

A little rain never hurt anyone

SHRINKING
SINKING
IN A MINUTE

“Sharply well-written.”
Kim Stanley Robinson

KELL COWLEY

The Sinkhole in a Sink Estate

Sunday 29th October

Six Days before Global Mandatory Hibernation

There are three main ways an umbrella can save your life.

Flea wouldn't have stolen the umbrella from the old woman on the fifth floor where the roof had caved in, if she hadn't been sure it was just what she needed to rescue her mum from the sinkhole that'd opened up in their living room.

Shelly had been stuck in the sinkhole for two days now. Flea couldn't ring up any emergency services to haul her out. If she called for help, whatever help came would quickly suss out that the flat was uninhabitable and send the Wheeler family to the nearest shelter of last resort. When they realized Flea, her brother Wes, and their mum Shell were squatting in the retirement home, and had been doing so since the unreported death of old Nanna Wheeler



last winter, they might just cart the whole family off to the closest detention centre instead. Flea didn't want to be the one responsible for getting them all evicted or banged up. So she'd just have to get her mum out of the sinkhole herself.

And for that, Flea needed an umbrella. And not just any old umbrella that the winds could blow inside out and yank from her grasp. Flea had gone through a lot of umbrellas in the summer of super storms and most of them had been as cheap and flimsy as paper cocktail decorations. But they'd been her training umbrellas, not only to shelter her in freak weather conditions, but more importantly, her weapon of choice. Because the first and foremost way in which an umbrella can save your life is if you've learnt how to use it in combat. Flea had trained herself to be a black belt of the broolly, a swordswoman of severe winds. All she had ever needed was an umbrella worthy of her skills.

Now she had one: solid steel tube, fibreglass ribs, high density waterproof and slash resistant



canopy – an Excalibur of umbrellas. Flea couldn't resist wielding and thrusting it as she bounded down the stairs. If she sharpened up its tip, then it would be good for inflicting shallow stab wounds. Its crook handle was the perfect size and shape to put a human throat in a choke hold. Its pole was strong enough to use as a battering ram or to clothesline down any police that might get in her way. With this umbrella, she wouldn't need her brother or any of his looter friends to protect her. She'd learnt from experience that the best way for a young Scouse girl to survive on the dark rainy streets of Manchester was to become the person who you wouldn't want to meet on the dark rainy streets of Manchester. That's who Flea could be now. She had her umbrella and she wasn't afraid to use it.

She reached the ground floor of the tower block, splashing down in a stream of floodwater that rose to her knees; a shallow day for this side of town. In her shell suit and wellies, Flea barely felt the chill anymore. She'd steeled herself against the smell too.



She was used to keeping her footing, even with the city swamps sloshing round her limbs and she never slowed her pace. Because you never knew when some bastard might jump you from behind in old Mankland. She could handle herself in a scrap, but she was smart enough to know that legging it away was always the safer option.

Two steps from her door, Flea felt a *whack* against her back.

Tightening her grip on the umbrella handle, she spun round to face her attacker. But nobody was there. It was like she had been pounced on by thin air. Then she felt tiny claws clambering up her shell suit. She felt a ragged tail tickling her neck as a greasy grey squirrel slipped into the folds of her hood for warmth. Flea sagged with relief and she didn't bother to dislodge it. The flats of Moss Side were rife with pests – mutant rats swimming through their flooded halls and fat pigeons bobbing on the water like feral ducks. Flea didn't mind the local vermin though. She'd learnt to live with them.



She'd learnt to live with a lot of things since the storms had first brought her family to this city two years ago. Since the Mersey floods of her poor drowned Liverpool had forced them this way up the Union Canal. The Wheeler family were urbanized to their cores. They could never imagine eking out a wetland life in the kitchen sink country of Lancashire, Cheshire or the Wirral. They needed to feel proper concrete through the puddles. So they'd come to find their own dirty lungful of breathing space in the already bloated population of Manchester. *Any port in a storm*, as old Nanna Wheeler used to say and even the hardest bastard you know can't argue with the storms these days.

Flea climbed over the sandbags piled up to the keyhole and then shouldered open the door of the flat. As she slipped and tumbled inside, one of her boots squelched down on the saturated remains of their carpet. Her other leg slipped from under her and dangled briefly over a chilly abyss. Flea scrambled back on her haunches, panting as she slumped against



the wall. The sinkhole had gotten bigger while she'd been out.

"Fleabag?" called a voice from below. "That you up there?"

Her mum's voice. Flea rolled her eyes. She'd never understood why Shelly had gone to the trouble of giving her a poncy pretty girl name like *Felicity* if she was only going shorten it to the ugliest little nicknames she could think up.

"Yeah, it's me, Shell. I almost fell in your cesspit."

Flea never called her mother "mum" anymore either. Not out loud at least. Shell was more like an older sister than a parent to her and a bad influence of a big sister at that. Shelly would only moan if Flea or Wes used the M word, complaining that they were making her feel old. Despite her two strapping teenage kids, Shell wasn't far into her thirties. Whatever Shell was to them, she was still family and she was trapped down a hole. A lonely little spider of a woman flushed down the earth's toilet bowl.



“You ready to be rescued then?” Flea asked, trying her best to sound casual. Breezy even, like her mum wasn’t trapped twenty feet deep in the yawning crater that’d become the centrepiece of their tiny bedsit flat. She asked as casually as you might ask about the weather. But just like the weather, Flea feared hearing the forecast.

No answer came. She crawled to the sinkhole’s brim, pulled a torch from her rucksack and pointed its dull glow into the chasm. The hole in the floor was roughly as wide as a kid’s paddling pool. About halfway down, the sinkhole stretched into an airy pocket in the earth half-flooded with the deluge that’d drained from their floor. Floating on the waters of this subterranean swamp was a small red dinghy. Shelly had made her bed in the dinghy long ago, bundling herself up in her dressing gown, shopping bags tied over her slippers and her hands gloved by Marigolds. Flea hadn’t been at home when the floor had collapsed and the dinghy had been sucked down into the pit. Shell claimed she had suffered no injuries, but



she'd probably been drunk at the time of her fall, so wasn't the best judge of her own health. Her mum could be a mess of breaks and bumps down there.

“Shell, did you hear me?!” asked Flea, knowing her mum had bloody well heard and was stalling her answer, thinking up a new excuse not to move. “Let's get cracking! Before the toxic waste down there brings you out in scales.”

Flea saw Shell's hand jerk up to her neck. Her eczema had to be suffering and her dirty blonde hair looked like it was turning to seaweed. Shell's face was white as a jellied eel in the torchlight, so much paler than Flea's dark olive complexion, inherited from the dad who she'd never grown old enough to really remember.

“Put the kettle on first, will you pet?” Shell called up, breaking her long wince of a silence. “Fire up the camping stove and make us a brew. You've been out for ages and your brother's still off looting with the lads. I've been gagging for a cup of tea. Where have you been, kidda? You left me here on my



billy lonesome.”

Shelly would've used this same bored impatient tone if Flea or her brother Wes had been too slow in bringing a takeaway home from the chippy. It was hard to play the hero for someone who couldn't be arsed with their own rescue.

“Bollocks to your cup of tea!” snapped Flea. “If we get you out of this hole, we'll celebrate with my last two cans of Coke. How about that?”

This wasn't a casual bribe. Flea had been hoarding her Cokes since she'd stolen them from a toppled vending machine during the last spate of riots that'd broken out in the city at the fag end of the summer. It was late October now and Flea had kept those Cokes like two dented rubies at the bottom of her bag. She had vowed that she'd only crack their ring pulls if she found herself free at this week's end. But the truth was she'd settle for sharing them with Shelly right now if she could only get her out of her hole.

“Maybe later,” said Shell. “I've got a headache



coming on. There's pains in me joints. You know what that means...there's a storm coming."

"There's always a bloody storm coming! You've been spending too much time with the senile biddies in this block if you reckon your body is somehow tuned into the weather. Enough of this old wives bollocks. Let's be having ya!"

Flea gave up waiting for Shell's cooperation. She turned off the torch and fixed her eyes on the bucket dangling from a rope over the sinkhole's mouth. This rope, attached to the bucket's handle, was looped round the longest branch of the tree that was sticking through the smashed glass of their kitchen window. None of the Wheelers knew where the tree had come from or how far it'd travelled on hurricane winds before crashing into their home. The flats were miles from the nearest park. This hunk of wormy deadwood stretching over their bedsit was just another thing they'd learned to live with. They'd hang their washing up to dry on it. They'd sharpen knives on its bark. And with the sinkhole directly under its



branches, the tree had enabled Flea to rig up a pulley system to deliver food and fags to her mum in its basin. Flea got to her feet, extending her umbrella to hook the rope with its crook handle. With the sinkhole widening, the bucket was much harder to reach.

“Fleabag, what are you playing at?” Shell called.

“I told you!” Flea yelled back. “I’m rescuing you! Do you know there are three main ways that an umbrella can save your life? One of those ways is using it as a raft. Remember that final evacuation day in Liverpool when families were putting their toddlers and pets in their upended brollies? Like little lifeboats on the floodwaters? That’s just how umbrellas are made these days. A special kind of rubber or something. So they float and don’t leak. So get your skinny arse into this one and I’ll hoist you up and out of there. You won’t have to stand in a bucket or even bend your knees. So don’t start whining about headaches or twinges in your neck! Just sit in the brolly and I’ll do the rest.”

Flea was so sure about this umbrella being the



solution that she was sounding like an advert. Her voice had gone all sunshiny like one of those airhead presenters on the shopping channel that Shelly used to watch all day long back when the telly had still been there to hold the Wheeler family together. Before they'd lost power for the last time. Now Flea was left clinging to a ragged piece of rope, retying it to the umbrella's handle and swinging it over the sinkhole, hoping she could use it to fish her mother out of the pool below. Hoping the rope and the canopy would hold Shell's weight. Surely they would. Her mum was such a weedy thing that at fifteen Flea was already taller and brawnier.

When did I get bigger than my mum? she thought, lowering the umbrella. *When did I get strong enough to lift her? How did Shell shrink so small?*

The voice out of the hole interrupted her thoughts.

“Bad luck to open an umbrella indoors, you know...”

“Give it a rest, would ya!” blasted Flea, cutting



her off. “I’ve had enough of your superstitious hocus pocus excuses. You’re not a weather witch. You’re just a silly mare that’s stuck at the bottom of a sinkhole. Now get in that broolly!”

Flea gave the rope a little shake for emphasis, like she was whipping a horse’s reins. Her mum huffed and sighed a moment longer. Then Flea felt the rope pinch as a hand caught hold of the umbrella’s brim down at the end of the line.

She’s gonna do it, thought Flea. She’s going to let me save her.

But then Shell screeched at the top of her lungs.

“Agh! There’s something inside it! Something *alive!*”

Flea frowned, confused for a second. Then she reached over her shoulder, patting her upper back. Her hood had been emptied of its furry little hitchhiker.

“It...it’s just a squirrel, Shell!” Flea called. “Sorry about that. Bloody creature’s been stalking me, stowing away in my hood. I can’t get rid of it.”



Shell gave a spluttering laugh that echoed up the sinkhole. “Animals always follow around after you, Flea. Animals know you’re soft.”

“I’ve just not got around to cooking it yet.”

“You’re a soft lass and those vermin know it! But they know you’re lucky too. That you’ll survive. I named you after luck, didn’t I Felicity? I’m not as lucky as you are, kidda. That squirrel will give me rabies if I go anywhere near it.”

“Don’t give up, Shell...not now, *please*.”

“Where did you get this umbrella from anyway?” Shell asked, changing the subject. “Don’t lie. Don’t say that you pinched it from some outdoors store. Your brother told me all the big high street shops were picked clean months ago.”

Flea sighed. She would’ve felt a lot better if she’d nicked the umbrella from one of those chain stores. But after all the shopping precincts had been raided in the summer riots and after the cleaner cops had been brought in to arrest the looters, those shops had mostly disappeared behind barriers of rivet metal,



their consumer goodies all harvested away. In recent weeks, Flea had been reduced to stealing from charity shops and food banks for the last slim pickings of supplies. Everyone needed supplies.

Like every other bastard around here, Flea was getting ready. This week the city of Manchester, just like the rest of their sorry country and just like the whole bleeding world, was being closed for maintenance. It was shutting up shop. It was holing itself up for a long winter sleep. It was going to ground. There was only one working week left now until the Global Mandatory Hibernation. The big G.M.H. that'd been looming Flea's entire life. It'd been voted for a generation ago, before she was even born. This six month sheltering period was a necessary measure so that some government science boffins could safely deploy their geoengineering solution and reverse the effects of climate change. This Friday it was finally happening. They were going to fix the broken weather.

And Flea wasn't ready for it. She'd never be



ready.

“Where did you get the umbrella, girl?” Shelly demanded.

“I took it from the old lady on the fifth floor where the roof’s caved in,” she admitted. “Rain was leaking through her busted ceiling and she...she was just sitting in her chair, stiff as a board, smelling bad. Poor cow died with her broly in her hand.”

Shell snorted. “The old folks in these flats won’t ever step outside again, Flea. They’d rather snuff it in the comfort of their own homes.”

“And what? You feel the same?!”

It was crazy for Shelly to want to stay. She wasn’t old and this wasn’t their home. But Flea could still remember the depression that had hung over her mum like a black cloud after they were forced out of their flat in Liverpool. Shell had loved that shitty flat, even though it used to take in a good three feet of sewer water with every storm. The family flood drill was always the same. Flea and Wes would have to share the top bunk. They’d fight over blankets, nose-



plugs and snacks until the pump man came. Their mum would make her own hard bed on the kitchen table, which was fair enough since none of them ever ate off it. It was only after the Wheelers lost their old home that Shell started washing her headache pills down with cheap gin, which had sunk her faster than any flood.

“I could just hibernate here,” said Shell, sounding scarily like she meant it. “I can’t go through another evacuation, Fleabag. There’s nowhere left to go. Not for the likes of us. We can’t afford our own fancy backyard bunker. Your Nanna was the only relative we had to take us in. She might’ve lived longer if we hadn’t brought our dirt and germs to her doorstep. Where can we go now? There’s no shelter left in this country. Little England is shrinking. The tide’s creeping in every day. The ground water’s surging up from below. This country’s a leaky lifeboat now. They’ll chuck anyone overboard who they don’t need. They’ll deport them like your dad or they’ll let the weather finish them off. I *like* it down



here, Flea. It's quiet. I can't hear the thunder or the wind rattling the walls. It's like going back into the womb. It's like being all safe inside your mum's tum."

Flea felt like she might just puke into the hole.

"Just...just get in the umbrella," she moaned. "If you won't get in, I'll climb down there and drag you out by your hair!"

Flea meant it. She leapt for the rope, catching it between her palms. The tree creaked as it took her weight, but she wasn't heavy enough to break it. She coiled her arms and legs around the rope cord, feeling herself slowly slipping down its length. She peered into the sinkhole's shadows, feeling its mouth gaping to swallow her. But before she could get any deeper, Flea thrust out her legs to brace herself against its brim. She clasped onto the ledge, clawing her way back onto the living room floor. She ran a hand over the short bristles of her hair and her palm came away damp with sweat.

Down below, Shell laughed at her failed heroics.



“I keep telling ya. You can’t cope with tight spaces. You think I can’t remember from when you were little? How you used to scream and bawl if I took you through a subway. And now the hibernation is coming. And you don’t want to go to ground, do you? Oh, my poor little Fleabag. My poor luckless Felicity...” The rope jostled, pushed from below. “Take your broolly back, girl. Don’t pretend you didn’t steal it for yourself. Take it and do one. No sense in both of us going down with this sinking ship.”

Flea’s throat constricted. She couldn’t answer, she could hardly breathe. She took hold of the rope again and pulled the umbrella back to the surface. The squirrel hopped into the branches of the dead tree and then tight-roped walked down to Flea, crawling up her arm and back into her hood. When she untied the broolly, she found that her mum had filled up its canopy with the litter out of her dinghy – with crisp packets, cigarette boxes, and drained bottles of booze. In numb movements, Flea slipped the rucksack from her shoulders, reached inside and pulled out one of



her last cans of Coke. She placed it in the bucket then lowered it into the hole, like a coin dropped into a wishing well. The bucket landed softly on the dingy below. A second later she heard the squirt of its ring pull.

“Cheers, kidda,” Shelly rasped between gulps.

Her mum must be thirsty down there, Flea thought. How long before dehydration took hold? How long did she have for another rescue effort?

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked out loud.

“I told you. Piss off out of here. Go make some friends. Find yourself a nice boy, one that’s not fussy on looks. You’ll need someone to shelter with.”

“I don’t need anyone! Besides...I *do* have friends.”

Shell snorted again. “Sure you have.”

“I’ve got a mate. At the school. A Manc girl.”

“What have I told you about going to school?!”

Flea gave up on arguing. Shell would only start bitching about Flea betraying her Scouse roots by sneaking into a Manchester school where she wasn’t



even wanted. Where she didn't even have a placement. But the school was the one place that Flea could go to for help. Shelly was right. She needed a friend right now. If she couldn't go down the sinkhole herself, then she needed someone who'd go down for her.

Flea didn't say goodbye. She didn't say "*See ya, Shelly!*" or "*Be back soon, mum.*" She wouldn't tell Shell that the next person she saw might be the flood rescue service pulling her out of her womb tomb by force. Flea just snatched up her rucksack and climbed back over the sandbags. Out in the hallway, she waded downstream to the entrance doors. Through their cracked glass, she saw the storm was still raging outside.

There's three main ways an umbrella can save your life.

For Flea, the surest of these was using her umbrella as a shield. Not to protect her from the clouds above. She wasn't so stupid she would actually hold an umbrella up over her head. Not unless she



wanted to be hoisted off her feet into a cyclone. She'd learned never to rest her broolly on her shoulder either. It wasn't a bloody parasol and the world was no longer made for picnics. Flea knew that if she chose to stay above ground and live in the weather, she'd need to thrust her umbrella straight out ahead of her.

She booted the doors and they flew wide.

Feeling those first ice needles of rain, she opened up her broolly and she bloody well braced herself.

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