

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

By Aditi Chandrasekar

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author BRAD GARBER writes: Aditi Chandrasekar's short story, "Survival of the Fittest," has more twists and turns than a James Bond motorcycle chase scene. From outer space to college to garbage bin and the White House, from love and hate and sacrifice and loneliness and murder, the reader never quite knows where the physical or emotional journey ends. And, perhaps, that is good because it need not end.*

I am, primarily, a poet and I find much poetry in this literary odyssey. There is a conflagration that "gobbles" up people and trees "like fresh pieces of meat being consumed by a hyena." There is the lover with "tinges of gold in his jet black hair," and the object of his attentions who wears "cheap make-up and excessively tight clothes to the grocery store." The imagery is tasty and delightful.

Ultimately, the reader is on a nice little trip that may be prescient in these days of uncertainty and worry. Like protagonist Sandra, we are all a bit confused, but we are all loved in ways we may not imagine. This is a story of hope in the face of loss, a story of bravery, a story of new beginnings. It is a fun read that will leave you wanting to read the next installment.

Survival of the fittest

Aditi Chandrasekar

Sandra gazed through the porthole at the wavering stars. They blurred and blended mysteriously. She thought she might be dreaming, until she felt an unmistakable sting in her eyes. Rubbing her face against a piece of foam inside her helmet, Sandra watched a little ball of liquid float past her. For all the leaps space technology had made, there still didn't exist a helmet that allowed astronauts to cry painlessly in space. Her helmet crackled to life. "Hello", she croaked, and was astonished by the hoarseness of her voice. "Hello", a robotic voice greeted her. "Welcome. You are aboard one of our capsule ships to the ISS. There are five other individuals travelling in

capsules of their own, so you're not alone! Please take a mental note of all that you're expected to do, to ensure your safe travel over the next two days" *You're not alone*, the words rang in her ears. How strangely toyish the green and blue of the instruments in the cockpit looked, against the devilish orange that enveloped her home planet. "Focus", Sandra whispered to herself, bringing her wandering attention to the woman who was now calmly reciting something about a water tank. She nodded her head as the lady robot droned on-she discovered at a young age that this helped her retain information. "That will be all. Have a safe journey", there was a beep before the audio ceased and she was alone again. Sandra surveyed her temporary home, a spotless white cage, and her eye caught an engraving near the porthole. Curious, she bobbed towards it and felt a shock of recognition as the letters swam into view. GRISHAM, it read in sleek, black letters.

Keith Grisham was sitting cross-legged on the couch in Sandra's house, his eyebrows knitted in focus on a Chuck Palahnuik novel. Sandra mentally reminded herself, for the hundredth time that day, to tear her eyes from him. Both shy, quiet, and unassuming-Keith and Sandra instantly hit it off when they met each other at a class in college. She couldn't remember since when but, his pleasant mannerisms filled her with warmth, his smile made her stomach do the tiniest of flips and the tinges of gold in his jet black hair suddenly stood out to her. She tried her best to push these thoughts to a miniscule corner in her head. It was hopeless - there was no way Keith Grisham, the handsome and beloved son of largely successful entrepreneur Kevin Grisham, would be interested in her. In what she viewed as desperate attempts, she flirted back with the man in the deli who hit on her relentlessly, and wore cheap make-up and excessively tight clothes to the grocery store. She would rather spend her life avoiding the intense emotions she

felt when Keith was around, than ever tell him. Now alone in her spaceship cage, Sandra wished, more than anything, that she had confessed to Keith the moment she developed feelings for him.

Tens of thousands. Tens of thousands of humans running and screaming at once. Sandra could swear she heard distant cries of women, men and children and the rumbles of the earth everyday. Fires had engulfed almost every single country on the planet. The world had been heating up for decades, so this was inevitable. Even as environmentalist groups and governments spent billions of dollars trying to reverse peoples' careless actions, it was of no use. The fires began in Australia five years ago, lasting several weeks and then several months. Until every last square foot of the island was scorched, it didn't stop. It came to Asia next, gobbling up houses, people and trees, like fresh pieces of meat being consumed by a hyena. It was only a matter of time before America was overtaken by this monstrous force of nature. The government threw themselves into action like never before. As the global death toll rose by thousands every second, they toiled day and night, drafting and testing. There was no doubt that they would have to deploy spaceships for their citizens-getting the people out of the planet before it collapses into itself was the only foreseeable future, if any. Of course, there was no way 500 million people were hitching a ride to space. The citizens waited with bated breath, with each day passing by painfully slow, to hear the president's plan on how the lucky ones were going to be chosen. It was a time that everyone saw coming, but somehow had felt like a distant nightmare until then.

GRISHAM. Why? How? Sandra's mind reeled with questions. She spelled out the name in her head, counted the letters in the word, looked up and down the wall it was printed on, before

realizing that none of this helped her arrive at any answers. No, she would have to tackle this one question at a time.

“When did this begin?” Keith asked, slightly awed and slightly confused. He was referring to the muddle of newspaper clippings, worn photographs of Valentina Tereshkova and Kalpana Chawla, clay models of aliens, and moth-eaten glow in the dark stickers that were plastered to the back wall. They were standing shoulder to shoulder in Sandra’s closet that was just wide enough to hold the two of them. Keith hoped she didn't feel the heat radiating from his cheeks. “I started collecting things when I was 8, but my mom says I wanted to be an astronaut pretty much since I discovered that it was a thing”, Sandra said, a ghost of a smile dancing on her lips. It was the first time Sandra and Keith were hanging out somewhere other than their common classes. She had invited him over to her house to study for a calculus test they had the next day, an invitation that she practiced many times before her mirror. "There's just so much out there in space that's left to explore and-" Sandra’s excited babble was cut short, as her eyes fell on a fairly recent newspaper clipping of an ad for admissions into the United States Naval Academy. The dreamy glaze in her eyes disappeared. “But these are just stupid dreams right?” she let out a forced laugh. Keith wanted to hold her hand, but resisted the urge to. “My parents wanted me to take on a stable job so I can support them financially as soon as possible...hence the nursing major.”, her voice waned and she fidgeted with the ceramic buttons on her sweater. They stood in silence, Sandra with her head towards the ground and Keith staring at the toddler’s handwriting in chalk, reading “My dream” .

Sandra emerged from her flashback suddenly, bumping into a yellow package whose contents she was disinterested in. She sighed-how distant the memory seemed, how unfamiliar the warmth they shared in her closet felt. GRISHAM-Staring at the embossed letters, Sandra felt an odd sense of foreboding consume her. Suddenly, Sandra became desperate for human company and recalled the communication code that the robot lady mentioned-three sixty one cat four wool six-if Sandra wanted to contact the other capsule ships. No one had tried to contact her yet, and she weighed the risks of contacting them. If robot lady was to be believed, they would all land in the ISS so they had to meet at some point. "Three sixty.." she said out loud, in a clear voice. She felt a gurgle in her stomach, as panic rose but she resisted the urge to shut off her mic. A few seconds of silence followed, and then a crackle like the one she heard earlier appeared. Her stomach flipped, "Hello?" Sandra said in a small voice. "Mr. Grisham?", the crisp voice of a human woman met her. She sounded confused, echoing the perplexity that Sandra felt. The voice sounded vaguely familiar too, like something she heard on TV or over the radio. Sandra placed her hand on the engraved letters. "This is Sandra", she managed to get the words out of her mouth. "Sandra Collins. I don't remember how I got here but I think that's because panic makes me forget things.", she gulped. Sandra felt more confident with every word she spoke, and continued lucidly. "Could you please tell me why we're the ones who were chosen to be on these ships?", she cuts to the chase. A silence dragged on for what seemed like eternity. Sandra wondered if the woman on the other end had possibly fainted or died. Many moments later, she heard a sigh signalling the presence of life. "I'm Claudia. Make yourself comfortable."

Keith, shivering and muttering curses at the harsh wind, wrapped the wool coat draped around him tighter before quickly loosening his grip. His chest still felt sore, still felt the impressions of

his dad's closed fists. He pictured his dad tearing the house down in an attempt to get a hold of him, Keith knew he only had a few precious minutes of solace left before his dad called the cops. He was cowering in a nook not far from his house--a convenient spot next to an overflowing dumpster. As always, he wondered if this place was only his little secret; if no one else occasionally came around here to find comfort next to a pile of garbage. Keith leaned back, closed his eyes and imagined what Sandra would have to say about his hideout. She would disapprove of the smell, but the clear view of the stars in the black sky would make up for it. He smiled. Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his coat, he marched silently back to his house. He imagined this is what soldiers heading into a war they knew they were going to lose, felt like.

A bomb. A green bomb. A grenade. Just as the President of the United States registered the words in his head, a deafening explosion followed. Balls of flame engulfed paraphernalia in his room---a vase filled with plastic flowers, a dining chair, his wife's wrapped birthday present. A crowd of uniformed men broke open the door, and rushed in with a grace that only years of relentless training warranted. Their rifles were trained towards the president's bloody corpse, a look of permanent horror pasted on his face.

Kevin Grisham paced around the dining hall, his phone gripped in his sweaty palm. He closed his eyes and-What was it that his therapist told him to do? Count to 15?-started muttering under his breath "1 mississippi 2 mississippi 3 missi...". Devoting himself to this exercise, he continued circling the teak wood table. His phone vibrated, and he looked at the screen. The face of the godfather of his children looked back at him. With a shaking finger, he moved the little telephone icon to the right on the screen. "Hello?" Kevin said breathlessly. "I'm going to publish

the plan tomorrow. You stay put, alright?”, said a familiar voice. Kevin had never relished in someone’s words so much. Flooded with relief and pleasure all at once, he wanted to squeal. Instead, he sank to the floor out of exhaustion. “Thank you John” he whispered and was met with a beep that signaled the end of the conversation. He glanced at the wall-mounted TV at the end of the hall, where a national news channel was showing an image from NASA—men with tired eyes and hammers huddled behind a tiny spaceship---unaware of the sudden death of the country’s ruler. Most certainly, it was those vindictive political enemies of his! the media would claim, hungry for the brutal assassination before the world was doomed to nature’s whims. Kevin felt an unmatched sense of elation. Erratically scribbling the date and time in a notepad that had the letters GRISHAM printed on every page, Kevin decided that he would remember this moment forever. He tore out the page and kissed it gently, barely tasting the sweetness of victory.

“The president has passed.” A woman, in the corner of the TV screen, didn’t make any effort to hide her childlike sobs. “This is a time of great distress for us. We ask you to respect our privacy.” John Gardner, the beloved vice president, said haltingly. Sandra turned to look at Keith, who was sitting next to her on the dilapidated couch in her living room. “Hey” she said softly, as she noticed the bright red colour of his face. Keith exerted a forceful sigh, looking down at his closed fists. He returned her concerned stare. “I’ve got to go,” he said abruptly, and walked out the door before Sandra could muster any form of speech. She got up to follow him, pausing at her open door. “Hey, are you okay?” she shouted, fidgeting with the strings on her hoodie. He looked at her, but she struggled to decipher his expression as his bike helmet cast a shadow on his face. “I’m fine.” he said. Whipping his bike around, he pushed the pedal down

with one foot and sped away. Sandra was worried, but mostly confused. Why was Keith reminded of his dad? That's the only time his fists clenched.

“John and he had been best friends ever since they met at Harvard.” Claudia said. “They agreed on everything all the time, good or bad. Evil or Noble.” Sandra’s stomach was sinking, it seemed, into a bottomless abyss. “So it’s no surprise that they agreed on a...horrid plan like that” Claudia said quietly. Claudia Polinsky, the famed CEO of the world's biggest car manufacturer-a distracted voice registered, in Sandra's head. “None of us knew anything about any of this.” she hurriedly explained, lest the young girl do something irrational and brash. Sandra felt smaller and weaker by the second, the white of the spaceship softening in her vision. Images began to form in her head, one by one, as though being viewed in a slide projector. Keith’s mortified expression, a gun held tightly in his right hand. Mr. Grisham’s lifeless body. Keith pushing her into the ship, the barrel of his gun pressed into the small of her back distracting her from the words that came out of his mouth-”I love you”. Scattered pieces of information in her brain were beginning to stitch themselves together. Sandra belched, she wanted to vomit. Keith hated his father. Keith discovered what his father pushed John Gardner to do. Keith Keith. Keith. He was all she could think of now. In a tiny voice that she could barely hear herself, Sandra asked, “What was the president going to do?” Claudia replied after many minutes with an equally small voice. ”He was going to send those who had done the most to prevent this-the environmentalists, the climate change activists, the social workers..” she trailed off. Sandra closed her eyes, sensing a familiar sting.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Author’s note for ‘Survival of the fittest’A couple of years ago, I stumbled upon a wonderful podcast hosted by Mrs. Clare Press named ‘Wardrobe Crisis’, where she interviews a bunch of influential people involved in sustainability and activism. Listening to them talk about plastic accumulation in the oceans, melting*

glaciers and animal cruelty among other things, I started questioning what it would take for us to pause this fast pace of urban living and question our practices. Out of this rumination, 'Survival of the fittest' was born-a story based in the near future when planet earth is almost entirely destroyed by raging fires, and a moral question finally comes to the forefront. I've always wanted to explore the themes of romance and corruption in my writing, and never thought that I would stash both in a single story but it just seemed apt to include both here. My main stylistic influence has always been Jhumpa Lahiri-her lucid language and emotional observations are things that I draw inspiration from, everytime I sit down to write. Other influences that have amalgamated (or at least, I hope) my writing style are Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie. It was a wonderful journey writing this story, and it will always remain close to my heart.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Aditi Chandrasekar is a 20 year old pursuing a bachelor's degree in Electronics and Communication Engineering. She lives in India, and her interests are vast and varied-including robotics, poetry, sustainable fashion and running among other things. She has written for companies like Analytics Insight and The Optimist Citizen, and hopes to publish her own fiction novel one day.*

GUEST EDITOR'S BIO: *Brad has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as Edge Literary Journal, Pure Slush, Front Range Review, Tulip Tree Publishing, Sugar Mule, Third Wednesday, Barrow Street, Black Fox Literary Magazine, Barzakh Magazine, Ginosko Journal, Junto Magazine, Slab, Panoplyzine, Split Rock Review, Smoky Blue Literary Magazine, The Offbeat and other quality publications. 2011, 2013 & 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee*