions and their cubs, long necked giraffes twisted in heaps, penguins floating lifelessly in their glass walled homes, a layer of black and white buoy's in tinged red water. But the elephants proved to be the most destructive. Their massive bodies crushed their own pens, brought down walls of cement block, even tore deep rooted trees from the earth as their bulbous frames collapsed in place. And yet, even with the suddenness of the deaths, it was as if they knew the end had come, huddling in groups seeking the comfort of familiarity.

An old heavy camera hung from a tattered leather strap at my neck. I delicately twisted the cap from the

lens pushing the small rotund piece in my back pocket. A cold breeze shifted through the worn holes in my jeans the grayness of the day reflecting in every aspect of the damp beach. I followed in the footsteps of my predecessors circling the object of my interest, stalking each angle with diplomatic contemplation. Icy water lapped at my ankles as I stopped, raising the camera to my eye.

It was only months later that the real problem began to materialize in our eyes.

Cattlemen hurried furiously to save as many of their prized meat producing meal tickets as they could before the carcasses succumbed to rot. Mounds of cattle were bulldozed into gigantic graves as the decomposed bodies became burdens to their owners. Poachers convened in the massive elephant graveyards in the deserts of Africa and wildernesses of India, gutting the faces of the precious ivory tusks that would fill their pockets with monetary sustenance and their bellies with food. Fishing boats took to the seas sinking their heavy latticed nets into the deep waters, each returning heavily laden with spoiled fish that was left to waste. Whales were processed, their blubber extracted and their carcasses thrown back in the frothy waters eventually beaching on shores already caked in rotting meat from a host of tide pool lurkers.

Creatures that grew sick from natural ailments were extinguished by the hand of man fueled by fear. Farmers took guns to their own beasts' heads, vets euthanized at the simplest inclination of the same disease that was spreading like wild fire, even Zoologists recommended the expulsion of life from various incapacitated caged creatures. It had been a naturally wrought disease, ignited by an unknown assailant, and propelled by fear and the disembodied judgment of the ones held responsible to care for the creatures of the earth.

So on this cold, desolate beach I was to witness the last of them. It had been years since what was thought to be the last had echoed across the world. A five year old boy sitting below an Acacia tree in Kenya watched as a small Green Mamba withered then convulsed and finally plunged to the earth. The fierce green scales wrapped between the sun darkened fingers of the little boys hands became the symbol of the end; plastered on every news station, posted on thousands of web pages and even viewed from the electric billboards in New York's famed Times Square. Just as every baby boomer remembers the moment of JFK's assassination, so would every person remember the day the Kenyan boy returned with the snake.

The seals corpse, freshly deceased, proved our appar-

ent mistake.

A line of frothy water churned under my feet as the tide slowly began to rise. I squatted next to the seal carefully focusing the bulky camera. The black and white lens washed the seal in shades of grey blending with its surroundings. I refocused on the seal's head, his bulbous eyes reflecting in the glare of the harsh light sifting through the bubbling clouds. I repositioned myself a few feet away and leveled the camera with its swollen stomach. Tempered waves crashed over the seal's form, the water forging a trench of crushed bones and dried barnacles around its body. A soaked newspaper clogged the trench, its headlines bringing forth sick nostalgia. A meeting of the minds, our world's most brilliant environmentalists, scientists, and leaders converging to problem solve from all corners of the world.

The environmentalists blamed global warming, the politicians blamed the environmentalists, and each country blamed the others neglect of Mother Nature. Scientists forged through months of research, testing and formulating vaccination after vaccination, all of which failed. It was conjectured that the poisonous gasses from the making and creating of our so-called necessities triggered their demise, but no answers would ever be gained from the invisible plague that wrapped our world in fear.

If only we had thought to store the bodies, save the precious nutrients that were essential to sustained human life. We thought to save them instead of prepare for their extinction.

My feet crunch on the pebbles that lined the small foot path that wound its way between the hills. The tiny speck of a building materialized on the horizon as I wrapped my sweater tighter around my body. The air was consumed with a pressurized stillness, a sticky silence that froze the breath in my chest. It proved to be a deadly silence that invoked the dread and fear and the unnecessary nervous chatter that filled the blank canvas of conversation that was known only to lead down one road.

Solitude was my only savior.

A small shed, solidly built and weathered from years of sea side life, sat at the meeting point of the two hills. The shed glowed to life under a soft red flame as I lit the red glass-sheathed candle. As my eyes grew accustomed to the tinted darkness I felt as if I were entombed in the center of a pulsing heart; dimly lit in a liquid red and decorated with string like veins crisscrossing the room sporadically. Large glossy photos dangled from the cloth stripped veins, secured in close pins peppering me in a sea of black and white images. Newspaper clippings, faintly

visible in the dim light, were pinned to the walls; Green Peace workers shaded beneath the canopy of the dense Amazon jungle inspecting a carpet of twisted lizards, awkwardly upturned birds, and large alien like insects. A pillar of beefy Gorillas towered above the heads of two Congolese tribesmen. Hair covered arms and legs jutted from the heap while blank un-evolved faces stared vapidly into the camera. A Himalayan mountainside marked in death with the decaying corpses of huddled yaks. A bundled Eskimo standing at the edge of a glacier, the glassy tundra below flawed by small dark specks littering the white canvas. Documentation of the slow spreading death wall papered the splintering wood planks of the hearts interior.

I arranged the necessary equipment in a procession from one end of the rickety work bench to the other. My hands moved habitually, automatically pulling a metal tub from a shelf over head and a pair of silver tweezers hanging on a rusted nail behind a row of white jugs. The back of the camera, unaided by my practiced hands, popped open on its worn hinges. I quickly extinguished the flame and was plunged into darkness.

The worst were the insects. The bees had been first, illogically separate, perhaps a warning unheeded. Then one morning the world awoke to a blanket of darkness

peppering the ground and a rancid bitter stench. Not only had they plummeted from the skies, but swarms returned to the surface where they died in. Infested regions experienced massive shifting as miles of underground colonies caved in, their housekeepers deceased. The shadowed floors of dense jungles were caked with shelled carcasses gleaming like oil in the dull sunlight. A rain of mosquito's plagued forestry reserves, their feather light bodies taking weeks to filter through the branches.

After the insects were gone vegetation began to die off. Winter turned into spring without the garnered hillsides, fields, and gardens of budding flowers. From the delicately cared for street side nurseries to the meticulously crafted and nurtured flower beds decorating the palaces and royal estates of the world's elite, none were spared. Mulched beds of shriveled bulbs, rotting exotic greenery, and dried, useless watering systems were left as ornamental reminders of the beauty that once was.

My fingers roamed the surface of the table guiding me to the plastic jugs of developing chemicals. The processing tub popped against the chilled chemicals. My hands tested the weight of tub. The delicate click of the film as it snapped out of the camera resonated in the dark silence that surrounded me, a crackle of fire, a solitary reminder of the demolition crews that scoured land and

water gathering the carcasses left to waste away.

The world had become diseased with rot. Organic substances, such as flesh and muscle, decomposed without the normal rapidity provided by the insect's assistance. Remains were left to bake under scorching desert suns. Camels and horses, the desert dwellers priceless companions, lay like boulders, steaming and doughy, their extended bellies swelling with gasses. Heavily coated bears never woke from hibernation, their carcasses freezing during harsh snows, their bodies surfacing from the dirt smeared snows of Russia to the white, crystallized polar caps of Antarctica. Skeletons of the wild Tarpán, meat still clinging to the bones, lingered in the cool dense greens of Eastern Europe.

Disposal methods were attempted, but the grand scale of the job was too overwhelming. The oceans disposed of waste on once populated beaches, bodies tumbled from nests and resting areas in the forest's canopies, and an overwhelmed populace clogged sewage systems with pet and rodent carcasses which slowly overflowed into the streets. Great fires were assembled across the globe, smearing the skies with toxins, manufacturing a stench that clung in the air and soaked into our skin. Each step closer to riding the terrain of their corpses took us one step further from salvation.

My fingers shook as I slid the film into the canister, my hands following the motions they had memorized from hours spent in darkness. The chemicals from the processing soup burned my eyes withdrawing emotionless tears that dampened my cheeks. I dipped the canister into the tub and leaned against the wall silently counting. My stomach grumbled as I pressed my palms against the ever present pain lingering there.

Tofu, manufactured in bulk to supplement the meat shortage, dwindled as the last of the organic milk piddled into inexistence. Fights broke out in markets as people argued over preciously scant commodities causing normally dormant soccer moms and docile fathers to turn violent. Processing plants shut down sending their workers into unemployment as wool, leather, cotton and silk slowly disappeared from stores, a final blow sending the economy in a downward spiral. Doctors' offices, clinics, and emergency rooms became central hubs as the most vital nutrients began to disappear from the shelves at the local grocery stores. Malnutrition and sickness spread. City morgues filled with the bodies of the young and elderly. Civilized society began to unravel bit by bit.

A flame quivered weakly at the end of the match as I relit the candle and was once again bathed in red. With the pair of tweezers I fixed the film in the tub watching

as the picture took form. The seal stared at me through the quavering surface, its baleful eyes already beginning to shrivel, its fur lined skin stiff from the salty ocean air. I drew the film from the tub and clipped the dripping strip to one of the many cloth lines zigzagging over my head. Numbered years were carved into the wood panels next to the rows, each carrying images of species extinct, year by year, chronologically documenting their descent. The seal sat next to a withered possum curled in the middle of an overgrown road, a crow crumpled between splintered railroad ties, a gofer nestled into a ball at the bottom of his hole.

A newspaper clipping on the far wall caught my eye. A village lined with huts took up the entire square of the paper. The ground was littered with the bodies of its inhabitants, some curled into balls, others splayed awkwardly in painful madness.

That had been the first of the suicides.

The religious groups set off the hysteria, beginning in a remote Haitian village of over three hundred men, women, and children. It spread from village to town, country to continent, a slow motion documentation of human induced Armageddon easily viewed on the nightly news. The wide bellies of pew lined churches were found occupied with the bodies of poisoned be-

lievers. Entire towns silenced with one swift stroke of madness, thousands succumbing to their fears. Chaos reigned as governments attempted and failed to regain sanity amongst their peoples.

Communes formed in remote areas where the silence was not so deafening. Those left unemployed and hungry traveled to the cities. Shanty towns began to fill the spaces between the city and abandoned town borders. They overflowed becoming epicenters for fear wrought anger to spread like a sickness. Death stayed its tight hold on our planet, even to this day continuing to squeeze life from every corner that might have learned to flourish again.

The populace stirred, transgressing from yelling and arguing, to contemplative reconciliation, and finally fell into silence. The forced whispers and hushed conversations converged as a collaborative breeze of murmurs blanketing society in unease. It was the fear of the unasked, unanswered questions that silenced the remaining.

I opened the door to the shed letting a shaft of light filter the darkness from the rooms corners. Fresh sea air consumed the processing chemicals, a large orb of orange and yellow weaving through a fog streaked sky on the other side of the door, a thick surface layer of polluted water riding the waves of the ocean that was merely a

glossy surface at this distance.

As I watched the sinking sun, a small shadow crossed over my face. I looked upwards into the maze of strings and pictures and my breath caught within my chest. A butterfly, small yet vibrantly colored, clung to the bottom most string of developed pictures, inches from my face.

Refusing to even blink or breath I simply watched. Its wings beat, the small fur lined antennae twitched as it sleuthed the smells of my shrine to its world's destruction, it sat on the cloth string and survived.

I waited for its demise.

I waited.

The sun slowly crested the ocean taking the light with it and as it made its final descent I held my breath.