

## We by Dillon Poe

Liz sat in the exam room staring at a sun-bleached painting of rolling hills, the frame lacquered and cracking. Dr. Heln cleared his throat behind a clenched fist, the sound muffled and distant. In the past, Dr. Heln always had the answers, doling them out in an almost lazy manner. He stood close to the door, both hands clutching the clipboard, his stethoscope tucked neatly beside his striped blue tie. He cleared his throat, louder this time.

“Okay,” Liz said. She didn’t know what else to say, and Dr. Heln didn’t have any answers. As she walked to the door Dr. Heln fumbled for the handle until he managed and swung it wide for Liz’s exit. She walked through the hall, past reception, and out the front door. She was met with a blast of wind, tremors rose from her legs and spread throughout her body. She climbed into her olive green four-door civic, turned the engine over, and sped off just as Dr. Heln ran out of the front door waving her jacket. He just caught sight of her car with the yellow diamond placard on the back window reading “baby on board.” He thought of yelling for her, but there was no point.

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The earth shook. Two plates ground against each other, each forcing the other higher and higher circling the lush farmland and town below. Chris’s hammer paused on the backswing. He widened his feet and waited for the shaking to stop. As it did he swung the hammer, hitting the last nail in the barbwire fence with the satisfying clink. The five o’clock news stopped its broadcast as the localized earthquake happened. Now, they scrambled for answers. Chris packed up his four-wheeler, checked the last item off his “To-Do” list that the new owner forced him to write each day. He drove first to the main ranch house where the owner stood on his brand-new wrap around porch. His pristine white cowboy hat studded with real gold, and his cowboy boots that have never known dirt. Chris let him know that his work for the day was finished and he smiled and laughed on queue. Then to his own house, hidden behind a hill in one of the lowest spots in the valley.

Henry let out a deep breath and smiled as the driveway dropped lower and the sun's rays slowly slid behind him. He wiped his feet on the welcome mat, stomping, removing the caked-on mud. He opened the door into the house and threw his boots next to the tiny, colorful pairs stacked orderly against the wall. He walks to his chair and sat. He began to think of the work that needs done. The cows need to be moved to the next pasture, the bulls need fed, and the hay field in the west needs cut and dried. The local news channel finally had an answer. "A freak geological occurrence." That was their new saying, the new catch phrase of the local news. The north pass was closed, the only pass into the valley. A solid wall of rock raised out of the ground carrying with it a forty-foot stretch of road, now a hundred feet higher. The entire valley was surrounded by fresh rock reaching towards the sky.

Henry slumped back in his chair, letting his head rest as he stared at the axe hewn wood ceiling. His stomach grumbled and he thought of Elizabeth. Early on you could see him playing with the children through the kitchen window above the sink. The times he would come home late, curl up with the children in front of the fireplace and tell them stories that only he knew. The fireplace was empty, the house cold, he knew he had to light it, but for now he had other pressing issues.

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The balloons stretched tight against their strings—colorful blips decorating the park. The usual wind had died since the localized earthquakes started and the wall had formed. Helicopters could be heard in the distance carrying supplies to the valley until the pass could be cleared. The kids, Henry and Beth ran around the park with their cousins, stopping occasionally at an aunt or uncle to collect money or toys or to steal another bite of cake. During these stops they were met with sayings they had heard many times before, you have your father's eyes, your mother's hair, it is like looking at an old picture. As the children walked away whispers followed. But they enjoyed the sun, the newfound warmth in their valley.

Chris and Elizabeth watched them from a picnic table draped with a polka dot plastic tablecloth. Elizabeth sat upon the top of the table scanning the family gathered. She drew a shuddering breath and dragged her palms down her thighs. Chris bent forward, covering his face with his hands.

“I just, I just don’t know if I can do it anymore. It’s just work, and the kids. It just feels like too much.” His frame bent over further as the grass caught his tears.

Elizabeth laid back and stared at the cloudless blue sky. The earth shook once again. Each plate forcing the other higher. Elizabeth closed her eyes and saw the familiar black, her shoulder blades rocked digging into the table, rubbing on the thin gaily colored plastic. As the rocking slowed she sat upright scanning the frozen crowd for Henry and Beth who she found huddled together under a slide—Beth’s face buried in Henry’s chest. Chris still sat hunched; his hands now white with the pressure.

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The Wall—as the news was now calling it—stood taller than any object in the valley. It’s shadow always being cast somewhere, for now the sun could only reach the valley at its apex. The military took over the supply efforts, their army green helicopters dropping like fresh olives then rebounding back over the wall. They had tried explosives, hand tools and excavators, but nothing budged the wall. It’s surface chipped and cracked, but it still stood.

The towns people talked and whispered. How long could the government sustain their town? How long would they care? Could the wall grow taller, fully encasing the valley, plunging it into darkness? Nervous laughter would follow, but every eye would stray to the wall. As they watched the wall crept upwards and the ground shook.

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Liz sat straight up in bed. The house was dark except for a thin stream of light cascading through her cracked bedroom door. She rushed to the bathroom, got on her knees and clutched the white porcelain

toilet. This was the third time it had awakened her in the last four days. Dr. Heln had said this was the start of the end. The first to come out was her dinner of hotdogs and fries, Beth's favorite. Then, the acrid bile. It came out in shades of green and yellow. It burned the back of her throat and as it slid across her taste buds she couldn't help but imagine it tasted like a rotten, yet non-ripe orange. Flecks sprayed the toilet as she heaved. Bubbles formed on the slimy surface, each one popping when its greenhouse like gasses became too much for it to bear.

Liz flushed the toilet and sat, back to the wall; knees pulled up. Her arms encircled her legs as she rested her head on her knees, catching her breath as her stomach muscles began to relax.

"Mom?" Henry said as he stood at the cusp of the doorway, the light fell from the ceiling, hiding his face. "Are you sick?" he said as he made his way in. For a moment the smell skewed his face. But upon seeing his mother's drained expression, the smell fled from his mind and he sat next to her. Mirroring her position.

"Yes," Liz said, "very."

Henry glanced at her, "should I get some medicine?"

"It won't help. I am dying."

"We all are."

They slept there that final night. Liz's arm draped around Henry's shoulders. Their synced breathing broke early in the morning, long before the sun had cleared The Wall. This time when the earth shook everyone just rolled over in bed and went back to sleep, some lovers mingled and intertwined, some animals ceased their wining and were let out. Only a few noticed The Wall's progression. It grew hundreds of feet into the air and now it bent further in. The top of The Wall was close to touching. It was as if a funnel had been placed over the valley. A sun sized blue dot was the only sign that it was daytime.

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Elizabeth climbed into her four-door civic, turned the engine over, and rested her forehead on the wheel as the car warmed up. She ran through scenarios in her head. She would have to speak first, that was her downfall at the park. She was just about to tell him, until he brought up the separation. How it was all just too much for him. She didn't understand it. It was all too much for her, but she got through it. The children got her through it. But now Chris was alone. She thought she had given him enough time to clear his head. But at the party, he seemed worse. Worse than ever.

Liz knocked on the familiar door and entered. Chris sat, head resting back staring blankly at the ceiling. The house was filled with a soft blue glow seeping through the windows. The Wall letting in only a trickle of light. Liz bit her lip and stepped forward.

"I am dying. Cancer. It's terminal."

Chris looked up. His brow furrowed, "What? No."

"Yes. Dr. Heln said there is nothing we can do, maybe if we would have caught it earlier, maybe."

Chris put both hands on his chair and forced his way up. He stood in front of Elizabeth; his face masked with confusion. "You can beat this. There has to be something you can do!"

"No, there isn't. I don't think I can beat this." Chris sat down and hunched forward. He didn't notice the emphasis that Elizabeth placed on the second I. Maybe if he did Elizabeth wouldn't of left, slamming the front door just as the earth shook for the last time. Speeding down the driveway just as the hole closed in the sky.