



CHAPTER THREE: AN UNCIVIL WAR

As soon as Lachlan woke at dawn, Robin stretched and prepared to start walking again. Keeping an eye on Lachlan as he packed his bags in the front seat of the car, Robin peed quickly and took a moment to ask: “male or female - what will I be today?”

The existential question of I or WHY popped up, as always. Robin with an I was usually masculine. Batman’s sidekick and joining the Hood to rob the rich and save the poor came instantly to mind. Robin spelt with a Y, on the other hand, was typically feminine. But that dualistic way of thinking was old-fashioned, narrow-minded and lazy. The burnt umber hues of a Robin Redbreast feathered male and female birds alike.

Besides, when a name is spoken it is not spelt... unless people ask... “Is that Linda with an I or a WHY?” Robin whispered, “as if it really matters.” For at least a decade, names had been getting more fanciful and now genderless names were all the rage. Even as late as last year, Robin’s university teachers had been reluctant to jump to conclusions.

‘Androgynous’. That was the word Robin’s well-meaning mother had used for years. But Robin hated the word. It sounded robotic and created a mental picture of a flat-chested, hairless-chinned-youth, who was completely asexual... some sort of BarbieKen doll with nothing between the legs. Robin couldn’t relate to the image, even today, with a newly shaved head.

Lachlan was getting out of the car. He raised his hands over his head, did some sort of jazz-hands-to-salute-the-sun-thing, then slung his backpack over one shoulder and then the other, and headed East along the middle of the road.

“Stupid,” Robin muttered, “so exposed.”

Robin stood up and started slinking through the dense weeds that choked the side of the road. Triffids, Robin called the weeds, in memory of the mutant, carnivorous, plants first discovered in a Doctor Who episode watched in middle school... or was it a Sci Fi book?

“Whatever,” Robin said softly, “The Devils are the real problem.”

‘Devils’ was the collective term Robin had assigned the swarms of insects that fed off the sticky Triffid sap. They were easily upset and only too happy to bite through Robin’s jacket and jeans.

Pushing the smaller Triffids away, and creeping around the larger ones, Robin was grateful for how easy it was to stalk a cautious person. Lachlan was strong and fit, ‘a real outdoorsy type’ Robin’s mother would have said, and yet, he was surprisingly hesitant in his decisions. The stop-start nature of his progress gave Robin plenty of time to think.

Inevitably, Robin thought about the year that was. A happy start at university, majoring in History. Students who were generally curious and kind. Teachers who were happy to alternate between ‘he/she’ labels, or else, apply the blanket term ‘they/them’. Robin appreciated the freedom born of the ambiguity but always bristled slightly at the grammatical confusion.

Robin was only ever one person, not two... never really a they or them no matter what the terminology implied.



Why could people not imagine themselves a bit of both genders? Why was it so hard for society to recognize a masculine woman or a feminine man? Why could people not accept that gender might be a context-dependent variable? Or a personal choice?

WHY or I.

There were some days during The Uncivil War, where being female was helpful, for example, and other days when it was decidedly dangerous...

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Robin almost laughed out loud as Lachlan tore his pants on a car's bumper-bar. Lachlan often acted incredibly impressive for a teenage schoolboy, whilst on other days, Robin wondered how he had survived this long on his own.

Without wanting them, images of The Plague filled Robin's mind. First there was the mild disinterest regarding how many people were becoming 'spotty'. Plenty of families even encouraged contagion to happen. They cited the benefit of boosting individual immunity, even when The Establishment discussed the dangers of a lowered herd immunity. Ever superficial creatures, it was only when the spots of The Plague became unsightly weepy-pus-welts which couldn't be covered with makeup, that humans really started to worry.

Of course, by then, it was too late. The most vulnerable were already all gone. The very young, the very old, the sick and disabled. By the time the government ordered everyone to stay at home, the beginning of the end was well underway.

Robin was grateful when Lachlan headed off the road and into Triffid-territory. Having to follow his movements more closely crowded out any thoughts of what had happened next.

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Lachlan stopped to drink from his water bottle and eat fish, so rotten, Robin could smell it even from this distance. Robin's stomach growled, but the sensation was ignored, and thoughts were turned backwards, not inwards.

Robin remembered how the beginning of Lockdown had been an amusing distraction from regular routines. While renting rooms in a communal house, Robin and three others enjoyed staying home in their shared safe space. Robin kept studying online, whilst Tyler, a first-year nursing student, started working irregular shifts at the hospital as the administrators opened and closed the doors based on ever-changing government directives and intermittent funding. Alex, an electrician whose shopping center refurbishment was suspended, was happy to play computer games or prank Robin all day. Even Darcy, a sacked apprentice chef, was content to sleep in and interrupt Robin's studies with elaborate versions of cheese on toast.

When their supplies started to run low, Darcy's homegrown herbs, both legal and illegal, had helped them barter toilet paper and chocolate with the neighbors after dark.

But then, Tyler and Alex were labelled Essential Labor and forced to work more and more. When they occasionally returned home, they were tired and argumentative, taking long showers to decontaminate themselves, then locking their bedroom doors. Soon, Tyler stopped coming home at all and called to say hi from the hospital, the phone calls getting fewer and further apart, the updates getting grimmer and more urgent.



One day, Alex came home, bloodied from a beating received at the Power Station. The Union had put up notices of monolithic disdain that screamed statements in bold black and white: “Men are Men – Women are Women – Trust the Science – Biology is Not Discrimination – The Future is Not Binary – Heterosexuals Welcome Here – Ban the Bad – Destroy the Freaks – Kill All Unhuman Animals.”

Robin threw up in the bushes, strangely ecstatic when several Devils were splattered against a Triffid. With a quick back-of-hand mouth-wipe, Robin began walking again, ignoring the haunting images of Darcy’s fate.

“Just let people be people,” Robin sighed while closing in on Lachlan.

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Over the last few days, a pattern had emerged: when Lachlan rested, Robin rested too. For some reason, however, today Lachlan was in a rush. He had already covered a decent distance this morning, and if it was possible, seemed to be walking faster the further East he went.

Robin was required to keep pace – The Lord of the Ashes had been clear; “whatever it takes, regardless of who stands in your way, you will deliver Lachlan to me... or else.” Even a month after the words were spoken, the intensity with which they were delivered still rang like a burning slap in Robin’s ears.

Lachlan. Lachan. Lachlan.

The name was repeated in Robin’s subconscious, from dawn to dusk, like a mantra, an affirmation... a manifestation. Once Robin had accepted The Lord of the Ashes’ directive, there was no turning back.

It had been easy to find Lachlan’s home. Easy too to figure out why the house was empty. The note on the kitchen fridge had been the giveaway: “Gone to River’s Bend”. What was not so easy was determining where River’s Bend was, or why he was going there.

Luckily, Lachlan was a secretive soul. Robin had found novels stashed in the base of his t-shirt drawer. Curious, Robin flicked through the hidden books, expecting them to be pornographic, excessively violent, or filled with embarrassing marginalia... but no. They were just cheap paperbacks, all horror stories, kept in the dark due to some shame, or value, Robin couldn’t discern. More useful were the notebooks Robin found, pushed into the back of Lachlan’s cupboard, behind his school shoes and a deflated basketball.

Robin had sat cross-legged on Lachlan’s floor and started reading: Fidelia. Fidelia. Fidelia.

From that day onwards, Robin had two names to repeat ad nauseum. And a better understanding of where River’s Bend was, and who might be waiting there.

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For half an hour now, Lachlan had been pacing backwards and forwards beside a grove of gnarly, semi-submerged trees. As Lachlan spun in circles, Robin took in the surroundings and smiled. Many of the houses were under water, but there were a few on higher ground, only one of which had smoke coming from its chimney.

“Fidelia, Fidelia, Fidelia,” Robin muttered while skirting a large group of Big Birds. They always reminded Robin of children’s TV... and the makings of a decent meal... which instantly manifested images of Darcy the chef...



Moving ahead of Lachlan, and closer to the smoking-house, Robin crouched down behind the remnants of a white picket fence that had seen better days. Robin snorted a quiet laugh at the blunt symbolism of busted boundaries and broken dreams. Scratching at the Devil Bites that had appeared on ankles and wrists, Robin scooped up a couple of handfuls of cool mud to press against them. Robin cursed quietly as a small pile of adjacent rocks suddenly fell over and a rising tide appeared in each of the new hole-bowls.

Looking around, Robin thought a lace curtain on the house had opened and closed, but also noticed that Lachlan was still spinning in circles, so close to the finish line.

“Lachlan, Lachlan, Lachlan,” Robin whispered, hustling backwards into a batch of blue-brown Triffids and closer to the remnants of a sickly orchard that bore no fruit.

Robin weighed up the two most obvious options; go into the house before Lachlan did and wait for him there, or, given there was no way of knowing how many people were in the house with Fidelia, wait a while.

‘Gung-ho’ was Robin’s preferred way of living, but there was no more certain way of dying than inviting yourself to an ambush. Images of Darcy danced in Robin’s mind, and so ‘wait and see’ it was.

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Robin didn’t have to wait long. As soon as Lachlan arrived at the house, he bashed his way through the rear door and disappeared into the house. Robin listened carefully. There was no hysterical screams, no gunshots, no indication of a fight in progress... or a celebration for that matter.

Hunched over, Robin scooted closer to the house and quickly peeked through the gaping wound Lachlan had made of the door. Inside was the strangest of reunions. Two young adults embracing on a picnic rug, surrounded by what appeared to be the remnants of a tea party, complete with teddy bears.

Slumping off to one side, Robin slouched against the house’s rear wall to listen to their conversation.

Lachlan was telling Fidelia of how his mother and brother had died from sickness and anarchy, and Fidelia was asking questions so vague it was obvious she knew nothing of the severity of The Plague or The Uncivil War that had followed.

“We listened to the radio,” Fidelia said, “until it became uncertain whether the voices we heard were local news reporters or propaganda from overseas. We heard about overflowing hospitals, park burials and riots... then nothing. We kept eating the vegetables from the garden, and stewing the neighbor’s apples... but then... slowly, things started to mutate... to multiply or dwindle... until... everything had changed, and we...”

“I know,” Lachlan could be heard interrupting, “change is an understatement! All hell broke loose! That’s why Father decided to break out of The Complete Lockdown and join The Resistance.”

“Resistance against what?” Fidelia asked.

“Them,” Lachlan replied emphatically.

Robin shivered and zoned out. Us and Them. What an ancient ideology. For all times, people had separated themselves into two combative teams. So many history books written by old white men about old white men subduing other men, women, and the environment. The themes of history



were so repetitive it was almost boring to recount: possession, obsequiousness, assimilation, rebellion, paranoia, insanity, imprisonment, death, decay, destruction...

Fiction novels were full of it too, from the subjugation of individual girls in “Jane Eyre” through to the colonial exploitation of an entire race in “A Heart of Darkness”... man always wanting to conquer and control... and in doing so, obliterating one set of beliefs with a counter opinion that rubs out diversity, individuality, uniqueness... and for what?

I and WHY, Robin thought, one for the other, neither for nothing.

Robin remembered all the incels, trolls, keyboard warriors, and armchair activists, who had flooded the internet during the early days of The Uncivil War. None of them knew it at the time, but their actions coincided with the last days of the World Wide Web. All those toxic messages spreading poison everywhere and destroying everything.

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“You’re bleeding,” Fidelia said.

Robin was pulled back into the present and tried to listen more carefully. Blood was bad, Robin thought, what had happened, when, and how had I missed it? Then, as Lachlan brushed it off, talking of Dinner Fish and big teeth, Robin remembered the incident at the river and brushed it off too. So long as Lachlan kept the wound clean it would be alright... unless fish were now venomous too.

Lachlan was asking Fidelia where her mother was. Even without being able to see Fidelia, Robin could hear her being evasive, “it was if Mother Nature turned on us. The weather became so moody... the animals became so weird... and then one day, Mother went to get food... and never returned.”

Robin could hear Fidelia crying and then, no matter how hard Robin listened; nothing. All sounds from the house had stopped. A minute later, Robin snort-laughed at the realization the teenagers were kissing. It’s the end of the world as we know it, Robin thought, and teenagers are still being teenagers.

Crawling back towards the damaged rear door, Robin did another rapid look-see and saw Lachlan’s plastic bag beside Fidelia’s teddies and teacups. It felt wrong to interrupt such a small but significant moment; a kiss which was presumably their first, and potentially their last.

How very Romeo and Juliet, Robin thought, “Romeo... Romeo... where are you Romeo?”

And then another voice cut into Robin’s head. The Lord of Ashes saying “Lachlan, Lachlan, Lachlan,” was now joined by the voice of Darcy reminding Robin to hurry up; “a deal is a deal – one life for another.”

“Too bad, too sad,” Robin whispered after taking another quick glance around the door frame at the kissing couple’s entwined feet, “I’s and WHY’s aside, this is the task I was assigned to do... today’s the day... what The Lord of the Ashes wants... The Lord of the Ashes gets.”

Robin stood, and with a quick shoulder-roll and hand flex, moved in front of the rear door and whispered, “and what The Lord of the Ashes wants, is to get his son back.”

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