

Outro to Destiny

THE WIND GUSTS OVER the land, kicking up dust and sand and dirt and little dried shreds of grass from the newly-mowed, deceased lawn of the school, all life stolen from its verdant blades, their corpses drifting up through the parched air and mingling with the other elements of the earth in some primordial concoction, flitting about as dead puppets on strings, a terrible false-life animating their cold, empty souls. Before him, the parking lot, ground paved in concrete to hide the origins of mankind's sprouting from sight, lies equally unfeeling, no car, tree, bicycle, or crossing guard occupying that heat-soaked pavement, no lifeform in sight to help supply its animation to the place.

None but him. The effect is deathly.

He thinks to himself that perhaps it is the lot itself that gives life to those beings wandering its grounds. After all, it is the purpose of the place to provide meaning to one's day, to spur others to action and breathe life into their bodies. But here, gazing upon this empty husk that is the lot, familiar with the concept of habitation and yet divorced from it entirely, he feels empty. He feels that he could stand there and let the dust and the dirt and the sand and the little stinging knives of grass swirl about him, and that, after spending centuries there he would become one with it, with the cloud of nothing that yet occupies space of its own, and that he would fade away. He would fade, and none would remember.

This is the way of things, he thinks, the dust and debris stinging his eyes while he refuses to let them close and deprive him of the sight of the empty lot. The wind whistles, once, a long, interminable sigh on which is carried the moan of the departed, and the earth falls still.

A tear cuts its way down his cheek, a lone soldier forcing its way through enemy ranks, before the heat steals its life and carries it off into the sky.

THE AIR IN THE car hangs heavy with words unspoken, purpose incomplete. It is a curtain of promises unfulfilled, promises of human nature and the condition of life that existence yearns hopelessly for and yet its inhabitants desire nothing more than to leave those dreams as nothing more than what they are.

He has not moved since he arrived in this place and moment in time, not a twitch of finger or toe or unaware shudder in the muscles of his legs or arms or chest or neck. He cannot feel his heart beating, an absence of sensation with which he is unfamiliar. It seems as if there is always some brutal pounding within his gut, sparked to life by some reaction to outside stimuli or often for seemingly no purpose at all.

There is no purpose to it. This is a thought he cannot reconcile with.

A shuddering cough comes from the woman sitting beside him, a pathetic little wheezing sound that spells her slow death in the years to come. At this time, her demise is a thought that those around her are only dimly aware of, but when she does eventually succumb to the grave they will turn inwards with self-hate and scream at their intuition for not eluding them to the fact of her incipient end. For it is a fact. A brief one, a momentary starburst of inevitability running along the shifty, spiraling line of that thing that people so foolishly call "fate" when truly there is no such thing.

There is only purpose. The cough has a purpose because it is an outer reflection of the inner torment, the cancer has a purpose because it leads to the death of the woman. The death has a purpose because it will lead the lives of those around her to spiral in new and confusing ways. It is the way of the universe to prevent those seemingly set upon a steady path from truly achieving that sort of peace. With peace there comes stability, with stability surety, and with surety destiny. With destiny comes uselessness. What is the point of life without purpose?

Nothing. Beautiful, lazy, horrible nothing, he thinks.

He has foreseen the death of this woman, a woman whom he thinks to be his mother but has so far removed himself from the idea that it is an unsure one. He does not know her, knew nothing of

her even before he denied any relation to the woman, knows her even less now. He knows this thought should sadden him, and in the coming years it will, in the time of his future when that “fate” has been upended head over heel and his strange foresight into the nature of things has since parted ways with him. He will wish that he had tried to connect with her, that at least he might have saved his father from the man’s saddened stupor, but they are useless wishes, and knowing that these desires will come does not animate him any more to speech than he already is. It is good to have these wishes, for they will drive him to action in order to improve himself when the time comes.

“H-how was your day?”

The words lilt through the air like feeble petals, a practiced uselessness to them. Great words carry weight, heft like a well-wrought blade or leather-bound tome. These fall with the force of a feather.

“Fine. It was fine.” They come and go like the dust of daydreams, stuff of little consequence and even lesser meaning.

The woman snuffles, raising a hand to her nose. He pays no attention to the motion. Outside, the traffic has placed them at a standstill. Like the earth. Like time. Like the dust. “Just fine?”

“It was fine,” he repeats.

“That’s good.”

He cannot muster the courage to reply, to connect. It is an arrangement that both are neither comfortable nor displeased with. It is simply satisfactory.

SHE SITS THERE ACROSS the courtyard from him, placed upon a crimson bench with two others, a girl and a boy, beside her. Two trees loom above them, dirty and yellow-brown with a death that she does not seem to notice, that fails to touch her, just as the dust and the sand and the dirt refuse to tread near her.

His heart thumps in his chest, beating in odd, irregular bursts, wickedly curved in a sickle's edge. At the bench, she is laughing, possessed with a joy that he cannot fathom. The other boy snatches something from her lap, and for a time they wrestle for control of it. His eyes track over every place where their hands meet, his heart bursting anew with every touch they share, the self-imposed implication of the thing. She is laughing. The boy is laughing. They are both joyously existing within this moment, while he remains outside of it, a stranger to life and the land in which it resides.

He brings himself up to his feet, eyes set on them.

The bell rings, and the three stand, departing, the moment burst.

HE STANDS ATOP THE mountain, the wind buffeting him, ripping him this way and that. Just five minutes back along the path he has trekked lies the camp of his mother and father and sister, all huddled together within their tent as the final embers of their flame die in the chill wind. A dull glow can be seen through the tree line, flicker flicker flicker, before perishing. Its light no longer shines across the top of the snow blanketing the mountainside. The stars dimly alight across the apex of the snow, their shimmer rising up towards the heavens before fizzling away into the midnight shadow.

He gazes out across the rolling hills beneath him, the valley extending miles away into the night in a motion so random that any hope to guess at its trajectory is fruitless. Stars shimmer dimly beneath a veil of silken mist, minuscule crystals of ice swirling through the night sky. The moon is departed, venturing off into some far-distant land where the concept of humanity is as foreign as that of flight to a fish.

For the first time in his life, he is truly alone. He is unsure how to reckon with the feeling.

Up here, atop the mountain, gazing out upon the silvery soup of the world beyond, the caliginous mass murdering all but the final vestiges of the universe's light, the full weight of the meaning of humanity rushes to him, into him, through him, spinning within his soul like a whirlpool and devouring all that lays within, a factor that cannot be denied, a disaster that cannot be averted.

It is a word that defies any conventional means of definition. Human. When that is the very species that brought the idea of words and syllables and sentences into being, the nature of that collection of organisms will refuse to elucidate itself to those sorry members of its race that are hell-bent on charting its meaning. Humanity is a word that does not wish to be placed in full in some dictionary or textbook to grow dust in a university attic. That is a fate that spits in the face of a concept with such weight, heft, glory. The meaning of humanity is one that will evade scholars and philosophers until the end of days, for no one person should be given the gift of such enlightenment. There are some minuscule places in space and some brief spots in time where such conditions come together to allow one to peer into a sliver of this meaning, if for the briefest of moments.

He is faced with such knowledge here, insight into the way of things that most would only dream of. It is a stinging and flaring and burning in and around and beneath his eyes. It is a calling and a cry and a scream and a shout within and throughout his throat and chest. It is a suffocation and relief and breathlessness in his lungs. It is a throbbing and a pulsing and a racing and a stillness within his heart. It is a shattering of shackles and an agony of insight and a rupture of freedom within his mind. For the first time he can remember, he knows what it means to be human.

And then it fades.

The night returns, that light within his mind's eye extinguished with wretched glee.

The stars flicker back into being, quietly observing from their heavenly perches.

He wishes to scream, a great lump welling in his throat like magma or the onset of tears. In that moment he thinks to himself that perhaps now, right now, he will show the passion that he has not felt, the life that has been foreign to him, and that he might know what it means to be human.

And then that feeling slithers down his throat, disappears as he claws desperately at it, vanishes.

He tries to force himself to cry, to shed tears, finds he cannot.

He turns his back on the valley, face an impassive mask, and makes his way back to camp, the memory of a scream that means human fizzling away from his mind.

HE SITS OUT ON the field, the boy beside him. All others have departed, the school looming empty and dead apart from the rare janitor or faculty that emerges from the great beast. Today, the wind is strangely absent of the dust and detritus that normally hangs within it.

He turns to face the boy, finds his companion is smiling, smiling at him of all things, and finds an urge to do the same. He musters a weak curling of the lips.

HE IS CLAD IN black suit and black pants and black tie and black shoes and painfully white shirt. A line of people extend before him, all clad in black, the occasional snuffle or sob rising from the crowd. To the edges of the room, smaller groups are gathered beneath looming vases of red flowers set atop tables of deep brown wood. All are mournful, some red-faced, others assuming the role of the consoler.

“IT’S A GREAT DAY out.”

“Is it?” he asks.

“ ‘course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know. Just doesn’t seem like that kind of day.”

“No day *seems* like it can’t be a good one. Not unless you make it, of course.” The boy retains that ever-present smile. Why is it that he insists on assuming such a positive stance?

“What about the day your grandma got in a car crash? Or her funeral? The divorce? I don’t think anyone could make those days feel good, not even you.”

The boy considered. “Well, I guess you’re sorta right. But it all comes back to how you take it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What I mean is that you can’t let that stuff get to you. Yeah, it’s okay to feel bad for a while. I’m not saying it isn’t. But what matters is after. Are you gonna let that ruin you, or are you gonna put it behind you and keep on going?”

THE LINE HAS SHORTENED, casting the scene at the front into further relief. He can spy an older woman, some relative from a far-distant corner of the family, casting her tears down into the wooden casket before her.

He feels nothing.

“BUT WHAT IF IT never touched you in the first place?”

The boy cocks his head. “What do you mean?”

“What if... What if all those things, your grandma in that car crash, your parents getting divorced, that funeral... what if none of that mattered to you?”

“Well... If that were the case, I’d think that person wasn’t human.”

“Then is that what I am?”

The boy’s mouth falls open. “You can’t seriously be saying that.”

“I am.”

“You’re... You’re not that. No. No, that’s stupid.”

“Really? How’s it stupid?”

“ ‘cause it isn’t true! It isn’t true, and you know it!”

“Do I?”

“What?”

“Do I know it?”

“Of course you do! You’re not crazy enough to think that way!”

“Then how do you explain the fact that I don’t care about any of it? Every day I get picked up by my mom and we sit in silence. Every day I get home and my dad and I barely speak a word to each other. Every day so many words and thoughts boil within me but I can’t bring myself to say them, to acknowledge them, to feel them! How do you explain that I can’t bring myself to care about any of the people in my life, that I don’t care that I don’t speak to my mom and dad, that I don’t care that the people I want to care about me don’t, as if that makes any goddamn sense?! How do you explain that?”

There are tears in the boy’s eyes. “What about me?”

“What?”

HE IS ALMOST UPON the casket. He feels wrong in his skin, with this beard that has sprouted from his face in the last few years and the inches he has put between his head and the ground since he last saw the woman within that dead box. He is terrified, terrified that he must face her once again after all this time, that he must return to that which he cast off and force himself to care about it.

He is terrified.

“I CARE ABOUT YOU.”

“Why?”

“Because I do, and that’s all the reason I need.”

“But that’s not good enough.”

“Is to me.”

“But... Why?”

He watches as the boy leans forward and places his lips gently on his, involuntarily closes his eyes and lingers there despite the knee-jerk inclination to slither away from the contact. They remain there for a time, and a feeling is called forth within him that he has not felt since that brief moment

upon the mountaintop. It is faint, less a place of unbridled human nature than that snowy peak, but it is there nonetheless, that tingling and burning and pulsing and shattering feeling of knowing what it means to be human.

When the boy finally pulls away, there are tears in his eyes.

“I hope that answers your question.”

He cannot find what to say, cannot bring sounds to throat, words to lips.

“I gotta leave now.” He pauses. “I hope you see what I do.” The boy stands, brushes himself off, departs.

HE HAS REACHED THE casket holding within it the corpse of his mother done up beautiful and sweet and has called to mind the memory of life and finds that tears of truth are struggling forth from the prison of his eyes. Feeling has graced his heart in such a way as it never has before and it is a glorious one but at once wretched in the pain that it causes him, like a wound torn open within his soul.

“I wish I knew you better.”

He pays tribute in tears and, once finished, excuses himself from the front of the line, none watching him depart. As he walks, his chains fall to the floor and crumble to ash on the wooden planks. With each step the boards groan with his newfound weight, not one of a physical nature but that of the spiritual, the soulful. It is inner liberation. Freedom. Truth.

The tears stream down his cheeks, and all the while he struggles to keep a smile from his face.

He opens the doors, glances back, walks through the gateway. All the while, the organ plays a song that calls to mind a faint memory, one that he cannot place. But he forges a new name for it. It seems to him an outro to destiny.