

THE PROMISE

BY BERNARD BECKETT

The colours in the bunker were muted, fading to grey in the shadows. Zadie tried to imagine the world outside. She pictured the sun, low and angry in a purple, ruined sky. Or perhaps it was night, the stars feeble in the haze. There was no way of keeping time, of knowing how many days had passed. Nick claimed it had been two weeks, based on the length of his stubble; he had been clean-shaven on the morning it happened. The last phone battery had gone dead on day five. None of them wore watches.

Zadie felt the cold reaching out like fingers from the thick walls. The concrete that had shielded them from the blast now threatened to freeze them. The lamp fizzled and sputtered overhead. They'd agreed to let it burn for one hour each day – but again, they were only guessing. Noah, their self-appointed leader, estimated that this way, the lamp would last another twenty days. Zadie's calculations told her that the food and water would run out in half that time.

"You all right?" Emma had propped herself up on one shoulder. She had fashioned her grey blanket into a hood and tunic and looked like a traveller from medieval times. Her hair, which Zadie had always been so jealous of, was tangled and dry. Zadie was glad that nobody had thought to include a mirror among the bunker's provisions.

"Yeah," Zadie replied. "I'm just, you know, thinking."

Emma didn't have to ask about what. What else was there to think about?

Asafo watched their every movement from the far wall. His eyes were full of worry as if afraid everyone else might disappear at any moment and he would be left to face the rest alone. He'd never been one for saying much, even back in the good times – before The Trouble started. Now he was like some sort of monk, slowly disappearing inside himself. So when he stood, everybody watched; when he cleared his throat to speak, everybody listened. He waited a moment, perhaps for effect or perhaps from shyness, who could say.

"I think it's time," Asafo said.

"For what?" Noah stood and turned towards him.

"You know what."



Noah walked forward until they were face to face, close enough to be shrouded in each other's steamy breath. Asafo didn't flinch.

"No, I don't know," Noah said. "So why don't you tell us?"

"You think we should go outside, don't you?" Emma said. Her voice was small with fear, and she shuffled closer to Zadie and took her hand. Zadie gave it a reassuring squeeze, even though she was just as frightened.

Asafo nodded. "Yes."

"We had an agreement." Noah tried to sound strong, but Zadie could hear the

cracks. "We talked it through, and we're doing what we agreed – to wait until the food is finished. The longer we wait, the higher the chance that the air is clean."

"I know," Asafo said. "But –"

"There is no but. That's how it is. No one opens the door."

Asafo's jaw clenched, and Zadie saw the muscles pulsing. Silence settled over them. That's how it might have stayed, but Zadie couldn't let it.

"I want to hear what Asafo's got to say," she said. "It can't hurt to listen."

Noah shook his head. "We knew the longer this went on, the more frightened

we'd get, which makes it harder to think straight. That's why we made a promise to ourselves. And now we should honour it."

The moment stretched tight as a drum. Asafo studied his feet. Nick scratched his chin and looked at the door. Emma's jaw worked an imaginary wad of gum. Zadie stared into the lamp until her eyes burned. She spoke again, not to the group but to the light. It was easier that way.

"I think Asafo was going to say that if we wait for our supplies to run out – and even if we can survive outside – we'll only have a couple of days to find food and water and to deal with any danger before we become too weak. We might have a better chance if we go now."

"And if the air's still sick, we'll die!"

Noah loomed over her, his voice bouncing off the walls. He sounded angry, but Zadie knew it was fear that fuelled him. Who wouldn't be frightened? She said nothing.

"We'll die if we stay in here," Asafo said. His voice was low and calm, like he had decided now and nothing would change his mind.

"Yes, but not yet," said Noah.

"Look around you," Asafo replied.

"You wouldn't ask animals to live like this." "To survive, animals do what they have to."

"I need more than this," Asafo insisted.

"More than each other?"



Zadie had thought like Noah too, at first. They all had. They'd told each other stories and sung songs and pretended this was just some very strange school camp. They'd tried to talk their way into another world. But the darkness, the cold, and the diminishing supply of food could not be denied.

"I can't live this way," Asafo said, restating his position. "I can't live in fear of whatever sits outside the door."

"And I'm not letting your fear be the thing that kills us," Noah answered.

The two boys held their ground, daring the other to yield. Noah was the first to flinch. He turned and stalked to the farthest, darkest corner.

There was a time when Zadie had dreamed of a situation like this: how she would walk to Noah and offer him comfort, how he would turn and finally notice her. But that was in another world, when all their problems had been so much smaller. Everybody waited. There was no hurry.

Nick spoke first. "I'm frightened too," he said. "But that's not the point. The point is Asafo's right."

Noah turned back to face the group. Zadie was surprised to see a tear on his cheek. He didn't try to hide it.

"Emma," Noah asked. "What about you?"

Emma had burrowed her face into Zadie's ribs like a nocturnal creature trying to escape the sunrise. Slowly, she turned her head to the group and blinked up at them. Then she stood, at first unsteady. Already they were growing weak. The group followed her with their eyes as she walked to the door.

"Maybe it's poison out there," Emma finally said. "Maybe it's fine. I can't stand not knowing. I know that's weak, but it's how I feel."

"It's not weak." Zadie used the wall as a crutch and pulled herself up. Her legs were numb, and her feet stung with the sudden rush of blood. She looked to Noah. "I think we all want to go."

"Well I think it's a mistake," Noah said. But the fight had gone out of his voice. Zadie took him in her arms. He felt softer than she had imagined. His shoulders shook. It seemed like a long time before they moved apart.

"All right," Noah whispered. "You all win."

* * * * *

Asafo grasped the wheel of the lock, his arms as strong as ever, his grip as certain. There was a slow hiss as the seal broke. Zadie held her breath.

The door eased open, and a thin shaft of light arced into a bright white flare.

At first, Zadie thought it was another explosion, but then her eyes adjusted. Nobody choked. Nothing burned. No one stumbled to the floor.

Asafo's shadow edged through the doorway, and the rest pushed close behind, blinking, their breathing shallow, barely able to believe they were alive.

The sky *was* purple. An arm slipped around Zadie's waist, another one at her shoulder. They stood together, the bunker behind them. They pulled one another closer. Nobody spoke.



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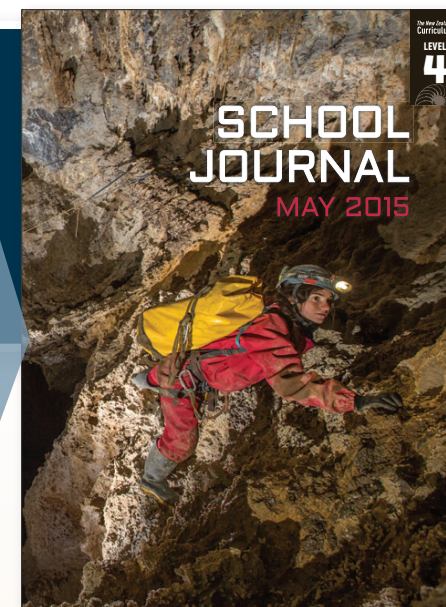
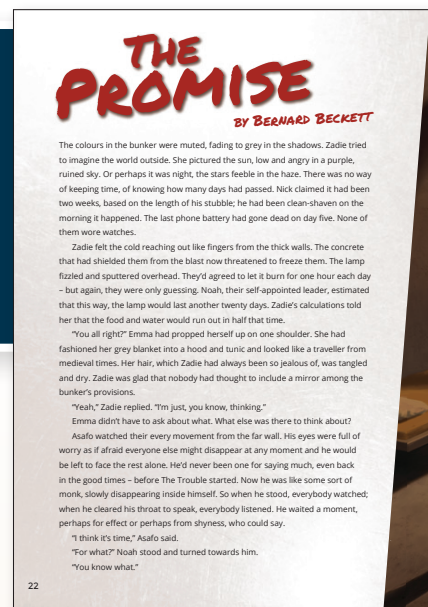
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