

Life on the Meadows, by Lesley Gibson

Summary: *In a shanty town on Edinburgh's Meadows, a former academic struggles to hold her community together. When a fire breaks out, she puts her knowledge to the test, and her life on the line.*

Characters:

ISLA (f), *Scottish, early 50s, a former academic now community organiser.*

FREYA (f), *Scottish, late 20s or early 30s, Isla's daughter.*

MOTHER (f), *20s*

DIVERS PASSERS BY (-) *various*

ISLA (narrating): The biting chill of the Edinburgh haar numbs my arthritic fingers, slowing down the preparation of our evening meal. Through the window my eyes follow the furl of smoke from the neighbour's brazier. It rises just above the level of the roof, joining the smoke from the other shanties in hanging like a shroud over the Meadows.

Sound of a door swinging shut and somebody entering.

FREYA: Hi Mum, that's me completed the fire inspection rounds for the evening. Apart from a family that left a paraffin bottle outside next to an electric cable, all is looking good.

ISLA: Thanks Freya. Has it been put right?

FREYA: Yeah, they had just forgotten to pack it away. I think we have most people on board in our section. It has been a while since we had a bad fire. We need to keep trying to get the message out to the other sections, especially the newcomers in Melville Section 1.

...

Thanks for watching the kids for us.

ISLA: I love spending time with my grandchildren. I just wish it could be under different circumstances. **(Pensive)** I can honestly say that I did not expect to be living out my final years in a shanty town on the Meadows

FREYA: It seems like a lifetime ago that we lived like that lot up there in Marchmont. Look at them, their families all safe and warm, barricaded behind burglar bars and security fences. Protecting themselves from the likes of us, no doubt. Bet they think they were so much cleverer than us, with their money squirreled away in all the right hedge funds before the Great Famine of 2045. **(Sarcastic)** I guess we just got what we deserved.

ISLA (Tired): Ah Freya, let's not go over this again. The Famine has brought different challenges to different people.

FREYA: Okay, I'm not going to argue. *(Muttering under her breath)* Stupid incompetent government. *(More upbeat)* At least we can agree that the past few years have been horrendous. If anyone says "unprecedented" or "new normal" one more time, I think I might scream. Anyway.... At least the work you used to do is getting put to good use.

ISLA: All those years studying the science of fire safety in informal settlements... There certainly is an irony in that.... Are you hungry, love? Dinner's nearly ready.

FREYA: Thanks mum. Kids! Come on. Tea's ready.

A clatter and a scream

PASSER-BY 2: Fire! Fire!

ISLA (narrating): I feel the familiar clench in my stomach as I see flames leaping in the air at the site of the old play park next to Melville Drive.

People screaming, metal clanging, children crying.

PASSER-BY 1: Grab your buckets, fire in Melville 1! Call the fire brigade. Doubt they will get here in time but we have to try.

FREYA: Mum! Are your feet frozen into this mud? Have you forgotten the last time there was a fire in Melville 1? Don't just stand there. Kids, go with your dad - now! James, get them out of here.

ISLA (narrating): In that moment I want to forget. To sink into the ground and let the mud swallow me up. How much more hardship must this community bear? How many more times must this happen before the people of the Meadows will be given decent housing, electricity and sanitation. Melville Section 1 is home to the most deprived, in the most inhumane conditions, with so many people packed into metal and cardboard homes, precariously balancing a second or sometimes even third floor on top of an unstable base. Narrow alleyways, barely wide enough for a child to slip through, separate the homes.

FREYA: Mum!

ISLA: Okay, Freya, I'm with you. Mobilise the community response team! Get word to Melville Sections 2 and 3 to prepare for the flames. It looks like it's going to be a big one. Get them to pull down the first lines of homes to make a fire break. Evacuate everyone towards Bruntsfield Place.

MOTHER (panicking): My child, help, somebody help, my child is still inside. I was just gone for two minutes to fetch water to make tea and I left him playing inside.

FREYA: The security gate is locked and they can't find the key.

ISLA: Freya, grab some cloth and let's see if we can't prise open the metal wall at the back corner. Hey, you two, douse those flames, if this home catches, the boy won't make it.

MOTHER wails.

ISLA (cont'd): (*Calmly to the mother*) Listen to me, I am going to get your boy out but you need to keep him calm. Go to the front where he can see you and get him to lie on the floor and keep still. Come on Freya, have you got that cloth and something to use as a lever? Good, let's do this.

PASSER-BY 2: The fire has got too big, we can't control it.

Sound of glass shattering. Shrieks.

PASSER-BY 1: We can't stop it, it is going to catch.

FREYA: Mum, I've done it, we can get in! Hold it open and I will squeeze in.

ISLA: No Freya. Think of your own children. I will go.

Sound of creaking metal.

ISLA (*narrating*): Squeezing through the narrow gap held open by Freya, I crawl inside. Black smoke threatens to choke me. Air, so hot, stinging my eyes. Keep calm... Stay low... Keep calm.... Stay low... I crawl towards the front door where I know the boy is waiting.

Child whimpering.

ISLA (cont'd): I've got you, lad. Let's get you out of here. Crawl just in front of me. That's it, well done. You will soon be out of here.

Sounds of buckling metal sheets, glass shattering.

FREYA: Mum! Mum! You need to get out, now. Thank God, I can see you now! Come on lad, easy does it. He's out!

Loud crash and sound of metal sheet falling.

ISLA: Freya, I'm stuck, my leg won't move.

Crackling fire, gasps of disbelief.

ISLA (*narrating*): I feel the air getting hotter and hotter and I am sure I can smell the singeing of my own hair. I know that this is not possible with the thick toxic black smoke swirling all around me. Fleetinglly, I am amazed that in this moment of certain death, my brain is still insisting on rational thought. It has always been this way for me. A part of the scientific community warning the world of what may come to pass. But so few chose to

believe. I can't help pondering that feeling of detachment in this moment. How strange my life has turned out to be. I feel myself floating away...

END

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