

For a Moment as the Road Passes By

This is as the world should be.

Peter had a feeling for a moment, a new one. In a quiet, firm voice, it told him that nothing was disjointed. It was like driving by a grove of trees planted by a steady farmer. For an instant, they line up.

He found it strange.

He looked up at the girl pulling him like a river current. She felt unreal. In those streets of old stone, walled by low adobe houses, she flowed in a silver dress and sky-blue shawl. Peter felt silly, how he was dressed. It wasn't silly, it was just Peter's regular office clothes, slacks and a sports coat. But it felt like some kind of uniform, something functional in a different world from hers. How would he look in one of her paintings? Hurried black outline, wide brushstrokes that left clumps of rolled paint behind them. Maybe he'd be carrying a briefcase, maybe he'd become an archetype. He thought about a math teacher he'd had, who told him that a circle could be made up of no lines at all, or an infinite amount of sharp edges. Ari was the natural curve, he thought, and he was an infinitesimal sharp edge.

They turned into the door of a light, wooden house, a towering pine on the hillside of pueblo-style houses. As they came to it, the thin beams at the door frame seemed to lean.

"You ready?" She asked him, inside, and went up the wide modern wood stairs, still leading him by the hand.

There were no walls upstairs, only enormous windows covered by translucent red curtains. The room felt like it was in the moments before a sunset; the people were ignoring it. Men and women in elegant clothes milled in small chattering circles, and a square bar in the middle of the hall served bright flutes of champagne. Peter felt underdressed and wondered again what he was doing here. Ari had brought him, but he wasn't here with her, he knew that.

"Is this place supposed to be a gallery, a party, someone's house?" he asked, lashing out a little. "It can't seem to make up its mind."

Ari went to talk and laugh with some thin women who looked like young pine trees in a clump, and Peter, feeling out of place, went to the red glowing windows. They were at least twenty feet high, and the thin curtains hung heavy on the floor. He could just make out the city on the other side, but all red and its lines blurred.

He saw a silver chain dangling, like for a cheap necklace—tiny metal beads linked, a single column of silver rain. When he pulled it, curious, he felt all the weight of the curtains behind it and saw the light wave.

When the curtains were raised just over his head, he stopped. A few people turned and looked at him, but, unconcerned, went back to their conversations.

Below, the city lay like a tessellation. The buildings were all low, sand yellow pueblo style, or built from large grey stones that reminded him of an old church he'd seen in San Francisco once.

"It's like an art deco painting," Ari said from just beside him. She smelled like expensive rosé. Peter wondered again what his role was there.

The little chattering groups were scattered through the room like fallen leaves on a lake, their ripples keeping them the perfect distance apart. Everything in there felt in its place. Peter knew that the feeling he'd had earlier—that the world was, well, right—was here too, but it was like it was on the other side of the thick glass and blurry curtains, hovering over the city.

He looked at the partygoers, and thought how they also looked like a painting, like something Degas might have done, alive and elegant and vibrant, and he thought how that piece would have no place to hang here, with these glass walls and abstract, modern architecture.

"Impressionist in here though, and there's a modernist frame between them." He looked back outside. He was surprised to see that it was raining, that the glass was waving and the world outside was blurred like watercolor. He laughed a little. "It's leaking."

Ari smiled.

"Ari!" a call came from the stairwell, a deep voice that didn't so much end the word as blend into the chatter of the room. "Ari, I can't-- I haven't been able to *wait* to see you." Ari went towards the voice, looking concerned. Peter watched her go, and Peter felt a silence like a pressure all around him. He realized he was holding his breath. The man she went to was drunk and lively, with a voice that rumbled through the room like a mountain breaking, and when they fought, it was about money. Life wasn't so different for her, then. Perhaps the tension was held in quivering champagne flutes, Peter thought, because when Ari turned and rushed down the stairs, it was the same as it had started in there. Peter went down the stairs, trying not to brush anybody on the way.

Ari collapsed on a bed at the bottom of the stairs. The mattress was thin and didn't give much, and Peter thought it must be very uncomfortable. He knelt down beside the bed, put his arm over her shoulder, and said nothing. She sobbed for a few minutes, and Peter, in a low tone like a lullaby or a faraway river, told her little comforting nothings, and he told her he was there, if she needed him.

Here, he knew his role. Ari was in pain—something serious had happened upstairs with the drunk man, Peter put together, who was now just a rowdy young rich guy in a party of young rich people drinking. Peter, kneeling with a crying girl and offering her whatever strength he could give, felt more in place, at peace, than in that quickly blurring room of girls like champagne flutes and men rich and burning as brandy. He felt Ari's quiet sobs, and he felt pain for her, but he felt peace here too.

He looked around them. It was the backroom to some bar that had been built into what Peter could only assume was a dutch cottage airlifted from lilac fields and placed in a slot in the city. It

was incongruous with the modern loft just above them, but somehow, looking at it, his arm around Ari, Peter felt again that sense, of passing by and seeing that line of trees. Maybe it didn't alight with the upstairs, but it might with them.

"Why does this place have a bed back here, anyway? So people can sleep it off, or what?" he asked Ari. She stopped sobbing, took a deep breath, and looked up at him. Her eyes were red, but she was smiling. Peter had heard people talk about a brave smile, and this was not that. Bravery, he felt, had something to fear. Her smile was not wide, maybe, but it was not afraid.

"Let's go," she said. "Let's go out on the streets and shop or just, well, watch. I should show you the city, anyway, and not through thick glass."

She stood up and grabbed Peter's hand, and she led him out back onto the streets. The rain had let up, but the streets were less crowded than before. Alleys branched off into dim pathways, and Peter could see them twist like bark on a tree.

They walked the streets, Peter and Ari, and looked into shop windows that sold silver and bone jewelry and expressionist paintings of female figures and souvenir postcards of cafes by a beach and green mountains shaped like knuckles with fog pouring over them. Ari bought a pair of jeans with holes already in the knees and a white shirt that she tied together over her tan stomach. Peter bought some skinny jeans and a plain white t-shirt, and he kept his jacket but left the rest of his clothes in a neatly folded pile in the changing room. They stopped to eat at a tperia, and ordered sangria.

Ari was smiling, and laughing. The sound of it from across the table brought sweet ghost tones to Peter's mind, imagined harmonies that lined up with the waves of her laughter.

"Have you ever seen the ocean?" Ari asked him, and ate a little chopito.

"Of course I have. I love the coasts, actually." He smiled, but it was nervous. Peter loved the ocean, huge and quiet, or loud at a frequency that was so low it could only be felt in the hulls of a boat. But he was terrified of it, too.

"You haven't seen our ocean, though." She smiled, and ate some more from the plate of tapas. Peter felt nervous.

They finished their food and had some more sangria, and then they went back onto the streets. Everywhere in the city, there was the thread of the smell of stone and salt. They followed it -- through the smells of hot foods, greasy and comforting, inviting, and the smells of gas from cars pushing up the hills, and of beer and smoke and people from the bars -- down the hilly roads that curved like old riverbeds. They walked on quiet streets. A ragged man walked and laughed with an imagined woman. On a cracked stone sidewalk, they heard singing. A city of people hummed. There were dried marks of tears still visible on Ari's cheeks, Peter saw, and he wanted to brush them away.

"One time," Ari said as they walked, "I went down to a beach that was at this cove at the end of a hilly trail."

"*There's a beach at a cove at the end of a trail in the hills in the bottom of the sea.*" Peter sang, thinking of an old children's song about a toad and a log. Ari laughed.

“Yea, exactly.” They walked on. “So, anyway, this beach was known for having intense riptide. So I went, and I stood by the cliffs—“

“There were cliffs?”

“Don’t all coves have cliffs? Well, this one did. So, I stood in front of them when the tide started coming in, and I dug my feet deep into the sand. So I wouldn’t get pulled away, you know? So that I had something me holding me to the ground.” Peter looked at her. She was looking ahead, down the winding hillside footpath they had taken to avoid too much traffic. “So, then, I waited a bit. Didn’t take long. You’d be surprised at how quickly the tide moves when you’re planted waiting for it.” They turned back onto a wider street. Up ahead, the night sky fell like a light curtain onto a blacker sea. “The waves would come crashing up and for just a split moment, they’d form sort of cliffs of their own. I imagined campfires under them, travellers resting, trails that led along them, tiny footprints on their own tiny beaches. And then, they’d break and batter against my legs and the cliffs and it was like being a kid at the beach, enjoying the spray. But then, they’d pull back as they sank into the sea again, and I could feel the water swirling around my feet and pulling at me, sucking at the sand around my shins. It felt hungry, you know? Like the ocean tasted me and couldn’t let go. But, not all in a bad way. Like the taste it had wasn’t a bite, but a kiss.” They came to a pier that came out from a stony edge of the ground. It stretched out ahead of them until it disappeared, and Peter thought of driving in the West, and seeing straight, straight dirt roads out in the deserts, where nothing was in their way. He’d see them coming for a mile, and they’d turn as he got closer, until, for just an instant as he drove by, he could look down them forever. He’d always wondered what would happen if he set down one. They felt so right.

Ari looked at him and smiled. “I stood there for a bit, and I laughed. I was as happy as could be.”

“Laughing? Why? It didn’t scare you at all?”

“Maybe some. But I was planted there. I was connected to the earth. With the sand over my feet to hold me down, I was like those cliffs. The water could suck away at it all it liked. It always broke first, and the earth was still there. So, I was happy, and I laughed. Anyway, we’re here.”

The wooden dock started out into the wild ocean, so far that it faded into the conjoined black of the sky and the deeper sea. Smaller docks spread out from it, and still smaller docks from them, so that it looked like a spider web that spread across the whole sea, and them rocking in the waves like strands in the wind completed the illusion. It looked like it was reaching out forever, trapping the earth and the waves. Peter closed his eyes. The splashes of water felt cold and he tried to shrink away from them. In the dark, there was the smell of salt and silk, and the taste of dark green seaweed. He breathed in and out and back in, deep, as he imagined the sea must breath to pull oxygen to the deepest spots. She was breathing there too, and he could smell her, fresh and heavy like a misty sky. He wanted to reach out, to feel rocks of the earth around, but couldn’t pull his arms into the void.

Her hand curl around his, and he opened his eyes. “You’re feeling alright” she asked, or perhaps told him. She looked at him, and it felt less important how she said it.

They wove through docks, and small boats seemed to jump out with each wave from their resting places. Pathways crossed underneath each other, across one another, until they came to a tiny dead end that jumped and pitched with every wave. She stopped.

“It’s like Escher designed this place,” he said, loudly, over the ocean’s waves. Ari giggled.

“This place wasn’t designed at all. It’s just something that came to be.”

Peter had salt on his face and spray on his clothes and Ari was leading him to the end of this strip of dock. They were only two or three feet above the water, and every wave burst onto them, echoing from the pier above them like a full-throated roar. Peter’s heart was beating like a current.

Another floating wooden strip was tied loosely to the high vertical poles that marked the corners of the one they were on. It was higher by a few feet, and tied carelessly. It had drifted sideways, so much that it was completely to the left of them, with only one corner banging against their dock. The wood was dark with water. Ari looked back at him, and grinned.

“You’re going to get hurt!” he called out, but she reached over and grabbed the next dock. She jumped off the side, landing on the horizontal beams of wood that made up the end of the dock like an emergency ladder. The waves crashed around them, and Peter’s face dropped. He saw the water like a moving mountain crumble over her, and for a moment the only thing he could see in the dark was white droplets from the spray. But then they dropped away, and he saw Ari, her hair soaked and her clothes pressed against her. He thought of the red curtains blocking the city from that closed-in room of glass and chatter, and of lifting them. Ari climbed up the wooden poles and looked back at him.

“Come on!” She said to him, “You’ll be fine.”

He looked at her, kneeling on the higher dock, lifting and dropping with the pulse of the water beneath them.

“I’m serious. I’ll be right here, you’ll be just fine.”

Peter set his face straight. He looked at the dark wood to the side. He looked over the side of the dock, and he put his leg out over the water. It splashed him. It was cold. He managed to get one foot onto one of the rungs of the other dock. He thought of that sense, that feeling of calm and peace and rightness, and of it hovering on the other side of the glass, and of her reflection there.

“Come on!” Ari said. “It’ll be ok, I promise.”

Peter shrugged, and jumped.

He grabbed the rungs of the dock, and felt the soft wood crush slightly in his grip. His feet slipped out and dangled in the water. A wave tumbled over him, covering his head, and for a moment, everything was quiet, or, the quiet of a constant roar all around, and a heavy, almost colorless green. Then it pulled over him, and he was hanging on the side of a dock, soaked, and laughing, in great waves in time with the banging of the docks. Ari reached down to him, and he grabbed her hand and started to climb up. Above him, through the slats of the pier, he could just make out one star in the sky. It was framed there, and all around it flew the sea foam, like stars

themselves. The ocean was pulling at his feet as he climbed up with his hand in Ari's, and he laughed some more, because he knew, the world was as it should be.