

Annie

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It's 7 o'clock, and Annie is not awake.

On an ordinary day, the Kingdom of Dust would be flush with movement, dust men and women leaving home for the day's work. The wealthy few would drift gracefully down from their perches; denizens of the Bookshelf, Dresser, and Floor Lamp districts embark on the wake of a swishing nightgown, making transfers at eddies and gradually riding downwards (those who settle in Ceiling Fan generally prefer the express, if ever they leave at all). Driven by the gentle thud of soft feet on a worn wooden floor, the middle class would roll laconically from their homes in Nightstand, Footstool, and Box-by-the-Door, and from the slums of Underbed (easy to move in, difficult to leave) would tumble the city's poor. Fat, stagnant beams of daylight would shine lazily through the panes of a bedroom window, and pillars of Motes would dutifully paint crosswalks of light on the floor for their larger dusty brethren below.

On an *ordinary* day, the sidewalks of Dust would be lively with activity [expand here]. On this particular day, however, its streets laid still, trapped in a snapshot of sunlit limbo. The Motes, ever prudent, paint their crosswalks on a frozen cityscape; citizens of Dresser and Footstool remain unstirred from their sleep, and the Night Guard (who nightly wage war against the Bad Bunnies, stirred to action by the shuffling of blankets and vagrant drafts), usually trudging home by now, still stand unmoved from their posts. And though the mischief of the night before had been quelled, the Chief remains motionless yet.

It's 7 o'clock.

In a neighboring kingdom, the Guardians of Bath stand poised, awaiting their circadian duty. The three great sentinels, barrel-chested and proud, sit perched atop the battlements of the great, smooth, Wall of White, the sides of which rise dramatically from the ground below and soar

vertically, seamlessly to its summit, where, before it plunges mercilessly downwards on the other side, it concedes a narrow ridge - on top of which stands the first Guardian, tall and slender, sternly uniform, but with subtly provocative curved sides, wearing a trendily distinguished (that is to say, not *too* distinguished) and meticulously maintained cap. It rises arrogantly from the edge of the Basin, its colors vivid and fresh - a defiant oasis of saturation framed by well-used ivory. The second, a giant, wide enough to be called stout, despite being at least two finger-widths taller than its closest peer. Its somewhat-squarish gut meld into more-squarish shoulders, terminating in a decidedly-squarish forehead, and it stands squarely and authoritatively (but not intimidatingly so) to the right of its more Suave®, extroverted younger sibling. On its far left sits the eldest - comparatively small, and whose conspicuously worn exterior is fading in color, peeling in some places and even molding in others. Its surface is worn thin, so depleted from usage that its front and back cave inwards under invisible fingerprints, a proud reminder of duty long fulfilled. Curiously, it meditates precariously on its head, balancing on a scratched, scarred, and slimy cap, its black-rimmed bottom facing unashamedly skywards (the youngest thinks it obscene and turns slightly away in disgust, while the eldest itself insists that doing so makes the job easier. The middle sibling sits in quiet understanding, solemnly realizing that it, too, must one day do the same - the others don't yet know that its bottom shows the first signs of fungus).

Today, as they do every day at 7 o'clock, the brother Guardians dutifully awaken and set to work praying for the Basin to fill with the bounty of the Almighty. Casually but deftly, the three reach out for each others' spirits, three cogs whose grooves have worn to fit the others' with daily use (one is conspicuously moldy), and together, beseech Kohler®(the Rainy One himself prefers to be called by family name) for their daily allowance, which, on an ordinary day, would cascade from the sky in dense, torrential streams and heavy drops - but which today, as it is no ordinary day, never comes. Concerned, and in a single desperate effort, the brothers force their conscious to the heavens, cogs grinding together until they become soft and distorted from exertion, melting into one another

(a bit of mold touches the youngest one's consciousness, he does not notice) until, exhausted, the eldest tips precariously, teetering on alternating edges of its slippery, worn-smooth cap. Tipping one final time over the edge, as if in slow motion, it plummets backwards off the Wall, its worn, tired body sending hollow reverberations off the walls as it clatters to a rest. The Basin remains dry.

It's 7 o'clock.

At the far reaches of the Kingdom of Dust lies a singular, lonely province which is almost perpetually plunged in darkness. Light (if there is any at all) filters through only in numerous thin, blade-like slits which surgically cut ribbons across the landscape below. Despite its foreboding appearances, however, the borough of Clo'Set is home to a gentle tribe of placid giants. In two haphazardly aligned rows, they hang from the walls, so casual in their demeanor that one can't help but imagine a mischievous stirring in their ranks, daring loose threads dancing rebelliously from frayed sleeves as faded patches hold back knowing laughter through their wrinkled faces.

The air is permeated with the almost-imperceptible yet unmistakable gossip of fabric - satin laughs delicately with lace and silk about sunbathed flower gardens, salty sea air, and roasting coffee, while denim and canvas reminisce nostalgically about sawdust and the mildly acrid scent of sweat (wool sleepily wishes they could do so more quietly while it dreams of fresh snow and cocoa).

An eccentric felt-and-faux-fur presence follows along intently and nods in encouragement from under a half-folded, half-fallen quilted patchwork, lulls in conversation filled with fluffy white stuffing - broken seams of childish wonderment and memories of wild adventures and roguish escapades, by now more made-up than remembered. He memorizes the rustling above with immortal ears, knowing that they, like those before them, will one day become faded stitches in the past. With a bittersweet needle, he weaves them into himself anyways.

And as he does, a pregnant pause claims the conversation above as its scents are carried away by an uncommonly chill draft. The needle snags and pulls a stray seam, but he does not notice. Meanwhile, two Guardians rigidly dread the fate of their brother, too stiff to peer over the edge. They linger on the precipice, waiting for destiny to come to them. Members of the Night Guard remain frozen, trapped in limbo, unable to see behind themselves. They know they are exposed.

Fabric rustles uneasily.

The Basin is empty.

Dust lies still.

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