

## The Last Man

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Niamh sighed, stood, and threw another log on the fire. She was going to have to be careful about this. When she'd looked at the wood stack by the back door there seemed to be enough to last out this winter – just – but what would happen next year? Obviously she would never run out of wood completely – trees grew after all – but the thought of cutting a tree down by herself terrified her. She had found a chainsaw in the shed, and a can of petrol, but she had no idea how to use one. Chainsaws were dangerous, anyway.

Leaving that thought for the moment, she wandered over to the window. The canal bridge was right there, with the steps leading down to the towing path directly opposite. She'd spent some time clearing those steps, last autumn, when the leaf fall made them slippery. Not that anyone used them these days, except her, but it kept her occupied.

Involuntarily, she shivered. It looked cold out there. The canal was starting to freeze over, glistening in the moonlight. Just a thin coating – nowhere near strong

enough to walk on – but a sign that spring was still very far in the future. Pretty, in a way, but it made her glad she had the fire. She drew the curtains tight and sat back down, watching the flames flickering in the hearth. She thought about reading, but that would mean lighting a candle, and she wanted to save those. She'd probably go to bed soon. In fact, she realized, she'd been adapting her sleeping patterns according to the seasons, going to bed quite late last summer and now soon after sunset – when it got dark. Was this how people used to live before electricity?

Electricity. There had been none of that for eight months now, ever since the day she'd been the only one to turn up for school...

She reached for her calendar, checking where she'd crossed off the days. Assuming she hadn't forgotten one, she would be sixteen in six months. Legally old enough to live on her own, independently. Except she'd been living on her own since last June, with no choice in the matter. And the laws probably didn't apply any more, with nobody to make or enforce them. Back in August she'd noted her birthday, but there didn't seem to be anything to celebrate. Now, if her world hadn't

changed so much, she would have been preparing for her GCSEs. Not a lot of point any more.

Perhaps she should have some supper. It would have to be out of a tin, of course – there was no fresh food, and she'd had to empty the freezer as soon as she realized the electricity was off. Fortunately, there was plenty of tinned food in the pub, and she'd also been able to stock up from the village shop and the school kitchen. It had been hard doing that – it took a lot of effort to convince herself she wasn't stealing; that nobody was ever coming back for it.

At least the gas cooker in the pub kitchen still worked, although for how much longer she wasn't sure. There were two cylinders out back, but once they ran out she had no idea if she would ever be able to find more, and even if she could, how would she get them back to the pub by herself?

The pub. It seemed weird to be living by herself in a pub at fifteen, but there hadn't actually been a lot of options. She cast her mind back to the day her world had come apart. It had just been a normal day at first. She'd been ready for school in plenty of time – she liked school – but then the minibus hadn't turned up.

Fortunately, her mum had offered to drive her the five miles before going to work, so she wasn't late.

But school was very quiet. Where were all the other girls? And there was nobody about in the village, either. What was going on? Was it a holiday and she'd forgotten? The school was open though, so in she went – and found the caretaker.

She knew enough first aid to realize straight away that he needed professional help. She pulled out her phone to call an ambulance but there was no signal. Desperate, she'd tried the school office – the phone there worked, but when she'd dialled 999 there was no answer. No answer, on the emergency number!

That was when she'd panicked, running desperately through the village trying to find someone, anyone, who could help. And the pub had seemed a logical choice. After all, the people who ran it lived on the premises. They had to be there. And they were. In the yard, lying on the ground, not moving.

Her mum hadn't come to collect her that afternoon.

She'd spent the night in the pub. The only other realistic option would have been the sick bay at school, but empty schools are creepy places – especially at night – and she hadn't been able to face it. She had no way to get home, short of walking, and she was terrified of what she might find there anyway, so she'd settled for the pub.

In the morning it had dawned on her that she needed to do something about the bodies, but she wasn't strong enough to dig holes to bury them – not by herself – and she couldn't even move them on her own either, and before she could think of another option... the flies came.

For a while it had been gross. Horrible. She'd shut herself in the pub, not even daring to look outside, but after a while she had come to understand that even flies serve a purpose, and nature had reclaimed its own. It had been easier after that.

She had spent some time pondering what could have happened. A virus? But why hadn't it also affected her? With no internet, she'd resorted to the school library, but there were no obvious answers. Surely, if she had survived, others must have – but nobody had come to

the village these last eight months. She'd found a bicycle in the shed, and used it to explore the surrounding villages, but everywhere was the same. Deserted. Uncannily quiet. She hadn't dared to go as far as the nearest town, scared of what she might find, although it did occur to her that eventually she might have to if she ran out of supplies.

A faint tinkling noise roused her from her thoughts. She had the vague feeling she ought to recognize the sound, but she couldn't place it. Where was it coming from, anyway? Inside or outside? Outside. It had to be. She checked through the window. And then she was grabbing her coat and boots and running outside as fast as her legs could carry her.

From the bridge parapet the noise was louder, clearer. The sound of ice breaking as the water moved under it. And in the distance a light, white, brighter than she had seen in months – an *electric* light. And it was moving. There was another noise, too. An old-fashioned, slow-revving diesel engine.

I'm dreaming, she thought. I've fallen asleep in front of the fire and I'm imagining this. But what if I'm not...

'Hey! Stop!' She was shouting now, waving her arms as the light passed under the next bridge and shone full onto her, temporarily blinding her. She waved some more – and was rewarded with the sound of the engine slowing to a steady tunc-tunc. Idling. Emotions swept through her: relief, excitement, nervousness, as she stumbled down the steps onto the towing path, reaching it just as the bows of the boat drew level with her.

Despite the engine, it wasn't an old boat, she thought. Full cabin, portholes with the faint glow of lights from within, traditional stern, probably full-length...

And a figure standing at the tiller, head and shoulders sticking up beyond the cabin slide. A man, she thought. Quite scary-looking, with the way the light shone upwards, casting long shadows across his face. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all.

It took her all her courage to speak again.

'Hi.'

The boat eased to a stop with the back cabin in the bridge-hole. The doors swung open, allowing light to spill out onto the counter. The man emerged.

‘Are you for real?’

She nodded, nervous. Her finger drifted to her lower lip. The guy grabbed a rope from the cabin roof and slipped one end over a dolly, before stepping onto the path with the other end in his hand.

‘I’m Adam,’ he said. ‘And you are...’

Now, in the moonlight, she could get a better look at his face. He didn’t seem to be that old. Older than her, definitely, but not *old*. Twenty? She shivered briefly, as she wondered what her parents would have thought of the age gap, but then considered that if he really was the last man on earth, she could have done a lot worse.

She grinned big, and held out her hand, desperately hoping he wouldn’t shake it. He understood though, and as she absorbed the warmth of his big hand surrounding hers she felt a tingling sensation in the pit of her stomach – something she had never even experienced before, let alone explored. It felt right, though. Good. And he had a boat...

She looked up at him and smiled.

‘Adam,’ she whispered, ‘and Niamh.’