

An End

by Nick Stokes

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An End

WHEN MATTHEW RETURNED there were twelve. He found the eleven others pressed shoulder to shoulder under a corrugated metal roof like thick lines of Others waiting to plug in and make their dull eyes bright. He listened to the rain on the roof. Twelve seemed too many. No matter, all love. The rain stopped and the twelve dispersed to their digging, planting, hoeing, picking, macheteing, cooking, eating, conversing, excreting, to their coffee, to their macadamia, and to their cane.

Matthew returned to the routine of the days. He forgot to count them. It did not take him long to not think anything of note. The other Community members spoke often, but often without expressing clear thoughts. He occasionally spoke to Mary of nothing. He had a conversation with Maggie that caused him unhappiness. He did not think about it. It was forgotten. He worked in silence.

Maggie, Matthew's older sister, full-breasted, smooth-skinned, wide-hipped, and happy-mouthed, was bit by a coral snake bringing the milk cow in from pasture. John was with her, but did not have the ability to treat her. She couldn't breathe, and he left her for help. He returned with his father Joseph to find her dead in the path, the cow chewing its cud, waiting to be milked. No matter, all love. They cut off her hair and buried her in a grave they dug communally.

John, engaged as Maggie's mate, tied her gold hair to the hair tree so her spirit would root in the Community, flutter in the breeze, and flower into the future. Joseph said a prayer for fertility, prosperity, simplicity, and meaningful happiness, and then wrote her name in the ledger at the end of the dateless list. They had long since abandoned dates.

Matthew was sad, but as his mother Sarah said, That is the way, nothing to be done. It is a good way to die, snakebit. She lived right, while she lived.

Matthew thought this true. With the first death since his return, he began to think thoughts without thinking.

There were eleven. One of them was in the belly of Sarah. Sarah was of an age when death would be accepted as normal. Death is normal was a value unevaluated by Matthew since his return. Sarah's pregnancy was said to be a natural miracle. She had always been a productive woman.

Fatherhood was attributed to Joseph, but John suspected Matthew of sneaking Sarah scientific fertility given him by the Others. Joseph had not produced a child by Hagar since John himself, who was several coffee harvests into sexual maturity. John had shared his concern with Maggie, who confronted Matthew about the abomination of an Other growing in their mother. But Maggie was dead. John stopped speaking his mind.

Matthew observed Hagar quieting as she incorporated the tasks Sarah was unable to perform during the period of dawn sickness. Hagar neither complained nor smiled. She washed, cooked, and dug. Hagar's Mother spent more and more time in a rocking chair, rocking, and so Hagar incorporated her function as well—water collector, berry picker,

gravesite tender. She had not a moment's rest, nor by all appearances a second thought.

Matthew said to Mary that Hagar worked harder and slept less than the frenetic Others. Mary calmed him by saying hard work was a simple joy, her mother had not sacrificed the old ideals, she was still one of them.

Matthew alone in the Community knew what such words meant. Perhaps any number of his disappeared brothers, those who fled or were stolen depending on who accounted, knew. Or they could be dead. No matter, all love.

He breathed heavily as he stepped onto the porch after climbing up the steep valley side with a basket of fish. Neither Great-grandmother nor Hagar's Mother stood to greet him. They sat in their rockers on the porch watching the sailing clouds, the smoking volcano, the humming birds, the cavity of the valley.

—You came back, Great-grandmother said.

—Yes.

—None of your brothers did. Your father didn't. Your grandfather didn't. Your great-grandfather didn't.

—My sister did.

—Your sister never went.

—I did. I came back.

—You then are like the greatest of the grandfathers who first left them.

—Thank you Great-grandmother.

—It is not a compliment. It is how it is. Could you communicate with them?

—No. But they made it understood that it would be easy.

—Yes, fast and easy. That is what I remember. Yes, fast. My father told me they promised time would cease to mean, it would move so fast. He told me it was a false promise. Then he left.

She did not look at Matthew. She watched the narrow valley, her skin shrouding her bones. He wanted to see what he'd seen again. He wanted to dig a hole. He wanted to speak his experience. He wanted to machete the cane.

—You encountered them? he said.

—When I was a girl. Not much older than your youngest brother. They came here.

—To convert you.

—They were looking for arable land. They measured steepness, sun exposure, moisture depth. They took tubes of dirt. They photographed the volcano. They ignored us, like one does beetles, until the end. They made us know the valley was not worth the investment it would require to engineer the soil and construct an agricultural factory.

—They were having a population explosion.

—No. They controlled their fertility long ago. They live a long time. Mating gives them no pleasure. Their codes are communally owned. A committee of representatives decides how and when the tool is to be enhanced for each subsequent generation. This is the story my great-grandmother told me before she died. They don't produce new people often. Their energies are otherwise expended. We also don't produce new people often. But they cannot reproduce with us. Their science can, but they cannot. They are a different species.

—What did they want with our land?

—Nothing. A more efficient site to produce nutrients than the one they possessed. But this valley is not profitable.

—I don't know what that means.

—It means not worth it. They made known the land here was slow. That we were trapped in time. That we were dying.

—We are dying. No matter, all love. We are living.

—They said they could help us. That it would be fast and easy. That it would be nothing for them.

—You said no.

—I said nothing. I hardly existed when she told me the story. I was five.

—How do you know? How old are you? Great-grandmother. How old am I?

—I watched them fly away. They roared. It was not like birds.

—All turned out for the best then. Life should not be fast and easy, but simple and savored.

—I am hungry Matthew.

—What would you like Great-grandmother?

When she did not answer, he went to fetch rice and beans and bananas and coffee and to have Hagar fry a fish. He felt good and tired after a day fishing and collecting the macadamia. He drank a cup of coffee while Hagar finished the meal. They spoke briefly of the weather and Mary's time of the month. He took the food to Great-grandmother and Hagar's Mother, who was dead in her rocker. As she ate slowly, Great-grandmother said she had been dead since she sat down that morning.

No matter, all love. Her forgotten name was written at the end of the list, her thin hair tied to the tree, her frail body buried.

Great-grandmother named the cause of death a cancer, a name the others in the Community did not know. Except later that night, when by firelight he stared blankly at a flaking pre-Separation flyer an Other had given him, Matthew thought he picked the meaningless word out of a long list of meaningless words struck through with a thick red line. He wanted to wake Mary. Instead he burnt the list.

There were ten. Though such things were not discussed, Mary, under a fig tree, naked on a blanket, post-coital in the afternoon, said to Matthew that Sarah's baby would be a girl. She said John had a premonition. Matthew said John was making a preemptive move to consolidate his position as its future mate in case the baby was a girl, especially in relation to Matthew's younger brothers Peter and Paul. Premonitions bore weight during mate selection.

Matthew rubbed Mary's slight belly. He envisioned it growing, then rested his hand in the hollow where thigh meets torso while he watched the blue sky sigh through the green leaves. This was different. Joseph was the keeper of the list, the defender of the right to persist, the last father left. Matthew and Mary were trying to change that, as had John with Maggie. But another child, a girl at that, would verify his authenticity. A girl was what was needed.

Matthew's father had gone to dig potatoes near the ridgeline and never returned. No matter, all love. Peter and Paul's father had hung himself from the hair tree. No matter, all love. Of his other brothers' father and of his father's father, he had never heard a word.

Mary, Matthew could feel, was sad. She thought too much of the future. She needed

a function to forget what may or may not come. They should harvest some pineapple, or papaya, or passion fruit, Matthew thought but did not say. He was not ready to get up yet.

—To enjoy simply, he said. To enjoy each other. To love.

She stared past him at the chayote vines spreading on the wire web he had laced for them.

—They have no rights to their bodies, he said.

—They are in them.

—They don't use them for what they are meant.

—What is that?

—They don't know physical love. They don't use their bodies for reproduction.

—Neither do we, she said.

He fought the urge to smash her face in with a rock. He did not count the seconds of silence. He latched onto a faint entrail of volcano smoke in the sky.

Sometime later, Matthew heard crying from the village. He assumed it to be Paul, fallen while running and yelling, playing dinosaur, but the wailing continued. Matthew and Mary dressed and walked down the hill. They passed the dozens of vacant, vibrantly painted homes—orange, yellow, pink, purple, fading—constituting the village. In the central square, it was not Paul crying but Peter, who had recently lost his last baby tooth. Paul's head was cocked at an illegitimate angle to his neck. No matter, all love.

Peter could not talk, but over the evening the Community created a story of what happened. The boys climbed the steep stone steps to the former spiritual edifice now open to the sky. Peter was trying to enjoy himself by meditating among the stones when Paul, who hadn't yet lost his first tooth, roared in Peter's face, scratching and biting and pretending he was a dinosaur. Peter ignored him and tried for peace. Paul mocked. Paul circled. Peter stayed true. Peter was a rock Paul danced around, wilder and wilder, hurling painful words and losing his footing. Paul fell down the long stone steps.

When Peter stopped crying and spoke days later, he said to Sarah that Paul had not been a dinosaur. Paul had vocally claimed his unborn half-sister as his right. Peter had said that Paul, as the younger, was genetically closer to her, and that risk management necessitated that she choose himself, Peter, for her love. Paul yelled no-no-no and mine-mine-mine until Peter pushed him, not to win the argument—Peter said he was old enough to know logic does not win arguments—but for silence.

There were nine. It was odd, and the odd numbers up to thirteen had some significance. The significance of one was ultimate, and seven was seven, but the significance of the others was forgotten even to Joseph and Great-grandmother, though the feeling remained.

Seven was their lucky number; they did not believe in luck. "We believe in pluck," Joseph often said. "I beev in fuck," Paul used to say, because they said not to. Seven was believed to be the magic threshold below which the Community could not persist due to a lack of genetic diversity. If they were fewer than seven, they believed they would not be biologically viable.

Joseph could not explain why this was the case, why seven was the line below which inbreeding would corrupt their code, but the number had been passed down from father to father since the Separation. The Community believed in the divine right of their existence. They expected to be whittled to seven, when the predestined birth of Sarah's

baby would begin a long, slow, ascendant spring for their species. They waited for the cusp of irrelevance.

Sarah, swollen as Other bovine meat before harvest, cared for Peter. Peter had stopped eating, and crying, and speaking, again. Sarah sang a rain song as Matthew approached under an umbrella. Joseph was with them. He rarely left her side now, like the stone lions defending the Others' edifices of commerce. Except Matthew thought he looked like a dog. He laughed inside in spite of himself. He stopped. There was little time. He thought his mother looked like an overripe mango readying to rot. He felt he was about to sell a pound of his flesh. He did not know how much a pound was, or how much he should be given for it.

—Mother, let me take you over the ridge to give it light.

—The rain is good for soul and soil, she sang.

—They promised a successful delivery. They promised to then let us go. They would like to help us ... perpetuate. They have remorse for their biological pressure. They don't want to enhance our code. I do not like them either, Mother, or their way of life, but they promised our survival and our free will within the valley. They would only observe—

—Authenticity, said Joseph.

—There is no authenticity in extinction, said Matthew.

—Yes, there is.

Matthew knew he was right.

Later, while Matthew whispered to Mary on the lee side of her family's house, he overheard John telling a story to Hagar. John said the Others were already in Matthew's head, and he needed to have his brain washed or be eliminated from the gene pool.

Hagar lifted her thick forearms, sodden to the elbow, from the washbasin and massaged her left hand with her right.

—They are the animal most genetically related to us, she said.

—Even if they think it's for our good, or to right an ancient wrong, or to maintain biological diversity, they do it only because they see use for us. Their machine will always need more parts. All I want is to live here, in peace. No matter, all love.

—Think of the baby.

Matthew knew John thought of little but the baby and how long he would have to wait. He and John were not very different. He watched John gnaw sugar cane through a crack in the wall.

That night in the outhouse, sitting for the first time all day on a wooden slat cut with a hole, cup of coffee between her clasped hands, Hagar had an aneurysm. No matter, all love. John, Mary, and Matthew dug the grave. Joseph tied the hair and wrote the name.

There were eight. Sarah's labor began. She was early. She did not know the days of gestation, but she had birthed enough babies. Great-grandmother from her rocker instructed Mary on midwifery. In the old voice's drone Sarah lay on a table on the porch above the dogs and chickens and rabbits and rodents where she could breathe. The day was hot. Beyond the porch, the sun beat.

Matthew raced to the ridge, past the pigs and the cow and the coffee and the sugar cane and the macadamia orchard. The nearest commerce center with all its population was a five-day walk. He did not know the Others had analyzed the situation statistically

and concluded it was a waste of resources to station one of themselves on the ridge to watch the Community do little but die. The Community stood by their isolation and sought no help; the Others maintained their distance and observed remotely.

A faint howl reached his ears. His mother had said to him not to worry, birthing was a brutal affair. He gazed over the fertile plains growing corn and soybeans, corn and soybeans, corn and soybeans. Corn plants bigger than houses, ears taller than windows. The soybeans, he remembered, were man height, the beans big as fists. Automatic sprinklers rained. In his head he heard the gene hub humming to stay ahead of pest evolution.

He visualized the commerce center. With their tools, their intelligence, their bioengineering, they did not need to work. They did. The impression left him was of bigness and smallness. Bigness of brain and building and speed and possibility, smallness of body and technology and voice and himself. There was a great rustle of sound as they worked and went about, and there was the sound of machines and electricity and at times song. But they did not speak. They controlled their evolution. Each generation advanced. Time meant something different to them. They lived longer but faster; the Community lived shorter and slower. He did not know what this meant to time. Nothing. It meant nothing to time.

A few appeared to serve important roles in science and oversight. Others performed mindless repetitive tasks that could have been engineered away, or played a game with numbers that rose and fell on screens, or engaged in commerce. He was made to know that most elected to have the parts of their brains unnecessary for daily tasks disabled. They plugged in for daily adjustments. He had been raised on authenticity, but they looked happy. When he tried to reason against it, he was made to feel it. It felt good.

But there were those who skipped their adjustments and maintained their non-vital brain parts. They were allowed because they occasionally created an artifact that contributed to happiness, such as the number game, which others would pay to see or touch or experience and which would then become commerce. More often their makings served no use. In private rooms he saw indecipherable figures blackened on paper. At unexpected moments bright illuminations obscured a screen. In an alley a woman hummed before a spiritual diagram that looked like what Great-grandmother called math. In a crowd Matthew made anonymous eye contact and was made to feel how the last Neanderthal felt burying the second-to-last. In the sky color wove in rivulets among the points of tall buildings. Others seldom took notice.

He was made to know what they knew. He wanted their knowledge, not their life. He wanted their facility coupled with what he called simple love. He didn't want to want their happiness.

Atop a rock, on a shoulder of a volcano, he looked out and remembered the new quiet line of man while his mother screamed on a table.

He did not know what to do. The Others would know, he thought. His grandfathers would know, he thought. But he did not.

He returned. His mother was relaxed, at peace, dead. Her legs laid flat, a clean sheet spread over her. Bloody bedding burned upwind. Joseph held a lump of flesh marred by the umbilical cord wrapped around its neck. A sheaf of red-wadded genealogy lay at Joseph's feet. Joseph stared out with dead eyes though he was not dead. Matthew had seen the look before, on Mary. Mary was nowhere to be seen. Great-grandmother

repeated in monotone, No matter, all love.

There were six. Peter, without a mother to logic or love him otherwise, willed his lungs to stop. He had a strong will for a boy. Mary hung his hair, Joseph said a prayer, Matthew and John planted his remains, Great-grandmother chanted and chanted and chanted.

There were five. Great-grandmother rocked. A creak forward, a crick back.

Joseph could not be near Mary. He shuffled by Matthew each day on his way to the fields to cut cane with his machete. When the sun was at its highest, he shifted to digging in the graveyard, mawing short-hacked lengths of sugar cane between what remained of his teeth.

Matthew could not be near Mary. In pursuit of the pure joys and love the Community was founded on, he began to make things. Remembering the colored sky swaths, he slathered vacant walls in fruit pigment. He was disgusted with the results. He was not displeased with his dissatisfaction, which he was able to use. He was displeased with his inability to render the most rudimentary designs he had seen in the commerce center. He knew that he lacked something more basic than technical ability. His imagination, his reason, and his awareness were all insufficient to making as the Others made. He was not as good as them.

Still Mathew filled his time with making. He wove sugar cane in enormous interlocking rings he hung over ravines. He spouted words into the air in novel arrangements to create an image of Mary. He sang like a hummingbird; he spent a sun being a dog; he affixed a dead sloth in a eucalyptus tree and sewed flowers into its skin; he tried to make a cloud. Nothing he made equaled what was in his head, and nothing in his head approached what he knew to be possible. His makings did not make him happy, but in the making there was self-absence.

John could not be near Mary, but he was. He whispered to her that Matthew was an Other bearing seeds of extinction. He whispered that Matthew was incapable of the love that was the principle of the Community. He whispered where Matthew could hear that he wished he needn't say what he said. He touched her elbow as he walked by. He held her eyes too long. He rested a hand in the small of her back as she stood at the woodstove waiting for the rice and beans to cook.

Mary could not be near herself. She no longer spoke. She completed her tasks, then retired to bed. She did not sleep. She got up and lay back down. She stood all night, hands at her sides. Her eyes never shut.

One night, as she stood at the window watching the sky, Joseph came near. He ran his finger lightly along her jaw. He cupped her face. He held her. Then he kissed her forehead and walked away.

The next morning, they followed the trail of blood. Joseph lay in a grave he had dug, one hand chopped off.

There were four. Months passed, though they did not know it. One day Mary told Matthew she liked the things he made. Somehow they made the valley more than it was.

—They are nothing compared to what I remember, he said.

—Then forget, she said.

—They are nothing compared to what I want.

—What do you want?

—I want to be the father of new humans.

She squeezed his hand with hers, then cringed.

Matthew made her a necklace of seeds. He whittled her a spoon and she said to him the story of the last night with Joseph. He taught her how to inventory the food stores on a sheet of dried bark. No one had taught him. Writing was believed to be a distraction and was reserved for the foremost father to keep the genealogy and the list of the dead, but he devised his own system of simple accounting from marks shown to him by the Others.

The creak of Great-grandmother's rocker set the rhythm of their thoughts. No matter, all love. John crushed macadamia and pressed oil to lubricate the rocker. He started her rocking again. But she gave none of the subtle shifts of body to perpetuate the movement. She was no longer there. She had not been for some time.

There were three. Matthew would not leave Mary and John would not leave Matthew. John smashed each of Matthew's makings. As it left his hand, or his mouth. He called them communication devices used to stream the Community's extinction to the Others. John negated his own reason for the necessity of such implements by asserting that Matthew was connected to the Others in his head. Matthew recognized the inconsistency, but did not care. It was true that he was inspired by the Others, and he did not feel like lying. They made things he wished he could make.

—What do they call themselves? John said.

—They call themselves humans.

—We are humans.

—We were.

—Humans are for love. What do they know of love?

Matthew did not know. He could not say. John continued.

—All day they sit before a glow, you say, redirecting charged invisibilities, imaginary particles, number thoughts. We are farmers, cooks, carpenters, herdsman, seamstresses, and fishermen.

—We are gravediggers, said Mary.

John and Matthew looked at her, surprised at her voice.

—We are all brothers and sisters here. Our babies will love like family and live authentically and enjoy like only we can with our own blood.

—All I see are babies and blood.

—No Mary, said John. We are the beginning. We will continue. We will wash the land of their farms. We will swamp them in babies.

—We will live right, said Matthew, in love.

—I don't want to live like them, said Mary. I don't want to.

—We won't, said Matthew.

—Don't trust him, Mary. He will make clones of you to make babies, then sell them

as specimens to the Others.

—We'll make a baby, said Matthew.

—And then? said John.

—If all goes well, we'll make another.

—And then?

He would not continue to argue for existence when existence was rife with pain and expulsion. He wanted to be alone with Mary. He picked up a sloth humerus. He had filed it down for a series of mobiles of bone and seed and feather and volcanic rock and balsa branches and pasaflores. The mobiles would hang from trees like a mating of bird and fruit and wind. Mary did not speak when he clubbed John in the side of the head. She turned her face to the valley, the empty space between the outstretched arms of the volcano.

There were two. He made marks on the list to represent Great-grandmother and John. He made marks at the end for himself and Mary. He buried the list.

She was silent. It was not how he wanted it to be.

They watched the clouds fly. They cultivated bananas and coffee and macadamia and sugar cane. They planted and harvested and cooked and ate and washed and slept well. He made artifacts until his hands were no longer articulate. He thought less. He spoke simple aphorisms.

Long after Matthew gave up on miracles, they had sex. They believed it was the last physical manifestation of love. They felt they could reach into each other's minds. When no offspring came, they mourned.

One day, after they had lived a long time, Matthew died. Mary sheared his gray hair and tied lock after lock to the hair tree. His last sensations were the sun on his face, a buzzing of insects, her bony body wrapped around his. No matter, all love.

END

About Nick Stokes

Nick Stokes writes fictions, plays, novels, nothings, arrangements, pieces of prose, and other undefinables. He lives mostly or mostly lives in Washington; he packs mules in the backcountry of Montana; he's been elsewhere. Among other explorations, circa 2014, he's working on an immersive (anti)-choose-your-own-adventure novel. His novel AFFAIR was recently serialized and released as an ebook by The Seattle Star. He's been a finalist for many awards; he's received a few. His other writings can be found in dark crannies, in magazines sometimes known as journals, and around the web for dirt cheap or less. For dissemination, refer to <http://www.nickstokes.net>.

Other Titles by Nick Stokes

Novels:

Affair

You Choose ... (forthcoming)

Novelette:

1 Day

Stories:

An End

Rise, then Descend

What Never Happened, an Observation
(others forthcoming)

Short, Flash, or Nothing Prose:

(numerous but for the moment you must search the web and on occasion read paper)

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