

THE QUARRY

Briana Symons

The End as We Thought It

My name is Bri. I've been sitting at my desk, looking at a blank page for ten minutes as I listen to my neighbour struggle to pull out of the driveway. Every scrape of tyre against pebble resonates in my chest. My neighbour always takes ages to get out of the driveway, but it feels different now. Everything *outside* feels different now. It feels as if I have to appreciate the little things.

Sometimes it is the little things that matter. Stop to smell the roses and all that. Stop to hear the tyres scrape. Stop to feel your chest inflate. My chest has felt tight for months.

I'm lucky, I know. All tests negative, all scares thankfully false alarms, all my loved ones still alive and well. Not everyone is so lucky. Not everyone is so unlucky. That makes me sound ungrateful. I am grateful, but since that day in late March when Peter Overton told

us over dinner that the coronavirus outbreak was at a peak in Australia and yet increasing, I've felt unlucky. After we heard the news, my mum turned to me and told me firmly:

'You cannot get sick, Bri. If you get sick, it is going to be very, very bad. We won't take any risks.' In that moment, I felt a different Bri emerge.

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When I was a kid, I loved apocalyptic books and watching end-of-the-world movies. I wanted to be the heroine who would fight off hordes of zombies single-handedly, scavenge supplies for my family in harsh conditions, maybe even be the one to find the all-important Cure, and protect everyone. It was sort of a morbid desire of mine to die in a heroic and sacrificial manner. Perhaps that's not the most normal aspiration to have, but I was a weird kid.

One of my favourite apocalypse series was the 'The Last Survivors', by Susan Pfeffer. There were three books in the series, 'Life as we Knew it', 'The Dead and the Gone', and 'This World We Live In'. The second book was always my favourite, and not just because it taught me that tall buildings trap heat. I was ecstatic when one of the protagonist's sisters was named Briana, just like me. It was the first time I'd ever shared a character's name, and her nickname was Bri too. Not only that, but she also had asthma, which I'd had since I was a baby. My mum told me she used to have to stay up through the night with a nebuliser to make sure I could breathe.

I felt like her character was written just for me, answering exactly what I wanted; my own place in this grand adventure to save my family from certain doom. Even though she wasn't the protagonist, I felt seen. I would ramble on and on about Book Bri at the dinner table to my mum and dad until my older sister got sick of my chatter and would tell me to be quiet.

Book Bri was everything to me. I devoured the book, reading as much as I could each day; and getting caught with a reading torch under my bedsheets at night. I loved that she was like me. She had such strong, unwavering faith, and as I was raised Catholic, I really looked up to that. She had faith in God and her parents, and as children do, I had faith in myself.

Even when she didn't appear in a chapter, I kept reading, just waiting for her return. Maybe she would learn new and exciting ways to survive on her own that she could bring back to look after her family. Maybe she would grow strong and dependable and exciting. Maybe I could learn new things, or become strong, and dependable, and exciting – instead of weird.

Maybe she would find their parents.

Maybe I could make it up to mine.

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Dear Prof.

I'm writing to let you know that my doctor has advised me that due to my medical condition I am considered to be in a high-risk category to be infected by Covid-19, and the effects of the virus could be exceedingly detrimental to my continued health...

Thank you for your consideration,

Briana Symons

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I began to self-isolate a week before the official lockdown. Everything up to that point had just seemed like a little bit of an inconvenience, but then suddenly, I had to email my teachers, reorganise my rheumatologist appointment to be via video call, and stay house-bound for weeks on end.

'Miss Symons here has a case of rheumatoid arthritis in several joints, which was diagnosed as juvenile idiopathic arthritis when she was seven.' I watched my doctor speak to the medical student observing our video appointment, nodding along as they took down notes like I was something to study. 'And as such, Briana, you must be careful with this whole pandemic business. People with immunodeficiencies and those on immunosuppressants – like you – are at greater risk of contracting a respiratory infection. Take every precaution.'

My mum was terrified for me. The more we learned about the coronavirus, the scarier it seemed. An acute respiratory disease spread through droplets is high up on the list of worst-case scenarios for those with respiratory diseases like asthma. Adding on to the stress was the fact that I'd just recently increased my immunosuppressant dosage. I felt very unlucky.

It hung like a dark cloud over our family. I was alone in the house for a while until my dad had to start working from home, and every day when my mum and sister came back it was almost a ritual to see them put down their things, throw their disposable masks away, and wash their hands before they even said hello. We all knew, if they brought it home, the disease would hit me very hard. This strange, overwhelming disease was already killing perfectly normal, healthy young people – it would ruin me.

To put it lightly, lockdown was very difficult for me. Even as a person who was used to spending a lot of time locked up in my room watching inane YouTube videos or working on various projects, I felt trapped. The front yard became a haven to me. I watched my dog run along the fence, back and forth, back and forth, as my mind ran with her. Caged in.

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I want to see my friends. I want to go to class. I want to catch the train. I want to go to my internship. I want to go to the doctors. I want to go shopping. I want to go to the local café. I want to get my hair cut. I want to go outside. I want, I want, *I want*.

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Bri died. The very first time I'd ever read about a character just like me, in a genre I loved, and she died. It wasn't heroic. It wasn't sacrificial. It was slow, and lonely, and she was scared.

My unwavering faith faltered.

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When the Covid-19 pandemic had just begun, I remember thinking to myself *at least it's not zombies*. But even then, I felt I would be more prepared for zombies than an inescapable illness. I had plans for zombies. If the apocalypse happened, we would have to do this, and this, and this. In every plan, I'd think about what I could do, where I could tell my family to go, who we could team up with, how I could fight if I had to. I've never thought of myself as being one of the vulnerable in a group, the one needing protection.

Covid-19 isn't a zombie apocalypse. In some ways, it's worse. It's real. And I can't fight it. I read an article called 'COVID-19 in Immunocompromised Hosts: What We Know So Far', and I couldn't stop thinking about the word host. *Am I just a potential zombie?*

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I want to move. It hurts. I'm hot. I'm cold. I want to play outside. I'm so sweaty. It's been three days: mum has to go back to work. I want my mum. I can't breathe. My lungs are heavy. I'm missing school. My knees are so swollen. My eyes ache. I want to read. I feel sick. I want to *move*. *I want my mum*.

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I read about a character who was just like me. Now I feel like I'm just like her. She could only leave her house once a week to go with her siblings to church. I went out once a week to sit in the car while my dad got food. She cried when their apartment was snowed in and her

brother told her she couldn't go to Sunday mass. I nearly screamed the day it became too cold for me to go pick up Wednesday night dinner without suffering aches through the night. She took it better than I did.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I know everyone is suffering. It's just I feel so trapped. Sunday is the only day I'm outside. I guess God could tell my motives were impure. I'll pray for His forgiveness.'

She thought to pray for forgiveness on page 238 of 301 of her apocalypse. They found her corpse 51 pages later. I've been trying not to count my own pages. I don't want her death. I feel as if my fingers are holding the next page but are afraid to turn it. I'm afraid to keep reading. With each word I read, with each day that goes by, I fear I am running out of pages.

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Dear Prof.

Did you know that Covid-19 was declared an official 'pandemic' by WHO on the 11th of March 2020, and according to the Australian Medical Association, as of the 2nd of October there have been 34,162,732 confirmed cases worldwide, with 1,020,932 deaths? 27,109 of those confirmed cases have been in Australia. How many of those people do you think were like me?

Hope you're well,
Briana Symons

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I get sick quite often, and I have since I was a child. It wasn't an unusual sight for the school nurses to see me laid up in the sick room while they waited for someone to come pick me up.

And some of that, of course, was just me trying to avoid bullies, but most of the time I was just unwell. I think they thought I might have been lying, considering how often I was there. But I just always felt bad. Whether it was a cold, or a stomach-ache caused by anxiety or my volatile medications, I just always felt bad.

I think that's why I got so into apocalypse books. They were another level of escapism that my dinosaur books just couldn't provide. It feels strange now to think of the apocalypse as a mode of escape, as the closest thing to one I've experienced so far has just trapped me.

Sometimes I feel like the outside world is moving to a place where I won't be able to reach when this is all over; if there's even an 'all over' anymore. Apparently, a lot of other immunocompromised people felt the same when we all huddled down in our bunkers while the rest of the world kept turning. It's a funny phrase, isn't it? 'The world keeps turning.' The world will always keep turning, no matter what happens to those who live on it.

There's a lot of funny things like that popping up with this pandemic. It's funny that half of the news we get from the outside world is about people who don't believe in the thing that has us locked away. It's funny that the requests we've made for years about accessibility and working or studying at home have been met with firm refusals and statements of impracticability from the rest of society – until they needed it of course.

It's funny that an influential person could suggest a ridiculous 'cure' to this disease that just so happens to be one of the medications keeping me inside.

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To whom it may concern,

In a tragic turn of events, my dear sister and dedicated student, Briana Symons, has passed away due to COVID-19. I know she may have been just another student to you, or even a number, but she was the light in my and my family's life, and I would appreciate her

passing being portrayed very seriously and respectfully to ensure your students are aware of how serious this pandemic is.

If you have any questions do not contact her emergency contact which would have been our mother, contact me on 61+

Stay safe,

Tashani Symons

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The page isn't blank anymore. I'm still scared. I almost feel like it's as bad to write on the page as it is to turn it. Have I accelerated my fate by recording it? I guess there's no way to tell. But still, there are little things to appreciate. My neighbour is long gone, but there's the *tac-tac-tac* of my sister's keyboard, the dog pressing her head against my closed door to beg for dinner, the *clink* of cutlery as my dad sets the table, my mum sighing as she packs away the console I left on the coffee table. Maybe I'm not one to hold off hordes single-handedly or find the all-important cure, but at least I'm a master at social distancing now.