

## Life with Meryl

By Morpheus Shield

The cherries did not taste right. Meryl expected a sweet treat, something that would remind him of his childhood. Picking up the cherry already invited waves of nostalgia to come crashing into him. Memories of sweating his afternoons away in his grandfather's backyard and plucking cherries straight from the bush whenever he was hungry filled his head. He expected something sweet, instead, all he tasted was a dull disappointment. Lackluster flavor buried beneath layers of artificial sweeteners.

Scientists had been trying for decades now to bring the flavors back right. Meryl vaguely remembers conversations about GMOs and pesticides ruining the tastes of things when he was very young. His father was a firm believer that homegrown was the only way to get a real taste out of anything. Now, even homegrown was not an option. One look out of the grocery store's front window is enough to remind him of that.

The world outside is a hostile, dry white. Even the old asphalt that made up the road through the center of town has turned into a muddy grey. The few plants that sprouted between dips and cracks in the concrete jungle looked overexposed, as if Meryl's eyes were waiting to adapt to the first instance of seeing a bright light. No matter how long he looks, however, their color will never return. Amongst the weeds and cement Meryl could see the homeless wandering, sunburnt, and starving. Meryl felt a tinge of gratitude for not ending up like them, but the feeling quickly turned into a weight in his chest. It was like a cinderblock had suddenly made its home on his diaphragm.

He looks away from the window and drops his cherry stem into the trash. It's soon followed by the pit as he spits it out and leaves the free sample stand behind. The basket on his

arm feels weightless. All he has is a bag of dry oatmeal, yet the confines of his budget are already closing in on him. The rising sensation of claustrophobia is repressed as Meryl turns down the canned food aisle.

Stark white lights line each shelf, every item locked behind riot-proof glass. Even inside, everything was white. LEDs create a sterile environment and ethereal reflections on glass doors as Meryl walks past. None of the cans stood out from one another, causing bare packaging to greet Meryl at every turn. They are all simple designs that evoked no emotion, excited no part of the human brain. It takes him entirely too long to find what he is looking for. The process would have flown by had he bothered to learn the discovery feature in the store's app, but Meryl despises relying on his phone for every aspect of life. He could find corn on his own.

Finally, he comes to a stop in front of the thin display of canned corn. It takes a moment to look past his reflection and spot the price tags. In that brief second, Meryl notices the wrinkles that run like canyons down his face. He notices the hairs that no longer cover where his hairline had been. His clothes, a hoodie and jeans he had bought for himself in college, are tattered. Time has been no kinder to them than it has to him it seems. When did he begin to look like this? When had the youth dissolved so entirely from his body?

“Can I help you with something, sir?” Meryl jumps, unaware that someone has approached him. In the reflection, he spots a young man behind him. His hair is long, dark, and slicked back behind his ears. The green apron he wears is seemingly the only splash of color in the entire store. “Oop, hey there. Sorry if I startled you,” the man says. Meryl shakes his head and dismisses his apology with a wave of his hand.

“No worries, no worries.” Meryl replies. There's a moment of silence.

“Well, can I grab something for you?”

Meryl nods and backs away from the shelf. He gestures toward the canned corn, “Yes, would you please grab me two of those?”

“Of course, sir.” the man says while unlocking the aisle door, “is there a specific brand you’d prefer?”

“Whatever is cheapest, please,” he chuckles, “Corn is corn, right?”

The man offers up a stiff laugh. He turns back to Meryl with a can in each hand and places them in his basket. As the door shuts behind him, however, Meryl spots the labeled price on the shelf he had grabbed the cans from. Five dollars and twenty-five cents.

“Well, if that will be all-” the man is cut off.

“Actually, wait, I think you’ve made a mistake. I asked for the cheapest one, son.” Meryl says, confusion clinging to his voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but that is our cheapest option, sir.”

Meryl shakes the can at him, “That label says these are over five dollars a piece. That has to be a mistake.” He pushes past the man and opens the door before he can lock it again. To his dismay, he had been given the cheapest option by far. Prices ranged from the can he held in his hand, all the way up to nearly ten dollars. When had prices jumped so high?

“As I said, it’s the cheapest one we’ve got sir. There’s a supply chain issue with everything going on out west and all. The trains can’t cross through Texas anymore and the weather has delayed most of our air and sea-bound imports. We here at the Green Neighbor take our customer satisfaction very seriously, though, so if our prices aren’t up to your standards perhaps I can sign you up for our-” his speech suddenly becomes a droning, robotic tone formed through months if not years of repeating the same prewritten lines. Meryl feels little remorse for interrupting him.

“Wait a minute, hold on. What’s going on in Texas?” Meryl asks.

“You haven’t heard, sir? The Liánméng landed in the gulf last week.”

Meryl’s breath is caught for a moment. “What do you mean they landed in the gulf?” The words leak out with more punch than he had meant them to. The employee seemed unphased.

“Apparently they’ve decided to invade us, sir. They’re banking on us not nuking our own soil. Not again, at least. Surely you’ve heard of all this on the news?”

The cinderblock dropped again. Meryl shook his head and turned to walk away. It is all he can do to prevent the sweeping pangs of anxiety from overtaking him. The man cocks his head in confusion as he watches him leave.

“I don’t follow the news.” Meryl says.

The walk home is a long one. A satchel weighs Meryl down as he marches through empty streets. Sometimes the city makes him feel like the last man on earth. Each step he takes echoes between desolate skyscrapers like boulders falling into a canyon. Sweat pours from his brow in a tidal wave in a futile attempt to keep him cool. It's times like this when Meryl misses the humidity. It has been a long time since the dry heat took over.

There is a rumbling off in the distance. Meryl looks around, confused. Has the train come back on? No, the rumbling is too inconsistent. It’s like the beating of a thousand arhythmic drummers marching through the city. It takes a second, but Meryl’s eyes finally land where he least expected them to. Black storm clouds toil at the edge of the skyline, rain rushing down in a wall over the city. Meryl smiles to himself. He can’t remember the last time it rained.

A few minutes later he’s sitting beneath the long abandoned overpass with his satchel clutched in his arms. The rain assaults the world on either side of him, but he remains dry. The

echo of the downpour creates an illusion of cars passing overhead, giving life to the city once again. Meryl peaks out at buildings just beyond the overpass and feels his heart lift. The sight of warm, yellow lights in apartment buildings during a storm always makes him feel at home. It's a comfort he had nearly forgotten. For once, the city did not feel so empty.

"Mind if I join you?" a voice calls out from behind him. A younger woman appears from the shadows in a wardrobe not too dissimilar from Meryl's. Her body is covered by a raggedy hoodie and sweatpants that look just a size too big for her. She lifts them up as she walks, revealing her bare feet as she approaches. Dirt cakes her skin in a thin layer, and her hair is matted and dirty, clearly having gone without a wash for a while.

Meryl springs up and juts an arm out toward the woman. He's careful not to misstep, otherwise, he'll find himself tumbling down a steep slope and into the road. He's not of the age to be able to withstand that sort of fall anymore.

"Stop. Don't come any closer." Meryl says. He grips his satchel to his chest as if it were about to fly away in the storm. The woman stops and shoots him a confused look. "What do you want?"

"I-" she smacks her lips. "What? There's really no more trust these days." she says, ignoring Meryl's question and continuing her march toward him. He backs away while she gingerly sits where he had been moments before. Meryl eyed the woman, feeling inclined to leave. The storm at his back kept him, however.

"What do you want?" he asks again.

"Nothing! Really, nothing. You can relax." She pats the area beside her. Meryl notices her hands are thin, almost bony. A closer look reveals her gaunt face and sunken eyes.

"I don't have anything for you! Leave me alone."

The woman shakes her head. "My name is Elen." She places a hand on her chest.

"What's yours?"

"Meryl."

"Nice to meet you, Meryl! Now come, sit. You're gonna get drenched standing there."

Just as she says that a gust of wind blows a half-ton of water onto Meryl's back. He rushes forward in shock, coming to a halt just beside Elen. He gazes down at her, evaluating whatever threat she poses to him, if any. It is clear the woman is starved, meaning he has a better chance of succeeding in a physical dispute. She does not appear to be armed, but those baggy clothes could be holding anything.

Meryl has had his fair share of run-ins with muggers before. He had never paused to take note of the aspects they all had in common, but whatever it was they shared this woman did not seem to have. Finally, with caution in mind, he takes a seat an arm's distance away from her.

"Thank you." she says.

"What?"

"Thank you. For sitting. It's been a long time since I've had some company." She hits him with a smile. It seems genuine enough.

"You're welcome." Meryl says. It came out more matter-of-fact than he had meant for it to.

"So, Meryl. Where are you from?" she asks. With a deep sigh, she leans back onto her elbows. "Me? I'm from Miami. Moved up here a few years ago."

"I'm from here, actually." Meryl pauses and gazes at Elen. Her move had not treated her very well. "Miami, you say?"

“Yep. I came up here after my house flooded. It was, uh,” she stops to search for the words, eventually throwing her hand up in defeat. “What was the name of that last hurricane?”

“Toshi?”

“No, the one before that.”

“Jezerelda?” Meryl says, questioning himself. He had stopped keeping track of the news a long time ago, but there was always talk around town whenever a hurricane would hit nearby. People craved the rain and even went as far as to wish a hurricane would sweep over their city. Elen considers it for a second and finally snaps her fingers and nods.

“Yep, that’s the one. Basically sunk my house. I lost a lot in that.”

“So why here?”

“What?”

“So, why did you come here?” Meryl asks, speaking slowly the second time. Elen bites her lip, thinking to herself for a moment.

“I think I came ‘cause the refugee centers. I heard that Atlanta was taking in a lot of people back then, so I thought it was my best bet. I didn’t really have anyone else to rely on at the time. Still don’t.” Elen’s eyes fell to the ground. Thinking back seems to drain the energy from her.

“The refugee centers have been shut down for a good bit,” Meryl finally says, after another moment of silence.

“Yeah, I found that out a little too late,” Elen says, “but at least it’s not as hot here. There’s a lot more shade too.” It was hard for Meryl to imagine anywhere hotter than here. It got as high as the hundreds during the peak of summer, to him it seems entirely impossible for life to exist anywhere that gets hotter than a hundred degrees on the regular.

Meryl finally sets his satchel down, feeling confident enough that Elen won't just take his things and run. The woman is strange, but so is everyone Meryl runs into these days. He appreciates her openness, something that he finds increasingly rare these days. Thinking on it reminded him of the man in the grocery store just a few hours ago. If Meryl didn't know better, he would assume the man had memorized a script for their interaction. No, Elen was nothing like that. At least, not that Meryl can tell.

"Did you come here on your own?" he asks her. The two had been sitting in silence for a while, listening to the rolling thunder.

"Nope. My daughter was with me at the time." She looks off to the side, "I'm not so sure where she is now." Elen's stomach suddenly roared, as if it was screaming out for food.

Meryl, not sure how to respond to what Elen just said, instead reaches into his satchel. His hand returns with a can of corn in tow, and he offers it to Elen. It hurts to let her take it, but he figures he can make do without corn for a few days. Besides, she clearly needs it more than him.

"Thank you, I would try to turn you down out of politeness, but I think my stomach would hop out my throat and take it itself if I did," Elen says. Her smile is broad, infectious. Meryl can't help but laugh.

"You're welcome, just make sure you appreciate it. That stuff is worth more than gold nowadays."

The two waited out the rain together in friendly conversation. Before he knew it, Meryl had lost track of time. It was a surreal experience, hiding away under that bridge, and sharing genuine laughter with another person. He felt young again like he had been transported back to



the summers he spent wandering the city aimlessly with friends. For a second there, his back didn't hurt as much, it was easier to breathe, and the wrinkles on his hands were invisible.

As the rain starts to let up, Meryl excuses himself to find a spot to pee. He still has to walk home and doesn't want to give up the illusion of being a boy again too soon. He's not gone for long, but when he returns he discovers Elen has left. A scrap of receipt paper is left where she was sitting. *Thanks for the corn, Meryl. Stay dry out there!* It read.

Her disappearance is sudden, but the encounter leaves Meryl with an extra pep in his step nonetheless. The walk home is easy now that the storm has turned into a cool breeze and the remains of the clouds block the evening sun from torturing him further. Night falls by the time he makes it to his apartment. Fatigue is just starting to settle in as he opens his door and hobbles to sit in front of the TV. He drops the satchel on the counter on his way in.

Meryl finally musters up the energy to unpack his groceries after dinner and a short nap. He maneuvers his way back into his kitchen, excited to finally refill his desolate pantry. His excitement is short-lived, however, for as he opens his satchel he is not greeted by the plain-looking cans of corn or any of the other groceries he bought. Instead, he finds bits of bricks and other debris where his plunder had been.

Meryl pinches the bridge of his nose and attempts to take a deep breath. *It's fine* he tells himself, *I can just get more.* Then he remembers the price tags and slams his fist into the counter.

“Fuck!”