

A SHORT STORY
MARDUKE
BURNING

DANIEL CAMOMILE

Daniel Camomile

Marduke Burning

A Suspenseful Christian Dystopia Short-Story

To see more of Daniel's works, visit his website at:

www.danielcamomile.com

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“Someone has to do something!” Caleb screamed, abandoning all pretense of appearing calm to the others. His fingers clawed at Karna’s sleeve, trying to tear the clothing away from the wound, but it was impossible. The black, crystalline infection had already spread up her arm, causing her skin and clothing around the wound to be as hard as flint. Caleb cried out as his wife’s stoney skin cut a jagged gash through his frantic fingers.

Helpless and terror-stricken, Caleb glanced around at the crowd of on-lookers, all of them cowed by the horrifying scene. The reality that nothing could be done for Karna fell on Caleb like the weight of the entire island. He fell to his knees beside Karna, clutching at her and gasping through tearless sobs. She would soon be just another blackstone statue, like so many others in Marduke.

As he wept, Caleb felt hot teardrops falling on the back of his neck as Karna stroked his thick, tousled hair with her unparalyzed hand. With an agonizing effort, Caleb lifted his head to look her in the face. She was forcing a smile on those perfect lips, her deep cerulean eyes glistening. It was more than Caleb could bear; he shut his eyes. Karna caressed his clean-shaven face tenderly, bravely choking back the tears long enough to say,

“Hey, my sweet man. It’s not really goodbye. I know you can stop this...like you always said. Don’t you give up. Don’t you dare give up...” Her gentle voice was choked by the infection as the creeping stone reached her throat.

Caleb opened his aching eyes again. The daylight stung them as he looked out of the kitchen window and into the garden, where a tall black statue of a woman stood. She gazed back at him lifelessly, as she had for the past seven years. Caleb reached up and touched his face, the once smooth skin now covered with coarse, graying hairs. He heaved a deep, empty sigh and glanced at the glass of water and bottle of black capsules sitting in their regular place on the table. He watched them trepidatiously for a long minute before a noise stole his attention. He was grateful for the distraction.

“Doctor! Doctor!” The voice rang urgently from outside Caleb’s shanty home. Caleb recognized the voice of his assistant immediately. Flinging open the door, Caleb already had his coat on and was outside before she could catch her breath.

“Alright, lead the way.” Caleb said brusquely, looking down at the frazzled, waspish woman. She appeared to have been running, and besides being winded she was flustered by Caleb’s demeanor.

“Doctor...there’s a...a sick man.”

“When isn’t there on this God-forsaken island? Show him to me.” Caleb repeated.

“No, you don’t understand. Not that kind of sick.” She went on, composing herself at last, “The police caught him trying to sabotage one of the engines! It’s not Blackrot, it’s the Burning.” She uttered this word low under her breath, as if it may conjure a horde of the vile people.

Caleb’s complacent eyes flared with interest, then narrowed almost immediately as he said,

“You’re certain it’s the Burning?”

“Deadly certain, sir. A very advanced case I think.” She replied with grave brevity.

Immediately Caleb rushed back inside the house to gather the appropriate vials and apparatus for the procedure, calling over his shoulder,

“I may have just the thing! Let’s only hope we’re not too late to catch it, for his sake and the city’s.” With the strap of his medicine pack slung around his shoulder, Caleb rushed out of the door and through the garden, his assistant hurriedly leading the way. Stepping out onto the cobblestone street, Caleb let his gaze float over the surrounding houses as they sped along.

Aside from his insubstantial garden, the surrounding houses that crowded the little gray street were bleak and desolate of green life. The howl of the engines sounded far off below the steep roofs and high houses. Tall windows in slanted walls peered down at the two of them as they hurried up the dingy urban street. Not a soul was out of doors, although here and there stood eerie human obelisks of black stone—victims of the never-ending plague of Blackrot. Caleb

made a point of never averting his eyes from their frozen faces. They were a grim and constant reminder of his chosen occupation.

Caleb recognized the area of the city his assistant was leading him. Sure enough, coming around a sharp turn and following a new street, Caleb found himself being led along the southernmost edge of the island, with nothing but an iron-wrought fence separating him from the thousand-foot fall beyond.

Caleb could not help but look over that expanse that every other citizen of Marduke dreaded to see. Below their floating city in the sky lay a blazing sea of vibrant fire, seething and flashing like the surface of the sun, stretching endlessly to the light-bleached horizon, without a suggestion of land beyond their floating island. Glancing back over his shoulder, Caleb could see one of the four objects that kept Marduke airborne. A towering, metal structure dominated the visible skyline, belching out black smoke from its top.

“That’s where they caught him.” Caleb’s assistant said, “At the base of the south engine, trying to break inside. God knows what would happen to us if even one engine were crippled. We’d be burned to an unrecognizable cinder!”

Caleb noted that the nauseating dread that used to accompany this possibility did not have the same effect on him now. The lack of feeling surrounding the idea of their island being plunged into that fiery cataclysm frightened Caleb. He thought of his black capsules still laying on his kitchen table, and the black medicine rattling in his medicine pack.

“Best not to dwell on it, I suppose.” Caleb replied, saving face. His assistant grunted a disinterested affirmation and led on silently. Caleb winced as he continued gazing over that span of vast solar fury, rubbing his burning chest as they walked. A troubling impulse to throw himself headlong into that fire stole over Caleb. He shut his eyes tight and drew in a sharp breath, grasping his chest suddenly.

“Are you alright, doctor?” His assistant inquired. She had stopped in his path and was eyeing him dubiously. Caleb straightened himself with a half-smile, meeting her eye as he replied,

“Never better.”

She sniffed and carried on. Turning a corner onto another street, the woman led on, but Caleb froze as if hit by an invisible wall. In front of him in the street gathered outside one of the cramped, slender street houses was a solemn crowd. Their unhappy faces all turned on him immediately with a tenuous look of fragile civility. Caleb had seen it before—a violent mob on the verge of erupting.

Caleb forced his legs to continue, dropping his eyes as he approached the crowd. They all shuffled to make way for the doctor, revealing a path to a particular door, guarded by a burly police officer holding a threatening-looking bludgeon.

“The Burning man’s at the end of the hall.” The officer rumbled, “Shout if he gets unruly.” He pushed the door open for Caleb, revealing a narrow, dark hallway within. With a wordless nod of affirmation, Caleb summoned his courage and stepped inside the house.

Once inside the dark hallway, the door was shut sharply behind him, leaving Caleb in near-perfect darkness. Fingering his medicine pack anxiously, Caleb looked down the hall and noticed a flickering light from under a door at its far end. He approached this light and, finding the doorknob, swallowed hard before turning it. As the door creaked open, it revealed a small, shabby, windowless bedroom with a single oil lamp burning on a meager table.

The sick man lay on a bed near the door with his face turned to the wall. Caleb stepped inside nervously, eyeing the man like a bomb he had to defuse. Caleb shut the door behind him. At once the man turned to face Caleb, who felt a pang of dread as he looked into the man’s blazing yellow eyes. Caleb knew at once that the Burning was in its most advanced stages. He immediately sat in a rickety chair nearby the bed and began digging in his medicine pack.

“What do you want with me?” The Burning man asked, with a voice like a harmony of two. Caleb swallowed hard, trying to keep his hands from shaking as he uncovered a syringe and searched for the right vial.

“I..I’m a doctor. I’m here to help you get well.” Caleb said, flatly.

“No. There are no doctors in Marduke. Just sick people.” The man retorted with a wry chuckle as he leaned back against the bedframe. Caleb shook off the offense, internally cursing

his shaky fingers. Why couldn't he find that blasted vial? The sick man went on in a leisurely tone,

“My name's Stephen. But I've already heard of you, Doc. They say you went a little crazy after your wife had the Blackrot. To be honest, I don't blame you. Love is the only thing that grounds us on this floating rock. To lose love is death itself if you ask me.”

At this point, Caleb's hands were shaking violently, and the burning in his chest would not stop. By some miracle, his fingers found the correct vial, a tiny black thing resembling an inkwell. As he struggled to insert the syringe and draw some of the black fluid out, the Burning man went on,

“Why do you do it, Caleb? Why do you keep trying to cure the Blackrot while everyone else just accepts it? It almost makes you a worse outcast than me, you know. I'm sure you've heard it. People are starting to wonder if you're getting sick like me...or should I say, if you're getting better.” He added with another chuckle.

“Oh, would you shut up!” Caleb exploded, dropping the vial to the floor suddenly as he withdrew the full syringe, “I'm just trying to keep you from getting thrown over the edge. That's what they do to people like you, if you don't remember. They throw you over the edge of the island! So don't go calling me a loveless man. Now show me your arm.” Caleb had stood up and was coming closer with the syringe in his hand. But Stephen made no move to show his arm. Instead, he went on as if Caleb had said nothing,

“I think I've figured out why you do it.” Stephen said, narrowing his luminous yellow eyes at Caleb, “You want to save the world. You're like me. I already see it in your eyes. It's only a matter of time before it's plain to everyone that you have the Burning, too.”

The gnawing fire in Caleb's chest had become unbearable and he clutched again at his heart, hissing a curse under his breath. Then, he turned his vitriol back on the sick man.

“You don't know what you're talking about! I do what I do because I love this island and don't want to see it incinerated by whatever is...down there. The engines are the only thing keeping our little world alive! It's men like you who are crazy and loveless.”

“That’s where you’re wrong!” The Burning man shouted, sitting completely upright with vital energy in his demeanor. Caleb fell back into his chair, feeling very tired. Stephen continued, “You have it all backward, about this cursed island and what’s actually below us. I never understood it, even when I was a boy. Our lives are wretched and futile here. There’s no cure on this island! No one’s safe from the Blackrot, and still everyone goes on and on about the good of Marduke and feeding the engines more and more to push back. Push back against what? You’re all fighting against the only thing that can cure you!” Stephen paused, then let himself settle back again, his face becoming reflective as he added quietly, “I had the Blackrot once.”

Caleb lifted his heavy head, still holding the black syringe in his hand.

“Yes, I did.” Stephen went on, “I was like you and your wife before she succumbed. Slaving my life away to feed the engines, breathing in their fumes in a cycle doomed to end with me being just another statue in the street. One day my skin began to crack and darken. I knew it was only a matter of time and I had run out of things to live for. I went to the edge of the island to throw myself in. Anything sounded better than Blackrot. But then, before I could jump, something unexplainable happened.” He paused, looking at Caleb with a face heavy with sincere wonder, “A flare, bigger than any I’d ever seen, came bursting up from the surface like a shooting star, and dropped something at my feet. One touch and...I guess it healed me.” Stephen smiled warmly as he said this, his eyes straying toward the ceiling.

Caleb’s head swam as his chest burned. He had half a mind to take the black syringe and plunge it into himself to stop the burning in his heart. But there was no will in him to do it. His thoughts were full of Karna, though now the memory of her face was almost all gone—replaced by the lifeless stone she had become.

“I’ve tried everything.” Caleb began, downheartedly, “Every possible cure for the Blackrot. Nothing works...there is no solution.”

“Caleb, don’t you get it?” The Burning man laughed, “The fire is the cure! I’m living proof, and so are all those others they’ve thrown over the edge of this island. The engines are not life-saving devices. They are the source of the Blackrot. Caleb, if you want to be a doctor and heal the world, there’s only one thing you can do.”

Stephen swung his legs over the bed and leaned in very close to Caleb, as he continued, “Let the Burning in. The Burning is the source of all life. I wish I could make you understand.” He sighed.

“It’s not as simple as that.” Caleb began somberly, reaching into his bag. He produced a little bottle of black capsules. “I’ve been treating my Burning...the only way I know how.”

Stephen shook his head with exasperation, suddenly slapping the pills out of Caleb's hand and taking on a much more urgent tone,

“Caleb, listen to me! You must understand this is bigger than both of us. You’re a dead man as much as I am. If they don’t throw you over the edge for having the Burning, you’ll soon be a pillar of indestructible stone. Caleb, we have to make the most of our lives now before it’s too late!” As Stephen said this, he produced an angular glowing object he had been concealing underneath his pillow. It looked to Caleb like a shard of metal, about the size of a railroad spike, radiating light as if it had just been removed from a forge. Stephen held it out reverently, like a sacred object.

“This is what fell at my feet from the flare when I was healed.” Stephen said, very softly, “It’s from the surface world. Once thrown into any one of the engines it will rip it apart from the inside. Marduke will be destabilized and the whole tragic thing will be plunged into the recreating fire. You must be the one to do this, Caleb. It’s too late for me, I’m a convicted man.”

Caleb opened his mouth to refuse, but all his passion against this Burning man had gone in reverse. Caleb found himself reaching out and taking the luminous shard, wondering at the same time if he had gone absolutely mad. The glowing metal was surprisingly cold in his hand as he placed it in his medicine pack. Zipping the bag shut, an unexpected sensation of hope choked Caleb’s throat and stung his eyes. There was a chance to save Marduke, to cure the Blackrot, to undo the curse.

Bang! Bang! Slam! There suddenly came a brutish knock at the door before it was flung open. In burst the officer from outside, who now looked at Caleb with unmasked contempt,

“Alright, you’ve had your fun with the criminal.” The officer snarled, “I’ve got my orders. I’ll take it from here, Doctor.” He uttered this last word with intentional derision.

“But...” Caleb stammered, finding it hard to keep a tremor of fear out of his voice, “I mean...you can’t take him yet. We have to wait for the serum to take effect!”

“If he’s not better now, he’s too far gone.” The officer boomed, pushing his way in and roughly dragging Stephen out of bed, “You know as well as I this man’s a threat to Marduke society! There’s only one thing we can do to cure worms like him. Into the fire, like the rest of ‘em!” The officer said, with heroic articulation. He glanced back at Caleb with a grin as he added, “You can join him too if you’re partial to his kind.”

Caleb watched the officer continue up the hall toward the front door, roughly shoving his captive along in front of him. What Caleb did next shocked him more than any citizen of Marduke who learned about his actions afterward. A blinding haze of deadly resolution filled Caleb’s beleaguered mind.

Before he knew what he was doing, his medicine pack was opened and the syringe of black formula was in his hand. In an agile bound, Caleb was up the hall and leaping onto the back of the hulking policeman. Before the officer could shout for help, the needle was in his neck and the surging black serum had already paralyzed his throat. With his free arm, the burly man seized Caleb by the shirt and threw him savagely onto the floorboards. But it was too late. His cruel expression had become a face of immovable stone. His body stumbled briefly before seizing up, crystalizing into black rock before Caleb’s eyes.

“What have you done, Caleb!” Stephen hissed in a horrified whisper. Caleb was still panting and gazing with terror at the empty syringe in his hand.

“Y-you said it yourself. If we succeed, everyone under the Blackrot will be set free, right?”

The Burning man looked at the stone figure of the officer with a heavy expression, then glanced back at the front door where the mob was waiting outside,

“You’ve bought your own casket, Doc...but you’re right. If we succeed, the victims of the Blackrot will be healed. But where are we supposed to go now? It’s only a matter of time before they come in and see what you’ve done.”

As Stephen was saying this, Caleb had already gone back into the room and retrieved the oil lamp and his medicine pack, which he slung securely over his shoulder. Walking back out into the hallway, Caleb saw there was another narrow passage leading left and up some steep stairs.

“This way, c’mon!” Caleb called, darting up the stairs with Stephen at his heels. As soon as Caleb had finished the first set of stairs and was turning to ascend the next, the sound of shouts from behind stung his heart with the reality of his peril. After several flights of stairs, Caleb emerged into an open, dark attic space. The acute inclines of the roof arched over his head, but not a window could be seen.

“Here, Caleb!” Stephen called, grabbing Caleb’s attention. There was an oval-shaped vent in the wall close to the floor, barred by half-rotten wood slats. With a swift kick, Stephen broke through, the shattered wood clattering onto the street pavement far below. Looking through with Stephen, Caleb saw there was a narrow ledge on the exterior of the house. There was no choice, Caleb could already hear shouts and furious footsteps clattering up the stairs. In a moment, Caleb found himself in the outside air, standing on a thin, wooden ledge, a short leap away from the roof of the next house.

Stephen jumped without warning, the weathered wood of the ledge giving way under his feet as he did. In a moment of panic, Caleb tried to leap forward but stumbled. Reaching out blindly, he caught Stephen’s outstretched hand. With a sharp breath and a groan of strain, Stephen pulled the doctor up to safety. Once back on his feet, Caleb anxiously felt for his medicine pack. To his relief, it was still securely strapped over his shoulder.

Scurrying up to the roof’s peak with Stephen, Caleb scanned their surroundings. Nothing could be seen but the slate-colored rooftops and soot-stained chimneys spanning the entire length of the gray, polluted island. Turning around, Caleb realized just how close they were to the sheer edge of Marduke. Beyond the border of the floating city, he could see the vast and blazing expanse of the burning surface world, an endless ocean of fire.

“There it is.” The Burning man said, calling back Caleb’s attention. “That’s what we have to destroy.” He was pointing toward the hulking tower of steel erected nearby on the edge of the island. The skyscraper-like manifold of the engine reached high into the atmosphere, smoke

pouring from its top, powering the gargantuan turbines below that upheld the city. The roar of the engine was intensified in the open air above the streets, like the guttural call of some primeval monster. Through this noise, a new sound mingled in Caleb's ears—the wailing of sirens in the city. Caleb knew at once the whole island would be out looking for them. He tightened the strap of his medicine pack nervously.

“There they are!” Came a shout from behind them. Looking back toward where they had come, Caleb saw a few of the braver people of the city jumping across from the vent in the attic and scrambling over the rooftop.

“Go!” Stephen cried, leaping and sliding down the steep roof to the opposite end. Caleb followed, and this time he was prepared to jump. Leaping to the next roof, Caleb and Stephen ran up and over it to the next. Up and down the rooftops they sped, the colossal engine looming higher the nearer they came. Caleb dared not look back now. He knew what would happen if they were caught. Marduke justice was swift and cruel—they would have no patience to hear Caleb's side of the story. The fall from the city to the rocky earth would silence them both forever.

Caleb's heart dropped as they came to an abrupt halt at the end of one roof. Below them was a broad canal of fast-moving wastewater, separating them from the next rooftop by an impossible jump. Glancing to their right, Caleb saw that their rooftop ended at the edge of the city, with no barrier between them and the fall to the surface. The flow of water below spilled over the sheer edge in a thousand-foot cataract before vaporizing in the fire. Looking with desperation at the towering face of the engine, Caleb felt helpless. It was on the opposite side of the canal, but he could see no safe way down, and he could hear the enraged shouts of their pursuers close behind them.

Caleb shot Stephen a helpless glance, but before he could say anything Caleb felt the Burning man seize him and shove him with all his might over the edge of the roof. In a moment of terror and bewilderment, Caleb's ears were filled with wind, then rushing water as his body plunged into the canal. Paddling his arms and legs furiously, Caleb burst to the surface, gasping hard as he began swimming with terror and adrenaline toward the opposite end. He could feel the powerful current dragging him at a horrifying speed toward the brink of the island.

As Caleb's hands found a set of metal rungs embedded in the scummy wall of the canal, he let out a genuine shout of joy. Climbing up with quivering arms, Caleb hauled his shaking body over the top with a weak laugh. Rising to his feet again, he turned and looked back over the canal to the rooftop where he had fallen from and where Stephen still stood.

Caleb's cheerful feeling of triumph at surviving the canal melted as he saw Stephen in the hands of a violent mob. Caleb could hear their shouts and curses echoing through the brick walls and paved streets of the city. With a wave of helpless horror, Caleb watched them drag his friend to the side of the roof facing the abrupt drop to the fiery surface below.

"Why don't you fight back, Stephen?" Caleb hissed through his clenched teeth, wishing he was still there to aid his friend, even if he could do little but bloody a man's nose and join Stephen in the fall. As he watched, Caleb could swear he saw Stephen look back at him. His expression was placid, even happy, Caleb thought. Then, through the din of the sirens and roar of the engine, Caleb heard the Burning man shout to him unmistakably,

"Heal the world, doctor!"

This was the breaking point for the furious throng. Without a word or gesture of ceremony, they flung the Burning man over the edge as if he were a rotten log discarded into a bonfire. For a moment, Caleb watched his friend fall, then he was alone. Caleb knew he would be next if he did not move quickly. He turned and ran, hot tears half blinding his eyes.

In a moment, Caleb found himself at the base of the engine tower. In the side of its base was built a small arch housing a steel bulwark door. Caleb rushed to the door and desperately tried to open it, but with no success. With frustration quickly settling into despair, Caleb craned his head back to look up at the hulking exterior of the engine. A tangling array of pipes running up the surface of the engine wall gave him an idea that filled him with dread.

The sirens in the city continued to wail. Caleb knew they had seen him from the rooftop and it would not be long before they figured out where he was. Moving his medicine pack around behind him and situating its strap securely, Caleb took hold of the first set of pipes and began to climb the sheer face of the engine.

At first, Caleb was encouraged to find that it was not much different than climbing a ladder. But before long, the pipes began to become thinner and less sturdy under his weight. To make matters worse, the higher he climbed, the more the exterior of the huge machine rumbled and vibrated. More than once Caleb had to stop as a pipe bent under his weight or the movement of the engine caused him to slip and nearly fall.

Feeling he had to be making significant progress, Caleb glanced up and was immediately crushed by the distance that still remained to the top. Following the same impulse, Caleb looked down and a wave of vertigo paralyzed his limbs. His hands froze, clinging white-knuckled to the narrow pipes in front of him as the hundred-foot fall to the pavement below settled on his frenzied mind. He clung there for an agonizing moment, his guts writhing and his head spinning, too afraid to continue and too committed to turn back.

“Hey, my sweet man...” Karna’s voice said to him, seemingly audibly in Caleb’s terrified mind, *“Don’t you give up. Don’t you dare give up.”*

Caleb breathed hard, shutting his eyes tighter, a determined rage slowly building in his chest like a burning ember in a rained-on bed of charcoal. He could still see Karna’s face traced in his mind as if the hopeless years had carved it on the backs of his eyelids. He tried to remember the touch of her warm skin, but could only recall the cold stone. Life spent in the shadow of her statue was all Caleb knew now. The years had been eaten away, searching for a cure that was never possible on the island.

“It’s not really goodbye.” Her voice went on, drowning out every other thought, *“I know you can stop this...like you always said.”*

Caleb’s eyes shot open, all fear of the fall and the remaining climb evaporated from his mind like water drops on a hot stove. He climbed with a speed and strength he never knew he possessed.

Before he was fully aware of the scope of his labor, Caleb found himself at the top, sweating and breathing hard. He was standing on the round, metal platform that made up the circumference of the engine’s top. In the middle, a gaping hole gushed an endless torrent of

black, putrid-smelling smoke. The full rattle and roar of the turbines within the manifold assaulted Caleb's ears with a pain that threatened permanent damage.

To Caleb, it didn't matter at this point. He knew all that mattered now was for him to throw in the glowing shard that would shatter the engine and plunge their cursed world toward the recreating fire. Caleb tore open his medicine pack, and what he saw caused him to crumble to his knees in sudden, unassailable despair.

Inside the medicine pack, among his Blackstone capsules and vials of black, abysmal serums, the glow of the shard had dulled into a slate-black pallor. Caleb reached in to pick it up with the shred of hope that remained in his heart, but almost before he touched it, cracks formed on the shard's surface. Lifting it in his hand, the once indestructible metal shard had the fragile, crackling texture of a twice-burned piece of wood.

Caleb remained there on his knees for a long and pitiful time. The shrill whine of the sirens below cut through the deep howl of the engine, penetrating Caleb's mind like mocking laughter. He held the useless remains of the shard in his lap, gazing up wretchedly at the inky billows of smoke that climbed high into the gray sky.

"Is this it?" Caleb asked aloud to no one, "Did I come this close to the cure for nothing?" No answer followed, audible or otherwise. Caleb just sat there, without a thought or a hope. He knew going back down was pointless, and even if he did, he would be thrown over the edge promptly and all his efforts to heal the world would be wasted. He could imagine himself kneeling up there on top of the engine forever, too heartbroken to rise, until the wind and rain hardened and petrified his body to stone.

The moment Caleb had this thought, another dreadful idea came to him. Caleb looked down at the jagged, cracked shape of the shard still lying in his hands. With a little effort, he snapped it in two, forming, to his delight, a sharp point on one piece. He held up his hand and pressed the point hard into his palm. Caleb gnawed his tongue as he continued to press the sharp edge into his hand until, at last, a trace of blood could be seen trickling down.

A black spot began to spread from the wound over Caleb's hand and up to his wrist, like ink spilled on light-colored cloth. In a moment that would have once filled Caleb with

unspeakable horror, he found he could not move his fingers on that hand. He knew it was only a matter of seconds before his entire body was sealed in a casket of invincible stone.

Caleb stood up and looked over the edge of the smoke-gushing vent. Below, he could just make out the glow of furnaces and the movement of mechanical parts. He sucked in a deep breath as the creeping stone crawled over his arm and began up his neck.

Caleb jumped. Although physical sensation was quickly leaving his body, Caleb could feel the momentary terror of freefall and heard the howling of the engines in his ears. There was a sudden jarring impact, the flash of an explosion, then silence and blackness.

It might have ended that way, and if truth be told, Caleb partially expected that it would. But it did not. A light shone in the darkness that surrounded him, like the sliver of gold that begins the dawn. Caleb felt himself in his body again, laying on a soft, familiar bed.

Opening his eyes fully, he found he was laying in his own room, staring up at his own ceiling, the morning light streaming in through the open window. He had never seen such a bright morning. Caleb slung his legs over the bed and sat up hesitantly. He stared blankly out the window that overlooked a portion of his little garden. Glancing beside his nightstand, he saw his medicine pack laying on the floor. A thought more terrible than death stole over his waking mind—could it have all been a dream?

His head slumped into his hands, even as a sunbeam warmed his knees. The faint sound of birds and people laughing floated in from outside. Caleb stood up and walked to the window down-heartedly, gazing listlessly over his empty garden. Suddenly, just as the dim realization that the garden was empty was crossing his staggered mind, a warm hand rested on his shoulder accompanied by a soft, beautifully familiar voice,

“My sweet man.”

About the Author



Hi, I'm Daniel. I'm a Christian writer and artist who believes in the power of fiction to teach theology to the heart and not just the head. I'm fascinated by writing that can harness the imagination to go theologically deeper than classroom lectures could ever go.

I'm currently working on a Young Adult Dystopia series. The first book, *Canaan Sleeps* is about faithful Christians living in the burgeoning postapocalyptic 'Christian' city of Shiloh, a city that has twisted the gospel and now faces a divine calamity. You can keep up with the progress of this series and get alerts as books come out by subscribing to my newsletter and by visiting my website: <https://www.danielcamomile.com/>