

Small talk

“Where will you be going?” She asked. She took a sip from her long-stemmed wine glass and adjusted her crossed legs in her chair. They sat across from each other at a quiet cafe overlooking the city skyline. It was a spring evening, and a warm breeze blew softly through her hair. Her natural curls fell over just one of her green eyes. The city lights were on now, reflecting off the haze of the setting sun.

This was his favorite view of the city he learned to love, not quite night, but no longer day.

“I don’t even know the answer myself,” he said. Even if he did know, he didn’t want to share. He enjoyed the subtle mystery of his job in her eyes. It made him feel adventurous, it gave him the confidence to act like he found value in his career.

He stared at her intently from across the table. He liked the way she called him “love” and the way she ran her fingers through his hair in bed unprompted. She was the source of emotion and empathy he desperately needed to feel genuinely human. They were both aware of that, and found their own version of shared purpose in it. They loved each other profoundly, genuinely, empathetically.

“Can we avoid small talk tonight? He said, breaking another comfortable silence.

“Sometimes it makes me feel like we're somewhere else, like we're talking on the phone from across the world. I think I'd rather be silent, but fully present with you then tell you how my day went.”

She chuckled endearingly. He smiled back, slightly embarrassed. She sensed his foot fidgeting under the table.

“My love, you’re feeling anxious. I can see it on your face. You’re not ready to leave yet, is that it?” she said.

His eyes darted low, stared deep into his red wine glass, twirling the stem in his fingers.

“Is it that obvious?” he said. He drank deeply, leaving only a small sip.

“When I think about who I’ve always wanted to be, how I’ve dreamt my expectations for this life, I’m ready. I mean, it's adventure in the purest sense, sailing over the horizon into the unknown, literally. I’ve spent my entire life believing the departure is the purpose of all of this.” He gestured his hands up at the sky then down at the table as he spoke.

“But all of it systematically pulled from my childhood aspirations of what my life is supposed to be. Supposed to be...” He repeated, then paused before speaking again.

“It feels horrible to say that.” He said again.

She continued to stare gently across the table, supporting him with her eyes as he spoke.

He continued, “but what does that mean to me right now? Sure novelty, excitement, tangible accomplishment. I can still genuinely get excited about all of it.”

“That’s a part of who you are,” she said. “At least a part of the identity you’ve been reaching for your whole life.”

Finally looking up from his glass to meet her gaze across the table, he continued on.

“But then I think about the life we’ve built here, the present. I’m so happy in this moment. When I reflect on this right here, this very second, I don’t want whatever’s next. I say that I need constant change in my life, that the flow of life is driven by novelty, and the monotony of the unchanging present numbs the mind, like something from a hemingway novel. But when I sit here completely present and look at the freckles on your cheeks and past your shoulder at the subtle beauty of this moment, nothing else matters. Travel, adventure, novelty, none of it. And that all I want is to sit at this arbitrary table with you and bask in the comfort knowing I can do it again tomorrow. ”

She sat silent for a moment studying his face after he spoke. He wore a look she was not used to seeing. She reached for her glass, and held it tightly in her hand. She looked over her own shoulder now, back at the city skyline absorbed by the deep pink and orange of the departing sun in a celebration of the culmination of dusk. It was close to nightfall now, and the apathetic rush of urban life had transformed into the dance of quiet, nocturnal bliss you only find in a handful of spots in any city.

She finally returned her gaze forward and said,

“Have you heard of the Mingobe tribe?” He shook his head no.

“Well, they’re a tribe in the Northern Pacific that has just recently made contact with humans. Remember the field research I told you about for my thesis?”

“Of course, I often quote your paper to my colleagues,” he said proudly.

“I learned about the Mingobians after I had read an unpublished work on them by one of my professors. I was interested in the tribe, but mostly in what they believe.”

“I remember now. It was a difficult grant to get, no?” He said.

“Incredibly difficult, justifying a psychology thesis in what is typically a grant reserved for anthropologists...”

Anyhow, they don’t wear clothes, they grow their own food, they mate with their loved ones in public in the dirt. They’re a passionate society, empathy and love for their people, nature, and existence is ingrained in their perception of reality.

They’re language is what drew me to their culture. It has no concept of time. There’s no word for tomorrow, yesterday, later, even now. They live in a non-transient moment outlasting any sentiment of past and future.”

“That sounds incredibly... peaceful I think is the word,” he said.

“Do you need some more time?” the waiter asked. They hadn’t opened their menus yet.

“Yes, just a few more moments,” he said.

“The wine is excellent, though”.

“Of course, take all the time you need,” the waiter said. He refilled their glasses and departed.

“My first day on site I was introduced to Po, he served as the intermediary for our visit. He was eager to share his people’s culture with me, for their customs were not their own, but belonged to their God. Which if I understood him correctly, meant it belongs to all of us.

Po was a young man with a small family who he immediately introduced me to. An interpreter ensured we were able to express our thoughts to each other.”

“How did an interpreter manage to connect two languages so fundamentally different?”

“It was never a perfect translation, but the words were just one medium for communication. Some of the best conversations I have ever had were in multilingual discussions...some of the best we’ve had have been purely physical.” They both laughed.

She continued, “It’s amazing what you can portray with emotion and a sense of empathy for the understanding of your listener. Po introduced me to his bonded partner. She was just as receptive to my questions about their culture. She explained their monogamous connection as best she could, which is why I brought this up in the first place. It’s something I did not mention at all in my thesis, it did not feel right to express it in the form of Western academia. I’ve kept it close to my chest all this time, I’ll explain in our language as best I can.” She continued on.

“Every Mingobian has a bonded partner they believe has come into their life for no particular reason at all. Nothing meant to be, no fairy tale story, but instead a happening of all humans flowing with life and crossing paths along their sinuous flow. Every human is a stream, starting at the mountain peak and flowing down the valley face where all water must go. Nurturing life around them, within themselves, carrying pebbles and sediment with their flow, slowly smoothing them until all edges are rounded to an equilibrium. Each human soul a stream, each human existence a flow. As the streams flow, they combine with others, combining their water and resources into shared existence. What a beautiful capacity for streams to combine. Sometimes they will part ways and the essence of their flow will create a tributary that continues onward. But once in a stream's flow, it integrates with another where the conditions are so connected, so euphoric, like the chaotic perfection of the pre-conditions for organic life, that they mesh their essence of individuality into the shared identity of a river. What is a river, but a compilation of streams? A watershed, but a compilation of rivers? A cloud, but that same water in a form of condensation? All of it is a fluid identity of existence.

This ethereal shared identity of a river flows with such passion and love that it becomes an integral part of the ecosystem. It nurtures the world around it and receives the same nurture in return. What a beautiful cycle! All made possible by the inexplicable connection of two streams on a mountain side. These streams are tethered now you see. Or rather in the Mingobian sense, they’ve always been tethered, and always will be. Their molecules have intermingled, salmon rely on them to breed, their pebbles become eroded in the same form, their flows align in a single current. It’s a bond! In the purest sense! By fate, by universal determinism? Maybe that is the case, but it’s surely not the point. What is certain, is the flow. The flow of life brings them together into a union of fluid identity and love.”

She took a breath for a moment and released her grip on the stem of her wine glass. He was enthralled by the thought of it. He imagined the two of them flowing together as one in a great rushing river on a mountainside. It's brought him immense comfort amidst their upcoming goodbye.

“That’s...beautiful.” he said with a glimpse of tears in his eyes.

He continued, “What a beautiful way to express connection and love. Connected to another stream, and thereby connected to the mountainside, and the earth, and the universe so forth.”

They both looked up at the expanse above them, a faint crescent moon was lowly present in the corner of the sky. City lights reflected off wispy clouds, creating a grayish yellow glow reminiscent of candlelight in a small room.

“How do they justify goodbyes? He said, bringing their attention back to the table. It was heavy in his mind.

“I asked them that...the Mingobians do not have a word for goodbye in their language. Goodbyes imply a separation of two entities through space and time. They wouldn’t be able to process the concept.”

“Interesting, I’m imagining Po leaving for the day and walking right past his partner without a hesitation. It’s comical, no?” he said.

“The way I see it, Po walks past his partner and embraces her with complete love and compassion, for it’s the only moment that exists for him. He puts his entire soul into that moment, just like every other moment that he exists.”

“Hm...” he muttered, gazing down into the deep red of his glass again. This time in deep thought.

“Okay, he said, so because of their language, they have no concept of time. But it’s too late for us, we programmed our brains to be slaves to a rigid temporal language. So what about you and me, transient consciousness and all, if we joined a Mingobe tribe, how would we say goodbye within the scope of our own reality?”.

This question she pondered. Her face scrunched as she looked back once again at the skyline, now lit purely by city light.

She started in an animated voice imitating Po, before shortly returning to her own soft voice.

“A river diverges. Branches off into two streams, to cover a larger area off the mountainside. Supporting different flora and fauna on their flows for a while, creating

geographically different contours in the earth. But the essence of that river remains just as real. The identity remains. The tether that has bonded those young streams transcends the spatial separation of a mountainside. The essence of their river lives on in both of them, continuing their flow as all water must do. The molecules remain intermingled, pebbles still rounded in their same sphere, they are in every sense that same river in a different form. But those streams are tethered by the gradient of the mountainside. As soon as they are separated, gravity slowly pulls them back together. And they return to converge into the form of the rushing river that once revealed that everlasting tether. A river that is stronger, fuller of nutrients, has experienced more of the mountain. Maybe now you might even see some river otters flourishing in it.” They both smiled.

He was captivated, on the edge of his seat now. He wore elation on his face and chimed in, “We’re a river!” He said loudly, nearly spilling his wine glass.

“...Tethered by the gradient of the mountain, until we reach the end of existence,” she added melodiously.

“Where's your Mingobian spirit, there's no end to the flow!” He said.

He started talking in his own Po voice now. She was laughing sweetly.

“Sure, all rivers end in the ocean. An ocean of shared existence where they are eventually returned to a stream on a mountainside to do it all again with different conditions, destined for a different outcome. As new streams are formed, every tether that has ever existed must leave its traces in the flow of existence. Some of those pebbles or descendents of salmon that the river hatched must continue to live on that mountainside, even after the river returns to the ocean. Tangible products of flow that paint the history of our shared existence. All that encompasses the mountainside.”

“Are you ready to order yet?” The waiter asked, impatiently now.

Night had rebirthed the quiet cafe. String lights were warmly lit above them, plates clanked in the kitchen, the soft symphony of human conversation hummed all around. The warm breeze blew her curly hair past her shoulder. Both of her deep green eyes invited his gaze to stay in that everlasting moment.

“We’ll have the salmon,” he said. They both laughed.

“Excellent choice,” the waiter said.

“And can we get another bottle of that red?”