

DYSTOPIAN FICTION

Alee

By P.J. Davies

The storms grew stronger in April, and by August the country was a battered mess of windswept peaks. October saw national infrastructure in tatters and the federal government declare a state of emergency before being swept away themselves. The suburban sprawl that Bree grew up in was flattened and dispersed, and those who managed to withstand the onslaught of the ceaseless winds sought shelter in the caves and hollows of the nearby hills. Furious air lashed all obstacles in its way, and the rain pierced the earth and uprooted everything that grew.

Bree's family lived at the foot of a mountain under a great slab of stone that had fallen between two ancient trees, now toothless roots that clung to the ground. Below the stone there was a fistful of space. Bree and her family nestled into it and braced themselves against the roar of the unsteady earth. There were two respites from the wind: dawn and dusk. As the light returned or left, there was a liminal time in which precipitation and sudden changes in pressure systems occurred. It was during this time that the wind stopped and the world stood still, catching its breath. Bree, her mother and her two brothers took turns venturing out to hunt deer and small game on the golf course, taking cover from the rogue winds in dugouts and sand traps. It was a terror to separate and go forth as an interloper in this betwixt world, but the family unit needed to regularly splinter and then regroup. It was the only way to keep everyone fed.

Bree was shimmying along the green, gaining on a lizard, when a raven landed beside her. Glossy blue-black and hook-beaked, it regarded her momentarily before gesturing with its right foot. Bree removed a filthy plastic bag tied there with red string, and eased the cracked plastic open, letting a piece of paper fall into her hand.

Unfolded several times and smoothed out, the note read:

WE HAVE A STRONGHOLD
RAISE THE MECHANICAL FLAGPOLE
OBSERVATORY ON GLINT MOUNTAIN
DAWN
STILLNESS IS NEAR
WE WILL COME TO YOU

Mount Glint was to the East. Narrow and peaked, it rose straight out of the earth and deep into the sky, an ideal spot for astronomers. A road spiralled and snaked around the perimeter, gaining in elevation by way of repetition. The observatory had been built into the stone, then shuttered and abandoned long before the wind began, with the door welded shut to protect against vandals and Astrofanatics. Bree turned and faced the hills of the Blue Mountains to the West. They were too far for her family to reach on foot in the shortened days of early winter, but supposedly had excellent protection in the form of a subterranean cave system that went on for miles. If there was a stronghold, she reasoned, it would be in those hills. The raven leapt into the air and looped towards them, as if to confirm her suspicions. It was a carrier bird, delivering messages to people left within the valley who could still be rescued.

Back home beneath the safety of the stone slab, she argued with her mother about the note. Her younger brother thought it was wondrous; her older brother wouldn't even look at the note. Their mother didn't want to risk it, to be caught on the precipice when the wind started up. But when they tried to imagine alternatives, they all drew blanks.

"This is our only chance at a true refuge," said Bree, tracing the letters for the hundredth time. "If I don't at least try to send them a

signal, we'll all wonder what could have been. We can't hold on here much longer."

They spent that night and the next outfitting her for the journey. Their mother tore clothing into strips and wound it around her legs and arms, insulation against the bite of the residual winds. Bree's task was to rise before dawn, with the calm, and run to an underpass halfway up the mountain road, where she would shelter until nightfall gave her an hour of ease to reach the observatory. Her backpack needed to be light to grant her speed, but she packed walking stick, rope, a small piton, and a sponge filled with water. Then she turned to her family, a lump rising in her throat. They had not been apart for longer than a handful of hours in many months. Those hunting trips had been hard enough, but Bree had yet to spend a night away. Her younger brother flung his arms around her and gifted her a handful of frog jerky, knotted in his cleanest sock. The moment before she stepped outside, her older brother shoved a pair of swimming goggles into her pocket and gave her a stiff sideways hug. Her mother embraced her, then firmly pushed her towards the yawning mouth of the cave. Bree immediately felt achingly exposed, a tall blade of grass in a layer of moss.

She set off at an easy jog towards the gate that marked the beginning of the observatory road. The animal in her wanted to run full tilt, to exhaust itself, but she forced herself to set a pace. Burning herself out too early could mean death, a swift descent down the mountain. She passed the gate and made her way up the steeply sloping hill. The morning light was just beginning to flood over everything, and from her spot on the mountain, Bree saw the land stretch on for miles, not a man-made object in sight, every edifice toppled. She had seen so little for so long, hunkered down, going from the stone slab to the golf course and back again. She wanted to stop and soak in the beauty of the rolling hills relaxing in their hour of repose from the storm's assault. But the sun made itself fully known

above the horizon and the wind was picking up, so she pressed on, chest burning. Rounding a corner, she saw a concrete arch blasted into the side of the mountain to let the road pass through. She darted towards it and flung herself into an alcove within the curved interior, pressing into the small space. Her legs buzzed with heat and she gasped for breath. The shriek of the wind rose in pitch, and the air was suddenly filled with dust. It occurred to her that the dust was the mountain, and that given enough years the storm would wear it into the ground as well. She pulled her brother's swimming goggles over her eyes and lost her gaze within the swirling sandstorm inches from her face.

Bree woke with a start, nearly falling from her perch. The light was fading, and the wind was dying. She extended her arm out of the alcove, and felt her sleeves buffeted by the remaining breeze. She rose and stretched as best she could, then stepped into the road. Immediately she felt herself pushed back, but she used her walking stick to find purchase on the ground and pressed on. The sky was lit up with pinks and blues, and the clouds were slowing their skittering.

She soon came to a section of the road that had split in half, the lower part having dropped several feet. The remains of an old tree were exposed by the collapse of the road, and her walking stick against a root created a boost to the base of the splintered cement. She tapped in her piton where earth met stone. Balancing on the root, she pulled her walking stick up and stuck it in the muddy wall. With the extra leverage, she hauled herself over the lip of the road. Bloody chinned, Bree reached down for her walking stick. It stuck fast in the mud, and a gust from behind made her clasp herself to the ground. Abandoning stick and piston, she trotted towards the observatory.

It looked achingly close, but the road tucked around the left of the mountain instead of forging straight ahead. This was the pedestrian-only Sky Walk, a fenced walkway that hugged the side of the peak. All the railings had warped, curled in on themselves. In some places,

the railing had been snapped off entirely. Bree dropped down and shuffled on her arms and knees, covetous of the firm ground. Even in the calmest of twilights, this was a windy place. The path narrowed where the rock had eroded and contributed to the sandstorm below. Bree stood and flattened her back against the hardness of the rock. The air screamed and snatched at her ears, loosening her woolen hat and sending it spiralling into the blackness below. Her curls swarmed her face, and she staggered to get a grip. Between strands of furiously lashing hair, she spied the domed entrance of the observatory, protected from the wind. As the sun blinked below the horizon and flashed green, the walkway opened and she reached the promontory. She ran across the courtyard and slid into the doorway, her ears popping. There was a coppery wetness in her nose that burst with the renewed gale, and she braced herself for the turbulence. And yet, the tempest did not rise in pitch, but mellowed. Casting her scarf beyond the mouth of the shelter revealed nothing. She walked into the courtyard.

Bree was met with a gently persistent breeze, the likes of which she had not felt since before the weather turned. Getting as close as she dared to the edge, she peered down the mountain, into the swirling darkness. And it was swirling—the storm had not died so much as moved on. The peak of the mountain pierced the eye of the storm and held it fast. She returned to the observatory entrance and propped herself against the door, stretching her legs in front of her. Fifteen feet away was the raised concrete box with the mechanical flagpole inside it, folded beneath the earth.

In the morning the eye of the storm still had not shifted its gaze. Bree approached the flagpole at first light with a scarf in hand. A device like a ship's wheel was set into the side of the flagpole box. Taking hold of it, she wrenched it to the left. The lid of the box opened, and the flagpole began to extend itself. She tied the red scarf to the top of the pole, then resumed turning the wheel. The flagpole

shot into the sky, her scarf slapping to and fro. At its fullest height the scarf snapped off and snaked into the sky. The dawn upon the land below had not yet reached the Blue Mountains opposite the observatory. She searched for a response among the low hills, her heart within her mouth. Finally, she saw her answer: a flash and a steady glow. A beacon of light spread across the valley towards her, illuminating a path to safety in the early morning gloom.