

## Under 25 Runner up 2018 OutStanding LGBTIQA+ Short Story Competition

### It's the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine) by Jes Layton

Avery stares into the abyss and the abyss, as they say, stares back. Well, it's less an abyss than a luke-warm mug of coffee. But Avery gazes into it with the same intensity any philosopher would when faced with the black nothingness of oblivion.

Jules collapses onto the verandah beside her, a mess of knees and elbows. 'You waited until after lunch, to tell me the world's ending?'

They're pissed. Naturally. Avery sips from the last half'n'hour shift to long, throat burning pulls. Jules picks at the skin around their fingernails, it looks painful.

'You're sure it's tonight?' they ask.

'Twelveish. Twelve-thirty, yeah.'

'You're really really sure?'

'You think I'm lying?'

'I mean, you're not even freaking out?'

'What good would that do?' Avery sighs, needing a refill. Her last dregs of coffee have gone disgustingly stone-cold.

'Fuck,' Jules falls back. They say louder, wetter; 'Fuck.'

Avery watches the way their whole body scrunches up with all the contours of a crumpled ball of paper. She sets her mug on the step.

Jules crawls over to flop onto her lap, exhausted, though they just got up. They scrub the back of one hand over their mouth. 'So, you want—'

'—nah.' Avery lifts her chin. 'Don't wanna see my parents.'

'Okay' Jules says, and then they start to cry.

Weep really, not cry. There's something about weeping that tugs at a different part of you, the part that stings.

Avery tries to soothe with pats and rubs and whispers, gathering them up. 'Hey, c'mon. C'mere.'

They stay like that for awhile. Avery carding fingers through Jules' tight curl and spiky undercut. She tugs a little on their collared shirt to straighten it. Her next idea's born, the same kinda desperation found at the bottom of an empty coffee mug.

'Wanna go to the park?'

Jules' snotty sniff gets rubbed on her bare thigh. They shift, looking up with rimmed-red eyes. Their shrug means "okay".

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The park's quiet. The swings empty before they both get to them. Jules takes the left and starts pumping their legs right away. Avery takes the right and drags her toes through the dirt.

When Jules' has had enough, they slow to a stop beside her. 'Is it gonna—'

'—won't hurt.' Avery scrubs out the circle she's made with her big toe.

'So...what's gonna happen?'

'Noise. Lot of it. Like everything's gonna get super loud, so loud you can see it.'

Jules' thick eyebrows furrow. 'Then?'

'Then? Dunno, it ends.'

'But, you can see the future?'

'I can't see the future if there isn't anything to see, dickhead.'

'Shit.' Jules breathes, 'and you've only told me?'

'Didn't wanna freak anyone out.'

'So, you just decided to freak me out?'

'No, Jules, I—who else would even believe me?'

Jules kicks off from the swing.

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Jules, thumbing out messages since they left the park, needs to charge both in battery and in burger, so Maccas.

Facing the window Avery holds a chip between two fingers like a ciggie.

Jules asks her: 'You have a good life?' Though around their burger it comes out more like "oouf'aveahgooflibve?" with bits of pickle.

Avery takes a moment, the most selfish thing a person can do when the world's ending. She works her words around the chips in her mouth.

'When you wake up everyday knowing exactly what's going to happen you don't get bad days or good days, you just get days that bleed into more just-days.'

'Heavy.'

'Yeah. Well, the world's ending.'

Jules' brows form their "true". They wrap an uncertain hand around Avery's thin wrist.

It's easy for Avery to thread both their fingers together. 'I'm glad you're here with me,' she admits.

'A good day then.' Jules says, and doesn't let her go.

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Everything's dark, quiet, night. Avery isn't cold. Isn't hungry. Isn't much of anything really, if she's being honest.

Jules holds her hand and swings it between them. 'Don't—'

'—tell you the time?' Avery huffs. 'Wasn't gonna anyway.'

'Thanks.' Even in the dark she knows they've just rolled their eyes.

Time passes. The gums around start whispering, the night thrumming with a kinda white noise that actually has some rhythm to it. It's been easy to ignore for the last couple of hours but now...

'Ave? I—'

...It's growing.

'Love you too, you weirdo.'

The air's static.

'....not wha...was gon...ay.'

The noise is a wall; erected as abruptly as—it's deafening. It's here and then, there's nothing.