

# Futures

## The Age of Reason

Seeds of hope. By Gretchen Tessmer



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**J**ust 90 seconds spent standing on the surface of the planet that you were born on and your life span will decrease by about 30 years, give or take. Do you really want to do this?

Another 90 seconds after that and you'll be dead, unless miracles *do* exist. Which is always possible but highly unlikely, given what we've all lived through these past however-many years.

My dad was always one for miracles – the more ordinary, the better. *Look at these apple seeds, Penny. Tiny, brown specks no bigger than your smallest fingernail. And a whole orchard grew from these little seeds. Just think of that ...*

I would. But there's poison in that thought. Metaphorical poison. But still.

The real poison is in the atmosphere, rising off those chemicals in the charred dirt and spitting off the rust-brown seas. You'll have to sign this waiver saying that you won't remove your helmet or touch any of it, no matter how much you're tempted. If you do, it's

obviously at your own peril.

But I guess you still want to do it?

You've probably got a good reason. Everyone says they do. But what's reason got to do with it? Lately, I've started to think that maybe the Age of Reason is the whole problem here and that's why our generation will never be content with living in space. They should have taken us earlier or left us to die with the others. They waited too long. We remember too much.

We can't shake the notion that our home is down there.

The Bad Earth, that's what the little ones call it. In their first-year classes, they point to each of the planets on the solar map in turn, rattling off the names. When they get to the third one, they make a face, turning their noses up at it.

"Why would anyone ever want to go back to the Bad Earth?" They shrug with natural indifference and common sense. The plucky spacefarer's kind, which knows good resources from bad. "It's ugly. It's dead."

They're content with their cramped cabins,

their meagre rations, their green-ish gardens. It's all they've ever experienced. But you and I can't settle. We can't shake the Bad Earth from our bones. It's like a piece of glass lodged in our throats, and we spit and we spit on it, like an oyster with aragonite trying to shine up a pearl. But there are no pearls for us. Just bitter crumbs.

Maybe it would be easier if we couldn't still see it, think about it and watch it spin from night to day, the black colour going a murky and mouldy olive-brown under sunlight.

The kids are right. It's ugly. Those colours are not the vibrant blues and greens they once were. That's what happens when you spray a plant with pesticides and then cover it with ashes. It rots, it dies. It stands to reason that the same thing happens when you spray an entire planet. But it's hard to bury a corpse when it lives in the sky.

I worry there's something sinister about that old saying that it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. It's a sickness

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really, and that sickness will have you going down there and trying to find something, anything, to give you hope and stymie reason.

I'm curious. What do you think you'll find, anyway? Some brave toad hopping in frothy puddles that smell like Freon? A lean but wily fox hunting among brambles of twisted plastic? Will you search the blackened fruit trees in your dad's backyard trying to find that last and most resilient apple?

Or maybe that's just me.

I've told you the story, haven't I? The morning they came, it was my seventh birthday. My dad and I were out in the backyard, me perched up on his broad shoulders, picking apples from high branches. We were almost done, but they said we didn't have time to spare. Not one more minute.

Dad reached up and hooked his hands under my arms, smoothly bringing me down to level ground. He handed me an apple from our

basket with a bolstering smile, "You'll be back by the time this tree blooms again, baby girl."

He made sure my backpack was on straight, kissed both my cheeks and hugged me tight as a bear. He took my hand in his, and we went out on the porch. There, he plucked me up again, around my waist this time, pressing another kiss to my temple, my cheeks, my nose, before leading me down to the waiting car and strapping me in.

He stood at the end of the driveway with his hand in the air until the car was out of sight. I know, because I immediately unclicked my seatbelt and was on my knees, waving right back.

There's this idea that if you could just go home, you know? And my dad would laugh and hug me and throw a crisp apple my way, saying, "Hey, what took you so long?"

I haven't been home in a long time. A *really* long time.

And what does time matter anyway? It took about 90 seconds for my dad to hug and kiss me goodbye. Maybe another 90 seconds for him to put me in that car, for the driver to turn the radio on — "... if we all can send up some extra prayers today" — and drive away.

An entire lifetime passed in those three minutes. I'd give anything for those same three minutes, but in reverse.

So yes, I know why you want to do this and yes, I'll clear the trip for you.

And when you make it home, would you do me a favour? Take these apple seeds, would you? Plant them there. See if they grow.

There's no reason in it. But still ...

Plant them with hope.

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## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**Gretchen Tessmer reveals the inspiration behind *The Age of Reason*.**

Well, this one went a little glum, didn't it? Apologies for the sad feels.

I wrote this as a thought experiment on why a person might be willing to trade 30 years for 90 seconds. Obviously, reason would play little part in the decision — or so I thought. While scribbling away and slowly having Penny reveal her motivations to me, I was reminded that reason is a complicated concept. And there's that ever-present tug of war between reason and faith that never quite resolves itself.

The fact that both can be present at the same time in the same mind is fascinating to me (if maybe a little exhausting sometimes, too). So letting Penny give in to hope at the end, unreasonable as it might be, felt like relief.

Planting seeds is always an act of faith. And it's a beautiful one.

