FREQ
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a novel

SOPHIE GANIC



TIDEWATER
PRESS

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For Michael, who, no matter what, has always
been my biggest supporter.

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It shouldn't be difficult to keep something alive. Give it what it needs: light, water, food, time. It does the rest of the work on its own. There's a logic to it. Most things work this way. It's a fair system.

If something dies, it's because someone has done something wrong or hasn't done enough, or missed something they should have seen. But if you stick to the system, the routine, then anything can survive. It's simple, really. The tomatoes are proof of that.

They're the only reason I ever let the light in. I stand on my tiptoes to reach the tape that holds closed the curtains covering the plastic sheeting, also taped, over the small window on the left. It's the only one I ever feel comfortable letting open for light. When I pull them back, a small sliver enters and casts across the floor of the cabin. It's enough for now, for me and the tomatoes. I know I'll have to plant them outside sooner rather than later, but I've decided to put that off for as long as possible.

To whomever one day finds this cabin and this journal, please note: the light will be the tricky part. Otherwise, Margaret's soil is good, and I still somehow manage to have running water. Maybe you will too.

My name is Hannah Meadows. That's how I start my broadcasts. It feels strange writing it here, because I know who I am, obviously. I suppose you don't, though.

I always thought Meadows was a strange last name. It sounds like the kind of name you would make up for a family in a children's book because they live in a cottage surrounded by flowers. I didn't grow up anywhere like that. I was born and raised in Vancouver,

where there are more high-rises than meadows, unless you trek out on one of the big mountain hikes that people always talked about and I never attempted. I often said I would, and I bought trail guides and combed through top-ten hiking posts, but I took it for granted, like it would always be there and there was never any rush. It's a shame, really.

I never thought it suited me. Meadows sounds like someone who lives outdoors and knows how to grow things. Like they can look at a patch of dirt and know what belongs there. My mom grew tomatoes. Margaret grew them too. But I've managed to kill enough houseplants that Jerome used to joke my name was false advertising. Maybe I'm adapting, though. My first attempt at growing tomatoes here didn't take, and the second didn't fare much better, but I'm learning over time. And I have plenty of time.

The pots I'm using are too large, but I don't have anything else. I have to drag them around each day so they follow the path of the sunlight. But it works. They sprouted at last. The leaves are a vibrant green so I know I'm doing something right. The flowers even started to bud. I just hope I don't kill them.

I'm checking them more than I need to. My fingers run up the stems, careful not to press too hard. The leaves feel thin and fragile, like they might tear if I'm too clumsy when I grab at them. Sometimes I turn them to see if they've changed colour. Other times I just sit and contemplate them. What else is there to do? I try to see if they're different from the day before, taller maybe, or stronger. I can't really tell, but they have my attention.

There isn't much left that responds to care like that. I suppose that's what I miss most. It's not any one thing, more like the noise that we were constantly surrounded by. People in the apartment above you, kids screaming in a playground, even someone yelling into their phone on the bus. You existed through life knowing that thousands of people were carrying on with theirs right around you.

And there were animals everywhere. People walking their dogs, or squirrels running across the tops of fences. There was a friendly neighbourhood cat who I called Valentina until I managed to catch a look at her tag when I was giving her a belly rub and found out she was called Noche. It means night in Spanish, and I always thought that was cute because she was completely black.

I wonder what happened to all the pets. That's probably a stupid thing to wonder about considering what happened to the actual people, but I do. When everyone started getting sick, there must have been thousands of pets trapped inside apartments and houses waiting for someone to come and feed them. I think about dogs waiting by front doors in the evenings because that's what they had always done, not understanding why no one was coming home.

When everything first started, I could still hear the birds in the morning. They seemed so loud, louder than I remembered them being, but I guess the rest of the world had just become quiet enough for me to really hear them. Then there were fewer, and now I can't remember the last time I heard one. It's been years. Two, maybe. It's difficult to keep track. I didn't notice when they stopped altogether, and that's what bothers me. I just realized one day that there was only silence. I wonder how many things ended like that because there was nobody left to notice. Maybe that's why I care so much about the tomatoes.

Speaking of tomatoes, food supplies in the cold cellar have held up so far. I keep track of what's inside without really going down there. It still feels like Margaret's domain. She was always more standoffish than Gerald and Parker, and it often felt like she was holding back, keeping a part of herself away. I think I understand why. I had come out of the forest from nowhere, and was another risk.

Despite that, she made sure I ate and she watched me carefully those first few days, putting extra food on my plate without saying too much about it. Margaret never asked for any help with

preparing the food. She had her own way of doing things, and I was careful not to get in the way. I never cooked with her. If anyone can call it cooking.

Down in the cellar, you'll find mostly cans and silver ration packets that smell a little bit like cardboard. If you go in farther than I ever have, I don't know what you'll find. More cans and freeze-dried stuff, I suppose. Sorry I can't be more helpful. I always reach for whatever is on the shelf closest to the stairs and head back up. The cellar creeps me out. Thankfully, since I've been here, there's always been enough of everything that I haven't had to worry.

Cooking doesn't matter as much as it used to, of course. I had always wanted to be a good cook. I used to watch all those chef shows on TV and online as if it were my religion, drawing inspiration from home cooks who had better ideas than I could ever come up with. I'd make mental notes of the advice Gordon Ramsay would give in between calling contestants donkeys, but when I'd try to translate that through my own kitchen efforts, I realized it was me who was the donkey. It never quite worked out, and I'd look at my dried-leather steaks and burnt-bottomed pans and hope that one day it would just click. I'd be able to cook a recipe with a fancy name I wouldn't be able to pronounce properly. *Canard désossé farci en croûte*, perhaps? I'd invite my closest friends over to sip wine and discuss the state of the world between bites, and when the plates were all clear they'd tell me how well I'd done.

It never happened, though. I kept trying, with Gordon Ramsay's voice in my ear, as I ruined one meal after another, and because it was just me, it didn't matter. I didn't care that my meat was tough or my sauces too watery. I ate it all anyway. I suppose that's what's helping me now, seeing as there's nothing more to cooking any longer than just opening a can or heating up a ration pack. But it did matter for a time there, before things got bad.

Jerome had us living in the worst version of lockdown. Well, I

was in lockdown. He felt it was perfectly fair to leave the apartment nearly every day. He had an important job, you see. People depended on him. He was a key worker. He had to leave. My job was to stay at home and keep the apartment clean and make him dinner. I don't think I would have cooked at all otherwise.

He'd come home by six o'clock most nights. I always had to make sure food was ready by then, or at least close enough to being ready that he would smell it when he opened the door. He liked that: the place tidy and neat, the table set, me in the kitchen where he expected me to be, like I was some kind of 1950s housewife.

We'd all been stuck inside before, of course. The last few pandemics had scared everyone into a certain way of living, but at least they had all ended. During those—I hadn't met Jerome at that point—I just eked out my little existence on my own, but I remember hearing about something called the 'shadow pandemic' on the news. I didn't understand it completely because I didn't need to, but I could see how being trapped inside with someone who was already an abuser would only make things worse. I watched the news and thought, how horrible, before flicking the channel to something else. Gordon Ramsay, probably.

One night, I had made pasta. I set the plates down as soon as Jerome closed the door behind him. He said it smelled fantastic. He consistently said so even when it didn't but by then we were following a script. I probably gave him some bright smile. I'd become good at that. It was mechanical. My mouth would have been first, and then my eyes, if I remembered. I wasn't happy, though. I just wanted him to be. I'd spent most of my life believing that if everyone around me was okay, then I could be okay, too. So I smiled. He rarely took the time to notice whether I really meant it or not.

He started eating as soon as we sat at the table. I watched him. Often, I wasn't hungry. Hunger came and went depending on his mood. If he was in good spirits, it was easier. I could sit there and

listen to him talk and convince myself I was having a nice time. If I didn't eat, he would notice. He would ask what was wrong, and then I'd spend the rest of the evening trying to convince him that nothing was. So, hungry or not, I would pick up my fork.

I probably asked him, "How was your day?" I tried to make my voice sound as normal as possible. He spoke while the food was still in his mouth, and there was a smear of sauce at the corner of his lips that he didn't bother to wipe away.

I can clearly see myself winding pasta around a fork. I told him I'd gone for a walk.

He stopped eating and glared at me. He asked where. I told him just around. I kept my eyes focused on my plate. He said my name and he did it in a way that I despised, like a correction. I mentioned the garden centre and his expression darkened. He asked why.

I could have told him the truth, that I'd gone for a walk because I'd been inside all day. There was nothing I needed from the garden centre. I just wanted somewhere to go, somewhere that wasn't the apartment. Before Jerome, I used to wander through stores all the time without needing a reason, and I suppose I wanted to remember what that felt like. What it was like to be free of him for just a moment. To make my own decisions. In a way, I wanted him to hear that, to look in the spaces between my words and find what I was really trying to say, but he never looked too closely at anything I said. He wouldn't this time, either.

All I told him was that I wanted some fresh air. He told me not to buy any more plants. I explained to him that I hadn't bought anything, and that's when he said casually, "You kill everything you touch."

I smiled the same mechanical smile again, then lifted a forkful of pasta and chewed. The food tasted like Margaret's cardboard ration packs, but at least if I was eating, it meant I didn't have to answer him.

I don't know why I'm writing about this. Actually, that isn't right.

I don't know how I remembered it. I haven't thought about that dinner since it happened. At least, I don't think I have. But now that I've started writing about cooking, there it is. That's been happening a lot lately. I keep gaining and losing stupid little things. You know when you walk into a room and you forget the reason why? Like that. Yesterday, I opened one of the ration packs and then caught myself opening another because I forgot I'd already done it. I found my coffee beside the radio this morning, stone cold, and couldn't remember putting it there. I'm calling it brain fog. People used to talk about it after the last pandemic. I thought it meant being tired or having trouble concentrating, but what I'm feeling right now is stranger than that. I can forget something from five minutes ago and then suddenly remember the exact expression on Jerome's face years ago. It's like I can't get to the things I know must have happened. The harder I try to reach for things, the further away they seem to move. Maybe that's why I remembered the dinner. I wasn't looking for Jerome. He was just there.

That's what bothers me. I want to remember things. I want to reach back and find pieces of the world before all this happened. But is this how it is going to work, that every time I reach for something, I am going to find Jerome there instead?