

## **For the World, an Elegy**

She doesn't quite know how she got there. But she knows she was there when everything began, and she will be there when it ends, too.

As far back as her memory can reach, there has only ever been the rickety wooden bench and the sunlight drifting through the leaves onto the platform beneath her. There's the forest, stretching around her as far as she can see, and the tracks that weave off into the distance in one direction but run into a tunnel in the other. Once, she'd stood up from her bench and stepped to the very edge of her platform to take a closer look. The tunnel was still a ways off, but she'd seen that it stretched on and on into the shadows with no end in sight.

An unusual feeling had come upon her, then. It had started in the pit of her stomach, like something dark and uneasy coiled there, before snaking its way up into her lungs and throat. It tugged her gently towards the tunnel, towards whatever or wherever it led to. She'd hurriedly sat down on her bench and stared pointedly in the other direction, but it was too late. From that point on, the urge to leave her platform and see what lay at the tunnel's end had never gone away.

But she'd never listened. Something told her that she couldn't--there was something she was meant to take with her, but she didn't have it, not yet--and then she would sit back down on her bench and return to watching the sunlight dance through the leaves instead.

Today, she wonders about the world past what she can see from her little platform in the woods.

Today, she wonders how she knows her whole existence will be spent in today, because some instinct she doesn't dare to question tells her that the train will always be on its way and the sun will always hang just above the horizon--as long as she waits.

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So it frightens her when the sun ceases to do just that.

Time has never held meaning in this place, but quite suddenly, it does. One instant, she's sitting on her bench like she always has, waiting for a train that will never come, and then she's realizing that the light has taken on an unsettling tinge. It takes her a moment to recognize what she sees as "orange," because her perpetually blue sky has never allowed for such a thing. She only knows what she sees because her luggage, a battered leather suitcase, has a sticker showing a sunset on it, and it might as well be a sticker of her new sky.

At first, she doesn't know how to react. The waiting has ended, and she is shamefully grateful for that, but that means something has changed. What scares her is that she doesn't know what. A little spot of numbness in her brain tells her that she has been waiting to see the world through, and the end of her wait must mean the end of--

The thought seems too terrible to grapple with, so she doesn't even try.

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It doesn't take long before she realizes that while the only difference she can see is the sky, it's not the only peculiarity. Before, her patience had been infinite. She could sit on her bench and wait without even a thought to bother her. But now, she's restless. She stands more often than not. She begins pacing, a habit that she'd never taken up before.

When she finally does step off her platform, she's so lost in thought that she doesn't immediately understand what she's done. The belated realization that her polished black shoes stand in grass and not on cement hits her like the crashing wave of an ocean she has never seen.

The moment her mind processes the alien feeling of ground giving beneath her feet, she nearly rockets off the loamy dirt and back onto the platform's edge. She couldn't have been more stunned, even if the grass itself had reached up to touch her. In all her memory, her world has never been bigger than her little platform with its bench and her suitcase--until now, that is, and she struggles to reconcile that with the new world she's just encountered.

She paces the platform again, then again and again, until her feet ache with phantom pains that halfheartedly remind her of a mortality she doesn't possess. She tries forcing her thoughts towards her purpose, just as she's done so often since the sun began to set. But, inevitably, they drift off to the memory of a feeling--a ground that isn't cold and unforgiving, the life thrumming through it palpable, an orchestra she hadn't even realized was there to be heard. All this time, she'd never noticed that there were birds singing in the trees, but ever since the walls of her universe collapsed in that single moment, she could hear nothing else. Before long, her self-imposed duty has been all but purged from her mind. Her hunger for her new, great big world has consumed that entirely.

There are no days, but when the sky has been like the paints of her sticker spilled on a canvas for so long that her memories of a blue sky are all but gone, she hops down into the underbrush and begins her trek into the woods.

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She's deep into the trees before the thought occurs to her that she's shirking her responsibility, and her feet stutter in the leaves when she remembers. She is meant to wait for the train to come, because she is meant to bring something to its destination--something that only she can carry. Whenever she catches a glimpse of the metal tracks through the trees, shining in the

fading light, a pang of guilt hits her, because her fascination with the forest has consumed any thoughts she might have had about her duty.

But still, she presses on.

She walks for a long time before she realizes something has changed about the light again. The dancing of the leaves seems more tired than before, and it takes her a moment before she realizes that the sun has settled further down into the sky. Briefly, she thinks to herself that she should've been at her platform to see it, but the thought soon leaves her mind: the coming of night brings greater worries. While the rustling of the leaves had always seemed to her like reminders that she is not alone, those reminders feel more sinister when the light has dimmed. More than once, she finds herself whipping towards a noise in the brush, and she could swear that something watches her as she walks.

But still, she presses on.

Because as cold as she is, as scared as she is, as tired as she is, her walk through the woods has shown her more than an eternity of waiting ever could. Every thrill of fear fills her with glee, and she relishes the novelty of it all. That omnipresent sense of duty has faded away into obscurity, and the forest feels more real than the stark cement of her platform ever did. The wild is something terrible yet something so incredibly alive, and merely being in it warms her enough to forget the cold.

Needless to say, it's a bit of a shock when she stumbles out of a particularly dense copse of trees to find the exact same platform and bench she thought she'd left so far behind.

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At first, she feels horror, and then anger. A powerful indignation rises up like bile and threatens to violently tear its way out of her throat, until she realizes with no small amount of confusion that someone is sitting on her bench, next to a battered leather suitcase, watching her with a startled look in his eyes.

She approaches carefully, and stops when she reaches the platform's edge.

"Hello," she says, and surprises herself when she finds that she can talk.

"Hello," the boy on the platform says, appearing equally surprised by his newfound vocal capabilities.

"May I come up?" she asks politely, and he nods wordlessly. He watches her as she hoists herself up onto the cement and approaches his bench, but he returns his gaze to the tracks when she sits down next to him.

"Where'd you come from?" he asks, after a moment of companionable silence. Her eyes are still scanning the scene around her, unsettled by its familiarity, and it takes her a moment to respond.

"From down the tracks," she says proudly, pointing in the direction she came from. "I've got my own platform, with a bench and luggage and everything. But it's a long ways away."

"Oh," he says. She can see the gears turning behind his eyes. She wonders if she has suddenly shown him that the world is bigger than his platform, and she finds herself hoping that she has. "How long have you been there?"

"Forever," she starts to say, before remembering that it's not quite true. "Forever," she corrects, "until I started walking through the woods."

“Oh,” he says, again. There’s another moment of silence, but this one more loaded. She can sense that he’s itching to ask something. Finally, he bursts out, “The sun--you know it’s...?”

She nods. “It’s setting,” she confirms, and he seems to sag with relief.

“I thought I might have been going crazy,” he confesses. “The sky was turning colors I’d never seen before. And then the moon came up.”

“The... moon?” she repeats, the word unfamiliar. He points to a white orb hanging in the sky, high above so the sun--only a sliver over the horizon by now--cannot reach it.

“You don’t have a sticker?” the boy asks. She looks instinctively at his suitcase, where a single sticker like hers is plastered to the leather. But where her sticker showed the sunset, his shows the white orb high in the sky, surrounded by glittering yellow dots.

“Mine is of a sunset,” she clarifies. “That’s how I knew the sun was going down.”

“Oh,” he says, but now he sounds delighted. She watches out of the corner of her eye as he mouths the word ‘sunset,’ clearly enjoying the feel of the new word. They’re quiet for a minute or two longer, and as she stares off at the horizon, she realizes that if she looks very closely and squints, it seems like the world itself is spilling over a waterfall. There’s a flicker of satisfaction, for her prophecy of the world’s end fulfilled, but it’s immediately drowned out by a torrent of apprehension.

Something catches her eye in the dark night sky, as impossible as it seems--past the last, dying rays spreading from below the horizon and past the rising moon. The sun seems to have crumbled into dust, its fragments sprinkled across black canvas. As she watches the shards spill off the edge of the world, she can feel them cling together to rebuild themselves again.

Something warm grows in her chest, and she can imagine the sun piecing itself together there, settling back where it belongs and lighting up her skin.

When she suddenly realizes that its glow isn't quite as imaginary as she'd thought, her first instinct is to look at her companion in shock--only to see him with his eyes fixated on the sky as well. The moon is dimming where it hangs, like an aging light bulb, until it eventually flickers into nothingness. She doesn't feel the moon come to her, but somehow, she knows that's because it is not hers to carry.

As they sit and watch, the same question surfaces in both their minds.

"What are we?" the boy asks, finally. She's not surprised to see that when she looks at him, his whole being is tinted a phantasmagoric silver. The answer weighs heavy on her tongue when she opens her mouth to speak.

"I think," she says, slowly. "I think--the sun, it's mine. And the moon, that's yours." She doesn't say it, afraid of the admission's weight, but he understands.

They are gods.

So many different expressions flit across his face. She catches excitement, anticipation, fear, all at once, until he opens his mouth to respond.

He's interrupted by the sound of a horn somewhere among the trees.

They glance at each other, knowing as soon as their eyes meet that they've come to the same conclusion, and they fling themselves off the bench and dash towards the platform's edge. There, chugging nonchalantly down rails that have never been used before, is a train.

It seems like they wait an eternity for the train to make its way down to them, but it's a different kind of waiting. They've spent as long as they can remember waiting for something

they didn't know would come, but now, the end is in sight. They can feel every fiber of their beings humming in anticipation, laced with a vitality they'd never felt before. Soon, the locomotive comes within throwing distance. And behind it--train cars of every color, of every shape, of every size. They see a simple red boxcar, then an elegant, rounded white carriage with gold trim, then a sharply angular blue car that looks like it could be a statue.

But the cars are not what catch the children's eyes. They're wonderful, of course, but they were always within the realm of imagination. Their contents were not. Through every window of every car, they can see people--eating, talking, sleeping, laughing--and that discovery is the most incredible of all.

It seems like ages before the train grinds to a halt with a resonant screech of metal. Far off down the track, there is a whistle of steam, and the train's caboose finally trundles into sight. A man is standing on the very back, leaning out over the car's railing.

The train slows to a stop, until he is right in front of the two children. "All aboard!" he calls out, apparently over the heads of the platform's only occupants. They glance back to see if anyone is there, but the cement is as empty as ever.

They turn back to the man. As he lazily adjusts the collar of his pinstriped shirt, the boy asks, "Who are you?"

The man fixes his eyes on the boy and seems to stare him down, before giving an almighty sniff. "You may call me the Conductor," he says, airily. "If you want to come along, hop aboard."

The boy doesn't hesitate. He hops up onto the train car with the Conductor's help, delaying only to grab his luggage, and immediately enters the car itself. But she doesn't move.



The forest is lit with a different kind of light now, the light of a shattered sun, and it almost looks like an alien landscape. She remembers the tunnel very suddenly, as the realization hits her that this train is going through it to whatever lies beyond, and she's surprised to still feel the tugging in the pit of her stomach. She'd figured that now that she was going, getting on the train she'd spent an eternity waiting for, the tugging would be gone, because she was going to do what it wanted. But it's not.

She doesn't feel satisfied. She doesn't feel at peace. She doesn't feel that she's going to be the god of a new world, but instead that she's leaving a world--*her* world--behind.

It's a few moments before she decides. She knows that her answer will be the most important decision of this universe, and she makes her choice with the flare of the sun in her chest, burning everything as cold and dead as cement away.

"I'm not coming," she says, with finality.

Almost immediately, a relief washes over her. Some inexorable connection to a world she'd only known at its end was still there, and it was powerful enough to keep her from leaving it. With that decision, though, something clicks. The pieces fall into place, and suddenly, she understands.

"What?" the boy asks, startled, poking his head out of a window. He looks completely baffled. The Conductor watches her with an inscrutable expression on his face, studying her in silence for a few brief moments.

"Do you understand what is happening?" he asks, finally.

"I do," she says, because she does now.

“This world is ending,” the Conductor says, unnecessarily. “This train will take us to a new one--”

“This isn’t the first, is it?” She doesn’t mean it as an accusation, but it comes out like one. “Your old world dies, so you take its gods with you. They build you a new world--no. They become it. Their flesh becomes your lands and their blood becomes your seas. Slowly, they die, giving their lives to feed your own, until you’ve sucked them so dry that they have nothing left to give.

“And their children wait, somewhere they will never understand the world that birthed them--so when the new world dies, you have new gods simply waiting to give you another you will call your own.”

The Conductor doesn’t respond. There’s nothing he can say. She’s not wrong, after all; she’s sure of that.

“Don’t go,” she says, to the boy this time. “We can fix this world. They won’t need another one.”

But he looks at her, and when she sees the eyes of the boy--her brother--she understands that even if he understands it all now, he does not know this world like she does.

“I have to,” he says, simply. “If I give them a new one, I know they will be safe.”

She could protest, and try to convince him. But her words would be pointless, and she knows it, so she is not surprised when he steels his gaze to meet her resigned eyes.

“Goodbye, sister,” he says, determinedly.

As if in response, the train starts moving. It pulls away from the platform more rapidly than would seem possible, and she only barely catches his wave to her as the train moves swiftly off towards the darkness of the tunnel.

As suddenly as the first time she'd found someone else, she is alone again.

She had no choice in her conception or her existence, but she made this choice herself. When she turns to look at the landscape stretching out behind her, she sees everything crumbling into dust, burning with the kind of fire that is cold and not warm. Reality itself is shattering, and she can see its broken remnants scattered across the fabric of the void, waiting for her to complete the monumental task of repairing it, to show the Conductor and the train that there is a better way.

But it's okay, because with the sun as her witness, she will make this world her own.