

This story is for Emily

In search of a happy ending. **By Alice Towey**

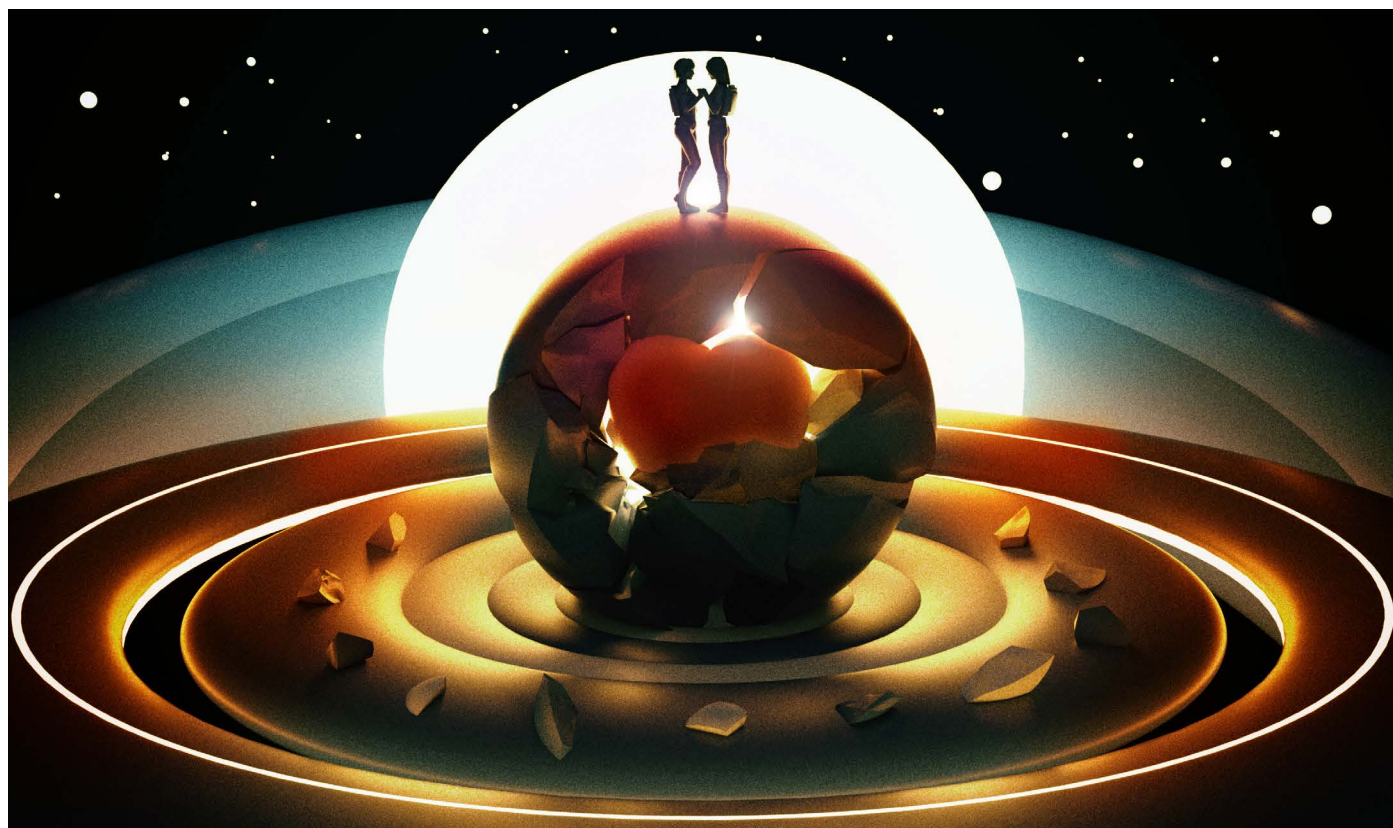


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

"Can't you write something nice for a change? Something happy?"
I took the laptop back from you. "What is there to be happy about?"

You went to the kitchen to rehydrate dinner. I could tell from the way you were banging pots around that you were upset, bothered that I had written yet another tragedy.

I opened the laptop and glanced at the text. I thought it was a nice story.

There was the clang of silverware hitting the floor and a howl of frustration. I ran into the kitchen to help. "Emily. Why are you mad? It's just a story."

Your shoulders bunched. "Everything you've written has been so fatalistic lately. I just wish you wouldn't give up, Beth. Maybe take an online course. You sounded interested in geology."

I winced at the familiar argument. Taking a class wouldn't increase my chances of being

chosen. None of the generation ships needed an adjunct professor of literature with two chapbooks, chronic migraines and no technical skills. Your chances of escape were better without me.

"I'm fine here," I lied. "Earth will still be habitable for a century."

You turned on the stove. Your face, lit by flickering flames from the burner, was beautiful. "You're just afraid."

You were already working in the greenhouse when I woke up this morning. I walked out in my pyjamas and watched as your elegant fingers curled soil around the base of a small seedling. Your ability to make life grow in any poor, benighted soil is one of the many things you have to offer – along with a degree in respiratory therapy, staunch good health and a sunny disposition.

I savoured watching you. In the story I was working on, the protagonist encourages her

lover to take a better job, even though she knows it will result in them leaving her. You said you didn't understand the character's motivation, but I thought it was obvious.

I want you to save yourself, Emily.

You wiped your brow with a sleeve, leaving a charming streak of dirt. "Maura's going away party is today. Let's walk over."

I squinted through the warped greenhouse glass. The Sun was an orange smear in the ochre sky. "Better to use a transit cred. The air quality looks bad."

Maura lived across town in a well-sealed, modern flat. She stood in the kitchen surrounded by a dozen people, face alight with the glow of someone who would soon be leaving Earth's gravity behind. It was a typical going away party: black-market fruit and protein rations, desperate guests, and a hostess giving away her possessions.

"Remind me where she's going?" I whispered.

Futures

"Tau Ceti."

I shuddered; 50 years in cryo, and you'd better hope the doctors were good or you'd never wake up.

"Emily!" Maura waved you over.

You hugged her warmly as I lingered by the hors d'oeuvres. This was really your crowd, and after a few short, polite conversations I decamped to Maura's library. She'd probably be giving away her books; maybe there was something I'd want.

I was examining a dog-eared Ishiguro paperback when I heard your voice in the hall.

"I'm so happy for you, Maura!"

"I still can't believe you turned them down," Maura's reply was hushed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful; but are you sure?"

"I'm not leaving unless Beth and I can go together."

"They're not taking many artists."

Your voice surprised me with its passion. "That's a mistake. We need people who can help us remember our culture, our history. Beth's work is just as important as mine."

My stomach flipped. I was touched to hear you describe my writing in that way. But I'd always assumed that you just hadn't got an offer yet; it hadn't occurred to me that you'd

turn one down without telling me.

My brain was spinning all through the party, through the tearful goodbyes, the well wishes, the final toast. I barely said a word as we headed home on foot, the train unexpectedly closed owing to a power failure.

You glanced at me over your mask as we walked down a deserted side street. "What's wrong?"

I didn't want to admit that I'd overheard your conversation. "Remember the story that you read last night? I was just thinking about the main character; how upset she'd be if, after everything she sacrificed, her lover still didn't take the better job."

You looked up at the clotted black sky. When was the last time we saw stars? "I'm not leaving without you, Beth."

"But it's killing you here." Fear and love battled in my gut, making me nauseous. "I want you to have a better life."

"What kind of life would it be, if I had to leave behind the person I love to get it?" you snapped. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

I lay awake in bed. You had fallen asleep quickly, as usual, your steady breathing

a counterpoint to my hammering heart. I want you to have a good life: to work in your garden, without a mask, beneath a clear sky of sparkling stars.

I want you to have a partner who deserves the noble things you say about her at parties, when you don't realize she's listening.

I got out of bed, careful not to wake you. I restarted my computer. I'm going to write a new story for you, Emily: where the heroine isn't brave or wise, but she does the thing that scares her so she and her lover can be together. It's going to have a happy ending.

But first, I'm going to register for that geology course.

Alice Towey is a writer of speculative fiction and poetry based out of Northern California. Her short stories have appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Asimov's* and *Analog*. She is a graduate of the Viable Paradise writing workshop. When she's not writing, she works as a civil engineer specializing in water-resources management.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Alice Towey reveals the inspiration behind *This story is for Emily*.

This story was inspired by a few different threads. I was thinking about climate change, and about capitalism, and about how our society makes decisions about who gets left behind, and about how wrong that is. I wanted to write a story in which the characters manage to find love and a hope for happiness in spite of a world that doesn't value them as it should.

