

# SCARLET RAIN

A Short Story



ALEX SCOTT



# SCARLET RAIN

*By Alex Scott*

Dribbles of red dotted the paper of Shae's sketchbook, with a particularly large one spreading smaller streaks all around. More fell on her arms, her vest, her hair, and on the grass around her. The red pattered into the surface of the river, and onto the fishermen Shae had been drawing. Before long it blotted out her entire sketch of them on their little boat. The rain lasted about five seconds, then stopped. It was a very distinct red, with a distinct odor. Blood.

Her pulse cranked, and she still held her pencil over the page, as if she could even try to draw on slick, soggy paper. She looked up at an overcast of high, thin clouds. Surely the blood must have fallen from somewhere. There must be a reason she looked like a murder victim. Right?

The fishermen were turning their boat back toward the dock on the other side of the river. Whatever that rain was, it had ruined their day as much as it had ruined Shae's.

Another shower came, and this time it didn't stop. Shae got to her feet and

ran to the parking lot, constantly smearing blood off her glasses. The clouds above were still too high and too thin for something this persistent.

She almost didn't find her car. It was bad enough with all these streaks on her glasses, but the rain had nearly painted everything from top to bottom. It was only the antenna in back that gave her Chevy away. She dived in, threw her sketchbook and pencil to the passenger's seat, used a leftover napkin to wipe her glasses. The raindrops made an endless drumroll on the chassis. So much blood covered the windshield that the light dyed everything inside red. Shae took several deep breaths from the bottom of her belly. Stay calm. There was a perfectly rational explanation for all this. Blood doesn't simply fall out of the sky.

Crimson, copper-smelling blood. Someone's blood.

Or something's.

Thanks to her trembling, it took three tries to simply push the button to start the car. The radio blared on.

Naturally they were talking about the rain.

"We are monitoring the situation with chief meteorologist Paul Mescon of Channel 3," the DJ said. "We'll be sure to pass along any updates as they come along."

Paul Mescon. The most popular weatherman in the town of Fairground. Shae's father. The way she saw it, if the weather got bad enough, she was probably safer with him than anywhere else. She could collect herself, figure out what was going on, see if he knew anything.

She turned the wipers up to full speed and peeled out toward the freeway. The DJ got an update explaining the phenomenon of a "blood rain." Usually, the DJ said, it was the result of dust or algae that winds up in rain clouds. It was rare, but it happened, and it wasn't dangerous.

Shae wasn't so sure about that. Something about this felt different.

Channel 3 was about a mile away, uphill from a Methodist church and a barbecue shack. Dad had brought her here plenty of times growing up, either on Bring Your Child to Work days or when Mom was sick and couldn't look after her. It was always such a joy as a kid to see the things behind the TV screen, the sets and the production room and the meteorology equipment. She

remembered feeling a small betrayal during one visit, when she realized the city skyline behind the nightly news anchors wasn't a window.

Shae went in and told a very alarmed receptionist who she was. The receptionist pushed the button to unlock the door, still paralyzed by the sight of Shae covered with the blood rain.

Shae's arms hung still beside her as she walked down the hall. The reporters and technicians looked at her like she was Carrie at her prom. "It's that bad out there?" one of them said.

Shae simply nodded.

The TV set in the break room was tuned to the news report from down the hall. Her father was in the studio now, in his small office past the news desk and the talk show stage, not many yards away. She was still dripping wet, with a red trail streaking behind her and a puddle around her. A woman brought her a towel from the office gym, plus a duffel bag with some exercise clothes inside. "You can keep them," the woman said.

"Thanks." Shae wiped off as well as she could. "Do they know what's causing it yet?"

The woman shook her head. "All we have are guesses right now. Hopefully this doesn't last too long. It's like something out of Revelation."

That was what Shae was afraid of. Maybe God had finally had enough, and was starting to show it, just like he did to the Egyptians. Was the rain hitting anywhere else? Or just here at Fairground?

The TV went to the anchor desk, and shortly after, Shae's father came to the break room. "Shae, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, just rattled," she said. Her hair and clothes were getting crusty now that the blood was drying. Not blood-colored water. Blood. "It ruined my sketchbook." She looked up at him, thinking about the tagline, *Paul's got the answer!* that she used to say in ads when she was little. Well, Paul, do you have the answer?

"Mom left a voicemail," he said. "She's fine. Today was one of her work-at-home days, and she's staying inside."

"Good, as long as she's safe." Shae tugged on her vest. "I really don't think this is like that blood rain you were talking about."

"I'll be honest, I'm not sure what's going on. There was nothing on the radar to show a storm front coming in. The satellites seem to be picking something up, but I can't tell—"

A male reporter rushed in from down the hall. "Paul, have you seen it?"

"Seen what?"

The news anchors listened to someone off screen. "We're getting

word that a video has just come in from a passenger on Delta Flight 922, which just landed here at Hayes Airport on its way to Cincinnati."

The screen then showed a vertical video pointed out the window of a passenger jet, briefly washed out by the light, but then showing mountains of clouds. Among them was a dark cascade spraying out of thin air. Shae knew it as soon as she saw it: the source of the shower of blood.

"I don't know what's going on," the male passenger said in the background. "One minute we're flying, and then the whole plane shakes like we —ing hit something, and we nearly —ing nosedive to the ground, then the pilots pull us back up, and now we're circling around some bum— town, and look at that. —ing look at that."

He focused the phone as well as he could on the cascade. It seemed to be rotating in the opposite direction of the plane, spraying the blood over an even wider field than if it had been stationary. In fact, it was more than one—there was another spray of blood orbiting around it. Someone else on the plane said, "How big is that thing?" It was hard to tell from the video, but from this distance the gash must have been colossal.

Suddenly a splash of color spread out from the gash, and filled the view

of the phone camera above the cascade. The passengers of the plane screamed, cried out for Jesus, turning the whole video into a cacophany of terror.

The blood was flowing from the bottom of a bulbous mass that hovered and spun in the air. Tentacles stretched out like highways, with one of them spilling blood as well. A short pod stuck out the top with a ring of eyes staring out.

"HOLY F—ING S—!" the passenger said. "We hit THAT thing?"

Shae clutched at her blood drenched vest. Whatever the hell that thing was, it was all over her! "Be right... Ugh." She ran with the duffel bag to the nearest bathroom and locked herself in the nearest stall. She managed to get herself out of the vest and into an athletic top before she vomited. If only it had *just* been dust or algae. If only it had been raining something nicer, like frogs. But that thing, that hideous thing, was still hanging up there, still bleeding. Its blood—its life—had gotten all over her.

And eventually that thing in the sky would run out. It would die. But how long would it take? What would happen when it did? To spread out so much rain over so far a distance, it must be as big as a city itself. And if it fell...

Shae coughed and panted over the

toilet until she was sure it was out of her system, then changed out of her khakis. The new outfit was all a little big for her, but at least it was loose, and not something skintight that was the wrong size.

She reluctantly put her bloody shoes back on and picked up her bloody vest and jeans with her fingertips. It was only after she tossed them in the trash that she noticed the urinal and realized she was in a men's room. Well, it was hardly the worst that could happen. The worst was up in the stratosphere, raining blood over her hometown.

She passed the woman in the hall and said, "I owe you one."

When she got back, the TV was showing a replay of that video. Her father wasn't there anymore. He must have gone back into the studio for weather updates.

The video ended and returned to the anchor desk. "Once again, that was unaltered footage of the object currently shedding red rain from the sky. And we've just received this breaking update: County Mayor Harris has issued an immediate evacuation order. All county residents with available transportation are ordered to—"

Shae's phone shrieked and rattled. It had gotten the evacuation order as well. At the same time, she got a text from Dad.

"Go ahead and go. I'll catch up."

All this told Shae one thing. They didn't expect that monster in the sky to stay there. And if it fell, there would be no stopping it, and no way to save anything underneath. Then she had no time to waste. She grabbed a newspaper, ran out with it over her head, and got back in her car. Just as she started the engine, she got a call from her mother. "Mom, are you all right? Are you evacuating?"

"That's why I called," Mom said. "Are you still at Channel 3?"

"Just about to leave. Dad had to go back to the studio."

"Then I need you to come pick me up. I have a flat tire."

It figured. Shae was already getting ready to abandon the only place she'd ever called home, while death loomed above. Everything had only begun to go wrong. "I'll be right there. Give me just a minute."

What didn't help was that her parents lived all the way on the other side of town. As she pulled out of the parking lot, Shae could already see the gridlock building up on the freeway, so she'd have to go by a more circuitous route.

"I just got another update," the DJ said. "There are reports that people and animals are experiencing extreme side effects from drinking the rainwater. Please, whatever you do, do not do that! Do not drink it, don't

let your pets drink it, just get out of here as soon as you can."

Shae turned off the radio. The last thing she needed to hear about right now was what she was seeing right in front of her.

She crossed the river, and the rain got thicker as she approached the center of town. The blood streaked across her windshield so much she had to keep using the water jet to keep it clear. As she drove, the scenery around her became more and more distorted. The trees, now completely drenched, raised and writhed their branches toward the sky. Strange alien stalks sprung from the ground, looking more like fungi than plants. A dog ran down the curb, fleeing from the extra pair of arms that had sprouted from its back.

She floored it, forgetting all her defensive driving education and ignoring all the traffic signals and steering around the other cars careening toward escape. The fact she didn't crash she took as a sign of divine intervention.

After she cleared the tunnels, the rain thinned a little, but the storefronts and drive-thrus of Eisenhower Road now inhabited an alien world, with more flailing trees, more hideous varieties of fungi, and more creatures that had once been ordinary animals.

Even human.

A hunchbacked giant shambled by with horns protruding from its shoulders. By the comedy club, a three-eyed cat thing as big as her car hissed at her. A ten-foot-tall six-armed man with a melted face leaned on the wall of the Catholic school but didn't notice her.

Had they really just let curiosity get the better of them, and tasted the blood?

She coughed, and a panic attack came with it. She hadn't tried to drink it, but how much had misted up and fallen on her lips by accident? How much of the moisture had she breathed in? She checked her arms for any new spots or marks, and it caused her to veer into the left lane and narrowly miss a head-on collision with a Wrangler. She didn't notice any changes yet, but one could come at any moment.

The car skidded as Shae turned onto Ramon Street. "Please God, if you're out there, let Mom be okay."

Her mother's Kia sagged over its front passenger tire. Mom herself was waiting out on the porch with her umbrella open, and she jogged out as soon as Shae rolled up. Shae didn't bother putting the Chevy into Park. She unlocked and opened the door and tossed her sketchbook to the floor. "Get in! Hurry, get in!"

Mom shook as much as she could off her umbrella, threw it into the

backseat, and buckled up. "God, this is awful. Just look at what it's done already."

Some of those stalks were springing up in the front lawn, not just here, but all up and down the street. Just a day ago Shae had come over for dinner, and everything was a lush green, with neighborhood kids playing in the circle, couples taking their dogs and babies for a walk, nothing but blue sky above. She'd grown up here, played in that very same circle, waited for the school bus there.

Shae changed her mind. This wasn't an alien world. It wasn't even a dark shadow of the old world. This was Hell.

She would have wanted to draw it if it didn't make her want to throw up again.

"Are you all right?" her mother said.

"Fine," Shae said. "Just peachy." She couldn't see or feel anything growing on her, so that was a small relief. "I'll feel better when we get away from the rain." If nothing else, having Mom in the car was a reason to drive more carefully. No reason to get *two* people killed.

"They said on TV that if it fell, it'd crush everything from Watermark to Ulster." Mom lifted her eyes to the ceiling. "God couldn't be this angry, could he?"

At the turn back onto Eisenhower, a dog covered with spines was fighting a cat with stegosaurus plates. Shae



made a right, toward the exit on Ward Avenue. Just about every route out of town was bound to be backed up for miles, so she figured it made no difference if she chose the nearest one.

Mom picked the sketchbook out of the floor and started flipping through. On a normal day Shae would have slapped it out of her hand—Shae was fiercely protective of it, especially with all the nude drawings inside—but today, she could hardly bring herself to care. "You've really grown as an artist, Shae."

"Thanks," Shae said. "I was actually out drawing when all this started."

Mom reached the blood-spattered page. "I see." Going back, she said, "I didn't know you were taking life-drawing classes."

"I'm not. Those are reference photos I found online."

Mom took a closer look. "I don't recall raising you to look up smut."

"It's not— Mom, they're professional life models, and it's literally *just* for art reference, and—*eeyahhh!*" Shae swerved around a three-headed buzzard that crawled in the middle of the street. "God, it's getting worse. Mom, be honest with me: is this the end?"

"We're not going to die, Shae," Mom said.

"That's not what I meant," Shae said as she turned onto Ward.

"Just keep driving." Mom's voice was

quavering. "Keep driving, Shae."

That was turning out to be easier said than done. Trees had begun to fall over the road, and some fungi were spreading from the sidewalks. Twisted roots clawed onto the houses on each side, cracking the walls.

A fungus like a pumpkin on a giant stalk hit the windshield as Shae maneuvered around a tree. Aside from causing a skid and giving her and Mom a fright, it left a spiderweb dent in the glass. As if it wasn't hard enough to see.

"Come on," Shae said, "not much farther." She prepared to dodge a puddle that took up a whole lane.

Something burst out of that puddle onto the other lane. "Shae, look out!"

Shae spun the steering wheel, and the car screamed out of control, and as she and her mother shrieked, the whole demonic world circled around them.

Suddenly the car tilted back and stopped with an ugly impact.

Her head throbbing, neck aching, her seatbelt chafing, Shae adjusted her glasses and found herself looking up at the falling rain and the thin, high clouds. The drops gradually shrouded the windshield, cracks and all.

"Mom? You okay?"

Her mother moaned, but she didn't seem injured. "I think so. We must have run into a ditch."

"What the hell was that thing?" Shae said. "It came out of nowhere."

"Well, we can't stay here," her mother said. "It might catch up to us."

Shae worked herself out of her seatbelt, pushed the door open, and fished her foot out to find solid, if not dry, ground. Once she did, she helped guide her mother across the driver's seat, and into the ditch. The rain had softened, but still poured.

They were standing ankle deep in blood. Shae's throat tightened and her stomach clamped in. She pressed her lips tight together. If any drops made it through, and she tasted, she might be a goner. As if they could even make it to the freeway like this, much less escape Fairground.

Something made the sound of splattering sludge at the top of the ditch.

Shae clutched her mother's shoulders.

The thing resembled a human, or maybe the mere suggestion of one, made of congealing blood. A pair of tentacles hung from its left side, and an oversized hand from its right. It looked at Shae and her mother with a cluster of eyes in the front of its head.

Shae and her mother held on tighter to one another.

The thing made a gurgling noise as it began to stoop down.

"Stay away!" Shae's mother yelled. "Don't hurt us!"

The thing reached out its right hand.

"Just stop! Make it all stop!" Shae's voice scratched her throat. "We're sorry, okay? We didn't mean to hurt anything! It was an accident! Just please, go away and leave us alone!"

The thing gurgled again. Somehow, it sounded oddly like "I."

Shae clenched a fist over a fold of her mother's sleeve.

"...mean... no... harm."

Shae and her mother both took a step back. "You heard that, right?" Shae said.

Her mother nodded.

"I... want... to... help..." The thing stretched its arm down. Its fingers touched the blood. *Please let me help.*

Shae had felt a tingle around her ankles. Mother and daughter loosened their grip.

The thing spoke again, and another tingle crept up Shae's calves. *I never meant for this to happen. I was simply passing by your star, and thought I'd stop to observe your world. But I miscalculated, and an aircraft cut open a blood vessel.*

"You don't mean..." Shae pointed up. "You're that... *thing* up there?"

*My consciousness is spread through every cell in my body, even in the blood. Even now, you are standing in my mind.*

"Why don't you just leave?" Shae's mother said. "Haven't you already done enough?"

*I wish I could. But it's already too late. I'm dying. It's already taking all my*

*strength to resist this world's gravitational pull. Soon I will lose consciousness and fall to the ground. Already I'm sinking. Look there.*

The thing pointed its eyes up.

The clouds split apart as the tip of a massive tentacle sliced through. For the first time in what felt like days, even through that little sliver, Shae saw a blue sky.

So this was it. The whole city was about to be crushed, along with anybody who didn't get out in time, which would be most of them. Shae and her mother, and her father, and all her friends, her classmates, her coworkers, her ex-boyfriends. Everyone.

And then the carcass would rot. And if that abomination's blood was able to do all this, what would its decay do?

There was nothing left to look forward to but death.

*Not necessarily.*

"Huh?" Shae said. Of course—she could hear its thoughts, why not the other way around?

*I've had a chance to do some thinking as I've pooled myself back together. My blood clearly has an unusual effect on life here. If we were to harness that... control it...*

"What do you mean 'we'?" Shae said.

*One of you could ingest the blood, allow it to change you, and I can guide the change so it gives you the power to stop the fall.*

"What?!" Mom cried.

"You want us to drink this?" Shae said. "On purpose? I saw those freaks out there! I'm not turning into one of them!"

*I believe if we work together, I can prevent it from causing you permanent damage. I can build you an anti-gravity organ, and then you can use it to send me back out into space, where I can die in peace. You can send me to one of your gas giants. I began my life on one. I'd like to make one my grave as well.*

"Absolutely not!" Mom said. "Shae, don't listen to him. He's the devil."

"I wasn't planning on it."

*In some of your fellow organisms, I encountered a saying... The devil can disguise himself as an angel of light. Now that I understand what an angel and a devil are, I ask you, would a devil disguise himself as me?*

"We're not drinking your damn slop!" Mom said. "Why us, anyway?"

*Because you happened to be here. We're running out of time.*

The clouds parted, and the body of the thing in the sky bulged through.

Mom was right. It took up the entire dome above them. Shae felt like she was getting crushed just looking at it. A flick of one of its tentacles sent out a massive gust, nearly blowing Shae's glasses off. Even the mightiest storm cloud had never seemed so colossal. It wouldn't even really have to fall. Simply touch ground. Shae would be an ant underneath.

Her only hope of survival seemed to be the stream flowing beneath her.

"What happens to all this?" Shae said, holding out her hand to a fungus that had grown in someone's front yard. "If your plan works?"

*This planet is hostile to my kind of life. These mutations will die very soon, even without being crushed. But I'm connected to them. I can help us."*

"And the blood?"

*There's nothing more I can do for what's already fallen. But together, we can stop more from coming.*

By then it would certainly be too late for Fairground. Nearly every stray dog and cat, every bird, and every bug within the city limits had probably drunk the blood by now. It would take something drastic, like fire, to clear it all out.

But the people could still get away.

Even if something happened to Shae, the people she loved might be safe.

All at once, Shae's panic withered away.

She stepped away from her mother.

"Shae? What are you doing?"

Shae bent down, cupped her hands, and filled them with blood.

"Shae! Are you insane?" Her mother slapped her wrist, and the blood spilled.

Shae bent down again. "Maybe so," she said. "The thing said it'd make it safe for me."

"You trust that thing? After everything it's done?"

Shae continued to back away. "But even if I can't go back to normal... Even if I die..."

"Get a hold of yourself! You're my only child. I've sacrificed so much for you! What am I supposed to do without you? What am I supposed to tell your father?"

Shae took another, longer step, out of her mother's reach. "Tell him I love him."

She scooped up another handful of blood and poured it straight down her throat.

"Shae..."

"I love you, Mom."

As soon as the blood hit her stomach, a spasm struck her entire body and sent her doubling over. Sparks were spreading out to every extremity. Her head became nothing but stormclouds.

Through all that, the thing's voice rang through within her. *Relax. It seems to be working.*

The skin on Shae's arms began to turn red and puff out like an allergic reaction. Her clothes tightened and stretched out. Shae took one last look at her mother, and then, as if compelled by her own arms and legs, climbed onto the road and started running. Her mother cried out her name. The crying soon turned to wailing. The noise within Shae soon

drowned it out.

The fabric began to rip. Even her glasses seemed to shrink, with the temples bending back from her face. Soon her feet burst out of her shoes. The clothes the nice lady at the TV station had loaned her tore apart and fluttered off behind her. Her glasses slipped off and bounced off the tip of her nose. Everything became a blur.

*Let me adjust your eyes.*

Shae's vision cleared just as she was about to run into a fallen tree. She was able to jump over it with ease. The fact made her stop. The tree hardly looked that much bigger than she was, and the roofs and chimneys of the houses around her were now at eye level.

"I'm growing," Shae breathed. Her voice had hollowed out and deepened. "I'm huge." Without understanding why, she grabbed onto the trunk she had just hurdled.

*You need more mass. This will help.*

The mutated bark sank into her hands, and the entire tree seemed to drain into her arms. By the time it was gone, she now towered over the neighborhood.

*Yes, it's working. You can absorb the fungus, too, and the other mutations. They know what we're doing.*

Shae pressed her hand to the ground, and the fungal stalks ran to her fingers as if into a vacuum. The blood in the ditch did the same thing. The three-headed buzzard rammed

her arm and became part of her. Soon other mutated animals bounded up the street just to merge with her, starting out one by one, then growing into a stampede. Even the giants that used to be a human joined in. Their minds and internal organs had already been destroyed, leaving them basically zombies. All they had left as they joined her was relief, and a hope that they could help.

Her mother watched from beside the car. The creatures kept away from her as they ran. Her eyes stayed on Shae.

Soon even the trees were uprooting themselves and merging into Shae's legs, and she continued to grow. She still had her hands and feet, and now the red had faded from her skin. It was turning gray, into something more like slate or marble, or maybe even steel. Her knees began to buckle slightly. Her back bent.

*I'm building up denser bones, hardier muscles.*

She stood straight again. She could see clear over the ridge now, over all the other neighborhoods and shopping centers and office complexes and railyards on this side of town, amid a sea of red that was flowing and swarming toward her. The bulge still dominated the sky above her. What was it again? How did all this get started?

All at once she remembered. *I've*

*built up new brain matter to supplement your own. I'm also adding more ventilation.*

As she breathed, air sucked in through pores in her ribs, in her arms, in her legs. When she closed her eyes, she could feel a spot of consciousness in every joint, along with a pulse. The thing wasn't just expanding her existing brain—it was building new brains, as well as new hearts and new lungs, all over her body, to ensure everything got what it needed.

From what she could tell, she was now taller than the largest buildings downtown, as if she had wandered onto a scale model of all of Fairground. She could see the chains of tiny brake lights crammed into the freeways that snaked away from town. Any minute now Shae would be as tall as the surrounding mountains—short though they were. She might even be able to simply reach up and touch the creature in the sky.

*We don't need to get that big. But we're almost ready.*

Shae could feel it—more strength, more energy than she had ever felt in her life. Than anyone had ever felt. She turned back and found her car still sticking out of the ditch, with her mother standing aghast next to it.

Shae didn't even have to take a step. Crouching down, she touched a finger to the car. It began to drift up into the air. She directed it over to the road, set

it down, let its weight return, and pointed it toward the Interstate.

"Shae!" Her mother's voice was faint and distant. "Shae, what have you done?"

Shae held out a hand over her mother, shielding her from the rain. "Go."

Even from up here, Shae could see the pain in her mother's face. But Mom got in the car, got it started, and headed off toward the traffic jam.

*I've finished the anti-gravity organ. You're ready.*

Shae broke off running, clearing several city blocks in one stride. Her feet pounded into the ground, leaving deep prints in the road. Occasionally she'd hit a sinkhole, but she never lost her footing. She leaped over the ridge as if it were a hurdle on a racetrack. Judging by how the creature was descending, the best place to position herself would be over at the ballpark by the train tracks. Not too far away now.

Choppers in the distance watched her race through the streets. The world was almost certainly watching. She would have preferred to achieve fame through a great graphic novel, but this would have to do.

With one foot on the road and the other crushing a baseball diamond, Shae jumped straight up.

She let her weight fall away and continued rising toward the fleshy

blob above. A crescent gash ran along the side of the dome.

Shae pressed her hands to the thing's flesh. It felt like a blister on snakeskin.

The thing's weight vanished, and it stopped sinking.

She pressed her hands to the thing's flesh again and gave it a firm push.

The thing began to rise as she fell back to the ground. But it wasn't rising quickly enough. She needed to push it far enough out that by the time it lost consciousness and its anti-gravity organ gave out, it would be too far for Earth's pull to reach it. Shae let herself fall, and smashed feet first to the ground, cratering the street. The thing was starting to drift away, so she ran about a mile before she jumped again.

Shae and the thing passed through where the layer of clouds had once been. A blue sky once again surrounded her, with the sun toward the west.

*You have such a beautiful star. And to think you have clouds like this on such a rocky world. This is not such a bad place to die.*

She gave the body another push, launching herself back downward. It still rose, but just one more nudge would give it the momentum and trajectory it really needed.

Just before she touched ground, she repelled Earth's gravity and softened

her landing. Right away she ran again and jumped.

The blue sky darkened as she flew up. Cracks began to form on her arms.

*The body I made is losing integrity. Don't worry. We still have time. I'm ready.*

Around her it became night. The Earth was glowing with its pale blue light miles below her. Shae reached the thing, and gave it one last push, and the hulking mass continued to float up... up... and out. The direction and momentum Shae had used had felt right. If all went well, in some years it would arrive on Jupiter to be consumed by its clouds, just as it wanted.

That left her hanging here, right on the precipice of Earth orbit. The vents all over her body were no longer taking in air. Shae ran entirely on reserves.

"What's going to happen to me?" she said, with no sound coming out. "Hello? Are you still there?"

*Just barely. I am grateful.*

Her fingers began to snap off as the cracks spread over her hands. "But what about me? Am I stuck here? Am I going to die?"

*I only came up to end my life. Not yours. Rest now. I'll find a way to keep you safe. Just rest.*

As her arms and legs crumbled, Shae closed her eyes and let herself float in silence.

---

When she awoke, she was lying down in a bed, surrounded by a blur and a mild antiseptic smell. There was something beeping to one side. The back of her hand stung... which meant she still had one. The last thing she remembered was watching it break apart like dried-up clay.

"She's awake!" she heard her mother say.

Someone laid a pair of glasses on Shae's face, and now she could see the hospital room and her parents and a shut-off TV hanging on the wall. The pain in her hand turned out to be the needle from the IV drip. The beeping was the monitor tracking her heart. "I'm... alive?" Shae said. Outside the window were properly green trees shaking gently under a proper rain shower. She couldn't see as well as she could before, but it helped. Mom must have found the spare frames in Shae's glove compartment. "Where am I?"

"Charlotte," her father said. "Someone found you washed up on a riverbed, and as soon as we heard the description on the news, we knew it was you. Drove all the way out from Louisville."

"Then... The rain... Was it all a dream?"

Her mother shook her head. "No. The city of Fairground's sealed off now. We still don't know if we'll ever be able to go back. But they got plenty of people out first. And now we have a

place to stay, and you can join us as soon as you're ready to be discharged."

"So then... Did I actually...?"

"You did," her father said. "We saw it. Everyone did."

"And by everyone, you mean..."

"The entire world." Her mother handed over her phone. "Just look up 'Fairground giant.'"

Shae ran an image search, and got an endless gallery of the colossal gray woman that had launched the thing in the sky back into outer space. Shots of her running, shots of her leaping to the sky, shots of her touching the thing's flesh. Some were taken at a great distance by the news choppers. Closer shots had been posted on social media by evacuees stuck in traffic and by people within the city who had never managed to find transportation. News sites all over the world—Britain, Japan, China, Australia, India—had posted versions of these pictures.

But it was really her. She remembered all of this. She *was* the giant.

She clicked on one link and got even more user photos with bigger, clearer shots. The giant had no hair, and much more toned muscle than Shae recalled having. And while some (especially the news outlets) had helpfully put a blur or mosaic or colored dot between her legs, on many of them, there was nothing on her body left to the imagination.



"Perfect," Shae said. "Now everybody in the world's seen me naked. Do they know it was me?"

"I don't think so," her mother said. "Nobody else saw you change. And when you turned up here, they probably thought you were just another missing person."

Shae found herself admiring one photo taken just after one of her great leaps into the sky. In her gray nudity, she looked like nothing less than an ancient goddess ascending to the heavens. Or maybe an old sci-fi book cover.

Shae began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" her mother said.

"Mom," Shae chuckled, "you and I were—haha—talking about life drawing right before we crashed. Remember? All those drawings in my sketchbook?" She let out a cackle that felt as large as the thing in the sky. "I just gave every artist on the planet the best nude photo references in history!"

She collapsed onto her back, still laughing.

Her parents looked at each other. "She's still got her sense of humor," her father said.

"I'm just glad I get to see you smile again, Shae." Her mother gave her a kiss on the cheek. "You don't feel any different, do you?" her mother said, running her hand over Shae's hair, now barely more than stubble. "After

how that thing changed you?"

"I don't think so." From what she could tell, her body was more or less the way she remembered it, right down to the moles and freckles. The creature that had changed her didn't seem to have missed a thing. It had even put her eyes back the way they were. "Honestly, I didn't even feel all that different then. I was still me. The thing was doing everything it could to help me stay that way."

"Then I guess I had the wrong idea."

"It's not like anyone could blame you," Shae said. "It did look like a giant scab." She gazed back at the rain outside the window. "Well, Dad, I guess you're gonna have to be a weatherman somewhere else."

"That'll be easy enough," her father said. "Every town needs a meteorologist. The important thing is, you're here. I can't explain how, but you're here."

"Well, darn, I was hoping you'd have a clue how I got down. I guess Paul hasn't got the answer this time, huh?"

He chuckled under misting eyes. "Your mother and I weren't sure we were ever going to see you again. Here." He pointed a can of Fresca on the bedside table. "Thought you might be thirsty."

"Thanks, Dad. Thanks so much." Shae noticed what was under the can. "Is that a new sketchbook?"

"I thought you might want to keep

your hands busy," Mom said. "Well, they don't want us to stay too long, so we'd better get going. I'm just—I'm just so glad you're safe."

"Right back at you," Shae said. "Thanks. Both of you."

"We should be thanking you," her father said. "My little giant."

They both gave her a kiss and left her alone in the hospital room.

Shae opened the can and took a sip.

The rain had died down, and a rainbow began to appear behind the trees—one of the clearest, most colorful rainbows she'd ever seen, and such a relief after so much red.

She reached over to set the can down, and only realized too late that she let go too far from the edge of the table.

Yet the can didn't fall.

## The End

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Scott is a graduate of the University of Tennessee, and he lives in Chattanooga. He is currently pursuing a Master's in Education with the goal of becoming a teacher.

[alexscottwrites.com](http://alexscottwrites.com)

[wordassociations.substack.com](http://wordassociations.substack.com)