

# This is how we disappeared

A short story by ©Vicki Wootton

Dear Ancestors:

I don't know why I'm writing this; nobody will ever read it, but I've got nothing better to do. You see, thanks to you, I'm the last woman on earth. There could be others, but I'll never see them. I still have a functioning shortwave radio, but I only turn it on when I'm really bored and listen to the spooky noises made by empty air. It doesn't hold my attention for long and I never hear a human voice. Even if I did hear someone, it'd probably be in China or some other impossible place.

First I will introduce myself. My name is Delta Frontenac. I was the last baby born in our community, the village of White Rock, on the west coast of North America. Everyone else in White Rock had become sterile except for my parents and one other woman, so nobody was having babies. This is not the original White Rock of course. That is now buried under a hundred meters of Pacific Ocean. The village where I live is about thirty kilometers south east of the original.

I'm a North American Native. It's ironic really; I read somewhere that the red man was the first race to appear on earth. And it looks as if we are the last as well. Ours was not a happy history, once the Europeans came. But I'm rambling.

First a word about names and dates. My grandfather was a scholar. His Native name was Sitala, meaning *Good Memory*. He compiled a list of all the animals that have become extinct since the birth of man. It is a long list, filling five ten-meter scrolls. At the age of seventeen, my mother, Huyana, *Falling Rain*, decided to rename the days. Instead of the old European names, she chose to name a day for every animal that had become extinct. I think this is fitting since we humans are the ones responsible for their extinction, especially you, Ancestors.

## Otter

Today is the day of the Otter. Huyana chose a name at random each day and marked it off on the list. She drew a little sketch of the animal beside its name.

I was born on the day of the Dolphin, but she called me Delta in memory of the drowned delta of the Fraser River, and Una, meaning *Remember*. I think it also means *one* in Spanish.

I have continued the tradition. It is interesting to note that I have not yet found it necessary to repeat a name, even though we've followed this practice for almost forty-seven years.

I said I would give an account of how we disappeared. I could actually explain it in one simple phrase: *man's insatiable greed*. But that

would not tell the whole story, and writing the details will help pass some of the time I have left and expunge some of my rage.

It started with what you called the Industrial Revolution. That was when men started inventing machines to do their work for them. The problem with that was the machines needed fuel to power them. And that's what caused most of the problems. Here's another irony: the red man lived without machines until the Europeans and Asians came and brought theirs. North America became the leader in industrialization.

Our people always had a stronger reverence for nature than for property. Some of our tribes used to hold what they called a *potlatch* every year to give away their possessions. We didn't even believe that man could own the land, but the Europeans did, and that was how we became so poor and marginalized. I have a dream sometimes that I am walking through a forest. I've never seen a forest; even so, there I am, searching for something that has been lost. In the dream, I feel unutterably sad.

Following the Industrial Revolution, men started to make massive fortunes from their machines because they could produce more things to sell. I don't understand why, but the more money they made, the more they seemed to want. I remember my grandfather saying that when want exceeds need, that's when the trouble starts.

I'm going to leave off for a while. Just thinking about you people and what you did to our earth makes my blood boil. The sun will be going down in about half an hour and this is the best time to go outside, or early in the morning. I'd get fried if I went out in the daytime unless it was cloudy. It's not really safe even when it's cloudy, because the ultraviolet rays can penetrate a thin cloud layer. I have to dress carefully before I leave the house, making sure that no skin is exposed. The insects are voracious at this time of day. I don't have many options; I can go out in the daytime and die of the heat or in the evening and be savaged by bugs. I need to get over to the storage vault and replenish my supplies, and my water pump is not working too well so I'll have to try to find some parts to fix it.

### *Platypus*

The platypus, native of a land called Australia, succumbed in 2041, when most of the continent became unlivable for animals as well as people; although I'm sure there are plenty of reptiles and insects.

When the last of my people died, I moved into this building because it has thick stone walls and stays relatively cool. It also has the advantage of being built over a well. It's a very old building I think used to be a church. I spent about three months cleaning it out and fixing it up. I turned the main meeting hall into a garden where I grow vegetables. There's plenty of light from the clerestory windows that run down each side and, with the glass to filter the UV, the plants don't receive so much

radiation damage. I use the rooms down the sides of the main hall for storing my things. I sleep in one of them and do my cooking and eating in another. One room is devoted to my library.

After everyone was gone, I went around and collected all the books that were still in reasonably good shape. For the past four hundred years, books have been printed on rolls of plastic, which is much more durable than paper—not that we would have been able to use paper anyway: no forests. For several centuries, people stored all their information on data disks, or chips, which they could read with the aid of electronic machines, but once the power grid systems started to break down and they ran out of materials to make the components, they couldn't use them anymore, so they returned to printing.

There's nothing much else to do except read, even though most of the stuff in the books is depressing. Last night, for instance, I was looking at an illustrated book about mammals. It's unbelievable how many species of mammals there were in this world at one time. Beautiful stately animals with magical names like tiger, elephant, gazelle, and orangutan, gone forever. There were also strange and grotesque creatures like the sloth that used to hang upside down from trees by its toes, the armadillo that had tubes for teeth and a tongue that was forty-five centimeters long to probe for insects in termite nests, and the long-necked giraffe. Why would men want to destroy such a paradise? It makes me weep to think about it.

You lived on the meat of domestic animals, cows, sheep, and pigs. Some of you ate meat at every meal, but the last domestic animals that were not victims of genetic engineering gone wrong, diseases, or climate changes that happened too fast for them to adapt, were hunted to extinction. DIDN'T ANYONE EVER THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE?

I know many people were concerned, and there were many courageous people and organizations that worked hard and made sacrifices to warn of what was happening, but they were ridiculed and called liars and alarmists when they tried to speak out. You people with an interest in keeping things the way they were—mostly commercial interests more concerned about making profits than your responsibility to the future—used unscrupulous scientists to refute the findings of their more reputable colleagues, the majority, using falsified so-called science to fool the public.

My poor hens are the last of the domestic animals to survive. I fenced off the front lobby of the building to make a sort of pen where I keep a few poultry. It's not a very good environment for them and they keep dying. If I could let them outside, at least they'd be able to live off insects, but they wouldn't be able to tolerate the sun and would die anyway. When I run out of grain to feed them, I guess I'll have to do without eggs.

The only things that seem to be immune to everything you ancestors could throw at them are insects—especially mosquitoes and cockroaches—and reptiles. There's no shortage of snakes and lizards, not to mention alligators. Many of these animals used to live far to the south in what you called tropical zones, but they migrated northward as the temperature of the world increased. Insects and reptiles: it looks to me as if the first animals on this planet will also be the last. Not all insects survived, just the pests. The bees disappeared five hundred years ago. Apparently that was the cause of a sudden increase in extinction and drop in the human population. Plants don't reproduce without pollination, and the bees were the major contributors to this process. I get very busy when the plants are in blossom, manually pollinating everything so that I will have seeds for the next year.

I found a coconut on the ground while I was out looking around by the pond yesterday evening. I don't usually go near the pond as there are always alligators lurking in the swampy margins, but today I took my ax with me. A good whack on the nose with an ax will usually discourage them. The coconut will make a nice change for supper. I usually eat some variation of corn and beans.

There's a shady walled courtyard at the back of the building where I grow a few root crops, carrots, onions and potatoes mostly; the soil in the indoor garden, all of which I had to carry in from outside, is not deep enough for the roots. I also have a few stunted fruit trees, mango, papaya, and avocado. I harvest fruits from cactus as well. It seems to be the only plant that thrives in this climate. There used to be date palms, but a few years ago they all succumbed to some kind of blight.

Early this morning, I dismantled some of the old water pumps in the abandoned houses for parts. I really need to get that pump fixed. There was hardly enough water to drink, let alone wash myself this morning. I just hope the well's not running dry.

## *Shrimp*

The shrimp, like all marine life, disappeared centuries ago when the UV killed off the surface plankton, which was the basis for all life in the oceans and freshwaters of the world. My people used to build their lives around fishing. Seafood and river fish were their staple diet and also served ceremonial purposes in our spiritual life. There used to be a fish in the Fraser River (just north of here, what's left of it) called the Sturgeon that grew up to three meters long. I haven't even seen a fish!

I fixed the pump. Luckily I found the part I needed in the old Pierson house. Now I can have a shower. I need one after lying on the basement floor, messing with the darned pump all morning.

It's amazing the skills we've had to learn over the last two hundred years in order to adapt to the changes. And everyone had to

learn them, not just the men. An emergency could kill us faster than the environment. Once the power plants stopped functioning, we had to learn how to make and maintain our own generators. I have a wind turbine that provides some power, but the parts are wearing out, and we've cannibalized old turbines so much, there are no spares left. Of course, there are no machine shops to manufacture parts, or mills for processing ores. Even if there were any, there would be no power to run them. The roof and south walls of this building are covered with photovoltaic panels to convert sunlight into electricity, but so many of the cells are worn out they produce very little. When I have the energy, and it's not so hot outside, I'll try to harvest a few from other buildings, but it's hard to tell which work and which don't.

This part of North America, surrounded as it is by mountains, used to depend almost solely on hydro power, but the grids broke down from lack of maintenance, like everything else. Severe storms also damaged many of the dams.

What's it like out there?

Picture this: skeleton trees adorned with shreds of plastic; denuded mountains, the forests that used to cover their slopes gone forever; rock hard ground with a few cacti, sparse grasses and scrubby bushes; rivers and lakes shrunk to a fraction of their original size, with swampy borders. Insects, insects, everywhere and no birds to control them.

This is the animal cycle of life now: lizards eat the insects, alligators eat the lizards, and the insects take care of the carrion.

What with the heat, new diseases, insects and forest fires, it didn't take long to destroy the forests. I've got pictures of Mount Baker with snow on top, but there's never been any snow in my lifetime. It is a little better around what's left of the lakes and rivers, where a few tropical varieties grow. We used to harvest dates, nuts, and coconuts on a regular basis, but the dates fell to disease and the nut trees died.

Plastic is one of the prominent features of the landscape. It haunts the countryside like the spirits of lost civilizations, pellets, sheets, clumps of Styrofoam, always there, lurking in corners, hiding in hollows and in crevices. Thanks for the plastic, Ancestors.

People used to harvest plastic and turn it into all sorts of things, including a medium for writing and printing, but it was impossible to get rid of it. It never breaks down. They tried burying it, but the desiccated soil usually blew away in one of the epic wind storms that come along every few months. So there it is: a monument to man's ingenuity.

## *Pig* ·

The pig was a domestic animal used for meat. It became extinct in 2095. According to my research, it was closely related to humans

physiologically and it was susceptible to some of the diseases of man. It eventually succumbed to mutated human viruses.

I started off talking about the industrial revolution and man's greed. Well it got worse. This is what baffles me: You became so materialistic, you stopped caring about the damage you were doing to the earth. Your obsession with owning things was so important to you that you actually denied the damage you were doing. When I look at the old books and see the kinds of things you "needed", it seems to me that about seventy-five percent was useless trash, but owning these things gave you status. It seems the more you acquired, the more you were worth. As if you had no value in yourselves.

One of your major fixations was on personal transportation, cars. It got to the point that if you didn't own at least one of these vehicles, you were virtually immobile. Many people had several. For about 125 years, you fueled these vehicles with gasoline, which was extracted from fossil oil. For some reason, you permitted car manufacturers and oil companies to control your entire transportation systems. It was probably apathy. But the use of fossil fuels, not only for transportation, but also to generate electricity, was so harmful to the environment that by the year 2025, the damage was irreversible. It wasn't until you finally started to run out of oil that you began to look at other sources of power.

Not only did families "need" several cars, you had to have a new one every few years in order to keep up with your neighbors and friends. Apparently, city roads were so clogged with cars at certain times of day that movement came to a standstill. Not only that, the air became unbreathable and you had to resort to wearing oxygen masks. From my perspective this kind of behavior seems insane.

So that's how you destroyed the environment. Burning so many fossil fuels created excessive amounts of carbon dioxide which destroyed the ozone layer leaving the world open to harmful ultraviolet radiation

Ahh. I can't go on. I get a headache thinking about it. I feel so infuriated. Stupid, *stupid*, STUPID! How could you let it happen?

## ***Kiwi***

The Kiwi was a flightless bird whose native habitat was in New Zealand. It vanished from the earth in 2058.

I haven't written anything for about a month. Thinking about you, Ancestors, and your recklessness makes me depressed. Ha! That's the king of understatements. The Creator gave us a paradise to live in and look what you did to it. It's like spitting in His face. There's nothing left. Nobody; except me. Sometimes I'm immobilized by the desolation. I can't make myself do anything for days at a time. What's the point?

My mother warned me about self-pity. I shouldn't give in to it, but hell, I'm lonely.

I'm forty-seven years old. My grandfather died when he was forty one; my father was thirty-nine and my mother died at the age of forty-eight, so I figure I don't have much time left. In a way, I welcome death, or as I prefer to think of it, crossing over. The next life can't be any more pathetic than this.

### **How did the human race die out?**

In the beginning, human die-off was caused by famine, warfare, disease, and natural disasters. Basically, it was their inability to survive the toxic habitat you'd created. Later, there was an unrelenting decline in the fertility rate. Gradually, the number of people who were capable of reproducing dropped to such a low level that the human race became unsustainable. I think of this as nature's way of fighting back, although it gives me no comfort.

Famine: desertification of large areas due to planetary overheating and lack of irrigation water; the rise in sea levels drowned much of the best agricultural land; pollution and UV radiation killed plants and animals.

War: the insane scramble for control of the remaining resources of the world. The use of nuclear weapons by reckless, irresponsible nations made matters much worse and hastened the deterioration of the environment.

Disease: one of the consequences of war and famine. In addition, many viruses and bacteria mutated into more deadly forms which were beyond control by the medicines still available.

Natural disasters: You used to call these *acts of God!* I don't think God had anything to do with them. Global warming sent the weather patterns of the world spinning out of control. There were earthquakes, hurricanes, massive tidal waves, floods, forest fires. The list goes on and the net result was the loss of millions of lives.

### **My life.**

By the time I was born, we'd lost count of what year it was, or even the month. It just didn't seem important any more. We might just as well have counted how long we had left to survive. As I said earlier, I was born on the day of the Dolphin. My mother was seventeen when she had me. There were fifteen births in her generation, those who survived to adulthood. There were only two in mine. People didn't form lifetime relationships; that would have risked a fertile couple never coming together, so they experimented until the right pairing resulted in a pregnancy. However this method risked incestuous mating, but by this time, who cared? My father was an older man named Joe Standoff. He'd already successfully fathered a boy with another woman. We always took our mother's last name. At least we could be sure it was the right one. The other member of my generation was a boy, my half-brother. He was

six years older than I was. His name was Rock. I don't know what his mother was thinking when she gave him that name.

I didn't like Rock very much and was always hoping someone else would have a boy baby, but no one did. He had a mean streak in him and was always trying to hurt something, mostly lizards and snakes. His conduct gave me a clue to the way our ancestors must have behaved. When I was thirteen, we tried a couple of times to see if we could produce a baby, but nothing came of it. In a way, I'm glad. What if I'd given birth to one child? It would have been all alone. Anyway, Rock was killed in a mudslide a year later and that was the end of that. My mother died when I was twenty. Joe had died about eight years earlier.

Joe didn't play much of a role in my life. He came to visit me and my mother sometimes, but I think it was more for a cooked meal—and to try to make another baby, I suspect—than to see me. He didn't know how to talk to children. He didn't seem to realize that we were people. My grandfather was much more significant to me. He was very well-read and taught me so much. I think if he'd lived in an earlier age, he might have been a great teacher. He died when I was seven. The other people in our village died off one by one until I was the only one left.

I had to help bury the last ones who died. We were prepared for burials. When it rained, and the ground softened enough to work, we dug pits and covered them with plastic sheets weighed down with rocks. We made piles of rocks near the holes so that we could cover over the graves. The last person I buried was a very old woman called Clara. She was over fifty when she died. I tried to take care of her when she fell sick, but all I could really do was keep her clean and give her food and water. And company. She was my mother's cousin. We were all related to one another in White Rock.

Damn! I hate thinking about all this. I miss them all, even Joe and Rock. I'm so lonely for someone to talk to, I'm going out to the porch to talk to my hen. Yes, there's only one left now. The last hen and the last woman. I think I'll let her into the garden.

### *Condor*

I woke up this morning with a violent headache. I think I have a fever. All I could do today was pull up and wash a few carrots to eat. It took all my energy to do that and pump enough water to drink. The wind's howling outside like a band of demons. It's building up for another monumental sandstorm by the sound of it. Something is flapping against the window. Nothing I can do.

### *Wombat*

I can't eat anything. Everything I swallow comes right back up. My throat is burning and the headache is worse. I noticed the hen had died when I went to get water.



*Okapi*

I'm running out of names. I feel so weak I can barely drag myself across the room. I have to get some water and rest for a while.

The sun is sinking. Everything is fading; I can't see across the room. The wind has stopped. No sound. It must be time...

...Oh.