**David Wynne**

**Let The Last One Out**

The world to Kieran Gilchrist had never made complete sense, even more so when he found his mum and dad stone-cold dead in their bed one rainy morning. The news had reported nothing else for weeks. Stay indoors, keep hydrated, stay warm – that's what they'd said but it hadn't worked. Not for old Mr. and Mrs. Broughton next door, or the Mackenzies across the street, or the other draped bodies he'd watched being wheeled out from their homes. The vans had been unmarked, civilian. No sirens.

     Kieran waited for the school bus on an empty street in the pouring rain. It should have arrived at 8:30 a.m. give or take a few minutes. At 8.40 he started on the twenty-minute walk to his school. No cars; no people; no pupils. School Closed Until Further Notice. The school had been shut for two weeks now. He missed school. He walked back the same route, counting his steps as he had done on the way there. 2, 104 steps later and he was back in his house.

     It was Monday. Waffles; he hadn't had them because his mother was . . . upstairs. He burnt his hand on the hot griddle and made the batter too thick. Halfway through a rubbery mouthful he stood up and launched the plate and its charred contents against the kitchen wall. His parents were dead, he fathomed that, but what did that really mean? Would he end up dead too like everyone else? Who would cook for him and wash his clothes and tidy up for him and drive him to guitar lessons? In the living room, he frantically called his granny, then his aunty and uncle but no one answered. Confusion, anxiety, and rage bubbled up badly. The phone hit a framed picture of a local bridge, inflicting a spider's web of a crack. The coffee table flipped over; the television crashed; his foot hurt when he kicked the walls and his head reeled when he punched it repeatedly. Only an ornament, a playful porcelain pig, his mother's favourite, stopped him. His breathless heaves filled the room. He gently returned the pig to the mantlepiece then slumped to his knees in choked sorrow. He had never been alone before. Not ever.

     Kieran spent the morning with his mum and dad. He wondered where they had gone to, really gone to. They had kind of believed in God, no church or praying or stuff, just a vague belief occasionally expressed – "God rest his poor soul" or "God bless you, son" or "God help her" but he didn't think his mum and dad were with God. He couldn't envision them up in heaven. He couldn't even envision heaven. They were here, tucked up in bed before him, pale, inert and gone . . . to nowhere.

     Order; he must have order. He spent the afternoon tidying up the mess he'd made in the living room. Order kept his confusion, anger, and fear at bay. After that, he began arranging and rearranging his record and comic book collections. He loved jazz, adored it. The improvised, free-flowing melodies ran contrary to his obsession with neatness and order, yet the music made infinite more logic to him than the jarring and conflicting outside world.

     He discovered an error in the alphabetical order of his records – a stray Oscar Peterson album had been placed before Charlie Parker, a mistake by his dad, no doubt. Against all instinct, he didn't correct the error. In fact, he removed a Sonny Rollins album and placed it before Django Reinhardt, out of order. It annoyed him, pained him even, but he did it to honour his father, his mother too, for the sake of normality.

     The soothing, syncopated sounds of Bill Evans and Thelonious Monk eased him into the evening. He took further solace in his comic book collection. The fantasy of The Fantastic Four Season One temporarily whisked him away from his gloomy loneliness, until hunger restored reality. He ate a cheese sandwich, a bowl of Frosties, and a mango yogurt in a deathly silent kitchen. He then switched off all the lights and gazed out of the living room window. The night sky still bled rain, a persistent drizzle caught in the lucent beam of the street lamps. All the houses in his street were shrouded in darkness. No lights; no life.

     'Goodnight mum. Goodnight dad,' he said outside their closed bedroom door. He waited a moment, not for a response, just out of habit.

     His cocoon of a bedroom welcomed him, as did Charles Mingus and The Amazing Spider-Man: The Night Gwen Stacey Died. He'd liked comic books before he'd even been able to read the bubble captions. Batman, Superman, X-Men, he could interpret their expressions and desires better than he could with real people. It was far easier for him to tell when Mister Fantastic was pissed off than with Mr. Reid, his old history teacher. But on that lost, forlorn night he didn't feel much at all, not even when Spidey's girlfriend fell fatally from a bridge at the hands of the dastardly Green Goblin.

     Sleep beckoned. He dutifully returned the comic to its shelf in the correct chronological placing and ditto for Mingus Ah Um. His hand lingered over the 'R' section of his collection. No. He turned the lights out and lay on top of his bed. Now he wasn't tired anymore. He got back up and turned on the light. With an air of finality, he walked over to his record collection and put Sonny Rollins and Oscar Peterson firmly back in their rightful place.

     Now he could sleep.

Kieran examined his neighbourhood from his front doorstep. The rain had stopped but the inky sky threatened imminently. Silence ruled the cul-de-sac. Curtains had been drawn in some houses, as obvious as closed-for-business signs; others remained wide open, vacant, no one at home. He'd watched some families hastily load up their cars, never to be seen again. His mum and dad, like many, had listened to the news and stayed put.

     "Hello, dog," he said, surprising himself with his own voice. A West Highland Terrier had wandered into view across the road. The dog padded tamely toward him. He bent down to receive the placid creature, happy to see a living thing. The dog's white coat looked a little grimy and felt dusty to the touch. A silver neck tag read: Mr. Peabody. Someone's stray pet. But when he returned from the kitchen with some leftover chicken from the fridge the dog had vanished. He thought of all the other pets, the dogs, cats, and everything else abandoned by death. A sudden and awful notion struck him. He rushed back into his house. Trainers, keys, what else? Bicycle.

     "I'll be back soon!" he yelled out to his parents even though he knew they were gone.

     Two wheels carried him through streets as barren as his suburb, past shuttered shops and an endless stream of lifeless homes. The absence of cars allowed him to cycle freely on the road. He wasn't alone though. Kids his age were dotted here and there, in gardens, outside redundant shops, wandering aimlessly alone. He cycled faster, taking the same route as the bus he'd been on so many times before. Death urged him on, that of his mum and dad, which he could do nothing about now, but he could help the animals in the city zoo . . .

     He was already steps ahead when his bike clattered to the ground outside his favourite place in the whole of the world. The raw, musky scent of the animals pleased his nostrils. No one manned the unlocked entrance. He knew the layout of the zoo like his record and comic book collections. He had always wanted to walk around the zoo without lots of gawping, noisy humans distracting him. Now, through hunger, the animals were gawping and noisy. The pelican and stork enclosures were locked, and the red panda and meerkat ones too. He kicked and shook the doors in vain, distressing the trapped beasts further. Shit. Freedom; they needed freedom.

     The empty roads opened up to him once again. He knew where to go but he had to take the exact route his father had driven three weeks ago the longer route. A Mercedes Coupe came careering around a corner, swerving and missing him by inches. The driver of the car lost control and overshot into a bus stop. Two teenagers roughly his age exited the car but he rode off when they began shouting at him.

     Unwavering in his conviction, Kieran arrived at the same tool hire shop his father had recently used. 'A tool for every job' so read the sign. The door opened, triggering an alert buzzer. He called out but no one answered. The chainsaw his father had hired to cut back the cherry blossom tree in the back garden was of no use. Agitated and in a hurry, he helped himself to two bolt cutters and a small, portable angle grinder. This time he stuck to the pavements on his way back to the zoo.

     Over 1,000 inhabitants set amidst 82 acres of parkland. Kieran knew what he had to do. He held no sentimental attachment to animals, not even for the cute or majestic variety. He admired their simple and practical ways. He understood animals far better than he did humans. Animals didn't baffle him with strange behaviour or lie to him or tease him. Animals lived as their nature dictated, not for what others expected of them or for the amusement of over-emotionally involved humans. Animals were cool.

     Sparks flew, padlocks sheared, and living things screeched and squawked. The birds were the first to taste freedom. A pair of black storks, a flock of pink Chilean flamingos, half a dozen great white pelicans, a couple of Egyptian vultures – most gazed warily at their open enclosures, wondering where the zookeepers were with their food. Hunger brought them tentatively out into the open. The varied species of monkeys ran rampant on their release, chasing the freed birds, jumping over enclosures, and scampering up lofty trees. Gibbons, baboons, and a troop of chimpanzees followed next. The 2 sun bears were asleep in their enclosure when he left a gate open.

     On the 7th day of the Apocalypse Kieran Gilchrist set free: 4 red river hogs, 4 swamp wallabies, 3 Western grey kangaroos, 2 red pandas, 2 pygmy hippos, 2 Malayan tapirs, 1 Chinese goral, and a Socorro dove in a fir tree!

     A hog could have gouged him, a Gelada baboon might have mauled him, a sun bear may have torn him to shreds . . . but they didn't because he was kindred in spirit, a modern-day, 16 years old Noah shielded by his feverish mission.

     He holed up overnight in the Grassland Restaurant and waited for the majority of the freed captives to jump, run and fly the coop. Loud and strange nocturnal sounds accompanied his broken sleep. He ate biscuits for breakfast. 2 greater one-horned rhinos were released from their pen under a drab dawn the colour of their thick hides and were last seen thundering past Penguins Rock. 8 Scottish wildcats promptly returned to the wild but the other species of cats were not so tabby-like. Defrosted meat from a nearby supermarket had distracted the ravenous trio of Asiatic lions long enough for Kieran to grind out an opening in their enclosure. After retreating to the safety of the koala house for a few hours, he repeated the process with a pair of Sumatran tigers. A hop, skip, and a jump, and the liberated lions were prowling the hilltop 'African Plains' area, drawn by a scent that had taunted them every day. Alas, the zebras and antelopes had been released hours earlier. The tigers went the way of the lions, zebras, and antelopes (and many of the other animals): into the dense forest bordering the zoo and from there to a freshly fallen city bereft of the predator (human adults) who had hunted many of their kind to near extinction.

     Somewhere amidst the menagerie madness, a lone cotton-top tamarin monkey hopped down from a tree and onto his shoulder, a piece of retrieved mango in one tiny hand. Startled human eyes met inquisitive monkey eyes; friendship at first sight. Kieran and Mango (what else?) pondered over the plight of the penguins and koalas. He was so glad the pandas had been returned to China a few years back. The sea would be the only chance of survival for the colony of penguins but he couldn't even usher them out of their enclosure. As for the 4 koala bears, they would require a constant supply of fresh eucalyptus leaves . . .

     A vague but vital recollection of a school visit to the city's botanical gardens soon had him cycling 4 miles across town with a cotton-top tamarin on his shoulder and 2 boxed koalas tied with rope to each handlebar. He paid no attention to the group of kids entering a supermarket through a smashed window. Once in the gardens, he placed the boxed koalas under the shade of a tree. A speedy return to the zoo to collect the final 2 koalas saw him avoid a violent skirmish between a flightless cassowary bird and a white-faced saki monkey. He fed the penguins the last of the defrosted frozen fish he'd salvaged from the supermarket and left all exits open should they feel the need to leave their doomed rock.

     On his way back to the botanic gardens he witnessed a blazing bonfire in a local park. Kids with scarves wrapped around their faces heaved body-size loads into the lapping flames.

     Nothing could deter him from completing what he had started.

     The sprawling, tranquil gardens finally put him at ease. Mango scurried up the thick and bushy Eucalyptus viminalis before the spooked and sluggish koalas even had a paw on the tree. Kieran placed all 4 on the low-set crook of the tree then watched with quiet satisfaction as the antipodean marsupials climbed slowly but surely toward their only food source. There were only a handful of eucalyptus trees dotted around the garden, not enough to sustain them long term but at least they would die outdoors surrounded by nature, as others would. But many of the animals would adapt, thrive even in their boundless new habitat. Herbivores would forage, carnivores would hunt, omnivores would do both, buildings and roads would split, crumble and succumb to the slow-surging roots of plants and trees that would dominate and consume all that had formerly passed with a tame and timely whisper.

     Kieran smiled at the sight of the climbing koalas and the scurrying monkey. A raindrop touched his face, then another. He would have stayed a little longer if not for the rain. His mum and dad returned to the foremost of his mind. He shuddered at the thought of burning them in a communal funeral pyre. No. He would bury them in the back garden beside the cherry blossom tree. They'd like that.

     "Let's go, Mango," he said, tapping his left shoulder. The little monkey leapt from the tree to the ground and swiftly scampered up his companion's back to sit on his shoulder. There were other kids alive, he knew that, and maybe he would meet some, but he wouldn't trade Mango for the world.

     One final, contented glance at the koalas and he was on his bike again. With a deliberate defiance, he shunned the route he had previously taken and took another path. He fought his inner autistic urge to turn back and retrace his steps as he always did, as he always had, but this time he won. Kieran knew there was no "correct" direction to take anymore, not in life, not now.