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Our Endless Numbered Days

Written by Claire Fuller

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Our Endless Numbered Days

CLAIRE FULLER

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For Tim, India and Henry

I.

Highgate, London, November 1985

This morning I found a black and white photograph of my father at the back of the bureau drawer. He didn't look like a liar. My mother, Ute, had removed the other pictures of him from the albums she kept on the bottom shelf of the bookcase, and shuffled around all the remaining family and baby snapshots to fill in the gaps. The framed picture of their wedding, which used to sit on the mantelpiece, had gone too.

On the back of the photograph, Ute had written 'James und seine Busenfreunde mit Oliver, 1976' in her steady handwriting. It was the last picture that had been taken of my father. He looked shockingly young and healthy, his face as smooth and white as a river pebble. He would have been twenty-six, nine years older than I am today.

As I peered closer, I saw that the picture included not only my father and his friends, but also Ute and a blurred smudge which must have been me. We were in the sitting room, where I was standing. Now, the grand piano is at the other end, beside the steel-framed doors which lead to the glasshouse and through to the garden. In the photograph, the piano stood in front of the three large windows overlooking the drive. They were open, their curtains frozen mid-billow

in a summer breeze. Seeing my father in our old life made me dizzy, as though the parquet were tipping under my bare feet, and I had to sit down.

After a few moments I went to the piano, and for the first time since I had come home I touched it, running my fingers without resistance across the polished surface. It was much smaller than I remembered, and showed patches of a lighter shade where the sun had bleached it over many years. And I thought that maybe it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Knowing that the sun had shone, and the piano must have been played, and people had lived and breathed whilst I had been gone, helped steady me.

I looked at the picture in my hand. At the piano my father leaned forward, his left arm stretched out languidly whilst his right hand tinkered with the keys. I was surprised to see him sitting there. I have no recollection of him ever sitting at the piano or playing it, although of course it was my father who taught me to play. No, the piano was always Ute's instrument.

'The writer, he holds his pen and the words flow; I touch the keyboard and out my music comes,' she says with her hard German vowels.

On that day, at that tiny moment in time, my father sat uncharacteristically relaxed and handsome in his long-haired, thin-faced way, whilst Ute, wearing an ankle-length skirt and a white blouse with leg-of-mutton sleeves, was striding out of shot, as if she could smell the dinner burning. She held my hand and her face was turned away from the camera, but something in the way she carried herself made her look displeased, irritated to be caught with the rest of us. Ute was always well built – big-boned and muscular –

though in the last nine years she's become fat, her face wider than in my memory, and her fingers so puffed, her wedding ring is locked in position. On the telephone, she tells her friends that her weight gain has been due to the agony she lived with for so many years; that she ate her way through it. But late at night, when I can't sleep, and creep downstairs in the dark, I have seen her eating in the kitchen, her face illuminated by the fridge's interior light. Looking at the photograph, I realized it was the only one I'd ever seen with the three of us in it together.

Today, two months after I'd come back home, Ute had been confident enough to leave me alone for half an hour before breakfast whilst she took Oskar to a Cub Scout meeting. And so, with one ear listening for the sound of the front door opening and Ute returning, I rummaged through the other drawers in the bureau. Already it was easy to cast aside pens, notepaper, unwritten luggage labels, catalogues for labour-saving household devices, and key rings of European buildings – the Eiffel Tower jostling against Buckingham Palace. In the bottom drawer, I found the magnifying glass. I kneeled on the rug, a different one from that in the photograph – when was it changed? – and held the glass over my father, but was disappointed to discover that enlarging him didn't show me anything new. His fingers were uncrossed; the corner of his mouth was not turned up; there was no secret tattoo I had missed.

One by one, from left to right, I focused on the five men in front of him. Three of them were squashed together on the leather sofa, whilst another sat back on the sofa's arm, his hands behind his head. These men wore scruffy beards and their hair long; none of them smiled. They looked so

similar they could have been brothers, but I knew they were not. Confident, relaxed, mature; like born-again Christians, they said to the camera, 'We have seen the future and disaster is coming; but we are the saved.' They were members of the North London Retreaters. Every month they met at our house, arguing and discussing strategies for surviving the end of the world.

The fifth man, Oliver Hannington, I recognized instantly although I hadn't seen him either for many years. The camera had caught him sprawling across an armchair, his legs in flared trousers, dangling over one side. Smoke curled through his yellow hair from a cigarette he held in the hand that propped up his head. Like my father, this man was clean-shaven, but he smiled in a way that suggested he thought everything was ridiculous; as though he wanted posterity to know he wasn't really interested in the group's plans for self-sufficiency and stockpiling. He could have been a spy who had infiltrated them, or an undercover journalist producing news stories which would one day expose them all, or a writer, going home after meetings and working all the mad characters into a comic novel. Even now, his strong-jawed self-confidence seemed exotic and foreign; American.

But then I realized there must have been someone else in the room – the photographer. I stood where the person holding the camera must have stood, and with a corner of the photograph between my lips, I positioned my hands and fingers to form a square frame. The angle was all wrong; he or she must have been much taller than me. I put the magnifying glass back in the drawer, then surprised myself by sitting on the piano stool. I raised the key lid, transfixed by the neat white row of keys, like polished teeth, and put my

right hand over them – so smooth and cool – where my father's had been. I leaned to the left, stretched my arm out across the top and something moved inside me, a nervous fluttering, low down in my stomach. I stared at the photograph, still in my hand. The face of my father stared back, even then so innocent he *must* have been guilty. I went again to the bureau, took the scissors from the pen pot and snipped around my father's face so he became a light grey mole on the tip of my finger. Careful not to drop him and lose him under the furniture, to be vacuumed up by Ute's cleaner, and with my eyes fixed on his head, I reached up under my dress with the scissors and chopped through the silky fabric in the middle of my bra. The two cups which had irritated and scratched fell apart and my body was freed, like it always had been. I tucked my father under my right breast so that the warm skin held him in place. I knew if he stayed there, everything would be all right and I would be allowed to remember.

2.

The summer the photograph was taken, my father recast our cellar as a fallout shelter. I don't know if he discussed his plans with Oliver Hannington that June, but the two of them lay around the sunny garden, talking and smoking and laughing.

In the middle of the night, Ute's music, melancholic and lilting, drifted through the rooms of our house. I would roll over in bed under my single sheet, sticky with the heat, and imagine her at the piano in the dark with her eyes shut, her body swaying, charmed by her own notes. Sometimes I heard them long after she had closed the key lid and gone back to bed. My father didn't sleep well either, but I think it was his lists that kept him awake. I imagined him reaching for the pad of paper and the small pencil stub he kept under his pillow. Without switching on the light, he wrote, '1. General list (3 people)' and underlined it:

Matches, candles
Radio, batteries
Paper and pencils
Generator, dynamo, torch
Water bottles
Toothpaste
Kettle, pots
Pans, rope and string

Cotton, needles
Steel and flint
Sand
Loo paper, Disinfectant
Toothpaste
Bucket with a lid

The lists read like poetry, even though the handwriting was a boyish version of my father's later frantic scribblings. Often the words strayed over each other where he had written them in the dark, or they were packed together as though tussling for space in his night-time head. Other lists sloped off the page where he had fallen asleep mid-thought. The lists were all for the fallout shelter: essential items to keep his family alive under the ground for days or maybe even weeks.

At some point during his time in the garden with Oliver Hannington, my father decided to fit out the cellar for four people. He started to include his friend in the calculations for the quantity of knives and forks, tin cups, bedding, soap, food, even the number of toilet rolls. I sat on the stairs, listening to him and Ute in the kitchen as he worked on his plans.

'If you must make this mess it should be for just the three of us,' she complained. There was the noise of papers being gathered. 'I am uncomfortable that Oliver should be included. He is not one of the family.'

'One more person doesn't make any difference. Anyway, bunk beds don't come in threes,' said my father. I could hear him drawing whilst he spoke.

'I don't want him down there. I don't want him in the house,' Ute said. The scratch of pencil on paper stopped. 'He is witching this family – it gives me the creepers.'

'Bewitching and creeps,' said my father, laughing.

'Creeps! OK, creeps!' Ute didn't like to be corrected. 'I would prefer that this man is not in my house.'

'That's what it always comes down to, doesn't it? Your house.' My father's voice was raised now.

'My money has paid for it.' From my position on the stairs I heard a chair scrape against the floor.

'Ah yes, let us pray to the Bischoff family money that funds the famous pianist. And, dear Lord, let us not forget how hard she works,' said my father. I could imagine him bowing, his palms pressed together.

'At least I am a professional. What do you do, James? Lie across the garden all day with your dangerous American friend.'

'There's nothing dangerous about Oliver.'

'There is something not right with him, but you will not see it. He is only here to make trouble.' Ute stomped from the kitchen and went into the sitting room. I shuffled my bottom up a step, wary of discovery.

'What use will playing the piano be when the world ends?' my father called after her.

'What use will twenty tins of Spam be, tell me that?' Ute yelled back. There was a wooden clunk as she lifted the key lid, and she played one low minor chord with both hands. The notes died away and she shouted, 'Peggy, she will not ever be eating the Spam,' and even though there was no one to see me, I hid my mouth behind my hand as I smiled. Then she played Prokofiev's Sonata Number 7 – fast and furious. I imagined her fingers sliding on the ivory like talons.

'It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark,' my father bellowed.

Later, when I crept back to bed, the arguments and the piano playing ended, but I heard other sounds, ones that sounded almost like pain, although, even aged eight, I knew they meant something else.

There was a list that mentioned Spam. It was on the one titled '5. Food etc'. Under the heading my father wrote, '15 calories per body pound, ½ gallon of water per day, ½ tube of toothpaste per month', then:

14 gallons water
10 tubes toothpaste
20 tins condensed chicken soup
35 tins baked beans
20 tins Spam
Dried eggs
Flour
Yeast
Salt
Sugar
Coffee
Crackers
Jam
Lentils
Dried beans
Rice

The items meander, as if my father were playing the 'I went to the shops and bought . . .' game by himself – Spam reminded him of ham, which made him think of eggs, which took him to pancakes and on to flour.

In our cellar he laid a new concrete floor, reinforced the

walls with steel and installed batteries that could be recharged by pedalling a static bicycle for two hours a day. He fitted two cooking rings, running off bottled gas, and built alcoves for the bunk beds – all made up with mattresses, pillows, sheets and blankets. A white melamine-topped table was placed in the centre of the room, with four matching chairs. The walls were lined with shelves, which my father stacked with food and jerrycans of water, cooking utensils, games and books.

Ute refused to help. When I came home from school, she would say she had spent her day practising the piano, whilst 'your father has been playing in the cellar'. She complained her fingers were stiff with neglect and her wrists ached, and that bending down to look after me had affected her posture at the keyboard. I didn't question why she was playing more often than she used to. When my father emerged from underneath the kitchen, his face red and his bare back shiny, he looked as though he might faint. He glugged water at the kitchen sink, put his whole head under the tap, then shook his hair like a dog, trying to make me and Ute laugh. But she only rolled her eyes and returned to her piano.

When my father invited members of the North London Retreaters to our house for meetings, I was allowed to open the front door and show the half-dozen hairy and earnest men into Ute's sitting room. I liked it when our house was full of people and conversation, and until I was sent up to bed, I lingered, trying to follow their discussions of the statistical chances, causes and outcomes of a thing they called 'bloody Armageddon'. If it wasn't 'the Russkies' dropping a nuclear bomb and obliterating London with just a few

minutes' warning, it would be the water supply polluted by pesticides, or the world economy collapsing and the streets being overrun with hungry marauders. Although Oliver joked that the British were so far behind the Americans that when disaster came we would still be in our pyjamas whilst they would have been up for hours protecting their homes and families, my father was proud that his group was one of the first – perhaps *the* first – to meet in England to discuss survivalism. But Ute was petulant about not being able to practise the piano with them lounging around, drinking and chain-smoking late into the night. My father loved to argue and he knew his subject well. When the alcohol had flowed for a few hours, and all agenda items had been covered, the meetings would dissolve from well-ordered discussion to argument and my father's voice would rise above the others.

The noise would make me throw off my bed sheet and sneak downstairs in my bare feet to peep around the sitting-room door, where the odours of warm bodies, whisky and cigarettes drifted towards me. In my memory, my father is leaning forward and thumping his knee, or stubbing out his cigarette so burning tobacco flies out of the ashtray and melts crusty holes in the rug or scorches the wooden floor. Then he is standing with his hands clenched and his arms held tight to his sides as if he is battling with the impulse to let his fists fly at the first man who stands up to disagree with him.

They wouldn't wait for one another to finish speaking; it wasn't a debate. Like the words in my father's lists, the men shouted over each other, interrupting and heckling.

'I tell you, it'll be a natural disaster: tidal wave, flood,

earthquake. What good will your shelter be then, James, when you and your family are buried alive?'

Standing in the hall, I flinched at the thought, my fists balled, and I held in a whimper.

'Flood? We could bloody do with a flood now.'

'Look at those poor buggers in that earthquake in Italy. Thousands dead.' The man's words were slurred and he had his head in his hands. I thought perhaps his mother was Italian.

'It'll be the government that lets us down. Don't expect Callaghan to be knocking on your door with a glass of water when the standpipes have run dry.'

'He'll be too busy worrying about inflation to notice the Russians have blasted us to hell.'

'My cousin has a friend at the BBC who says they're producing public information films on how to make an inner refuge in houses. It's just a matter of time before the bomb drops.'

A man with a greying beard said, 'Frigging idiots; they'll have nothing to eat and if they do the army will confiscate it. What's the frigging point?' A bit of spittle caught in the hairs on his chin and I had to look away.

'I'm not going to be in London when the bomb falls. You can stay, James, locked in your dungeon, but I'll be gone – the Borders, Scotland, somewhere isolated, secure.'

'And what will you eat?' said my father. 'How will you survive? How are you going to get there with all the other fools heading out of the cities as well? It'll be gridlocked, and if you get to the countryside, everyone including your mother and her cat will have gone too. Call yourself a Retreater? It'll be the cities where law and order are restored

soonest. Not your commune in North Wales.' From behind the door frame, I swelled with pride as my father spoke.

'All those emergency supplies in your cellar are meant to be just that,' said another man. 'What are you going to do when they run out? You don't even have an air rifle.'

'Hell, give me a decent knife and an axe and we'll be fine,' said my father.

The Englishmen carried on arguing until an American voice cut through them all: 'You know what the trouble is with you, James? You're so damn British. And the rest of you – you're all living in the dark ages, hiding in your cellars, driving off to the country like you're going on a fucking Sunday picnic. You still call yourself Retreaters; the world's already moving on without you. You haven't even figured out that you're survivalists. And, James, forget the cellar. What you need is a bug-out location.'

The way he spoke was authoritative, with an assumption of attention. The rest of the men, my father included, fell silent. Oliver Hannington lolled in the armchair with his back to me, whilst all the others stared out of the window or at the floor. It reminded me of my classroom, when Mr Harding said something none of us understood. He would stand for minutes, waiting for someone to put their hand up and ask what he meant, until the silence grew so thick and uncomfortable that we looked anywhere except at each other or him. It was a strategy designed to see who would crack first, and nine times out of ten it would be Becky who would say something silly, so the class could laugh in relief and embarrassment, and Mr Harding would smile.

Unexpectedly, Ute strode through from the kitchen, walking in that way she did when she knew she had an

audience, all hips and waist. Her hair was tied in a messy knot at the back of her neck and she was wearing her favourite kaftan, the one that flowed around her muscular legs. Every man there, including my father and Oliver Hannington, understood that she could have gone the long way round, via the hall. No one ever described Ute as beautiful – they used words like striking, arresting, singular. But because she was a woman to be reckoned with, the men composed themselves. Those standing sat down, and those on the sofa stopped slouching; even Oliver Hannington turned his head. They paid attention to their cigarettes, cupping the lit ends and looking around for ashtrays. Ute sighed: a quick intake of breath, an expansion of her ribcage and a slow exhalation. She berated the men as she walked past them to kneel in front of me. For the first time, my father and his friends turned and saw me.

'Now you have woken my little Peggy, with all your talks of disaster,' Ute said, stroking my hair.

Even then I knew she did it because people were watching. She took my hand to lead me upstairs. I pulled back, straining to hear who would break the silence.

'There is nothing bad going to happen, Liebchen,' Ute crooned.

'And a bug-out location is?' It was my father who surrendered first.

There was a pause, and Oliver Hannington knew we were all hanging on his answer.

'Your very own little cabin in the forest,' he said, and laughed, although I didn't think it was funny.

'And how are we going to find one of those?' one of the men on the sofa asked.

Then Oliver Hannington turned to me, tapped the side of his nose and winked. In the glow of his attention I let Ute tug me by the hand up to bed.

When the work on the fallout shelter was coming to an end, my father put me into training. It started as a game to him – a way to show off to his friend. My father bought a silver whistle, which he hung around his neck on a length of string, and he bought me a canvas rucksack with leather straps and buckles. Its side pockets were embroidered with blue petals and green leaves.

His signal was three short blasts on the whistle, which were sounded from the bottom of the stairs. Ute would have nothing to do with this either; she stayed in bed with the sheet over her head or played the piano, propping the top board fully open so the sound reverberated throughout the house. The whistles, which could happen at any point before bedtime, were my signal to pack the rucksack. I ran about the house, gathering the things from a list my father had made me memorize. I flung the rucksack on my back and sped down the stairs in time to an angry 'Revolutionary Étude' by Chopin. My father would be looking straight ahead, the whistle still in his mouth and his hands clasped behind his back, whilst I raced around the newel post, the rucksack bouncing. I rushed down the cellar stairs two at a time and jumped the last three. In the fallout shelter, I knew I had about four minutes to unpack before my father blew the whistle again. I yanked out the chair at the head of the table, facing away from the stairs. And from the rucksack I pulled out a pile of clothes – underwear, denim dungarees, trousers, cheesecloth shirts, jumper, shorts, nightie – and,

making sure they didn't unfold, placed them on the table. My hand went back in the rucksack to snatch the next item, like a lucky dip at the funfair. Out came my comb, placed horizontally just above the nightie; to the left, an extending spyglass; my toothbrush and toothpaste, side by side on top of my clothes; and next, my doll, Phyllis, with her painted-on eyes and her sailor suit, beside them. In a final rush, I produced my blue woollen balaclava and squeezed my head inside it. Despite the heat, matching mittens were meant to go on next, and when everything was perfectly aligned on the table and the rucksack was empty, I was supposed to be sitting quietly with my hands on my legs, looking straight ahead towards the gas stove. Then the whistle would go again and a nervous excitement would run through me, as my father came down the stairs for the review. Sometimes he straightened the comb or moved Phyllis over to the other side of the clothes.

'Very good, very good,' he would say, as though it were an army inspection. 'At ease,' and he would give me a wink and I knew I had passed.

On the final occasion that my father and I performed our drill, Ute and Oliver Hannington had been invited to be our audience. She, of course, refused. She thought it was pointless and childish. Oliver Hannington was there, though, leaning against the wall behind my father when he blew the first three whistles. Ute was in the sitting room, playing Chopin's 'Funeral March'. At first, everything went well. I gathered all the items and went down both sets of stairs in double-quick time, but I made an error in the laying out, or maybe my father, in his excitement, blew the second whistle too soon. I ran out of time and the mittens were not on my

hands when the two men came down the cellar stairs. With my pulse racing, I stuffed the mittens under my legs. They itched the skin where my shorts ended. I had let my father down. I wasn't fast enough. The mittens became wet beneath my thighs. The warm liquid ran off the chair and pooled on the white linoleum beneath me. My father shouted. Oliver Hannington, standing behind me, laughed, and I cried.

Ute rushed down to the cellar, swept me up into her arms and let me bury my face in her shoulder as she carried me away from 'those absolute awful men'. But like the closing credits of a film, my memory of that scene ends as I am rescued.

I cannot remember Oliver Hannington leaning in his indifferent manner against the cellar shelves with a smirk on his lips after I wet myself, although I'm sure that he did. I have imagined but I didn't see him take the cigarette from his mouth and blow the smoke upwards, where it would have crept along the low ceiling. And I didn't notice how red my father's face became after I let him down in front of his friend.