

A Plutonium Record by Maria Stanislav

*To John and Patrick
(probably the entirely wrong place for a dedication)*

Some say we are the cursed generation. On some days, I am sorely tempted to agree. After all, we have faced global warming and ensuing climate chaos, the gradual destruction of the ozone layer and the melting of ice shelves. We have seen innocent numbers become symbols of the death of thousands, and female names growing to be associated with disasters. We have experienced trepidation as the end of the century and the millennium coincided, and some follow-up on that as different calendars forecasted their own versions of the apocalypse.

Did it make us less cursed, or even more so, that we tended to laugh in the face of all that? Too many fears, too many tragedies – could anyone blame us for becoming maybe a bit more callous than was appropriate? Callousness can be both a blessing and a curse, in my experience. We could make fun of things we were supposed to be afraid of, and it helped. To an extent, at least. Because all those scares, they were hardly sufficient to earn us the name we could have bragged about under different circumstances, as did some X-ers, and then Y-ers, and as would the Z-ers, if there were a generation Z. But the real reason we were dubbed cursed was the fact that among the things we had witnessed was the end of the world. Even for us, that was rather hard to laugh off.

I lay the pen down and stretch my fingers, clenching and unclenching the fist a few times. Three years, and I still have trouble writing with my left hand.

Maybe my idea to write some of my thoughts down is not really worth the effort, considering the inconvenience it's causing me, not to mention the expense. For some weird reason, I decided to procure proper writing paper instead of settling for some bits and scraps put together, as people do now, when they find themselves in need of writing something down. Stationery is not exactly a commonly traded good these days, and the pretty blue notebook decorated with pictures of cats cost me three days' worth of generator fuel. Even that was a rather hard bargain for me, as the sweet old lady out of whose handbag I had seen the notebook falling out, had originally refused to part with it for anything less than a week's worth. She went on and on about its sentimental value to her, while never actually refusing to give it up. She had obviously read me like a book and knew I'd haggle as best as I could, but not actually leave without 'one of the last things she had left in this world, a gift from her departed daughter'. Eventually, we reached common ground at three days' worth of fuel, provided I took it over to her place.

Going by her house was an experience in and of itself, as it was the first of its kind that I've seen even though I've certainly heard of her kind before. Such people were called clingers because of the way they

clung to their former lifestyle, despite the hazards it brought. Clingers would stay in their old houses if the area was even remotely habitable, or drag to their new home as much of their things as they could, regardless of the contamination they'd carry with them. Their reasoning was such that they'd live out the rest of their lives, however long that was – or short, given their habits – surrounded by the familiar things. They were shunned for obvious reasons – even though despite the scary stories, I didn't see anything actually *glowing*, in this house, at least – but I found their rock-hard denial almost refreshing. Pretending to live in a world where one could eat fruits from a tree or drink water from a river or get caught in the rain – there was something to be said for this rather hard-core escapism. It had something in common with pretending to die of asthma rather than admit lung cancer – before, and of cancer rather than atomic disease now.

I left the house of the clinger lady thoughtful and somewhat disappointed. I hoped sincerely that there was never a daughter, or if there was one, she never gave that notebook to the lady who traded away a memento of her dead child for several cans of gasoline. If I had something of Patrick's left, I would never give it up so easily, or at all.

At home, I examined my newest possession, idly wondering how radioactive it was. Couldn't be much worse than some of my records or tapes, really, considering the multitude of places they were recovered from. Inside the back cover, I found a short description of the person who had originally created the artwork used for the notebook's cover, in the early second half of the twentieth century. She was one of those affectionately referred to as 'flower children'. The word itself smelled of summer, warmth and what smiles would smell of if they had a discernible scent. Stroking the unfaded colours of the cover, I found myself smiling as well. Believing that peace and love would save us all was probably one of the best illusions to live by. So what if they never did save us? It isn't like anything else did, either.

Remembering the story of my notebook was enough to let my fingers rest, so I get back to the writing. Where was I? Ah, yes; the end of the world.

The end of the world was not biblical, or mythological, or spectacular, or complete, or, for that matter, a proper end at all. It was the end of the world as we knew it, and it came in stages, none of which were acknowledged for being steps towards the end, up until the moment when it became clear that this was actually it, and there was nothing left but to turn around and try to figure out when it all began. Or this particular bit, anyway.

At first, as usual, there were scares. Scares and rumours. They went through the normal life cycle of all scares and rumours in the world. Stage one: the first sparks, when only the most paranoid ones believe and try to convert the rest. Stage two: the kindling. That's when the number of believers becomes big enough to start growing quickly. At this stage, no one needs much proof to believe. In fact, denial works wonderfully as a fan for the flames. Stage three: forest fire. Everyone but the biggest sceptics believes and expects the onset of whatever the rumour is about, often in a completely mutilated form by now. And

finally, the fourth stage. The ashes. Belief is no longer required, because the event in question has either arrived or utterly failed to. This is the time to either strut smugly or shuffle away in embarrassment, depending on whether you were in the paranoid or sceptical camp, and on whether your opinion was confirmed or overruled, respectively.

In rather rare and particularly nasty cases, the rumoured event arrives just when everyone stops believing in it. This was the case for us. War came just as the last of the ashes of its rumours were being swept up.

My husband was one of the moderately paranoid ones, I one of the moderate sceptics. Between us, we accumulated just enough of the popular survivor kit to, well, survive.

I pause as I look at the last two sentences. Barely a page into my account of the events, and I already strayed into personal details, something I have promised myself to avoid as much as possible. Then again, we were a typical enough family, and possibly a good enough representation of what was happening to our people.

The basic survivor kit at the time included water, rations that kept indefinitely and – this is important – a small power generator. Some of the more paranoid parts of the populace had equipped their basements for living for weeks at a time, if necessary, complete with air recyclers. We had settled for a garage, accessible through a back door of the house.

Despite the horror that the word itself carries, war did not descend upon us like a many-headed beast, scorching the country and tearing lives apart. It was here, sure enough, but somehow, always on the other side of a television screen or an internet news portal. Whoever reads the following words will likely think me callous even for my generation, possibly nothing short of immoral, but I would be lying to myself if I wrote otherwise. The war was horrifying, and appalling, and more of those adjectives spoken on screens by stone-faced politicians and tear-struck female talk show hosts – but it was not personal. No one I knew was dying out there. No one I cared about more than one should love their neighbour – and anyone who recognises the reference knows how well most fulfil that particular commandment (in case this is read when no account of religion is available, this was a reference to Christianity, one of the world's major religions as of the time around the end; and the tone of my writing should give the reader a general idea of how devout the majority of the world was at the time).

So I was no more afraid than any wife and mother whose husband and child went to work and school every day – not to war. Perhaps I am generalising and tarring other American mothers, known for their patriotism, with the selfish brush of a born-European, raised-somewhat-American – but that was just my opinion. Everyone is entitled to one, after all.

So, I was afraid, but not terrified. I did not wake up at night thinking I heard an air raid warning or gunshots outside.

I stop short of writing 'maybe I should have been'. Even if I were, it would not have changed anything. My attempt at a semi-historical account is rapidly turning into a diary of some sort. No matter. In the second World War, a young girl's diary survived her by generations and became widely known – at least, in her country. I have no such ambition. I just want my thoughts and memories committed to paper, carrying a small part of me – where? Just 'somewhere' is good enough for me.

On the last night before the world ended, I had gone to bed early. I wasn't sure what woke me up. In hindsight, it might have been the noise or the tremors, or both. I was a very sound sleeper then, and had gone to sleep wearing my favourite headphones. Big ones. The kind that blocked all sound from the outside. I was not worried about Patrick waking up and calling me – John had promised to be there if our son needed anything, and told me to get a good night's sleep. Whatever had shaken me out of my slumber must have been pretty damn loud, therefore. Sleepy and confused, with headphones hanging around my neck, I waddled over to the bedroom door and pulled it open. At first I thought that lights had gone out. As I rubbed my eyes, I realised that it was dark because I was looking outside. Half of the house was gone.

The remaining half contained the bedroom, on the doorstep of which I was standing, the kitchen underneath it, and the garage. The other half contained – had contained – the guest room, the living-room and Patrick's room. It would've been too much to hope that both John and Patrick had been in the kitchen at the time. I went there regardless, scrambling down the remains of the staircase and falling halfway down in the darkness. The kitchen was empty. I went to the garage, the only place left to search. Of the other half of the house there weren't even any ruins. As if it had been sliced clean off. Later, I would find out that that was exactly what happened. Weeks later, I would be told about the new generation vacuum bombs that imploded objects rather than exploded them, annihilating small and large areas with surgical precision. At the time, all I knew was that the garage was the only enclosed room remaining in our house. So I went there. John wasn't there. Neither was Patrick. And that was when my world had ended.

A knocking outside catches my attention. I get up and walk to the door. It turns out to be Ben, one of my regular customers. We exchange a few jokes, and he trades me two blank compact discs for one with a record. I have plenty of blanks at this time, and would prefer fuel or food, of course, but setting prices is against my rules. After all, nothing of what I trade is mine, so a blank disc is more than sufficient payment for the power spent copying a record. As for my time, I was never good at attaching price tags to it, even when I had to.

Another thing I get from Ben is a promise to keep an eye out for any old gear on his next trip down to the nearest city. Players, phones, hard drives – I check everything to see if there's anything to add to my ever-growing library.

Ben gone, I return to my notebook. The happy blue cats are smiling at me from the cover, just as before. The words I stopped at turn out to be 'end of the world', again. It really is time to move on from there, I tell myself.

Later, I would find out that the date of my personal apocalypse coincided with the official beginning of the new calendar for the rest of the survivors. At the time, I knew nothing, which was exactly as much as I wanted to know. I sat in the garage – it had seemed as good an option as any. From the sound of something hard colliding with the wall behind my neck as I did so, I realised I was still wearing the headphones. I pulled them back on.

It may seem ridiculous, but among the items in our survival kit were plenty of batteries and a few devices for charging them. For both John and myself, being able to listen to music was a need that fit somewhere between the first and second levels of Maslow's pyramid. Hiding in our garage with nothing to listen to apart from gunfire outside would be so boring, we had joked, and made sure we wouldn't be left in silence. Music had always been an important part of our lives. For me, who had no musical talent whatsoever – sad, but true – it was an eternal companion. John, now, had been blessed with a perfect ear for music, and even though he never made a career out of it, he played plenty and sometimes, when sufficiently pestered by myself, sang a little. And our Patrick, much to my delight, seemed to inherit his father's talent and his mum's passion, and but a few weeks prior to that night, when asked by someone what he wanted to be when he grew up, declared he wanted to be a 'muzizian'. At four and a half, his instrument of choice was a drum, and John and I had spent a lovely hour playfully arguing about what kind of band our boy would play in. I suggested punk rock, but John insisted I set my sights somewhere higher, like classic metal.

I digress, but only to explain how a box full of AA batteries ended up among the essential means of survival in our makeshift shelter. Moving to sit down next to that box was the only movement I had made, once the music in my headphones stopped. It could have been minutes after my arrival in the garage; it could have been hours. I stayed next to the box from there on, popping new batteries into my player whenever my headphones went silent. There were also some rechargeable ones there, I knew it, but starting up the generator and finding the charger was more effort than I was willing to expend.

For however long I had sat there, the music played relentlessly. I woke up whenever it stopped, changed the batteries blindly, and went back to sleep. Much later, it would take me months to learn sleeping in silence, actually.

The first thing capable of attracting my attention since I had sat down by the wall was a thud loud enough to be heard through the headphones, and swearing supplementing an instrumental part that had just come up. I looked up to see a man sprawled on the floor and realised he must have slipped on some of the batteries strewn all around me.

I decide to omit the conversation with my visitor – I must be ungrateful, but I fail to think of him as a rescuer, even now. After all, I was in no danger whatsoever, and capable of surviving for months on the food and water originally meant for three people, if only I could've been bothered to use any of it. Since I am incapable of describing my meeting with him – I don't even remember his name, how's that for the depth of ingratitude? – as a glorious rescue story, I will refrain from describing it altogether, lest I disappoint my possible reader even further. Besides, the conversation in question was basically a monologue, my contribution to it limited to shaking my head to answer questions as to whether I was injured, in need of help, or mute. Actually, later, the doctor at the camp I was brought to discovered that I had dislocated some joints in my right hand rather badly – no doubt when tumbling down the stairs – but setting them right proved rather difficult because of the time that had passed. He said I had to practice doing things with my injured hand despite the pain if I wanted to keep use of it, but I neglected that. Now I'm officially left-handed.

Using the pause to stretch my fingers again – this is more writing than I've done in one sitting ever, in the new world, at least – I think what would be a good point to pick up my story. Some facts are probably in order, as opposed to the opinions I'm giving out by the handful.

We arrived at a place best described as a camp, made up of cars and tents. I wasn't asking questions, but watching was enough to gather some basic facts. The people running the place – or at least, the ones most talked to, so I assumed they were in charge – were neither police, nor emergency services, nor the military. Just volunteers, average people who either gave up on hoping for the government's help or never expected it in the first place. Some went around looking for survivors, like the man who had found me. Some gave what medical aid they could to whoever needed it. Surprisingly, there weren't that many of those. It dawned on me very quickly that there were barely any wounded in this war – only the living and the dead. Or those beyond help, like the people from the big cities, those who survived the nuclear blasts. No, I tell a lie. Those would be people from the suburbs and satellite towns of the big cities. Of those who lived in the cities, none survived. At least, I haven't met one city dweller in the three years that have passed since then.

There were also people in charge of distributing resources that originally came from the survivor kits of those brought over, as well as from empty houses. The stuff from my garage was taken for distribution as well. I didn't object. They had not taken any of my batteries, however, and I didn't bring any with me.

What followed was waiting. The kind of wait where, eventually, everyone stops caring what happens next – as long as something does finally happen. Nothing did. All channels of communication – telephones, radio, television, the internet – were dead. The camp grew slowly every day. In some time, we got our first suburban dweller who gave us a few morsels of information. He had learned just enough to tell of vacuum bombs used on the countryside, and of the nuclear ones detonated over the cities. His story was sufficient confirmation of the general belief that no help would be coming. It also earned him his rewards – as much food and water as he could carry, which was not much at all, and a request to stay far away from the camp – far enough to be unseen.

It was a request, not an order or a threat. A request made in a reasonable voice that didn't even appeal to understanding – it was assumed. And received.

It was around that time that I decided I had had enough of human contact. I considered requesting the same treatment as the latest visitor, but wasn't sure I would be granted it, not having death hovering around the corner to make me eligible for condescension or any kind of priority treatment. I was fortunate to get another chance, however – a scouting party was looking for an extra pair of hands. I was doubly fortunate that this one was going to be away for weeks, planning to drive as far as fuel would allow, looking for more people and news, maybe even another camp like ours. I had jumped at the chance. They were not sceptical about me being a woman or not particularly fit. I could drive, which was good enough for them, and any danger I could be putting myself into was my own.

I left the camp with the two things I had come to it with – my player and my t-shirt – plus a pair of shoes and jeans received from the clothes distribution pile. Since I had consumed much less food than was brought over from my garage, I considered the trade to be fair.

The party, consisting of four small trucks and a camping van used for sleeping, drove for two weeks before using up two fifths of the fuel reserves. The remaining part would be used to come back and address any possible contingency. Right at the end of that long drive, we found remains of a town not unlike mine. The party was joined by a dozen survivors, some of which had vehicles. The residents of this town must have had a higher than average paranoid ratio, too, since the supplies they had gathered prior to our arrival could have supported them for a year or so. In fact, some things would not fit onto the trucks and had to be left behind. There was fuel, too, as a miraculously undamaged gas station lay on the edge of town.

A decision was made to leave one truck behind while the rest would carry the people and supplies back to the camp. The remaining truck would use this town as a new scouting base. At first, three people were to remain with it. I was all too eager to volunteer to be one of them. The other two were as eager to continue exploring. They said 'this ghost town gave them the creeps', and miles upon miles of empty roads were immeasurably more welcome than empty windows and deserted streets.

That was how I remained alone again, with just enough information to know that going anywhere else would change very little. I spent a few days exploring what remained of the town, on foot. Even though I was left with a car, fuel was precious. This is actually one fact that remains true up to the time of this writing: fuel is precious.

Fuel is always precious. It is used as a means of exchange in the majority of non-food transactions. Food transactions themselves are pure barter, with the parties agreeing on the exchange rates on their own. It is also frowned on to deny food or water to someone who has little to pay with, or take their last resources as payment. From what I have seen so far, the system, wobbly though it is, as any system relying on morality, works out most of the time. Apparently, mankind needed to witness destruction of most things they knew and be decimated in the process, in order to learn how to function with the good of the majority in mind. Perhaps we rely on each other too much right now to afford to become too selfish.

Exploring the town yielded some welcome finds, such as instant coffee, obviously not considered worthy of inclusion into the average survivor kit, and batteries, which proved that my keeping the music player with me all this time was not in vain after all.

Another thing I decide to omit is the description of my feelings at what I could only think of as scavenging. In a way, the houses had become tombs of the ones who died there, and taking things from there felt nothing short of graverobbing. With each item taken, I couldn't help but think how I would feel about someone handling John's or Patrick's things. No matter what the circumstances could be, I found myself hating that imaginary person, even were they taking things to save their own husband or child. Even more so in the latter case, in fact, since that meant their loved ones had survived.

I didn't wallow in self-loathing, however. What I did was silently address the owner of the house I would enter, telling them that they were free to hate me, and that I was aware of the fact that my actions were despicable. Then I would go ahead and take what I needed or saw fit.

I find myself omitting more and more of my feelings, considering them irrelevant or apt to make the reader despise me, or both. If I could, I would go back and tear out the page with my ruminations on the nature of patriotism. But alas, I find myself unable to mutilate the notebook. At least I can write about the houses that even I left untouched – the tombs with the dead still in them.

Some of the houses still contained remains of their inhabitants that the survivors forgot or neglected to bury. I marked those on the map of the town that I picked up at the gas station and later, gave it to the party that arrived, so that they would take care of the dead. That was one duty I shirked because it made it all too easy to imagine my husband and son becoming one of the partially-intact corpses, were the radius of the vacuum bomb that hit our town just a few meters off. Our house caught the very edge of the blast, after all. Before, I had thought us a family with the worst fortune in existence. Now I knew that at

least two thirds of my family were extremely fortunate. Unlike so many others, they never knew they were dying.

I did find a house that looked like it hadn't been occupied for a long time, and decided to make it my home. There was no evidence of preparation for the war there, or of weathering the time after the end. The owners must have moved away long before that. I left my car at the gas station with a note on the windshield as to where I could be found, and a map with my new house marked, for when the explorers would be back.

I equipped the house with one of the spare generators left, hoping I would be allowed to keep it, for my services as the keeper of this base, if nothing else. I also brought over some supplies. Sooner or later, they would run out, so my best bet was hoping that this town would indeed become a stop on a travelled road. Then I went to sleep in my new bed, switching my music player on for the first time in some weeks.

I look at the page, thinking if it is possible to avoid describing my morning and proceed straight to the next part of the story. Sadly, that part would make little sense without the morning. My readers will just have to bear with me there, I guess, as the description that I will start writing now is even more crucial to my tale as the explanation of the importance of music in my family's life.

The first awakening in a proper bed for many weeks was also the most unpleasant one in my life. Opening my eyes to see a bedroom, not my garage or a tent the likes of which were used in the camp, or the inside of a trailer, created an illusion of being back home, and having all the same effects I had then didn't help, either. The fact that the bedroom was not extremely similar to my old one wasn't enough to break the illusion. I stood in front of the door for a few minutes, wondering and hoping that it had all been nothing but a nightmare, elaborate though it was. When I managed to quell that hope, it gave way to the fear that I was about to relive that night all over again. At least that I was spared, when I finally dared to venture out. But neither did the hope survive. And that was the beginning of my first official nervous breakdown since the death of my husband and son.

Eventually, I pulled my headphones on again, but failed to lose myself in the music as I always could before, even during those catatonic days in the garage. The problem was that, for the first time since the end, I realised I was listening to the voices of dead people. Not simply 'dead people' as in, people who were dead before I was born, or long enough ago to count as such, or dead before I found out about them. I never had a problem listening to Elvis Presley or Frank Sinatra, for example. But it was an entirely different feeling thinking that the owners of the voices you have heard live, or on live television, at least; faces you knew and recognised on screens and magazine pages; hands that signed posters you had thrust out towards them, having pushed your way to the front of the screaming crowd, the crowd you yourself were also a jubilant part of... were dead. That must have been the feeling experienced by the fans of Freddie Mercury, and later Kurt Cobain, and later still, Michael Jackson. But to look at each new song

coming up on shuffle and thinking that all of those voices would only ever sing from your speakers and never, ever, from anywhere else again? That was almost enough to warrant my second nervous breakdown for the day.

What stopped it from occurring was another realisation – that even though all of the musicians, most likely, along with writers, actors, artists, movie directors, and all other people creative enough to afford living in large cities, were gone, what they created survived even now. Had I created some, any piece of art, I would have been not flattered, not honoured, but rather shaken to know it survived the end of the world.

I looked at my music player with a new eye. I could very well be holding in my hands some of the last music surviving in the world. No doubt there would be more somewhere – but of the people I had seen in the camp and around it, not a single one had anything resembling a music player about their person. It only made sense. Few bothered about entertainment when survival was at stake. Whatever music they had owned would have remained in their homes, abandoned or destroyed.

Since no one else cared about it, I would, I decided. It was as good a purpose as any, and certainly better than anything else I had available, not being spoilt for choice. This would be done in the memory of all musicians survived by their art, and in the memory of John and Patrick. I was certain they would have approved of my endeavour.

And that was when I decided that the world had not ended completely yet.

This is where I stop again, this time to calm my emotions rather than rest my fingers. In this particular part of the story, I don't care if I was being overly personal or sentimental. If I set out to tell whoever may read my notes about the world and my part in it, I had to tell why I was doing what became my purpose in life.

I leaf through what I've written. Perhaps it is sufficient for the first day. After all, I am in no hurry whatsoever. It is not my goal to fill up the blue-cat-decorated notebook in one day, one week or even one month. Tomorrow, I will continue and write more about the beginning of my collection, about music I traded away from other people for fuel and food, and then about the first 'customers' who brought me their music in exchange for something from my library. Later, I may also write about my scouting of the ruins of record stores and night clubs, and all kinds of buildings where blank discs or tapes could be found, and of the slow accumulation of the vast collection of playback devices – I do think I am now capable of playing about every kind of format or medium available. I may even detail my rather reckless expeditions to the outskirts of big cities in the hopes of finding remains of studios or radio stations – some of them successful, too. And if I'm feeling vain enough once I've written all that, I may even mention the name I go by these days. It's quite funny, really, the way it started with a t-shirt, then continued as a joke, and then just stuck. I still feel extremely flattered when I'm told my new alias fits my occupation.

There's a knocking on my door again. This time, it's Charlie, someone who doesn't visit often, but has a few gems for me every time he does come by. He is quite enthusiastic about my cause, and while he doesn't dedicate all of his time to salvaging music – to the best of my knowledge, I'm still the only one quite that obsessed – he always keeps an eye out for it on his journeys. And Charlie sure journeys a lot – this is part of the reason he is an infrequent visitor. In absence of any intercontinental transport and limited fuel, all forms of travelling had all but died out, but people like Charlie don't let such trifles as the end of the world interfere with their travel plans. His latest plans involved checking how Alaska is faring, I believe.

“Have I got a treat for you,” he announces by way of greeting.

I smile.

“Let's see it, then.”

“Hear it, you mean. Bring out your best mp3 gear.”

I lead him to the computer with the best speakers attached.

“Good thing those copyright wars of the early twenty-first century were never quite won by the corporations,” Charlie comments, fishing a small memory stick out of his pocket. “Without good old piracy back then, your job would be much more difficult now, don't you agree? Now turn around, don't spoil it.”

Chuckling to myself, I turn my back. Only to spin around and stare at the screen after the first few chords.

“This can't be...”

“I think you'll find it can,” Charlie answers with a grin of the kind normally seen on the face of a relative of my notebook's felines found in a certain county.

“I thought they were gone forever. I didn't even find anything of theirs in those radio station stocks...”

“Well, they're not exactly common radio material, you know.”

“Used to be quite proud of that fact, too...” I mutter and fall silent. Charlie is quiet too as we sit and listen to the music of my favourite band, loved so much I didn't even have it in my player at the time. It may sound paradoxical, of course. But back then, I didn't need to. Some music one does not need to listen to every day in order to carry it with them. But over these years, I had sure missed it, this music so obviously written by people who dreamed like they'd live forever and played like they would die tomorrow, to paraphrase the old saying just a bit.

After a few songs, I press the pause button and turn to Charlie.

“How can I thank you?”

“By not insulting me with offering me anything, okay?”

And that is Charlie through and through.

“Alright, I won’t. But you do know that anything you need-”

“I only have to ask, we’ve covered that before. Right now, I think I’ve got my van stocked with everything I need and some more, for the next few months.”

“Going to Alaska, then?”

“So I am. Would’ve gone yesterday, but made this little detour to drop the music off here. Thought you’d appreciate it.”

“I do, Charlie. You know I do.” I smile again.

“I’ll be off, then. I’ll drop by on the way back. Bound to have something new for you by then. Maybe I’ll even run into someone you know. I’ll be sure to say hi.”

“Someone I know?”

“Someone from your collection, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you wouldn’t think every single musician in the world is dead, would you?”

I’m silent, unable to vocalise that these have been exactly my thoughts for some three years now. Charlie laughs heartily as he obviously reads me.

“Always a bit on the pessimistic side, aren’t we? A bit like your namesake, perhaps – I saw one of them the other month, by the way.”

I remain quiet, the sheer realisation slowly washing over me. I never doubted my original idea because... it never crossed my mind to doubt it, actually. It made sense that everyone meaningful and worthwhile to me was gone. I never thought that there could be more people like Charlie – who didn’t let anything stop them. Not even the end of the world.

Sometimes, just sometimes, being proven wrong is the best thing that can happen to a person. It certainly was the case for me, just now.

“Anyway, I’ll leave you to catch up with the music now. I didn’t check, but I think there were some unreleased ones there, too. From a little over three years ago, you know.”

I finally find my tongue, if only because I know I have to fare Charlie well before he’s gone.

“Thanks again, Charlie. And take care out there, okay?”

“You too. Bye, Muse.”

Find more of Maria's work at <http://thecoffeeclef.wordpress.com/>