Count to Ten by Katie Leland

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

My deep blue eyes sprang open and my heart rate slowed. I jolted up when the nightmare became unbearable. It was the shadows again, chasing me while chanting my name; ‘Rose,’ they would scream. Their voices sounded like banshees and nails on a chalkboard mixed together. I was running as fast as I could with my honey blonde hair being pushed back in the wind. The shadows were right behind me. They were about to possess me when I became conscious again. To get over the traumatizing event that occurred I did the only thing I could do to calm myself from the reoccurring nightmare… count to ten.

I then sluggishly got out of the cot that I have slept in for the past nine years. Just one more orphan perk I guess, sleeping in the same bed since you showed up on the front steps and sharing a room with countless other girls. Suddenly, I stopped. I noticed that I was the only one in the room, just like the dream. I scrambled down the long, tile hallway. My toes froze as my bare feet padded through the orphanage, trying to find just a trace of any living person. I walked through every room, from the canary yellow nursery to the cool grey one that the older boys slept in. Nothing.

After my rounds and finding no one I heard it again: the shadows crying my name.

“Rose!” They all screeched simultaneously. The piercing yell shook the already unstable orphanage that I called home. *How do they know my name?* I questioned myself, but blew it off thinking that it didn’t matter, that this was all just a dream; it wasn’t real. I silently crept back into the young girls’ room I slept in and got back into the cold, hard cot. *It’s only a dream,* a voice kept whispering in the back of my head. *Just wake up and you will be fine.* I tried to listen to the voice, so I pinched myself but nothing happened; it just really hurt. The voice kept replaying in my head like someone stuck it on repeat and it wouldn’t stop so I did the only thing I could think of: what I always did. I clenched my eyes closed and counted to ten.

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I opened my eyes and the voice was gone. I didn’t want it back, so I shook my head, causing my shoulder-length honey-blonde hair to get all in my face. I grabbed a ponytail holder and tied it up, leaving no strand down. I tried to go back to sleep but I couldn’t due to the wailing shadows outside. Instead, I decided to figure out what was happening outside and where I really was. I hopped out of my pajamas and threw on a pair of torn denim jeans and a ratty camouflage shirt that one of the older orphan boys had given me. Finally I threw on my scarlet-rimmed glasses, laced up my cream high-tops, and was ready for all of my questions to be answered. That’s when I heard the banshee voices again. The only thing was that they weren’t calling my name. They were screaming, “Stella!”

*Wait,* I thought to myself. *If they were screaming someone else’s name then that means that I am not here alone.* I began to think of a plan to find this Stella girl that was here too. Ideas swarmed through my head until I thought of the perfect strategy.

I sprinted to the back door of the orphanage and looked out of the window. The outside world was an eerie, muted green, as if a green muck filled the air and covered everything in sight. Then I spotted it, the old stock house, about ten yards off of the orphanage. It was a straight shot, *I have to do it.*

Since I wasn’t sure what filled the air, I took a deep breath and opened the heavy oak door just enough to poke my head out. The only sound emitted was the click from when I turned the lock. When I glanced outside I looked to the left and right and saw nothing, not a ghostly figure in sight. I quickly closed the door to decide if I really wanted to take the chance of running or not. After a minute of contemplating I took one last deep breath, opened the door and sprinted to the stock house.

The gravel crunched under my shoes as I dashed closer and closer to the stock house. Just ten more yards, five, three, I was there. I swiftly turned the brass doorknob but the metal door wouldn’t budge. The air in my lungs began to diminish and some shadows began to chant my name. I knew they had found me.

As the voices crept closer I began to throw myself at the door. My frail shoulder hit the door repetitively because I thought repeating the action might make a difference. I was choking on the tiny bit of oxygen I had left, not daring to breathe the most likely poisonous air, when the door opened revealing a silhouette in the doorway.

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After I opened my eyes I found myself in a dimly lit room, and I noticed that I wasn’t in the orphanage. Then it all came back to me: waking up and being alone, the shadows wailing my name, running out to the stock house, and finally blacking out after I got a glimpse of a silhouette. I propped myself up on my elbows and again saw the silhouette, but it was now coming towards me.

“Who are you?” I croak out as the silhouette entered the light, revealing a girl, a few years older than me; Fourteen, fifteen maybe. She had unruly fiery hair and hazel eyes that showed a hint of fear.

“I should be asking you the same thing.” She replies sarcastically. “I heard the shadows screaming and something was banging on the door. I decide to peak out of the window and saw a girl.” I just stayed where I was, not moving and she decided to answer my question. “The name’s Stella, and you?”

A piece clicked in my mind. Stella, the name the shadows were screaming earlier. “Rose,” I absentmindedly respond.

“Rose, as in the Rose that the shadows were screaming for earlier,” Stella questioned me. I shook my head and she simply asked, “When did you arrive?”

“Arrive? Where are we even?” I interrogated.

Stella explained that we were in this nightmare world. Well that’s what she called it because anyone she met has had ‘the dream,’ the one that had been my reoccurring nightmare, and just showed up one night.

After a while Stella saw that the sun had come out through the square window of the stock house. I looked out the window and saw that everything was the same color as before, the faded green, except now it was illuminated. I got up to walk out with Stella but inhaled deeply right before I got to the door. Stella caught what I was doing because my cheeks were puffed out and she laughed so hard she snorted.

“Rose, what are you doing?”

“Well I just… I just thought that the air was poisonous because it was green.” After the words came out of my mouth my head dropped. “That sounded really stupid out loud,” I add.

“Yep, you’re new. Everything is this odd color because of old man Tennant’s machine. He made a few years ago to try and get back to our world and his invention exploded leaving us in this muck and killing most of the plants and animals like Pompeii and its ash.” I had no response but just started breathing at a normal rate again.

“So where is this destination?”

She never responded to my question but obviously heard it. She looked on edge after I brought up where we were going, as if she was not really sure about it. I didn’t attempt to ask again because I obviously would find out soon.

We sauntered down the path once more. Hours of walking had passed and what seemed like hours more were ahead. There was just one problem: the darkness was going to settle soon. I thought that I should just trust Stella and we would get there before anything bad could happen. Another twenty minutes or so passed without us speaking until Stella’s voice broke the comfortable silence.

“We’re almost there.” Stella told me and pointed to the house on the top of a hill, indicating that was where we were going. “It’s almost a five minute walk and we have a few minutes before the darkness sets.” Stella persisted. “Speed up or you’ll become possessed.”

That was all of the motivation I needed. I didn’t want to become possessed, not tonight. I sprinted as fast as my short legs could take me not even thinking of how I was leaving Stella in

the dust behind me.

Before I knew it I was on the wooden porch of the house Stella pointed out. I aggressively knocked on the door four times before it flew open. Standing in the doorway was a man who looked as if he was in his mid-thirties because of the few wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. His hazel eyes, the same as Stella’s, looked full of anger through the thick lens of his metal rimmed glasses. He soon saw what was causing us to run for help and ran his hand through his ash brown hair making it stick up in the front. The man swiftly pulled me into the house and ran outside to help Stella. I jogged into the living room, meaning to see what was happening outside when I became distracted. The smell of burning oil filled the room and all of the furniture was stained sage. It looked just like the color of everything else except richer. Curiously, I ran my fingers down the arm of the couch and the sage coloring rubbed off on my hand. This must have been where old man Tennant’s machine experiment went wrong.

My train of thought was quickly broken by a blood-curdling scream coming from outside. I turned to look outside through the window to see old man Tennant carrying Stella over his shoulder, stumbling back to the house. As soon as he entered the shack of a house and laid Stella on the sofa he started mumbling things like “She’s been hit,” and “It’s all my fault.”

After a lot of contemplation I decided to approach him and ask what exactly happened. He explained while running to get Stella to safety he saw Stella trip and fall. He shook his head and tears formed in his eyes. Still not knowing what was happening, I walked up to her. Her skin was clammy and when I placed my hand to her forehead it felt like icicles were running through her veins.

Old man Tennant walked behind me and placed his hand on my shoulder and we stood in silence. Soon Stella’s limp body began to fade into the couch until Old man Tennant and I were just staring at a couch.

“She was hit,” He started. “When she tripped the shadows got her.” There was a slight pause and change in his voice. “I wonder if it worked.”

“Wonder if what worked?”

“I must find out, Rose. Just do as I say. Trust me.”

With that he pulled out a gun. Before I could protest he pulled the trigger, causing the gun to fire, leaving a high pitched squeal in the air. Right after the bullet hit his skull, old man Tennant disappeared, and the gun he was holding clattered on the ground. The shadows must have found me because they began wailing my name again. It kept getting louder and louder until I could feel their presence. The glass windows began to crack and I picked up the gun, thinking that I could do something with it. The shadows broke through the window and started making their way towards me. I then decided the last thing I might ever do. I raised the gun to my temple as the shadows crept towards me. I clenched my eyes closed and counted to ten.

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I fired the gun.

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I awoke with a start and heard a continuous beeping sound along with the talking of numerous people. I slowly opened my eyes and tried to figure out where I was. My eyes adjusted and I attempted to put together what I saw. Chalky walls, ceilings, and floors. I see an IV full of liquid protruding from my arm, and I’m dressed in a hospital gown. I look at the other beds that are lined up in ten foot intervals. Everyone looked asleep and I saw a girl who resembled Stella from the dream.

“Rose?” The girl asks.

“Stella?” I reply, unsure what just happened to me.

“Do you know what just happened?”

“No idea.”

As if on cue, a nurse came into the large room. Her face was full of excitement when she saw that Stella and I were sitting up. “Oh my word, Doctor!” The nurse screamed. “Doctor, come now to the coma ward!”

“Hello,” the doctor greeted us. “I’m sure that you both are wondering what sent you and

the rest of the patients into this dream. Well, we think that it was caused by a mixture of things. Looking in all of your health files, every patient has had a horrible brain injury at one point in time. Also you all have been prescribed Methylin and have been taking it to help repair the brain. This medicine has been proven to have horrific side-effects, which you have obviously experienced. Other than that, you know as much as we do about why this happened, but after some blood tests and lab research we should find out and be able to prevent this from happening again.”

Stella and I looked up at each other and nodded as the doctor made his way farther in the room to check the other patients when he voices that someone else has woken up. It was a man most likely in his mid-thirties with dark hair – old man Tennant. He saw us, ripped off the IV and stumbled towards us.

“Stella!” He yelled.

“Daddy!” She responded, taking her IV out of her arm. They met midway in the room and collided in a hug. I admired the father-daughter reunion for a moment when a twinge of sorrow hit and I remembered that this would never be me. Stella looked over her father’s shoulder at me. Her father obviously saw that I was upset so let go of his daughter and made his way to me.

“Rose, answer me this,” He started. “Do you have a family that’s always there for you?” My head hung low as I shook it, not knowing where this was headed.

“Well,” he stopped and looked at Stella, who nodded, knowing what he would say. “How would you like to be a Tennant?”

At this tears came to my eyes as I croaked out my answer.

“Yes.”