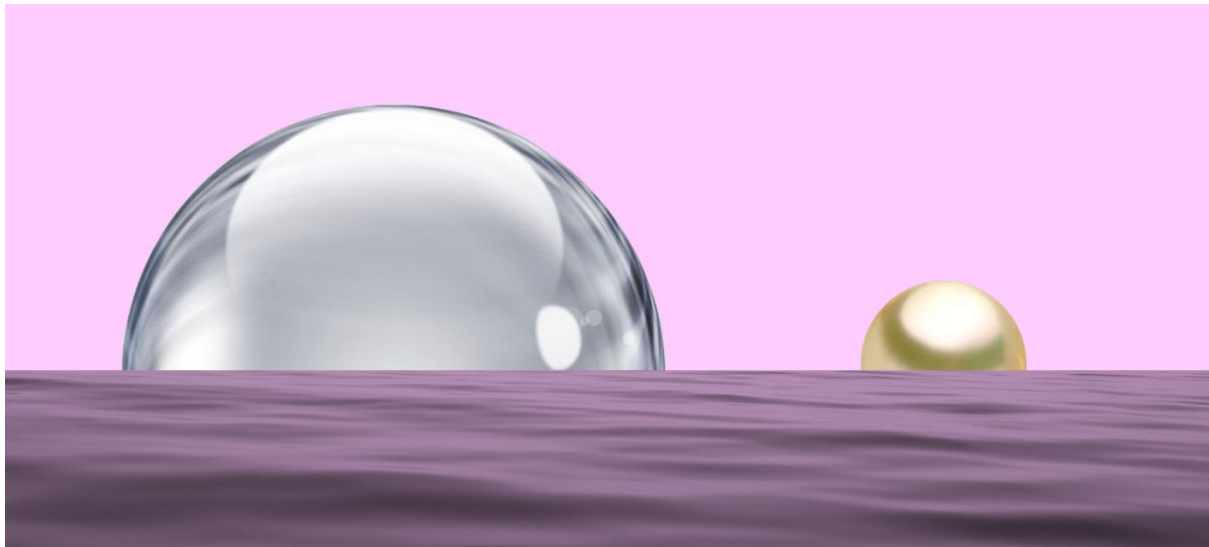


Today is Better Than Tomorrow. A short story by Guy Lane.



## TODAY IS BETTER THAN TOMORROW

*The year is 2071, fifty years after the Arctic Blue Ocean Event.*

Exhausted from the rapid climb, Kitty clambers onto the narrow platform at the top of the vegetation trestle, just a few meters from the ceiling of the bubble. She grips the metal frame for fear of falling, and tiptoes to see over the top of the wilted foliage of the diseased tomato bushes. She scans the flat ocean that stretches out in all directions. Up here, it is humid, and the air is tinged with the stench of rotting vegetation. It's bright, too, the sun beating down on an ocean no longer shaded by clouds.

Kitty's whole life of thirteen years has been spent in this Aquaponics Bubble. It's a 30-metre diameter inflated, air-tight sphere made of clear plastic that sits half-in and half out of the Canfield Ocean. The upper half contains air and plants, the lower half contains freshwater and small fish, and nutrient cycles between them. Floating on the fish-water is a pontoon with structures that Kitty calls home.

Fifteen meters below her, on the pontoon that floats on the fish-water, Kitty's little brother lets out an ear-piercing screech as he rushes back and forth, knocking stunted tomatoes off the vine. Charlie has gone completely *off the spectrum* today. Through the tomato vines, Mother chases Charlie, weeping and begging him to, "*Stop! Please Stop!*"

It's ominous because the last time he acted this way Kitty's father died, and her world changed *foreverworse*. Last time it was like this, awfulness visited Kitty's life. *Bubble split bleach slaughter gore* is what she wrote in her journal, that day. And just like last time, *there it is... That shape, that thing...* In the distance, the awful sight throws hairs on Kitty's arms to alert. Her stomach cramps like it does when there's no food to eat.

Across the lifeless, lilac-coloured Canfield Ocean, moving at speed towards her is a Golden Cruiser, a round, gold-coloured sphere. It rotates swiftly, and the poisonous seawater forms a thin film on its surface that glistens in the sunlight. Upon seeing this magnificent yet horrifying device, Kitty feels as though the skin of the Aquaponics Bubble is an inadequate defence against the outside world. Just 10 millimetres of transparent polyurethane separates the air inside the bubble from the hydrogen sulphide that leaches out of the Canfield Ocean.

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The atmosphere has been poisonous for decades now, and the several thousand people who survived abrupt climate change can only survive in bubbles.

Kitty gasps, transfixed by the glistening, golden orb. A crashing noise below distracts her, and she peers through the withered tomato leaves to see that Mother has tripped Charlie. The boy has hit the deck hard and is sprawled on the pontoon. Mother pounces on him and grips him tight as he struggles, screaming that awful noise.

Looking back towards the Golden Cruiser, Kitty paces on the narrow decking, clutching a forearm across her belly. She is anxious and worried, but doesn't know why. As she peers at the Golden Cruiser, internal shapes become visible. Inside she can see four short, stout men – *Tweedle Toadies* – armed with wooden clubs. *But, more.* There is a fifth man in the group. A hideous figure, noticeable by his height and the distinctive colour of his clothes.

Kitty's breathing becomes erratic, and she is suddenly unsure of herself. Should she remain high above the pontoon, hidden by what remains of the foliage of the tomato bushes? Her heart rate shoots up, and a shudder runs the length of her body as she realises what is happening. The memory of a long-ago nightmare returns. An uncontrolled response. A gush of air forces out from inside her and she screams in terror, "*It's Uncle Lou!!*"

Hearing Kitty, Mother looks up through the vines and calls out, desperately, "Kitty? Where are you?" Distracted, she loses grip of Charlie and the boy races off, bowling over a crate of pasty, thin-skinned tomatoes that bust open on the pontoon, trickling what little juice they contained through the planking. Mother flips into deranged state, trying to arrest Charlie from running wild and at the same time trying to scoop up the fallen tomatoes.

The Golden Cruiser is close enough to be audible. The whining sound of electric motors spinning the skin around the internal pontoon compliments with the trickling noise as the poisonous water slips off the surface of the sphere and back into the murdered sea.

A withered tomato leaf brushes against Kitty's cheek and she jumps, then gets vertigo with a sense of falling. Her stomach rises in her throat, making her feel nauseous. She grips the trestle, and wipes hot tears from her face with her forearm to better see what comes next.

Uncle Lou is clearly visible now. His tall, angular frame is like the trestles on which the diseased tomatoes grow. He is garishly dressed with a purple, suede overcoat with white lace shirt cuffs protruding out the end of the sleeves. Black and yellow striped pants wrap his spindly legs, and the toes of his shoes are pointy and curled up. Through the sheen of water on the Golden Cruiser Kitty can see his face; his ridiculous buck-teeth, his bony nose and unshaven, pasty skin, the colour of the most diseased of the tomatoes.

Again, a rush of air comes from within her, belching out his name, "*It's Uncle Lou!!*"

Mother looks up, a half-dozen puny, busted tomatoes cradled in her arms. She calls out with a harrowed voice, "*Kitty? Where are you?*"

Kitty doesn't answer as the Golden Cruiser closes the last few meters and she braces for impact. The taught skin of the cruiser collides at full speed and the Aquaponics Bubble deforms inwards, appearing as if it were ingesting the small Golden Cruiser. The impact jars the pontoon and the force reverberates to the top of the trestle where Kitty clutches the metal frame, terrified that she'll fall. Desperately, she yells, "*It's Uncle Lou! It's Uncle Lou!*"

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Mother stumbles, dropping all the tomatoes. “*Please help us, Cod.*” she calls out as Charlie races past, shrieking like he were possessed with Brain Worms.

Kitty moves the parched foliage aside to see the Toadies activating the cutter. There is a sizzling noise as a hot blade punches through the skin of the Hydroponic Bubble. A waft of white smoke curls from the hot blade as it moves through its arc. The stench of burning rubber infuses the air as the blade moves in a slow circle, burning away the plastic and fusing the two bubbles together. Each passing second brings the inevitable moment at which Uncle Lou is no longer outside. When the blade completes a full circle, the Toadies pull the metre wide circle of plastic inside the Golden Cruiser.

Kitty stares aghast as she can now see the Toadies without two layers of plastic in between. She retches as the acrid burnt rubber taste in her mouth triggers the suppressed memory of the last time Uncle Lou – the fixer for the ruling Tweedle family – visited. The Toadies clubbed father so hard that he bled-out through the ears. He stopped breathing but his eyes stayed open. Mother told Kitty to close his eyes, but they wouldn’t close. He just lay there, staring at her. And what to do with a body when you live in a plastic bubble on a dead ocean, and you can’t go outside? Kitty remembers hearing Mother’s screams when Uncle Lou touched her. That would have happened to Kitty, too, had she not fled to the platform high in the foliage? That was back in the days when the vines were lush and healthy. Back in the days when she was just a child, to the extent that a Collapse Native actually has a childhood.

Kitty remembers Uncle Lou’s departing words as he called out, “*There is the ‘what is’ and the ‘story about what is’ and you stupid farmers don’t control either of them.*” She’d didn’t knew what that meant. But now, seeing the skin of the Aquaponics Bubble disappear inside the Golden Cruiser, Kitty understands. The ruling Tweedle Family and their lackeys are free to murder, steal, and molest at will because they control force. They own violence; they instruct the Toadies, the stupid men with clubs; and they own the Golden Cruiser, the cutter blade, and now the patch of Aquaponics Bubble skin. Without that piece of skin, the Aquaponics Bubble would deflate, and Kitty, Mother and Charlie would choke to death on the hydrogen sulphide that leeches out of murdered Canfield Ocean.

Mother stands mortified as two Toadies step inside the Aquaponics Bubble, tapping wooden clubs against their palms. Charlie swoops past, screeching and a Toady grabs him and slaps his face hard. Charlie becomes inert, whimpering, stunned by the blow, blood smeared on his cheek. Two more armed Toadies enter the Aquaponics Bubble.

Then, after a long pause, a shoe with a curled toe protrudes through the hole. A yellow and black leg appears, followed by the rest of Uncle Lou as he steps into the Aquaponics Bubble. He carries the pelt of a dead cocker spaniel dog. This is a powerful status symbol, and its black, glass eyes are a reminder that Uncle Lou holds death in his hands. He straightens himself to his full height and looks around the diseased tomato farm. Sniffing the air, he pulls a face of obvious displeasure, revealing his ridiculous buck-teeth. He settles his eyes on Mother, ogles her and then turns his attention to Charlie who is weeping, unable to raise his eyes. Uncle Lou moves his body with a mincing gait and he lets out a ridiculous giggling laughter. He puts his fingers to his lips and says with feigned surprise, “*Oh, it’s Mother.*” He steps into Mother’s personal space and she looks up at him trembling, her face pale. Uncle Lou leans forward, and through clenched teeth tells her, “*Make the most of today, Mother. It is so much better than tomorrow.*”

End.