

The Opposite of Dystopia

by Author 17

Beth was in the administratrix's office at Colvin Hills Home in Melbourne. She was in the last year of primary school and had long dark hair. It was May 18th 2024, a Saturday, and she was in trouble again. This time it was because she had played a prank on some of the other girls at the orphanage. Outside the window, the leaves were brown and red and orange. The sky was grey, and a breeze was blowing.

"Do you think it was a bad choice to play that prank?" said the administratrix. Miss Howe's office was plain but elegant. The walls were dark, and lined with bookshelves, trophies, and black-and-white photos of past administrators. The large window had a dusty Venetian blind, pulled right up. She had been in charge of Colvin Hills Home for two years.

"I don't know," said Beth. She was only half-listening to Miss Howe. She just wanted to be alone and not think about any of this. She was looking forward to later. Her dorm mate Sarah had a new DVD for them to watch.

"You don't know if it was a bad choice to smear Vaseline over the floor at the entrance to the change room? Knowing, Beth, that the netball team usually runs back after practice, and would likely slip over on the floor and hurt themselves?"

"They didn't have to run," said Beth, still looking outside. A single red leaf fell from a tree and fluttered down, out of sight. For some reason it made her feel sad. She wanted to be alone and not have to think about any of this.

"We are talking about you and your choices, Beth. Honestly, how many times do we have to have this conversation?"

Beth did not answer. She wanted to cry.

"Beth, are you listening to me?" said Miss Howe.

"Yes Ma'am," said Beth. Her voice cracked slightly when she said 'Ma'am'. She turned her back to the administratrix.

"Aside from wasting all that Vaseline, which the infirmary has informed me was stolen from them, Laura hit her head on the cement because of your prank," said Miss Howe. "Luckily she wasn't seriously hurt. Nevertheless-"

"Can I please go, Miss Howe?" said Beth in a soft voice, interrupting. "I'm sorry for pranking Laura."

"Beth? What's wrong?"

Beth put her head down and began to sob loudly. Miss Howe was momentarily stunned, and did not know what to do.

"Why are you crying?" said Miss Howe.

"It's nothing," said Beth.

Miss Howe gently grasped the armrests of her chair, as though she were about to stand up and go to Beth to comfort her. But instead she hesitated. She looked out the window to see what Beth was looking at. The sky was darkening, and the breeze was picking up. More leaves blew off the tree.

"Double cleaning duty this week," said Miss Howe, softly but sternly. "And I expect you to apologise to Laura."

"Yes Ma'am," said Beth. She stood to leave.

"Please return to your dormitory," said Miss Howe. Beth was already on her way out of the room. "And remember to be mindful of your choices."

Beth left without another word. Rather than go to her dormitory, she went to the place she sometimes went to at times like this, a cleaning supplies closet. She did not want anyone to see her. She shut the door and barred it with a spare vacuum cleaner pipe. Then in the darkness she cried and cried.

After dinner in the dining hall, and after her additional cleaning, and after apologising to Laura, who was wearing a bandage on her head and did not seem to accept the apology, Beth went to her dormitory. She was in a better mood. She found the work had been good for making her forget her worries.

When Beth arrived in the dormitory, her bunkmate Sarah was already there. Sarah had blonde hair and was prettier than Beth. Sarah had the bottom bunk and Beth had the top.

"I've been waiting for you," said Sarah. She came over and hugged Beth.

"Have you the DVD?" said Beth.

Sarah smiled, reached under her pillow and took out a DVD case. The cover was monochrome and showed two grim-looking men in long dark coats. The title was *Equilibrium*. It was rated M.

"It's M!" said Beth, her eyes lighting up. DVDs were banned in dormitories, and M-rated ones were banned in the entire orphanage, so this was double-forbidden. "What if she gets caught?"

"She said she'll just say she made a mistake," said Sarah. The librarian from the town library who came in once a week was a young woman named Jenny. She had short hair and a long skirt and a soft spot for Sarah. Jenny let Sarah borrow DVDs. She said people didn't borrow DVDs as much anymore. "Let's watch it."

Sarah then took out her portable DVD player, which Jenny had also given her. She'd bought it in an op shop. The DVD player was about the size of a book, and folded out to make a screen, like a small laptop. It was small and smooth and easy to hide. There was a port to plug in two sets of earphones, which they did. No need to have any passers by hear them.

"Why did Jenny choose this one?" asked Beth.

"Jenny knows all about how you're into Sean Bean at the moment and that you're interested in stories set in the future," said Sarah. "I told her everything about you."

Beth smiled.

They started watching the movie. As they watched, they kept a few pillows and books nearby, to hide the DVD player in case of a knock at the door. Beth was worried that Miss Howe might drop by to check up on her, because of how she'd cried in her office. However, she didn't.

The movie was set in a future society where emotions and the things which caused them were banned. There was a special police force that went around catching people who had books, music and artworks. To stop emotions even more, everyone had to take a special drug three times a day, which they injected into their necks. The leader of the society was called Father. He seemed really smart and had a soft voice. Father said the people had to take the drug and not have books or music or paintings because it was too dangerous to let people have feelings. Feelings caused fights and wars and other bad things.

Sarah was a little disappointed in the movie. It was too violent. She wanted to stop watching it halfway through. She closed her eyes during a few violent scenes. But Beth was enjoying the movie and wanted to keep going. Sarah did not grumble anymore and they watched it all.

When the movie finished, Beth and Sarah were quiet for a few moments.

"It's a bit like here, isn't it?" said Beth.

"What? No it isn't," said Sarah.

"Everything in that world is on a timetable and nobody is happy," said Beth. "They do things at the same time. Go here, do that. They can't have books, just like we can't have DVDs. They even have to take their injections at the same time. Think of all the kids here who have to take Ritalin every morning."

Sarah said nothing. She was a little bit annoyed that Beth had made her watch the whole thing. It wasn't that good a movie. But she thought Beth did have a point about the Ritalin.

Sarah began to pack away the DVD player. Beth put the DVD back into its case, and re-read the blurb. *A sci-fi action movie set in a dystopia.*

"Can I have some sultanas?" said Beth.

"Help yourself," said Sarah. She tossed a half-full plastic bag of sultanas tied with a rubber band in Beth's direction. Kids at Colvin Hills Home got sultanas as a reward from Miss Howe sometimes, but Sarah didn't like them that much.

The window rattled from the wind. It was an old building. Beth ate a sultana. It was sweet and small and soft.

"Do you think Colvin Hills Home is a dystopia?" said Beth.

"Not really," said Sarah. "Maybe sort of."

"I do," said Beth. "We live in a dystopia. Our lives are all regulated for our own good and there's no love and we'd all rather be somewhere else and basically it sucks."

"That's not true. I love you," said Sarah. "You've got friends. You think too much. I'm going to go clean my teeth."

Sarah smiled and grabbed her toothbrush and toothpaste. She unlatched the door and headed out to the shared bathroom down the hall, leaving Beth alone. Beth listened to Sarah's receding footsteps. She would be gone for a few minutes.

She slumped on the pillows that were still on the floor. The memory of that lonely red leaf falling from the bough outside Miss Howe's office returned to her. She felt sad. A tear came back to her eye. She wiped it away.

She went to the second drawer of her bureau. She opened it and rummaged past the socks. Right at the back was an envelope, old and slightly creased. She took it out. On the front, the name of the orphanage was written in biro. There were also four small orange squares for the postcode, but they were not filled in.

From the envelope she took a folded letter. She took the letter up to her bed.

It was a letter from her mother, whom Beth had never seen. The letter had been left with Beth when she was a baby. Her mother had dropped her at the orphanage, wrapped up in a blanket,

in a cardboard box from Bunnings. The orphanage had returned the letter to Beth on her 8th birthday, because they thought she was old enough then. It said,

*Please look after my little girl. Please give her a good life. I only wish I could give her the life she deserves, but I can't. Her name is Beth. Maybe one day in the future we will meet again. I love her.*

It wasn't signed, but the orphanage had stamped it with the date they had received the letter and Beth: 18th May, 2013.

Today was her birthday.

Reading the letter always made her feel sad, so she'd often thought that she should throw it away. That way she would never have to read it again, and it could never make her sad. But she kept the letter.

Besides, even if she did throw it away, she would always remember it anyway.

The door swung open. Sarah returned from the bathroom with a cheerful look on her face.

"What's the opposite of living in an orphanage?" asked Beth.

"Living with your own family of course," said Sarah. "Gonna go clean your teeth?"

"Yeah," said Beth. She folded up the letter, placed it back into the the envelope, and slipped it under her pillow. She grabbed her toothbrush and toothpaste, and headed for the bathroom.