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## Acceptable Losses

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## Acceptable Losses

It is 2015 and the overworked mother on the crowded public bus reads the news.

The headline says "Flint Officials Are No Longer Saying the Water Is Fine."

She is not surprised. Her water has been brown and reeked of toxin for months.

She wonders how it took this long, when she catches sight of her reflection in the bus window. It is dark skin that frames her tired eyes and she knows the answer to her own question. She has two kids at home and now she wonders how she will pay to keep her kids safe when she is working two jobs and can barely make rent.

The white man in the sleek black car listens to the radio. When the voice on the radio says only 43 people have been affected, though it is a lie, he assumes that the issue cannot be that bad. He takes a sip from his plastic water bottle and ponders how this will affect him. He changes the radio station.

The teacher at the public school watches the news before she goes about her day. The text at the bottom of the screen reads "Lead found in water at 3 Flint schools". Beyond her teaching, she strives to encourage her kids to eat healthy and drink lots of water. She does not know what she will tell them now. They either don't drink water and they die or they do drink water and they die and it doesn't matter which one they choose because either way they will get hurt. She cries for a moment and then she stands up. She has to buy pencils for her students. Neither they nor the school can afford it themselves.

The teen working at the fast food restaurant scrolls through social media on his lunch break. A post reads "Flint lead levels OUT OF CONTROL" He knows from what the doctor told them when his brother was shot how serious this is and he is worried for his little sister. She is only three years old and she is so smart but he wonders if that will change as she drinks the water she needs to grow.

Now it is 2020 and the overworked mother still rides the bus to work every day and reads the news. She wishes she could be home with her children and help them with their new online classes, but her grocery store job is considered essential and she cannot take time off. Today's news talks about how the economy is sure to rebound, with a few acceptable losses along the way. She still sees her reflection in the grimy bus windows and she knows that it will be people like her and her children who will be "acceptably lost". Her youngest child has already been falling behind in class and no matter what assistance the government tries to give it will never change the 18 months of poison her children endured.

The white man in the sleek black car listens to the radio. He does not remember what the overworked mother and her children went through. Indeed he would be hard pressed to remember what the name of the town they live in is called. When the radio announcer says "Life expected to resume with acceptable losses" he is not concerned. He is young and healthy. Moreover, he has money and good health insurance.

The teacher is also young and healthy but when the news broadcaster says "A few losses are acceptable on the way to economic recovery" she is terrified because she knows exactly what that means. She has taught English for years and she knows how to read between the lines. Acceptable losses does not mean no one will die, or that no one will be mourned. It means the people who will be lost are the ones that the government didn't care about protecting anyway. And she knows that it means that when 14,000 children die in the coming school year, it will not be the wealthy children going to online private schools who will die. It will be her kids, the poor black and brown kids who already have the world against them. She doesn't not cry this time, she only checks her wallet and goes to buy the cleaning products she knows her school cannot provide.

The teen at the fast food restaurant cannot scroll through social media to read the news. He is already dead. The asymptomatic man who ordered his food did not care to put on a mask and infected the teen. His little sister is seven now and while she is still building her vocabulary she knows what it means when her father mentions the words "acceptable losses". She knows what it means deep in her bones, from the bullets in her oldest brother to the sickness that killed her brother last month, to the fact that even though she ate all her fruits and veggies and drank lots of water she is falling behind.