

## Dystopian fiction inspired by Handmaid's Tale - Lara Gibson (A level English)

When you wake up, there are a few seconds - milliseconds - when you're home. Not physically. These are the most precious seconds of each day. They're not toxic, infested with the blankness of our surroundings; not kind and gentle like the memory of a fragile grandmother. Untainted by the New World, it's the only time you can ever be you - purely and unapologetically. At first, I felt I had died and God had answered my prayers but each time I would wake. This made the subsequent moments all the more painful. God does not want me today. Back to life; a reality I didn't choose.

"It's better if you don't look at her face."

We were at some strip club down Soho. It was Dave's...maybe Otto's stag and after 3 pubs, 4 clubs and swarms of shots later we had found ourselves here. We all felt incredibly uncomfortable (and that was obvious) apart from Jared who was way too preoccupied with some girl's clumsy attempt at a lap dance. He wanted us to all have one too with the same girl. I wondered if she ever felt like a child's toy. Picked. Played. Passed. Each play leaves a mark: a scratch on the arm, a crackling voice, masked by hair cut short and eyelashes and brows redrawn in a melodramatic fashion. I didn't want another boy's used toy and I definitely did not want Alin to find out about this; I'd already got three missed calls and five aggressively question-marked texts. So we sunk into our leopard-spotted seats, indulging in our collective awkwardness and the soggy crisps we had nabbed from the crudely decorated buffet, praying inwardly that soon Jared would pass out and the evening would be over.

Prayers don't help anymore. My prayers slowly subsided into weeping begs but this wouldn't change the fact that every morning I would still be waking up on the cracked tarmac comforted only by the blanket of nothingness that every day engulfed me further. One day I woke up and it had enveloped me entirely and there was no space left for God so he lost sight of me too as I became another piece of the landscape.

When it comes to The Act, it's better if you don't look at their face. It's better if you just close your eyes. I tell myself this every time I am told it is time but this mantra never helps. I know I must think of the end goal; I must think of humanity but I feel like a rapist. But I'm not, am I? The Act is a sworn duty to humanity - of course it's not to be enjoyed anymore - it remains 'sacred'. Why do we feel the compulsion continue as before? Be born. Live. Reproduce. Die. Why can't we just be born, live and then, when our time comes, die? Nothing to be remembered by.

Nine months had elongated to years in my mind so that once the day had finally come it all felt grossly impossible. The women all huddled around her, proudly convulsing at the thought of a new-found purpose. Watching them all talk over each other as they all attempted to calm Aija sent the snake in my stomach to squirm and as their voices overlapped and spun in my head only one thing was clear. After nine months since The Act, after the unbridled joy at the pregnancy and after the turbulence that ensued, I didn't want to be here anymore. I should stay. The baby's head had crowned, Aija's shrieks grew louder and more penetrative, the women more excitable. The back and forth of anxious breathing intensified until a vacuum hit the air like the bombs that used to smack against the landscape day and night and all that's inbetween.

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Alin was on the floor monotonously groaning into the bloodied ground "No hope..no hope...no hope...". "What? What is it- Is something wrong? Something's wrong, tell me-" my voice left my mouth in pathetic, uncontrollable trembles.

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The first time she told me she was pregnant I didn't even reply for a good minute. When I finally stuck a pin in the silence all I said was "How?". "Angel Gabriel came to me and told me I was to be borne a child and that child were to be called..." She saw my face, contorted into expression of disbelief and confusion.

"Of course not you wet wipe the condom broke didn't it?" The reality smacked my body so hard my arm flapped as a fish out of water would - searching for somewhere, something to keep myself up. Oh shit. "Are you gonna say something then?" I looked up into her face, my eyes wide, and saw her eyes, wide too, with flecks of despair accentuated by the fat tears now falling from her chin. I let my body give in and fall onto the beige duvet in our reasonably decorated bedroom - filled with second-hand objects that her mother had given us to 'brighten the place up': trinkets, toby jugs passed down innumerable generations; the overall aesthetic was nonetheless mothballs and beige. What we both knew hung in the air, obviously placed and as tender to the touch as a newly-formed bruise. We had both always wanted a boy, not so soon but nonetheless. But recently the boys had stopped surviving - like all their instinct had been sucked from their being before even arriving before us. We had to pretend to ache for a girl whilst secretly hoping we do have a boy and that it would survive and maybe then we might have a real life miracle. "Alin...can we try that again? Can you come in and tell me that again...Pretend like I don't know." She smiled her usual smile; it unfurled across her face, eyes brightening at the grand reveal. That was my white flag, telling me it was OK, that she loved me, that she was happy; that flag struck a form of loyalty into my veins every time it appeared. Noticing I was stuck on her mouth, she stayed for a few precious seconds before slowly turning back towards the door. I noted the exaggerated wiggle in her hips as she tried to flick her hair swiftly backward (which took a few attempts before getting to the exact desired slickness). She closed the door. She came back in. We could be different.

Laying on the crusted tarmac is a girl. All our pointless hope had now manifested itself before our hope-stricken, needy eyes but I couldn't summon the strength to turn toward it and take a look yet. I could tell that nobody had picked it up - something in the way it was crying - it was just left screaming on the rags everyone had generously donated in a panic as they heard Aija begin to scream. I'm sure everyone was already regretting forgetting themselves in the anxiety of the moment and was just waiting to see who would snatch their rag back first.

"What are we going to do with it?". I was the first to break a lengthy silence. It was just lying there, crying into the abyss where our compassion once resided. It would be a coup de grace to kill it now - but no one dare. The fresh blood of its mother still clung to its caramel skin and was beginning to coagulate from the attracted dust leaving a caliginous goo to dry in the indignant sun. Clothes or a blanket were needed now but no one dare fetch any because it would mean too much. It would mean we would keep it. Raise it. What's the point in having a girl? So we all stood there, bound by our lack of moral compass; her, already festering in the swollen heat. It's better if you don't look at her face.

When my first child was born we already knew that he would not enter this world alive and we were most definitely not to be blessed with some sort of modern day miracle. Miracles don't exist. Ten excruciating hours of labour and hardship by Alin left us both emotionally and physically exhausted so that when he did come we couldn't even cry. She didn't want to touch him, him and his body so blue and cold and pallid. I did. As soon as I could I picked him up, all wrapped up in hospital blankets, hard from overwashing and overuse, instead of the ones that we were given at the babyshower, so plush. I stared intensely, held tightly, kissed profusely, believing that maybe if I tried hard enough then our souls would switch so that he should live. I kept thinking that his eyes fluttered, losing colour every time I did as I wiped my eyes only to realise it was my tears that blurred my vision; my despair that gave me hope.

It was near impossible to arrange to get him buried let alone hold a funeral as those services, especially for stillborns, were so much in demand. So we left him, cushioned with the babyshower blankets in an old, Nike shoebox Alin had found. He was buried as soon as the overrun funeral directors could. I knew I had lost my child that day; I didn't know yet that I'd lost my wife that day too.