

## **Friendless in a Burning world**

The current temperature was 60°C at 8 am. It wasn't that hot, most days the temperature is 50°C to 70°C. Our house isn't that fancy. We have a couple rooms, the meeting room, the dining room, and the kitchen. Years ago, people would go outside to socialise with friends. Nowadays? No. You couldn't even go out without fear of heat stroke or difficulty breathing due to ozone depletion.

I'm Ananditha, I live with my parents, and my favourite thing in the world is planes. I'm fascinated by planes. I learnt about them through my grandad, who was a pilot in the Singapore Air Force. Being able to go wherever you want, anywhere in the world! I can only imagine. The whole world at your fingertips. Aeroplanes defy gravity, and they could take you to places you've never been to. I hope to be able to build them when I'm older. My room is full of models and blueprints of planes.

I heard an alarm sound from the air monitor. Low. Since the late 2040s, we've had to get oxygen tanks delivered, and we have seven air filters in the house to circulate air and remove pollutants. I checked the air tank; empty. I checked our cupboard, and grabbed one of the canisters, put it in the funnel, which spreads the purified air out to the entire house. We get three tanks a day, government funded. Since the 2030s, the air in Singapore has worsened, and contains strong pollutants. All houses are equipped with vacuum sealed doors. You can go outside a couple times (without a mask), for just a couple minutes, but the longest someone has survived without a mask is 20 minutes.

I'm in secondary school. All classes are online. Important tests (Like O levels) are taken at home, under surveillance (motion sensor camera). Some kids try to cheat on tests, but they get caught through eye-movement monitors and get expelled.

Honestly, it's hard to make friends. We communicate through texting or calling on our devices. It's annoying. My history books say that there was a time where you could go outside, play sports and video games with your friends. Nowadays, only adults are allowed to go outside with respiratory protection, as children's bodies are not developed enough to survive the pollution.

My dad is a lawyer who works on cases relating to housing issues, such as if the walls aren't properly insulated or if the pipes don't deliver air canisters properly. He makes sure the homeowners who have been affected by developers not following the building code get appropriate compensation. My mom is an investment banker, and she leads investments in technologies that address elder needs.

I wore a mask from my secret stash of protective gear to sneak out of the house. They look like gas masks, and apparently 'decrease chances of death by 87%'. I stole it from my dad, when he

was carrying out a home inspection. The city was a ghost town. It was creepy, but beautiful. Abandoned buildings that once had a purpose, but you'll never know what. The sky was grey, like a storm was approaching. It always looked like that. There was rubble everywhere. I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Hey." I jumped, startled, and couldn't find my balance, then fell flat on my face. "Whoa, real smooth there." I recognised that voice.

"Hey Alicia." I said, looking up. She has green eyes, brown hair, freckles, and muscular arms. She lived out here somewhere, with her dad. Her dad works as a construction worker, and builds new houses, and that's how I met them. When I was six, I accompanied my father on a home inspection. I was playing around with some tools, and I heard a voice telling me to be careful, and a kid with green eyes came up to me and started showing me how to use the tools properly. By the end of the day, we'd created a small fort out of spare wood and nails. We've been best friends ever since.

Alicia and her dad have been living in the streets of Singapore ever since her mom died, and her father battled depression. "So, how's your dad?" her carefree grin suddenly disappeared. "He's carrying through. Hey! Maybe in a couple years he'll make enough money to buy a house." She looked moody, so I changed the subject.

"I got you some food." Her eyes lit up immediately. I reached into my bag and pulled out sandwiches. She teared up, "You're the best!" We then turned around, and headed to where she usually spends her days, protecting herself from the toxic air.

Alicia and her dad move around using the MRT station network. The bomb shelters in the MRTs have been repurposed to prevent toxic air from entering the network. "Are we going to Orchard today?" I asked, kicking a dead rat out of my path.

Orchard is basically where everyone on the streets ends up at one point. When I first learned about 'street life' from Alicia, I got to know about the untrustworthy characters to avoid. Especially the ones that would beat you up if you said / did the wrong thing. "Yup." We jumped onto the train tracks and walked through the MRT tunnels to Orchard.

"Hey, I have something to tell you." Alicia said, sounding serious. "You know how I've always wanted to leave this place, and start a new life?" I looked at her. I knew she wanted to leave Singapore, but that was always fantasy, not reality. "The Merlions figured out how to get us out of here. They've got a boat that's heading out tonight." The Merlions are a gang that run the streets of Singapore, doing acts of charity for the homeless. They also provide oxygen masks for those who can't afford them.

My eyes swelled and I felt tears in my cheek. My best, and only friend. Was leaving me. Alicia looked up at me and wiped away the tears. "It's okay. Who knows? Maybe you'll build a plane

and come visit me. We could live happily ever after.” I noticed she was crying as well and wiped her tears away. We walked along the train tracks, talking about all we’ve been through together. By the time we got to Orchard, it was 12pm, and it was bustling with activity.

Orchard MRT station is made up of makeshift stands, selling everything under the sun. Most people on the street don’t have enough money to spare. Every cent counts. They need food, and every oxygen mask lasts only 48 hours without a new air canister. In Orchard, there were hundreds of people whose only possession was displayed in their stall. I walked past them, following Alicia, who was going around, grabbing essentials for her journey. I saw a kid begging for money, the back of his oxygen mask was beeping. He was obviously going to run out of oxygen soon. I checked my pockets, drew a portable oxygen tank. I helped him secure the replacement canister for his mask. He thanked me, then I looked up and realised I was lost.

I was near the old UNIQLO in ION mall. I saw Alicia haggling with someone for a lifejacket. I ran over and saw that Alicia didn’t have any money. “Look, I’ll pay you back later. I just really need this jacket right now!”. “Look kid, I trust you. But I have mouths to feed. And I can’t have my merchandise taken without payment. That’s just the way it is.” I checked my pockets. I had a 50 dollar note. I handed it to the stall owner. “I hope this helps your family.”

I looked over at Alicia, who was clutching the life jacket like she was giving it a bear hug. “Thanks. The life jacket was the last thing on my list. I’m fully ready to go.” She looked at me. I couldn’t believe it. After all this time. It was over. “I’ll walk you over to the harbour?”

A couple hours later, I said goodbye to my best, and only friend. “Promise me something. Whenever you can, help the people on the streets. The ones like me.”

“I promise.” We hugged goodbye, and I headed home, admiring the buildings as I passed them, for the first time in ages, appreciating the ghost town I live in.