A composite image featuring a computer monitor in the background. In the foreground, there is a white goat on the left, a metallic, rusted helmet in the center, and a field of colorful flowers (red, blue, purple) on the right. The monitor displays a message in green text on a black background.

05:55 3/20/2125 (GMT-7)
37.3688° N, 122.0363° W

First Response: Prologue - Part 2

I'M WORTH IT

Message sent... (100%)

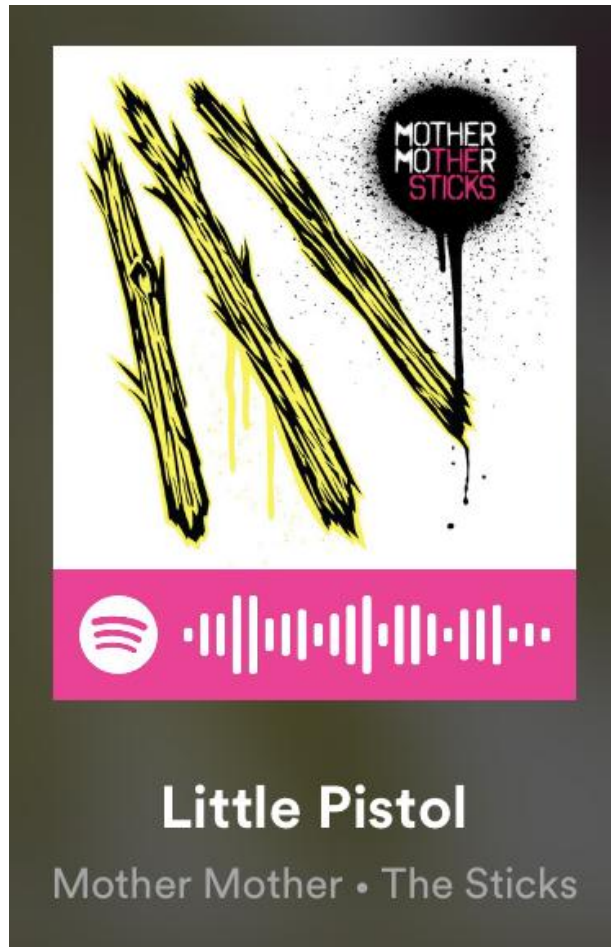
First Response is a collective of short stories and art, set in a post-apocalyptic future.

Decades after pollution and war ravage the Earth, there are two groups of people in the wastelands; those that strive to heal the world that died, and those that benefit from it staying dead.

Kusasa HQ Boston received an incoming message from a small town on the West Coast. The sender was unfamiliar, tagged only as "BEX". The message was a distress call... sort of.

A.R. Bexley is a young computer science prodigy. After her rescue from The Shell of Heaven, she began receiving medical treatment from the Kusasa Corporation. All she wants is to make good on the promise she made, but there are more obstacles than she hoped. She just needs one win.

Recommended listening...



TW: Mentions of cancer, allusion to cults/religion.
Be gentle, read at your own discretion.

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Thank you so much to Katie, my forever writing partner and Bexley's creator. I hope I've done your baby justice, and I'm SO excited to show her off alongside you.

Also shoutout to my therapist, without whom these stories would have taken much longer to share.

The day starts with ringing.

Bexley was used to alarms and sirens and dinner bells, but this ringing was simply ridiculous.

She blinked, staring bleary and incredulous at the clock screaming its shrill wake up call.

5 am. Bombs above, Mama never pulled shit like this.

She slugged out of the cot in her little quarantine room. Precautions, precautions.

While brushing her teeth in the room's desolate bathroom, the fancy comms bracelet she had been given beeped. She raised it like how the boss dude, Kit, had shown her, and the voice of her doctor emitted from it.

"Good morning Bexley! If you'd please stop by MedRed, that'd be great." The guy sounded two coffees short of heart failure.

As she finished getting ready, Bexley wondered if he was trained to make it sound like people had a choice in doing things.

At least she was allowed to walk alone this time.

She ambled towards Analysis Room 5, her home away from home, away from home. The MedRed employees that cluttered the halls of the emergency bay had finally stopped gawking at her like she was an alien. They'd better be careful, she almost felt normal.

There was some commotion around the door. She spotted the blonde curls and shiny metal arm of the boss dude, along with a bunch of other vaguely familiar faces from her rescue party.

Dr. Maxwell was at the center of it all, deep in discussion with a very intense and tall woman who hunched over his wheelchair like a vulture.

Bexley was seconds from turning the fuck around and going back to sleep when Kit spotted her and waved her over.

"Bexley! Over here" He shouted, as if she couldn't see him.

Dang. We're doing this then.

She sped her gait a bit, giving him a small wave so he could stop causing a scene, but the damage was done. Everyone was now looking at her.

There is an unmistakable tingle when one is about to be exposed to a surprise party in their honor. It's as if joy could be a sinking feeling.

Bexley had never been to a surprise party. Or even really a party at all, unless you counted Shell Drop Day. She knew a little of what they pertained, as some of the old people back home would talk about having them when they were little. Sometimes she and the twins played pretend that they were having one. Ethel would make cakes out of dirt, and Rodney blew up plastic bags to look like balloons. It was fun. But it was never going to be real.

She felt that sinking joy that only a surprise party could give.

When one of the rescuers came out of the analysis room with a cake, surprised she was. It was huge, half as long as she was tall, with what she guessed was about 5 million little icing flowers all across the top in a rainbow of colors.

She had never experienced anything so beautiful in her entire life. She wanted to frame it. She wanted to shove her face in it and roll around in it like one of the food pigs back home. She wanted to cry.

“What...?” She could barely think. The wires weren't connecting, which was dumb because she was great with wires. Maxwell came forward.

“Everyone wanted to do something special for you.” He glanced back at the group, and Kit nodded enthusiastically, eyes misty. Bexley's chest felt tight, her knees shaking.

When Maxwell turned back, she was practically vibrating. “Bexley, I am so happy to say... your cancer is in partial remission. You're cleared for work.”

Ah. There were those tears.

“Holy shit.” She whispered. “Holy shit holy shit holy shit.”

Boss dude came forward, grinning like crazy despite crying almost as much as she was. He pulled a badge from his pocket, holding it out to her.

“If you're still interested, we would love to have you join the Kusasa te-”

She cut him off by tackling him in a hug, surprising even him. Before he could make a move to reciprocate, she pulled away, snatching the badge.

***A.R. Bexley; Kusasa Tech Quadrant -
Search Sector.***

She ran her fingers over the letters, tattooing them into her brain.

“Thank you.” She said, quiet and raw and very un-Bexley like. She could sense it threw the group for a loop. Thankfully, the rescuer with the green hair piped up, holding the cake up like an offering.

“Alright, kid. Party time.”

The group migrated to the Med quadrant’s caf, all of them chattering and buzzing excitedly to Bexley. She felt like the most radioactive belle of the ball.

They all settled at a table, and the green one started cutting into the heaven cake. Bexley’s sadness at the flowers being ruined was quickly overtaken by a voracious cake-eating demon possessing her body.

It was chocolate and strawberry and perfect. Bexley didn’t even know she liked chocolate strawberry, but decided at that moment it was her favorite thing ever forever.

She dug in, absorbing the moment like it would disappear if she didn’t take in every last drop.

At somewhere around her third slice of cake, the intense lady came and sat beside her.

“Hello.” Her voice was low and smooth, accented in a way Bexley didn’t recognize.

“Uh...” She hastily swallowed down her bite. “Hey.”

“Vesta Derne, Director of Kusasa.” She held her hand out, and Bexley’s jaw dropped a fraction of an inch as she shook the hand.

Here she was, then. The Head Honcho.

“I haven’t had the chance to properly meet you since you came. I hope you don’t mind.”

Bexley could only shake her head, stupefied by Madam Honcho’s near-oppressive vibe.

“Wonderful. I wanted to set some expectations, Miss. Bexley.”

Bexley found her voice. “What expectations?”

“We don’t let just anyone join our ranks, Miss. Bexley. You did not apply through the proper channels. You have no prior references, no significant history, and as you are 13 years old, you do not fit our age requirements for hiring.” Madam Honcho Lady crossed her legs gracefully, folding her hands over her knee. “I am a woman that makes few exceptions.”

Bexley’s hands gripped tight on the badge. The woman noticed.

“However. I saw your work. Being able to create a working computer and contact hub from scratch is no small feat. There are adults in this very facility that could never dream to gain that level of skill.”

“What’s your point?” Bexley kept to her defenses, her face neutral despite the praise.

“Do you remember the message you sent out?”

As if she could forget.

After that awful night when Mama had excitedly told her the Shell would claim her soon. After she realized she would never be able to save her parents from the hold the cult had on them.

After realizing she couldn’t save Ethel and Rodney if she were dead on the pyre of the Shell.

She had sprinted to the solace of that shitty garbage PC, sending out that digital flare of a message as her last ditch attempt.

Bexley wrangled the memories back.

“Obviously, I do. What about it?”

“What did it say, again?”

Bexley blinked.

“‘Help me get me the fuck out of Sunnyvale. I promise I’m worth it.’”

Vesta’s smile spread like a fox’s.

“As I said, I make few exceptions, Miss. Bexley.” She leaned forward in her seat.

“Prove you’re worth it.”