



KEEP THE INSIDE Olumide Popoola

“The dimensions?”

“The what?”

Carly looked at the woman in front of her. Was she serious? It was a bunker, did they really intend on renting it? The wellness shut-out. It sounded like an awful idea.

“I want to know that we can get the maximum amount of people in.”

Carly turned to her colleague who was talking to an elderly lady by the pre-ordered books shelf. Samantha was laughing, her hand on the woman’s back. Carly rolled her eyes and turned around again.

“We’re not used to renting it out, it’s been storage for most of my time here. We’ll probably have to measure it.”

“That would be wonderful,” the woman with the blonde fringe said. “Will we be able to have access to all the rooms down there? It really is the future, living underground. Totally amazing, environmentally...Very green. But we’re doing it mostly for the isolation. To recharge. To get back in touch with yourself. Like really.”

“I understand.” Carly did not but if they could make this work the income could run the whole library. “I’m not sure about health and safety...”

“Don’t worry about that, our lawyers will take care of any issues. If we can come to an agreement.”

Nine months later the renovations were complete. The bunker was decked out with reclaimed wood. The design team had gone to great lengths and the contractors had managed to get the underfloor heating working. The door that led from the street straight down to the bunker had two security guards with name badges. The woman with the fringe, Lauren, was fluttering about like an excited bird, stopping passerbys.

“The ultimate pampering experience. Here is your chance to shut out from everything that stands in the way of ... Y O U. Opening offer: packages available at half price.”

Carly was standing on the main road. Samantha was laughing again.

“I can’t take them serious. It’s all just...”

“It’s happening Sam. One guy signed up for 90 days. 90!”

“How is that even possible?”

“They’ll supply him with all everything he needs, the vitamin d shower will take care of the lack of sun. And whatever else they have there. It’s all tested otherwise their legal team would have not gotten approval from the council.”

Carly bit her lip. Samantha looked at Lauren who was talking excitedly to some people attracted by the posters that were fixed on the outside of the building.

Three months later Frank, the first long-term guest, came out. Carly stood by the gates and watched a BBC reporter interview him. It was all he had hoped for. He felt he understood the world better. The reporter asked him what he had done with his own flat during those three months. And with his job. Frank smiled but seemed to not want to answer. Then he said, "sometimes you have to chose yourself. All the way."

Carly turned away and went back inside. She had her shift to finish. To chose herself, she liked that. Why did you need to do it away from the world? It was dark when she left the library. She wrapped her arms around her coat. The gates to the bunker were shut, the security guards had left. There was a two day deep clean before the new guests were coming.

"What do you think of it all?"

Carly jumped. The shadow crept closer. Before she could run a hand was on her arm.

"I saw you earlier."

Frank. Carly held her breath and stood as still as she could. His eyes were piercing but he didn't seem to want to hurt her. He took out a piece of paper.

"Here. It was the first time I had heard about it."

Carly read the red caption that spread across a picture of a flat without windows set in a cloud.

Be by yourself. Heal. The Wellness shut-out.

"But you're not by yourself. And you're not healing. I really wanted to be alone." Frank's voice was shaking. It had been a long day. She didn't feel like seeing a guy she didn't know cry because he had spent all his money on the latest fad.

"I have to go."

The next day he was there when she walked to the tube. Carly lifted her chin briefly. Frank followed her.

"You didn't tell me what you think."

She stopped. The street lamp lit him up as if he had a halo.

"You look tired." Carly saw the lines on his face. She had thought he was in his early thirties. Maybe she had been wrong. His short afro was mostly grey. He was pleading with his eyes. Carly wasn't sure for what. But she knew tiredness.

"Why did you do it, I mean really?"

"My mother."

They were facing each other now. People were rushing by. Frank's brow starting twitching.

"There were black people here during the second world war, you know."

Carly nodded. Frank continued.

"My mother. She died a few years back. She wasn't here but she went to a bunker not too far off. She never got over it. The fear. The being shut away. The devastation when you got out and saw what was destroyed, who..."

They were walking now to the calmer end of the street.

“I wanted to know what it felt like...”

“It’s for the well-off only. It’s the opposite of keeping us alive! They start here and then all gets taken over and there is nothing left for us.” She had managed to hold it in for so long. It was completely dark now. They stopped by a lamp.

“My mother used to bring us here. There was a swing there.”

Frank looked like he had more to say but he put his hands around the lamp post and swung himself around. Once, twice, then a few more times. Each time his eyes caught Carly’s he smiled.

“It’s not different. You keep something alive. Against the odds. It’s like that.”