

#1 Circular Endings

It's a new beginning.

A void, a bang, a flash. Atoms welding together and rupturing apart. A little rock: sometimes erupting, sometimes breaking, sometimes cracking. Unstable, volatile, lifeless.

She smiles patiently through its development and smooths it out with her fingers, molding it into a sphere. She carves out basins with her fingers, swatting away crumbles of rock. She painstakingly crafts each droplet of water, pausing to admire how light bends inside them, and places the liquid into the empty space. She scatters dirt, sediment, pebbles and clay across the entire sphere, spreading thin layers in some places and thicker layers in others. She stitches sheets of air together, hearing the gases fizzle and slide around in place, and positions them like protective blankets around the sphere. She sculpts landmasses, breathing tufts of minerals deep into their corners. She fashions the hearts of creatures and gives them life. She sifts through the land, curving it in some places to form mountains that stretch into the sky, and flattening it in some places to create rolling, endless prairies. She spins clouds out of her love. She freezes water as snow to powder across the mountaintops. She forms her creation carefully, adding more day by day.

And finally, she sits. Her work is done.

Mother Nature holds the world in her hands and smiles.

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They come slowly, the ones who call themselves “humans.” At first, there are only sprinkles of them scattered across the rolling hills. She watches silently, her heart bursting with pride. Her night-sky locks caress them all. She sloshes the purple-aquamarine waves to lull them to sleep, she whispers song into the animals’ ears, she lights up the sky by painting a plethora of colors and pleads the sun to stay out a little longer.

Just for them.

Every night, she glides across her creation. Her eyes scan every corner, ensuring that everyone is healthy, everyone is joyful, everyone is loved.

She spreads out her long, thin fingers and she keeps *creating*, keeps enveloping her precious sphere of earth and ocean with new species and beauty.

Just for them.

At first, it's easy.

But as eons pass, the ones who call themselves humans grow. They expand, press all the way to the edges of her world, inhabiting every nook and cranny. They invent millions of unnatural creations that spit out black smoke and destroy thriving habitats. They kill innocent creatures ruthlessly, and they even start killing each other.

The deep scarlet shade she used to love turns into the reminder of yet another lost life. Blood spills from silent corpses, the only indication of their presence a pungent, rotting reek of death.

All of this takes a toll on her. The luscious, vivid colors of the rolling hills begin to fade. The atmosphere she ever so carefully stitched starts splintering, giving way to holes. Mountains and hills alike erode away, replaced by towers of trash called landfills. Dirt is scarce, minerals are scarce, fresh water is almost extinct. The clouds in the sky disappear. Snow melts.

Time unfolds.

She still watches over them. No one ever notices her.

She still smiles. It's odd how a smile can turn into a grimace.

As her hair greys and her eyes wrinkle around the corners, she longs for the days when her biggest worry was how happy the humans would be. Now, all they seem to express is wanting.

Wanting more, more, more.

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She knows. The moment she arises from her restless slumber that morning, she knows her time is up. The tears drip down her cheeks: large, flowing, erupting, *flooding* the world with despair. Yells from the humans swarm in her ears.

"It's the ending!"

Gurgle of water splatter through the land. Trees are uprooted, skyscrapers crash like dominoes, the oceans rumble, and the earth shudders with quakes. Humans driven from their homes flail in the water, their limbs creating an uproar of splashes.

It's chaos.

She does nothing.

Then, in the midst of it all, she sees a young woman who reminds her of herself: a young woman whose inky black hair is streaked like the stars, a young woman whose her eyes brim with passion, love, and empathy. The woman's chin quivers, but her fists are clenched as she holds onto a tree trunk stretching above the murky floodwaters. Her voice stammers for a moment. Then the woman juts out her jaw and calls out with sheer courage: *"It's not the end!"*

She is silent for a moment as she fixes her watery eyes on that woman. Her hands stop shaking and a smile tickles her lips. Hope flows through her entire body, floods through the cracks and faults, fills her heart with appreciation, and reminds her why she created this world in the first place.

She tests out the phrase. "This isn't our end." It feels so good to say it.

"This isn't our end!" She yells it this time.

"This isn't our end!" It's a vow.

She's realized something today: endings are circular. Circular, just like this sphere she created with nothing but countless hours of hard work and love. Circular, because no matter what, one ending will open another beginning.

So it's true: today is an end. But it's also the beginning of something new, something real, something *better*.

She clasps her hands and a deafening roar shakes the world. Little chips of rock crinkle and spatter and lava flows through the cracks, heat ebbing off in waves. The landforms meld into a uniform chunk of mass, and the hiss of mingling water and fire fills the air. All remnants of the old world are gone. All except for one: the woman lying in her palms, her eyes wide.

After all, she'll need help with this new beginning.

Unstable, volatile, lifeless. Atoms welding together and rupturing apart. A little rock: sometimes erupting, sometimes breaking, sometimes cracking.

The woman and Mother Nature embrace *this* end and smile.

A void, a bang, a flash.

It's a new beginning.

#2 Blood-Stained Prayers

I.

They meet on a morning of innocence – she skips downtown and whistles a hymn, he languishes where the roaches frolic. She’s wearing her Sunday best; he’s stained from tobacco. She’s sixteen and foolish and happy to be so; he’s old and greasy and covered in grime. He shifts as she passes, upsetting the resident swarm of flies.

“Ma?” His voice is hoarse, chipped and faded from cigarettes. “Is that you?”

Panic presses her heart, rises up in her throat and paralyzes her voice. She squeaks, skittering off the sidewalk and into the road as she snatches her skirt from his reaching fingers.

“Ma?” he says again, and she screams.

Passersby are curious now, heads turning and paces slowing. A man (a hero) steps forward. “Hey now, you, leave the young lady alone!”

The creature falters, slinking back into the gutter, almost invisible among the filth. Confusion wells in pale eyes. Greasy hair plasters his face, skin sick with scars and sunburn. She wonders if he’s human – a corpse would seem more alive, or a toad, or a clod of mire vomited up from the netherworld. “I figured—”

“No one cares what you figured,” the hero snaps, before turning back to her with softened eyes. “Never mind that fellow, miss. They say he fought in a war and came back with half a brain. He wouldn’t hurt you – might just cry at you and call you his mother.” The man pauses, glancing at her flushed cheeks. “Are you frightened, miss?”

“A little,” she admits, pressing trembling hands to her chest and warming them with a spark of pity. “Though I feel sorry for him, in a way.”

“Don’t. He would sell the other half of his brain for whiskey.”

II.

She meets him again two years later, on an afternoon so bright the sun matches the giddiness of her soul. Bibles have been replaced with boys, wide-eyed innocence with winged-eyeliner, and

where once she whistled, now she gossips to the girl beside her as they stride arm in arm down Main Street.

“I saw Thomas at a party yesterday,” she giggles, flippancy coursing through her veins like blood and drugs. “He told me—”

Her friend stiffens, pulling them both to a stop. A man sprawls in the middle of the sidewalk. His lumpy arms and legs wiggle as he mutters, “Party,” over and over again. “Party, party, party...”

“Oh, it’s just him,” she says, an old memory resurfacing. “He’s a harmless old fool.”

He grins at her knowingly, eyes glimmering. “We went to war so you could *pray*,” he says, spraying laughter and spittle, “not party. We went to war so you—”

“Oh, shut up,” she snaps, her ears tingling with crimson annoyance.

Her friend stares at her, wide-eyed. “Aren’t you frightened of him?”

She pats her dress down (it’s new, bought yesterday) and huffs primly. Fear would be the response of a child, someone small and unused to the world. But she is eighteen, almost nineteen (completely grown-up), and disgust is easier than fear, easier than kindness or common sense or all the other things a child would feel.

“Me, frightened of *that* pathetic creature?” Her lips curl in a pretty sneer. “I’d sooner be frightened of a toad.”

III.

They meet for the last time when the moon is out, when she’s twenty years old and a party transforms into something worse. Lipstick smears her mouth like blood, staining the cigarette clenched between her teeth. Her head aches, her body aches, her mind and soul ache and she *must get out*, yes, just for a moment to taste fresh air on her tongue and spit out smoke and sin.

She stumbles from the room, bursts through the door, out of the smoky little row house and into the dark street. Music pulses behind her. The ground wobbles.

“I used to do that, too.”

The voice is raspy and vague and swims through her whiskey-saturated senses like molasses. Swaying, she turns. A dark shape slouches against the building.

“I... I know you,” she says, even though she doesn’t.

The person guffaws. “I *was* you,” he says, as if that makes any sense at all, as if this sordid creature and herself could ever have been the same person. “Once, way back. Then a war messed me up.”

Bile burns like acid on her tongue. “You’re disgusting.”

“So are you.”

She doesn’t know what that means, spoken from a man missing teeth and scratching at fleas. Music still throbs in her head, gathering up anger and disgust and all the darkness of her soul in a single, pulsing flame of pain. She hates him. She hates him, and she doesn’t know why. Once, when she was younger, her heart only had room for kindness, but she’s too drunk for pity, too drunk for anything but the weight of her own wretched soul.

“Shut up,” she mumbles, staggering away as the world smears at the corners. The ground is spinning, she is spinning, lights are spinning, closer, closer, devouring ground, tires skidding, brakes squealing, and *light*, too much light, devouring her—

Her knees hit the asphalt. (*Blood.*)

His body rests between her and a car. (*More blood.*)

“Go on.” Red stains his teeth. “Get drunk. We went to war so you didn’t have to.”

Shiny with blood, he reaches out – beckoning her or beckoning death, she doesn’t know. Peace comes in the blankness of his eyes, the smile on his lips as his head falls back to touch the pavement.

He’s dead.

She’s not.

(*Horror mixes with blood, and the wail of approaching sirens.*)

“Hey!” Car doors slam. Someone drops down beside the body, someone else grabs her arm. “Are you alright? That man pushed you out of the way and—” He pulls back, disgust forming a familiar pattern on his face. “Are you drunk?”

(*We went to war so you could change.*)

She trembles, and prayer replaces alcohol on her lips.

#3 A Journey...

Of Hope and Failure:

It was dark. The road was empty. Destin's younger siblings slept as he drove home. There was no moon tonight. The stars shone with intensity. He breathed in. The infinite specks of light eased his usual hyper-awareness.

Headlights appeared around the bend, it looked like an 18-wheeler. Destin instinctively set his Time Anchor – he always did when approaching cars at night. The headlights flickered. Then went out. Suddenly, the truck swerved towards into their lane, tipping and falling on its side. It slid sideways, covering the width of the bridge as it headed straight towards Destin.

Darkness

Attempt 1:

Everything calmed. Silent. The Lull always happened whenever time reset. He sat behind the steering wheel, grasping it with both hands. He couldn't move since time hadn't resumed yet. The lack of control during the pre-time moments used to terrify him. Eventually, he grew appreciative of it. The Lull gave Destin a few seconds to focus, to orientate himself.

Time began.

Destin slammed on the brakes. But they were going too fast.

Darkness

Attempt 10:

The Lull was peaceful. A contrast to Destin's rising panic. Each reset resulted in death, instantly causing time to reset. He would avoid the truck eventually; he had reset instances more times than this to achieve a desired outcome. He could do it again. He would save his family.

Time resumed.

Destin hit the brakes and turned sharply into the truck's lane. The car scraped the rails of the bridge as he drove along the opposite side of the road. If they could squeeze through the gap between the truck and the rails, they might survive.

The back of the truck collided with their car.

Darkness

Attempt 2115:

Destin held the steering wheel steady. The truck lost control and began sliding on its side. He jerked the car to the side. The car slammed against the rails, nearly bending the metal with the force. The truck hit them, flipping the car over the side. The bridge was short and the ditch beneath it was dry. The car stopped upside down. The roof creaked.

Destin released his seatbelt. The tension snapped free, sending him falling headfirst.

“Is everyone okay?”

No one answered. Deep down inside he knew they weren't. He felt the Time Anchor in his mind and prepared to reset. But first he would check each of his family members to make sure. Even if they were alright, he would need to replicate this outcome with enough consistency to remove his Anchor during the Lull. Once removed, he'd have only one chance to save everyone.

Attempt 41,892

He sat alone, in the dark. He leaned back, resting his head against the roof of the car. It lay sideways in the ditch. He had discovered that driving straight off the edge would sometimes result in his survival. Only his thought, and so he kept trying. The stars were dimmer than they used to be. Their light was no longer warm. Doubt crept in, it claimed more of him each reset. Why was this so hard?

A passing breeze rustled the trees. He prepared to reset, but ,what if he didn't? He could wait for help to arrive and continue on with life. It wouldn't be real, though. Time would reset eventually. Even if he didn't reset, on his deathbed it would. All those years would be for nothing, only his memories as proof that they once existed. No. His family could be saved. They had to be.

Time reset.

Attempt 207,946

The Lull was no longer peaceful. Even in its perfect stillness Destin heard the screech of tires. He saw the sparks on the road and felt the weight of the truck as it crushed them. Time after time he was reminded of the impossible task before him. There were only a limited number of actions to take. He tried them all. Somehow, each led to failure.

Attempt 951,552

“I can’t do this anymore” Destin said. “I can’t save you.”

“You’ll find a way.” Drea said.

To her, this was their first crash. She didn’t know how many times he had tried to save them - how many times he had failed.

“I’m going to give up,” words he thought he’d never to say. “I just, I wanted to tell someone before I remove it.”

It was quiet for a while.

Sometimes, after a crash, one of his siblings would be conscious long enough to talk. It had taken thousands of resets for Drea to survive. When it first happened, it gave him hope. But each time they were severely injured. Each time, the ambulance took too long.

“You haven’t failed us, Destin.”

“I have.” *More than you know.*

“It’s okay.”

Eventually, lights appeared in the distance.

He reset time.

Attempt 951,553

The Lull. He loathed it. Yet he clung so desperately to the peace it once had. His mind reached out and felt the anchor. He hesitated, then removed it. Everything that happened beyond this point would never be undone.

Time began with the fury of a storm unleashed.

Destin maneuvered the car. Memories upon memories overlapped, nearly disorientating him. The sum of all his attempts lead to this moment.

He accelerated and turned the steering wheel slightly, scraping against their side’s railing. The truck started to fall. Destin jerked the steering wheel in the opposite direction. Their car slammed into the rails and flew off the side of the bridge. But not before the truck reached them. It crashed into the rear of the car and sent them spinning in midair.

Darkness.

Of Acceptance and Next Steps:

Silence greeted him as he regained consciousness. Not the Lull's all-enveloping quiet, but the stillness of night. He lay beside the wreckage, listening to his heartbeat. It was over. This was real, permanent. He didn't save them. He tried *so* hard. The past couldn't change. But perhaps instead of dying, he could live for them, for their memory.

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