

KARINE RAYMOND

APEX GENERATION

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A Short Story

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novembre

At six in the morning, the owner entered the cluttered living room, banging a metal spoon against a tin can. When all ten pairs of eyes were on him, the lean, deeply wrinkled man announced the sale of the inn—if you could call this hovel an inn, with its moldy ceilings bulging from water seepage. He would be handing the keys over to the buyer the next day. Neither sign nor visitors had given them a clue, though his broken English left no room for doubt.

“New owner is entrepreneur. She going to tear down house. No lease: bye-bye!”

It had been barely twelve days since Kabyra had stumbled on this clandestine dormitory for women, no questions asked and payable in cash. The innkeeper inflated an extra camping mattress whenever he added a lost soul to the herd. Her private-school friends had disowned her, and she’d had to find a cheap place to stay after she ran away. The loot she’d stolen from her mother’s emergency stash was rapidly shrinking.

Accustomed to their ignoble life, young and old packed up without flinching, misery imprinted on their faces. Too bad for Rahmi, Kabyra's sleepy neighbor, who had just laid her gummy head on the pillow after a long shift. She was a laborer at the recycling plant, and her clothes had a funky, metallic smell. The burn on her left cheek was a constant reminder of the poor working conditions she endured.

On the porch of the century-old house, the women hugged each other before dispersing like plumes of dandelion in the wind. A hand on Kabyra's shoulder, Rahmi smiled encouragingly. Her complexion should have evoked the golden sun of her Pakistani origins, but the long hours at the plant had turned her face gaunt with fatigue.

"I'll be at The Mule for a few days," Rahmi said. "It's more expensive, but until we find something better, it's safer than a park bench."

Kabyra imagined returning home, begging her mother to take her in. Did she have another choice? "Mule," a stubborn and sterile hybrid. It sounded so depressing. She didn't have enough money for any kind of decent rent, and the police were probably looking for her, so it was impossible to get a cheap job for some quick cash. At least legally.

In any case, the recent increase in population had killed the local job market. Exiles of the Great Floods occupied all workplaces that formerly relied on a constant supply of needy students—exiles like her: Kabyra Monard-Doyle, sixteen years old, on the

run, without friends, without family, and broke. Her stomach tensed as she watched Rahmi wave before turning the corner.

Across the street, children from the elementary school stretched their legs in the cramped basketball court. Red-and-black sweatshirts, fluorescent shoes, they were itching to be let loose. Kabyra wouldn't miss the glaring spotlights left on every other night, which pierced the thin curtains of the inn. Not to mention the cries of the supporters and the old pop music tainting the atmosphere with gloomy nostalgia. Still, she preferred the loud enthusiasm to the rasping bellows of the apartment block behind, a hangout for junkies where the police sometimes dropped in to break up a brain-addled scuffle, sometimes to save the neighborhood from a raging bonfire.

After a last look at the students, Kabyra found the courage to put one foot in front of the other, but quickly stopped at the permanent garage sale that cluttered the neighbor's driveway. Between a cut-glass ashtray and a boom box, she saw a tarnished metal oil lamp, a forlorn remnant of a bygone era. For a long time, she had dreamed of rebuilding her life from scratch: clearing land, making a shelter, hunting, picking mushrooms and herbs. Freed from the shackles of her mother, of calorie counting and pretentious neighbors, of the school that mistook conformity for education.

She sighed. After having rubbed shoulders with homeless and solitary women, relying on sheer grit

to survive, she felt like an ungrateful brat of wealth and privilege. Her running-away backpack was better stocked than theirs, and it was only a hundredth of the objects that lined her room at her family's primary residence.

A man came out of the garage—his pear-shaped face and sagging jowls made him look like a toad.

"How much?" asked Kabyra, pointing to the lamp.

"Six bucks."

She fumbled through her pockets, showed the vendor two crippled dollar bills. "That's all I have left," she lied.

She couldn't waste six dollars on a useless antique. Before she had time to put her money away, the toad tore it from her fingers and stashed it into the fanny pack hidden below his paunch. He grabbed an orange-and-black flashlight and shoved it in her hand. Kabyra looked on, questioning.

"That's two bucks," he said, patting the yellowed plastic protecting the bulb.

"Okay, but I don't need it."

"It's a lamp, and it's two bucks."

He closed his fanny pack and promptly returned to his camping chair in the shade of the garage.

Burning bile roiled Kabyra's stomach. *Who the hell do you think you are?* As she clenched the flashlight, a subtle tremor coursed through her body. She lifted her head as a loud but brief vibrating noise emanated from the power line above her. Her anger subsided.

She stared at the black wire. A sparrow landed there, silently.

Kabyra put the lamp away in her backpack, then stomped past the downtrodden apartment blocks. Here, aluminum cladding slats had come loose and were obstructing the sidewalk. There, the rusted remains of two cars and a heap of garbage bags blocked the main entrance to the ground floor. At the end of the street, a metal fence had been erected in the fall of her fourteenth birthday to protect the neighborhood around Lake Tirana from the destitute.

Over the past decade, rising water levels had uprooted people in low-lying areas. They had taken refuge in mountain towns like hers, and had invaded the perfectly groomed lawns with tents, caravans, and the unrefined turmoil of human need. The shock wave of awareness and collective resolve that should have ensued crashed against the uncaring barrier. On the other side, decorum and social niceties prevailed. The grass was green within this haven for the wealthy; the dearest habits of pampered life remained safe and sound. Unconcerned.

As she stealthily scanned the gate, she recognized the gatekeeper sitting in the security cabin, a neighborly old man with a hunched back and a kind eye for the vagaries of youth. She was in luck. No one in sight, Kabyra approached. Through the glass, Andrew looked at her disapprovingly.

“You know I can’t let you pass. If by any chance I saw you prowling around, I’d have to call the police.”

She nodded uncertainly. Andrew checked his monitors.

“Mr. Pinet’s Mercedes is coming. You should go.”

As she stepped back, he added nonchalantly. “There’s a new hole in the fence near the Galibot stream. Little rascals use it to loot the sheds.”

“Quiet as a mouse,” she said, smiling.

He shrugged, motioning her to leave.

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The Galibot stream flowed into Lake Tirana through a dense thicket of young conifers, an ideal place to cut the chain-link fence without being spotted. New and rusted wires crisscrossed the fence haphazardly, making it clear the guards had repaired the breach time and again. Her watch showed seven fifty. At this hour of the morning, Edgar, her stepfather, would already be inserting a needle into the gums of his first client. As for her mother, Janice, she was surely blending her breakfast shake with berries picked from their estate. In twenty minutes, she would get behind the wheel of her white Range Rover and drive toward the village of Mount Carmine. There, she would oversee the smooth running of the exclusive hospital, dedicated to the optimal health of international patients who suffered from both ailments and riches.