

Where the Rivers Return

The lone daffodil withered. It rested in the center of a small wooden table in an unlighted room. The light blue walls bustled with various posters and shelves garnering pictures and untouched books. One shelf held a framed picture depicting a man and his peers on their graduation day. The man's bright grin caught the sun's scrutiny, as did his friends. Pushed against the junction of two walls was his desk, holding stationery and more books spread neatly across its surface. Dust accumulated on the floor and table. The paint had flaked off the walls. The man no longer bore a grin.

From his seat in the living room, the man stared at the shut door to the daffodil's room. Dust motes drifted in the faint light, and he felt a slight tug of a nameless emotion. His gaze flicked toward the television; the news headline read "World to End in Less Than a Day," as it had read for the past week. No one was exactly sure what the end would look like. To the furthest extent of his knowledge, it was to be grandiose with heat-fiery bursts of light would consume his world. From forethought alone, the end already had consumed his world. The fear made him ponder the futility of what he knew.

Arkansas itself now felt purposeless—so much preserved, and for what? Even the Natural State was to face its demise. The Arkansas River still cascaded brilliantly out of Colorado, flowed proudly through the rolling hills of Kansas and the gentle plains of Oklahoma, and finally emptied futilely into Arkansas. So much effort, but with no eternity; soon, the river would not cascade, flow, or empty ever again. He peered cynically out the window of his house and at his neighbor's sprouting garden. The lavender-colored beebalms and the pink bergamot curved delicately as they bloomed, reaching for the same sky that would soon meet its end. A

petite web, home to a lone spider, clung lackadaisically to a struggling aphid. Its thin silk glimmered in the morning light, illuminating a soft gradient of blues and oranges. One tiny web restraining one tiny aphid, yet its contribution was immeasurable. The flowers continued to sway.

They grew because someone cared.

Lowering the dust-covered blinds, the man once again felt the pang of an emotion he could not comprehend. Maybe once it was familiar to him, but now he only knew its pain. He wanted to escape the emotion, the pain, and the fiery conclusion waiting for him at day's end. So, with a begrudging push, he stood up from his chair. His legs were weak with disuse. The man approached the chair sat across from his own—he had laid his coat along the back of it days ago. The coat had a noticeable tear along one sleeve, placed just high enough for the man's elbow to protrude slovenly. He pulled it on, along with his socks and shoes. He did not bother to comb his hair, wash his face, or brush his teeth. Instead, he walked down the hallway past the misaligned family photos and the doors forever shut by disregard. In the kitchen, the man opened the top drawer and reached for his car keys. With two clicks, his car's engine roared to life.

The drive to Wye Mountain was odd. The man pulled cautiously out of the cul-de-sac, as if leaving meant the impossibility of return. As he pulled up to the stop light on the intersection of Evergreen Drive and North Mississippi Street, the stop light still functioned. It was commanding an incessant, hypothetical flow of traffic that did not appear. This was peculiar to the man. Mississippi flowed proudly across the hills of Arkansas; at times, the asphalt cascaded down slopes and branched into its tributaries. Now, other than the occasional vehicle, the roads only conducted their own fluvial yellow driftwood, spaced perfectly even and rectangular.

Catastrophe would not preserve the roads, yet it continued to flow in the face of mortality.

Uneasiness shot through the man's mind.

As he waited at the stoplight at the intersection of North Mississippi Street and Cantrell, the man peered to his right. Edwards shadowed a deserted parking-lot. Darkness decorated the exterior of the store while silence filled the vicinity. A single, dreary sign covered the front window beside the automatic doors: "INDEFINITELY CLOSED." The decision to close made sense; who would want to work when their pay would not have the chance to go toward anything? The workers stopped working, the stores stopped selling, and preservation of the building was thus discontinued. The day was Tuesday, the day that every household would wheel their trash cans to the curb so that their trash may be collected. The curbs were empty.

A mockingbird flew past the man's car and to the branch of a bulky, flourished tree. Her wings thumped the air as she slowed herself, finally lighting on the end of the branch. The bird hopped insouciantly across the limb toward her nest. Three whining bulbs protruded from her nest in hopes that their mother brought food, just as she had always done. One by one, she fed her babies. The mockingbirds continued to sing.

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Dark green trees towered beside the river of asphalt—a land pandered to the future of a once-grateful Arkansas. Like a raft down the Arkansas River, the man was driven by its current more than his own force. The river climbed Wye Mountain and cut through the forests until it reached the clearing the man sought. He stepped out of his car and walked up the hill. A sea of

yellow blinded his vision—seven acres of daffodils.

He wanted to spend his last moments in the Wye Mountain community church. As a child, the man had gone to the annual Wye Mountain daffodil festival accompanied by his friends and family. The community church acted as the crux of the festival, but neither he nor his family were ever fixated on the church. Instead, they were drawn to the vast spread of flowers and the picnic tables scattered around the field and especially a specific cherry bark oak tree. He and other children loved to climb on the great specimen, which they dubbed “The Daffodil Oak.” The single-standing, colossal structure towered in the field of daffodils, similar to a guardian. The Daffodil Oak toppled over one summer because of a storm, but the church repurposed the oak for its pews. The man was going to topple soon. That fate was the only thing he and the tree had in common.

He almost had to squint to see past the daffodils. A small, hunched-over figure stood amidst the field. He felt like a crow to a scarecrow—afraid to approach. Keeping his distance, the man yelled out.

“Hello?”

The greeting was simple, thus unfit for his predicament. No one else should have been there. Just as he began to sputter out a new address, the scarecrow croaked cheerfully.

“Hello!”

The voice belonged to a woman. She sounded older, her voice frail but unafraid of breaking; a voice filled with vigor but complete and utter kindness. Her one word comforted the man, but he remained reluctant to approach more than a few nervous steps. Furthermore, the field was odd. The woman stood far out into the sea of yellow, yet not one plant had been

trampled. He took a few clumsy steps, squishing a daffodil with each one. Once again, the woman's voice carried over the flowers.

“Careful, hun’! Watch your step, please.”

The resonance of her voice was forgiving, like a mother's. The daffodils perked up at the melody.

Looking down at his boots, the man slowly high-stepped through the field. His tongue peeked out the corner of his mouth in concentration. Beneath his boots, fewer daffodils bent and broke. He looked up over the flowers once more, squinting harder to inspect the woman. Her sunhat swayed softly in the wind. Warmer colors of the daffodils contrasted easily with the pastel-blue apron dress she wore. The dress came up to her chest and was held in place by two blue rouleau straps adorned with smaller hand-sewn flowers. The light caught her wrinkles, framing the left half of her face like a melting sculpture and shading her right side from the sun's dying gaze. Her gentle smile glinted with both contours. The watering can tilted with her posture over the blur of yellow. The wind gracefully carried the scent of the flowers, creeping into the nostrils of both the man and the woman. The woman simply smiled. The man sneezed. He could never get used to the smell—allergies, perhaps.

“Ma’am?” he inquired.

“Yes, dear?”

“Have you not heard the news?” With a long pause, he finally stammered out, “The sun is dying.”

“I know,” she responded easily. Her demeanor was off-putting to the man—she sounded too casual to have known the news. And if she had heard about the news, why was she still

tending to the church?

The man stammered once more, “The sun is dying.”

“The sun still shines.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant. The woman wasn’t wrong, of course, but her answer did not fully satiate his cynicism.

He continued, “Why are you still out here watering the daffodils?”

She finally stood up straight, “They haven’t died yet. Why let them die before they have to?”

The man’s shocked face twisted with annoyance at the sentiment. He was dumbfounded by the waste of time she described. The sun—the very object providing life to everything the man saw and heard and smelled—was to destroy its own creations. How someone could trudge on with bliss among those circumstances was beyond him—yet her words resonated more as suggestion than lecture. Hesitantly, he turned toward the church.

Behind him, he heard the older lady set the watering can down between the flowers.

“Dear, would you do me a favor, please?”

He wanted to laugh. He held back until the woman spoke again, at which he forfeited the humor.

“I left my cat in my home,” her voice began to lower. “She’s deathly afraid of being alone. Would you... bring her here?”

The last part of her request hit the man in a way he was not expecting. He stopped walking toward the church and looked down at his footsteps to deliberate—not a single daffodil was crushed that time. His brain rattled on and on, trying to think of excuses for not

retrieving the feline, but it was of no use. The woman was persuasive, even with her seemingly-simple lexicon.

The drive back down Wye Mountain was even odder than the ride up. He noticed more this time—the mockingbirds, the empty curbs, and finally the tear on his coat sleeve. He grimaced at the hole. The man pulled into the driveway of the given address and turned the key. The lady had a smaller house: one story, filled with plants of various kinds, little evidence of anyone even using the home recently. A soft-looking calico cat sat anticipatorily at the doorway. Orange and white spots littered her black fur coat. Her entire underside was like a bright cloud with the night sky hovering above. Soft reddish-orange splotches sat on her sides, beneath her pointed ears, and framing her eyes. The poor creature trembled on the cold floor of the home; confused and scared without her owner, she was left to endure this fear on her own. The cat's ears twitched as the man knelt down. She opened her eyes and looked up at the man. He stared back. Immediately, there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between the two. The man scooped the cat up into his arms and carried her to his car outside.

As he remembered the hole in his sleeve, the man felt the nameless emotion pinch at him again. He stopped at his home on the drive to Wye Mountain.

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The cat trembled softly in the seat beside the man all the way up to Wye Mountain. Upon seeing the sea of yellow, his car halted, and he took the cat. This time, the walk up the daffodil field was more purposeful. He cradled the quivering pet as he carefully stepped around each and

every daffodil. He squinted past the effervescently orange light reflecting off the flowers to try and find the woman. He was tempted to yell, but for the sake of the fragile creature in his arms, he did not.

The church steps creaked with each of his steps. He bent over to let the cat down and she bolted beneath the small staircase. The man did not yet pursue.

The sun set. In minutes, it would never rise again. The Arkansan sky, blanketed with a soft haze of blue and a gradient of warmer colors descending over the horizon, no longer felt temporary. The tall forests around swayed with the wind, blowing leaves across the church steps. Critters of many different sizes roamed the soil before him. A mother mockingbird swooped down and caught one, flying off without another thought for anything but her children. The daffodils continued to sway. Over the horizon, a vibrant blue began to rise. The blue gradually engulfed the horizon and shot up over the rest of the sky. The wind picked up violently. Towering green giants threatened to overturn and the soft yellow daffodils now glinted purples, blues, and greens. The critters rolled up into balls or buried under the steps and birds fled from their trees.

So soon?

A soft meow harmonized with the wails of the forest. The man leaned down to grab the calico cat from under her hiding spot and carried her into the church.

The cat was still quivering, but the man held her closer to his chest in a comforting embrace. Evenly-spaced stained glass windows illuminated the room in a mirage of colors, each tinted slightly blue. He sat in a pew among a flood of vibrant hues; he remembered the wood. The oak was imbued with a dark, crimson-cherry color that comforted him. Each pew held a Bible, hymnal, and missal, but he did not bother opening any. He was never the religious type.

The hanging lights rattled as extinction grew closer. The noise outside worsened and the wind grew stronger than before.

The stained glass now only shone shades of dark-blue. Intense heat picked up and rattled the church. The man shook off his coat and wrapped the fabric tightly around the feline like a cocoon. The calico ceased her shivering and nuzzled against the newly handsewn sleeve.

Soft purring drowned out the rustling, and the man grinned.

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In the man's home, the door to the daffodil's room stood ajar. The picture frames along the hallway had been realigned upright. Bluish light now flooded through the doorway and opened blinds. Footprints in the dust led to the center of the room. His stationery lay neatly in a mug in the corner of his desk. Resting in the center of the lighted room, the small wooden table had also been dusted. The lone pot's soil was moistened and dark.

The lone daffodil swayed.

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*All the rivers run into the sea, Yet the sea is not full; To the place from which the rivers come,
There they return again.*

— *Ecclesiastes 1:7 (KJV)*