

Everything is Not What it Seems
A Short Story by Macy Abad

Another day.

At least, that's what the protagonist thinks. All days looked and felt the same in Onism; surrounded by darkness, the only feeling that of coldness. It's not easy to survive, but the people who live there make do. There isn't a name for those who live in that place; they're just called Residents. The government came to the revelation one day that people who live in Onism don't need a name if they drop like flies anyway. That's how it is in Onism; people die every day and no one asks about it. Between the living and environmental conditions, there's no way people can truly live there. They survive, but they're barely living. There are almost no trees, the mountains have been detonated on so much that these have become little mounds on the ground, and the water is filthy. The air is relatively clean, but that's only because there are no vehicles in Onism. And besides, the only energy supplier in the area is powered by this strange substance that the government makes. No one knows what it is or what's in it. Then again, no one really knows what the government of Onism is ever up to.

Onism came about when the Previous World was destroyed because of The Disaster. Not much is known about it by the Residents, but they know the gist of it. One day this thing called an ozone layer was destroyed because of human activities (no one except the government knows the details of this event). This event then caused these places called Antarctica, the Americas, Oceania, Europe, and Africa to burn away. Only a place called Asia was ready for these; as such they had built this dome that would seal them away from both the burning sun and the rising water (which was apparently caused by melted ice). This dome is made from opaque materials that the Residents don't know the name of. When the governments of Asia found out what was about to happen, they sealed the continent off. The Disaster happened the day after. Back then, there were independent governments who made decisions for separate countries; now, there's a singular government made up of 48 officials. This counts as one representative from each of those countries, which have now become Districts. Various languages are spoken in Onism, but the one that everyone speaks is English. It's the only one that the protagonist is truly fluent in.

Eleanor Faith is a nineteen-year-old girl with waist-length wavy auburn hair and sad blue-green eyes. She's of average height; she thinks she's around 5 foot 5 inches, but she's probably a little taller than that. Height doesn't really matter where she lives, but it matters to her. She likes guessing her height based on everyone else's. Her body is average, but her skin is paper white because of the lack of sunlight in Onism. She has no family; she used to, but they all went their separate ways long ago. Her sister left first; she said she was sick of the way they were living and wanted to make a new life for herself. She was 10 years old then, while Eleanor was 13. No one knows what became of her. It was assumed that she was either locked up in a government facility (for the crime of Abandonment) or that the environment of Onism had killed her. Mother Nature is, as the government says, the primary killer in Onism. Next to leave was her mother. She said that she felt like she was going crazy; she left the house and never came back.

Eleanor found her father crying the next day; she just assumed that meant something bad had happened to her mother. She never asked to confirm her fears; she was too scared of finding out the truth. She would rather believe that her mom was out there somewhere than nowhere at all. Next to leave was her father. He went out one day to get them some rations and never came back. From then on, Eleanor was all alone. She was 14 years old by then.

It's Thursday today, which can only mean one thing: it's gathering day. This is the day that Eleanor ventures out to buy necessities and materials. Eleanor finds Onism quite interesting; the Residents are like these people called hunters from the Previous World. The only difference: they don't have to kill animals or harvest crops or plants for themselves. There are no plants in Onism and all crops are grown in a secret laboratory. These belong to the government. All animals are also under their control. The citizens have to go to a special center called Rations to get ingredients for food. For necessities, they have to go to a center called Necessary. If they need anything else, then they have to go to a center called Miscellaneous. She'd read about it in books before; these labels are quite similar to those of video games before The Disaster. Eleanor, to this day, doesn't know what these things are. They have games in Onism, but these are generally physical ones. From ages eight to thirteen, the young Residents are required to go to The Stadium on a yearly basis. They are herded together, and they have a set of tasks to do. If they fail one, then the consequence is death. The government doesn't kill them; it's a thing that's integrated into the courses. The last one in the area is dropped into a hole never to be seen again. They called it Natural Selection. It didn't seem so natural to Eleanor. Then again, there are many things that don't seem natural in Onism.

There's no currency in Onism. People pay with what they make, and what they make is based on what they do. The hierarchy in Onism is as follows: artists are at the topmost level, people in business are in the middle, while scientists are at the very bottom. The government has found that the occupations that attempt to make Onism a prettier place are commendable, while those that aim to change and understand things are to be looked down upon. In addition to that, they also liked to blame the scientists for The Disaster. There's no real reason to blame them, but the government likes having people to blame for problems that are out of their control.

Eleanor gets everything she might need ready. Several gym bags to carry things, a knife for self-protection, and poison. Sometimes she has to kill to get what she needs. She puts on jeans and a sweater and puts her hair into a high ponytail. She knows it'll take her the entire day to get everything she needs. It's currently 7am. She has to be back home by 6pm latest to avoid The Guards. She heads out of her house to go to the centers.

The usual blackness engulfs Eleanor as she exits her house. She brings out her hardhat, turns the light on, and proceeds to walk. She knows that the closest center to her house is Miscellaneous, so she makes that her last stop. The one furthest away is Necessary, and Rations is in the middle of both. She heads for Necessary first. She knows she needs some new cooking supplies, cleaning materials, and toiletries. It was always simple to get cooking supplies and cleaning materials, but it was incredibly difficult to get

toiletries. It's a fight to the death to get those, and she was ready to kill for some toilet paper.

Onism has a total of 48 Divisions. Much like the seats in government, there's one for each country. Eleanor lives in the 18th Division. It's the smallest of all divisions, and as such getting to all the centers is quite easy. Necessary is 30 minutes away from her house, Rations is 10 minutes away, and Miscellaneous is a mere 5 minutes away.

Eleanor enters Necessary and turns off her light. She looks around, but there's no one there. The only people with her are the workers; a reviewer (the one who looks at what products one buys and collects the item to be traded), the one who stocks the shelves, and the one who keeps track of their stocks. She goes to all the aisles she needs; it's rare for her not to fight over products or kill someone to get what she needs. *Everything's too easy*, she thinks to herself. She exits the center, turns on her light, and makes her way to Rations.

When she gets to Rations, there's already a line. There aren't too many people; maybe a line of 15? She waits in the line for what she thinks is 5 minutes. When she gets to the front of the line, she's handed the usual box of ingredients. It's a box of rice, noodles, condiments, seasonings, various meats, vegetables, fruits, tea leaves, bread, and butter. For the regular person, this box would feed them for a week. But Eleanor isn't a normal person, so the box can feed her for two weeks. She immediately leaves after taking that quick peek into the box. There's no safe place in Onism, so loitering is an extremely stupid idea. You could get robbed, hurt, or killed. Worst of all? You wouldn't be able to see who came up to you because of the total darkness. Not even the homes were safe; Eleanor doesn't know how they do it, but the government always knows what's happening in all the houses. The number of times she's gotten an extremely creepy letter from some government officials has become unnerving. *They should really learn not to snoop on people when they're in the bathroom*, she thinks to herself.

She knows she'll be spending the least amount of time in Miscellaneous because she knows exactly what she needs. Food preservatives, books, and her embroidery materials. This is how she keeps herself alive. Residents only get a little bit of food to survive, so it's absolutely necessary to find a way to preserve these. This is how Eleanor has survived for so long; she has more food than what most people have because of her preservation skills. Having no friends, books are her only escape. However, she's a little picky when it comes to her books; she only reads first edition books. There's something about holding something that was around in the Previous World that's strangely comforting. Eleanor has always wondered what the world used to be like. Did people go to different countries? Did families stay together? Did everyone have friends? She longs for that time; a time that seems so much better than the one she's living in. She gets all of her supplies and heads home.

Not quite. She's stopped by someone who doesn't look like they're from Onism. This person has brown skin, black hair, and bright blue-green eyes. She's wearing jeans and a t-shirt with sneakers. Eleanor gets even more suspicious. She tries to walk past

her, but the girl seems extremely terrified and utterly lost. She says that she must've wandered into the border by accident. Eleanor suddenly remembered that Division 18 was indeed near the border of Onism. The girl asks for her help to get out of this "creepy place" (the girl's exact words). Eleanor says that there's no way out, since the world ended years ago. The girl continues to protest, but Eleanor stands her ground. There's no way the world hasn't ended; if there was another place to go to aside from Onism, she would've gladly left for this place years ago. Eleanor gets an inkling that this girl really isn't a Resident, so she invites her over to her house. She feels a strange connection to her, but she can't place it.

Eleanor asks her further about the world outside of this one. The girl says that there's sunlight and everyone pays with something called money. The streets are relatively safe and you can travel from one country to another. Eleanor's still not sure if she's telling the truth. But how couldn't she be? She looks different, sounds different, and even moves different. She couldn't just be from a different division; all divisions in Onism look the same but have different sizes. Besides, everyone in Onism is extremely pale and moves in a sluggish manner. They also have very sad eyes. This girl's eyes are bright and happy. No one in Onism has ever known that kind of happiness.

She offers the girl some food and something to drink. She seems quite young; maybe 15 or 16 years old. She doesn't ask about it. She sets a plate of rice and grilled chicken and a cup of tea in front of the girl. She says her thanks. Eleanor has the same thing. They eat in silence. Eleanor looks at the clock near her door; it's 6pm. It's officially illegal to walk the streets. She tells the girl this. The girl asks if she can stay here for the night. Eleanor doesn't reply. So far, this girl hasn't attacked or made an attempt to kill her; any other Resident would've done either of those on the street or the moment they entered her home. Eleanor says yes. She fixes the daybed (that she uses as a couch) for the girl and shows her where the bathroom is, in case she needs to freshen up. It's 8pm by the time the girl's ready to settle in. Eleanor tells her it's time for her to get to work. The girl asks if she can stay with her to observe these. Eleanor says yes. *Is this what it feels like to have a friend?* she thinks to herself. She doesn't consider the girl her friend (they haven't known each other very long, after all) but she was now more than a stranger. Yet she didn't know her name. She doesn't know why, but the thought of knowing her name scares her. She has never known anyone's name; not even her parents' or her sister's. Then again, names were kept secret in Onism.

Eleanor pickles all of her vegetables, salts the meats, and filters some tap water so that she doesn't have to rely on the bottles that the government gives them. The water straight from the rivers might be filthy, but the tap water could be easily filtered. She then gets straight to embroidery. She's able to make 5 pieces by 10pm. When she's too tired to continue, she says goodnight to the girl and heads into her room. She freshens up, gets changed, and goes straight to bed. She opens her first edition H.P. Lovecraft compilation and reads from where she left off. As much as she lives in terror in Onism, she likes the idea of there being terrors beyond the world that she lives in. She feels her eyes begin to get heavy, and falls asleep. By this time, it's midnight. When she wakes up the next day and goes out of her bedroom, the girl was no longer there. There was a note

on the couch. She opens it. *I just wanted to see you again and let you know that we're all fine. I'm so sorry if it took so long.* – *Cynthia Faith; 2381, 2391, Onism.* Eleanor was at a loss for words and could only stare at the note. 2381 was the year her sister was born; she left Onism in 2391. She never knew her name. She doesn't know if her name was Cynthia or Joan or Emily. There's a part of her that doesn't want to know. She takes this as some sort of sign. She wanders out of her house and into the darkness without a destination.