

## MESSENGERS

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Our community was encircled by walls that were eighty feet tall. We had been sealed here, in this compound, for over a hundred years. Our district was spread out on land that stretched for miles; there were farms and stubby gray fields and a large clear blue lake. The community was built in concentric circles, so our homes all faced the center square, a flat concrete yard with long, blue shadows cast by the founder's statues, where we gathered most nights in the cool dusk.

We were a successful community because we had claimed this wild land many years ago and, with some strange luck, started growing a plant. It resembled a walnut but tasted like raspberries, and its fruit produced a very healthy jam, and its leaves could be ground into a substance that was valuable in war. The land was vast, and the soil was gray and dry and sometimes difficult, and our community was surprised and grateful when this plant blossomed under our care. We heard about the first years the plants flourished, when trucks

rumbled out the gates, carrying loads of jam to the outside world, bringing back food and supplies that helped build our community. Those years, everyone was busy and productive, and our leaders said we had a responsibility to those who lived outside our walls, those who eagerly awaited our items; we could not let them down.

For several years, we had bountiful seasons. The plants broke out of the earth and opened, twisting, green and glorious, into the sun. We woke up, we brushed our hair, we went to the farm or to work or to school; the roofs glistened as each day slid into darkness. When our parents and neighbors sat in the center of the town, they told us that the seasons were not always this generous. They told us about the years when the soil was stubborn, when plants pushed out of the earth but did not flower, when the trucks idled, empty, and when nothing came in. Sometimes when we were assembled on the concrete square, waiting for the day to end, waiting for the sky to flush a deep blue, someone might softly mention the Confusion. We noticed a stillness in the air after this—then someone wept or coughed or walked away.

"What happened?" we asked.

The Confusion—which apparently happened more than once—was an event that made everyone wilt with embarrassment. No one wanted to discuss it.

But they did want to talk about another topic, which generated a kind of low, dark excitement, made people brighten and lean forward; the appearance of the messengers.

The community was surrounded by a vast number of districts. For a hundred years, messengers had come to our

community and gathered outside of it. They arrived annually, during the deep cold of winter, and stood on the other side of the huge wall, their voices echoing through the silent, chill air as they called for us to accept an envelope and read their message.

The point that everyone agreed on was this: the community had never accepted any of the messages, ever. We had a great deal of pride about that.

IN SCHOOL, WE learned that our community was created after a war, after activities that were unspeakable, and the story we were told was this: Mr. Van Worth had discovered the uses of the plant. He had been running along a river, under the cold, steel sky, exhausted, starving, and as he tumbled to the ground, he picked up the scaly green pod. It looked inedible, but Van Worth, that genius, decided to crack it open with his teeth. There were casts of Van's mouth in classrooms, so we could see close up the teeth that somehow understood the task of survival. We were proud to have brilliant white teeth that could crack anything apart and sometimes cracked fruits at our desks in class, applauded by our teachers. They were most appreciative of those who, through evolution or masterful dentistry, had developed teeth that resembled fangs. We sang songs in honor of Mr. Van Worth, whom we were all named after—Van1 or Vanda1 through thousands. We remembered the bravery of those who joined Mr. Van Worth on this unpredictable land, who set up the community and constructed the walls protecting us.

Our teachers marched us down the streets of our district, singing songs praising Van Worth. They pushed us to sing louder, especially as we walked past the main buildings of our district, the slumped old buildings, the dark, crumbling sides. They had been constructed, squat concrete structures, decades ago, and there was a sort of suspicion built into them, the blocklike structures with few windows. After the plants first blossomed, there was a time of flourishing, and the walls were first erected to protect us from anyone who wanted anything we could not provide. We had survived, they told us, because we had worked together so effectively, because our community had used our land and bounty; the teachers told us this as we stepped carefully through the cracked streets.

When the messengers arrived, they held an envelope with something urgent to tell our leaders, and they said that the community needed to listen. The decision to turn them away was made immediately and was resolute. The community spent all its extra money, that some said could be used to develop our old buildings, our rutted roads, to build our walls higher, bolstering them. The walls thickened and grew, their solidity a point of pride for the community. Certainly, we thought, those in the less successful districts around us, those who had not coaxed their land with our ability and skill, viewed us with envy; we believed their messages were full of malice and threats. So we refused them and waited, with great anticipation, for the people of these districts to try to destroy us.

Every month, a siren pierced the air, and we ran down stairs located beneath closets in our homes. The stairs led

to corridors under the city, clean, solid concrete tubes with dim lighting that made our faces look blue. These were, besides the walls, the best-maintained structures in the city, the corridors that would keep us safe. They wound down under the streets, and when the sirens blew, everyone in the community clattered down into the halls with a low roaring sound like thunder. We were supposed to be perfectly silent as we huddled in the concrete corridors, which stank of everyone's breath. Some of us were good at crying, muttering with anxiety; one of our history teachers had a splendid, terrified moan. The imagined intrusion was so vivid it seemed as though it had actually happened. We climbed out of the tunnels and resumed our daily activities, but we remembered (even treasured) these moments, the gauzy dark light in the tunnels, the brimming silence, the mesmerizing, living quality of our fear.

WE COUNTED THE months, marked by the drills, and in the dull cold of winter, when we went outside and our lungs stung in the chill air, we waited with fear and hope for the arrival of the messengers. It was a fear that made the lights brighten inside our homes. Who would approach the wall? How would they try to present their message? In what manner would they be turned, again, away? There was the simple method, in which we ignored them and went about our lives efficiently, responsibly, knowing the messengers were outside the walls of the compound, desperately wanting to say something, waiting, unheard. There was the more active

strategy in which members gathered on the wide flat surface of the wall, glared at the messengers, and screamed, "Go!" We would sometimes pause in class to listen to their screams pierce the air.

The knowledge that the messenger was out there, waiting, while we were inside the compound made us all feel a prickly clamminess, a combination of fear and pride. The messengers wanted to tell us something—maybe something we did not know. But it was absurd to think the messengers could tell us anything new. Our teachers, our parents' supervisors all emphasized this—if we needed to know something, we would have learned it here. Yet we all waited, with a kind of eager trepidation, for the messengers and their thwarted visits. The messengers' relentless determination over the years, our ability to turn them away, made us feel, it seemed, that we were worthy.

First, there was a messenger who came once a year and was turned away immediately. There was the messenger who walked barefoot to the wall and surprised everyone in the community by singing. No one was fooled by that, though the few people who remembered his voice did say that they admired the way he held the final note of his song. They remarked on his talent, but, they added, there had been no need to let him in. We heard about the messenger who was extremely thin, almost skeletal. Some kind members tossed her a few biscuits; she stood outside the walls of the community for two days, waiting, and they described how they watched with interest to see whether she ate the biscuits, but they did not let her in. There was the messenger who was beautiful in

a way that people still talked about. She had blue eyes that were luminous and pale as though she were staring through a darkness we could not see, and some people gathered just to witness that stare; they talked about how her stare made one of the Vans nervous, and the story was that he actually took the envelope, just to look at her eyes one more moment, but then, of course, crumpled it up and tossed it to the ground.

When we became used to the frequent incursions, they began to arrive in groups. There were two messengers waiting in the shadow of the massive wall encircling our community, then three or four. Was their message longer, requiring more than one person to deliver it? Or was it more pointed, more urgent? What could they possibly want to tell us? And now that they were standing out there, how long were they going to wait? Were they going to rush the walls, grab us, force us to hear their message, whatever it was?

IT WASN'T SAFE for children to go near the messengers; when we approached the walls, we generally were told to stay away. But that day, we hadn't *decided* to go see the messengers. It was simply something that happened. We sat at our desks in school, and we knew they were out there, clutching their envelopes and waiting. We did not want to go, of course we didn't, we had exams to study for, there were all the tasks ahead of us, but it was distracting, thinking of them out there, knowing they wanted to speak to us. We were going to check on the situation—perhaps that was what we planned to answer if any teacher asked us why we were going, but it

was not an answer because we had no need to answer, because there had been no decision.

Van657877, tall, with a long, emphatic stride and glorious, fang-like teeth, walked first, for he knew how to get to the top of the wall; his father had a job repairing it. His tongue moved lightly across his sharp teeth, the way it did when he was nervous before an exam. We ran up the stairway that would take us to the top, and we were in a rush, which felt strange because there was, of course, no need to rush.

It was not the first time I had seen a messenger—I had caught glimpses of one or another a few years before. But this was the first time I examined them at length. They were young, in their late teens, and they looked vaguely similar to us, as though we were seeing our own faces distorted, far away, through a telescope. They were two girls and a boy. One girl had a face that held a similar determined expression as my father's, as though they had been born in the same dream. The messengers all had limp bronze hair that stretched down their backs, and they were thicker than us and shorter than I had imagined. They saw us, and one blinked in surprise, a fluttery blink, as if to reconcile the real and imagined versions of us that lived in a blurred overlay in his mind. Another held up an envelope.

"Here! Read this!" they shouted.

They stood in the patches of dirty snow, shoulders touching, as though trying to warm each other, and that intimacy was somehow startling, not what I expected to notice. They all clasped hands.

Their hands disturbed me. The clasping, the huddling

together—it felt like a reproach, an answer back to some statement we had made. We stood on top of the wall, casting our thin shadows onto them. Next to me, Van657877 inhaled slightly. I turned to look at him. With his height and his teeth, I'd always assumed he was fearless, but now I sensed a fragile aura about him, as though he were a stack of twigs that had just been assembled.

"Go!" Van657877 shouted down to the messengers, and there was his voice. So loud. How peculiar it sounded, soaring over them, but they did not seem threatened. They rushed forward and tried to thrust the envelope in his hands. "Here!" Their voices rumbled over our ears, and their faces were convinced of the importance of their message; the conviction seemed a peculiar, awful costume thrown on them, and I wanted to tear it off. I looked to Van657877 to see what he would do. His tongue flicked over his teeth.

"Stop holding hands! Just go."

They looked up at us, and we looked down at them from the top of this hulking wall.

Then they laughed.

Their laughter. We had never heard it before; it was a bright sound, like aluminum cubes clattering. A circus-like sound, a sound I had never imagined them making, never imagined would be turned in our direction. The messengers were not supposed to mock us; they were supposed to be sent away. Van657877 stepped to the edge of the wall, paused. We weren't sure what he was going to do—jump down, which would have broken his legs; dive down, crushing his skull; or weep. For that moment, any option seemed possible.

And then, quickly, he turned and ran away from the laughter, ran through the sparkling, clean streets of our community to our homes, ran toward the dusk stretching dark over the silver roofs. The rest of us tumbled after him. We sat up straighter in our seats and were grateful the next day when our teachers reminded us that our job was not to listen to the messengers. And we were grateful when the three messengers were gone the next day, their envelope left in the dirt and swept up, disposed of as always.

THEN IT WAS spring, and the plants stretched out their leaves—the green stalks unfurled their long arms, studded with the tiny gleaming flowers that would become their fruit. We gathered at dawn to watch the plants grow—they grew so fast you could almost see it—and we shivered as we watched them bloom. The vast dark-green fields glittered like an eternal lake in the sunlight.

We watched the leaves grow, and we went home, and we returned the next day to see their progress. But as we walked toward the vast fields, we saw people running. They ran alongside the rows and bent down and shouted and then ran a few feet and stopped and bent down again. A peculiar green dust hung over the field. Dust, we thought at first, blown in from elsewhere, carried in on the air. Then people started pointing at the plants, and it slowly became clear that the green in the air was the plants, that some of them had become dust, and that they were dissolving.

No one predicted that the leaves would start crumbling

off the stalks of the plants. Just a few plants dissolved at first. It was a mutation, they said, or the sun hit them a certain weird way, or there were murmurings that the visit from the messengers interfered with the fragile growth of the plants. No one could describe the biology of this last interaction, but everyone spoke of it with conviction, so it appeared to be true. The plants had flourished in this community for so many years. Still, the next week it happened again, more leaves crumbled at dawn, the bright-green dust rising softly from the fields under a hard, glittering blue sky.

We began to receive daily reports on the plants: how many were growing and the proportion of leaves that crumbled. We still went to work and school, everything continued, but after school, we went to watch the plants. The dissolving of the leaves was mesmerizing, a glossy leaf present and then suddenly not. After a lifetime of drills, disaster had finally arrived, but not as we predicted, not from outside our walls. The sirens sounded, we gathered, silently, in the cold corridors below the city, and we went through our familiar gestures of dread, the ones we had rehearsed for all our lives. But we did not look too closely at each other's faces.

AND OF COURSE, the messengers kept coming. Van657877 and I were in the fields together one day, checking on the plants, and heard the usual commotion. Van657877 was agitated, covered in green dust.

"Why are they here?" he asked.

"They are always here," I said.

"Why are they here? Now?"

They were here because they were always here, but this answer was not enough.

"Come with me," Van657877 said. "I want to show you something."

There was a small door that led to the area beyond the wall. No one was supposed to pass through it—only select members of the community, to evaluate the climate outside the walls, to sometimes gather supplies. Van657877's father, a high-ranking member of the district council, went through it at times, and Van657877 once saw him, and now he found it, in a section of the wall surrounded by thick gray bushes, and we pushed through it, through a damp concrete tunnel, and then we were outside, and we were looking at the messengers, right in front of us. There were four of them. Their breath was like meat and musty, as though they ate different foods from ours. Their nearness, the heat of their breath, was shocking, and I did not know where to look. One held an envelope out.

"Hello! Van? You can read this! Here!"

He had said our name. One of them pushed close to me, and I could feel his breath, and then he put a hand on my arm, gently, as they pushed toward us. I jumped a little. I had never been so close to a messenger, never felt a messenger's hand on me, and I thought, Who are you, and I thought, Who am I, and then, What do you want to tell me, then a little flare of interest, and then I thought, You cannot tell me this, whatever it is. I was so close to the messenger, I could bite him, though I did not. I noticed his eyelashes, long and dark. His

eyelashes startled me; I don't know why they reminded me of my eyes when I saw them, but they did. The same eyelash curl, the same color. I was dizzy, I was not the messenger, and he was not me, but this little bit of us was the same, and somehow terrible. I blinked, hoping the eyelashes would look different, that the me-ness would vanish, but then I heard the messenger click his tongue, which was not a sound I had heard before, and fear flared in my throat, and I trembled.

We were all blurred together, the messengers shouting, and then Van657877 shoved one of them, shoved him so he fell to the ground. The air seemed to ruffle and bend; the other messengers knelt by the one whom Van657877 had pushed, and then a fist hit Van657877 in the face, and then there was blood coming out of Van's mouth—he was missing one of his fang-like teeth.

The other messengers yanked the one who had punched Van657877 back, and one started to speak sternly to him, while another still held the envelope out, in a ludicrous and stubborn gesture of hope. But Van657877 was focused now on one thing—he lurched over to the one who had punched him and hit him so hard that the messenger collapsed. I had never seen Van657877 so mad—his fist came down on the messenger again and again, like a hammer, and the others tried to pull him off, but they could not. My heart was bouncing around in a confused way; there was a great jostling, and I did not know how to stop him; I did not think I was supposed to stop him. I heard someone shrieking, and I believed it was me. My shame was both a knife thrust in me, an assault on me, and fluttering somewhere in the air, away. I was not me

and Van657877 was not Van657877 and also he was, he was who he was, and the world weighed a thousand pounds and also nothing. Van657877 was strangely silent and focused in his battering, as though he had been practicing for this all along. I saw something sharp on the ground, and I lunged for it. It was Van657877's bloody fang-like tooth. I put it in my pocket.

The messengers finally slipped in and pulled away the one getting battered. The messenger's face was broken, the ground was dark with his blood, and he was completely still. When I looked at him, there was a knife in my throat. My hands twitched, holding nothing. The messengers murmured to him. Their whispers were urgent, limned with fear, but they were quick, efficient as they lifted him in their arms and walked away.

Van657877 ran back through the door into the community. I followed him. He had his finger in his mouth and was rubbing the empty space where his tooth had been.

"Look!" he said and opened his mouth. I peered in and saw the gap, and his mouth was full of blood.

"Where's my tooth!" he said. His finger was bloody, too; he was breathing hard. He looked at the wall, and I thought he would go back out there, searching for his prize tooth. This idea made my heart beat faster.

I found myself standing in front of him; he stopped.

"Van. You're bleeding. Let's get back."

My fingers touched it in my pocket, that curved knifelike point. It was mine.

VAN657877 HAD BEEN, out of nowhere, attacked by a messenger; that was the story he told, and everyone believed it, especially after they saw his missing tooth. He had been attacked, so unfairly, and they would all return. Of course, the message was this! That they would knock our teeth out, and worse; this was what we had predicted, and this was what happened when we stood too close to them—imagine what would happen if we took their envelopes, if we let them in. For a few days we did not discuss the plants and how they were dissolving; we did not discuss how people were going into the fields and grabbing the fruits that were blossoming and storing them away. Instead, we prepared for the return of the messengers, after they had attacked Van657877, one of the most popular young men in our community, whom the best dentist outfitted for free with a gleaming new tooth.

TWO HUNDRED AND seventy-eight members of the community climbed to the top of the wall, and they sat in chairs in the hot sun, waiting for the messengers to return. The top of the wall was thick, about eight feet wide, and they set up umbrellas and rolled out blankets to rest on, and they looked out. They were allowed to leave their homes, their jobs, to camp out on the wall and scan the land day and night for the surge of messengers. Guns and other weaponry lay across their laps. There was a great relief in the community that they were sitting on the wall, that they were looking.

A few days, we thought, and the messengers would arrive. One week went by. Two weeks. A month.

The fields twinkled with plants growing and vanishing. People ascended the wall with great excitement but tired after a couple weeks, dazed by the glaring sun, and were replaced by others.

The officials organized parades for those sitting bravely on top of the walls, on lookout for the messengers. We marched by the walls, blowing horns, shouting our appreciation for them, waving colorful flags.

Two months. Three. Four.

We felt a subdued but clear craving to hear the messengers, to be able tell them to go. It was the structure, the shape we were accustomed to, and now its absence gave me a shivery feeling, as though I were not quite whole. We were all possessed by a great restlessness. "Can't you feel it?" a neighbor said with conviction, rubbing her bare arms. "They poisoned the air."

In the fields, green dust lifted into the blue sky.

THE FIRST ATTACKS happened in the fields. It was, they said, a misunderstanding. It was Van657877's father who tackled Van998126, who was, opportunistically, scooping extra berries into a bag. Then it was a group of adolescents who got in the way of a few others entering a market, who claimed they did not have a clear path inside. Then it was a scuffle between two women at a clothing store, who knocked over a shoe display in their determination to grab the same

shirt. There was the moment the sirens sounded, and we all rushed into the corridors beneath the city; all the lights went out, causing a brief panic, and in the darkness there was a shriek. When the lights sparked on, several minutes later, Van109876 was on the ground, his jacket torn and his face bruised.

There were misunderstandings, the newscasters said. My parents listened to the broadcasts, to the community leaders who commended our bravery in this difficult time. If we behaved appropriately, there would be special jam distributions and other rewards. Here was bounty, beyond the walls was threat. But people had started locking their doors, and my parents brought boards from a closet and hammered them on the windows, expertly, as though they had done this before. Sometimes, when the sirens went off, the members of the community did not rush through their escape doors but remained in their homes, pretending not to hear their loud drone.

We began to eye one another. Mostly we eyed each other through our windows, for we were becoming afraid of going out into the street. We did not venture out to the fields, where most of the fights went on, for we didn't know who would rush up and pat us down for something; we didn't know who might come up behind us and begin to hit us, looking for some sign of our diminishment.

THE SAFEST PLACE to sit was, oddly, the wall, for no one harmed any of the brave people who sat there. They had to

switch out every few weeks, for the sun and the boredom depleted them. The leaders called for more people to sit on the wall, to look for the messengers. Soon it was my turn to scan the landscape with the others.

I sat under a frail umbrella, holding a gun. I was, it turned out, an excellent watcher. The others who sat on the wall beside me were an excitable, impatient group, believing they saw the messengers coming, believing they saw danger when they only saw the slow rippling leaves of a tree, the glimmering shadow of a bird. They were glad to have a purpose. They wanted a purpose as much as they wanted to live. They told me to tighten my grip on the gun if they saw a particular shift in a certain tree's shadow, that a certain circular flight of the birds meant that they had spotted a person in the brush. I was, they said, a diligent watcher. They complimented me on my hard gaze, the way I stared, at my clearly intent absorption.

I didn't tell them what I was really looking at—the sky, the glossy and wide blankness in it. I noticed the variance of the colors, the pale rose of the start of the day, the fading light blue, the midday aqua, the way it slid to darkness at night. It told me nothing, but I could not stop looking at it. They did not know that I was pretending to press myself into the sky, not in the community or outside of it—I was a great student of the sky, of nothingness; perched on this wall, not looking for the messengers, not looking at the community, the dusty, dissolving fields, behind me. I imagined the sky and clouds gathering into new forms, forms that defied physics and the laws of weather, that rose into columns and swirls and fountains and towers, into new cities that I had never seen before.

I told no one of this. I did not quite know what it meant, myself, but I imagined taking myself apart and becoming absorbed into the clouds and sky and these cities, becoming not me, not here.

I felt the concrete roughness of the wall under my feet. Sometimes I put my hand in my pocket and felt Van657877's tooth, which I had kept for a reason I could not explain. Carefully, I ran my fingers along it and felt it, knifelike against my palm. Sometimes I wondered what I would do with it.