

Futility

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The wine had gone bad some time ago, and yet the man still took small sips as he looked out over the city. Bad wine, of course, was a rather trivial matter to one at the end of the world. The matter, in fact, was not with the wine, but with the timing of its consumption. It had been given to him perhaps a decade ago, the gift of a colleague upon their parting. The man had remarked that he should like to save it for an occasion, and yet no such occasion had arisen. Of course there had been celebrations in his time, of the advancements in his careers --there had been many in his long life --and a handful of personal events. He had always held off, convinced there would be something better to save it for. Now, at the end, he could only wonder about how it would have tasted in its prime.

The revelry of the evening had long passed, and the streets of the city had been left coated in a layer of broken glass and plastic. Small fires burned off in the distance, sending smoke up into the darkening sky. It was likely one of many empty warehouses by the coast burning, the man thought, they seemed to attract trouble. Or perhaps it was a library, or a school. It didn't matter. Just as the streets would not be cleaned, the fires would not be put out. There was no point. In a little under an hour, the world would burn and humanity would perish. It seemed fitting somehow, that the thousands of partygoers had dispersed to their homes when the sun went down, as if there was some safety indoors. They were not fearless after all, even though the signs had advertised a party lasting all night. The age old instinct to shelter from the darkness remained, even now. Death was coming, even if there was a flimsy wall between them and it.

The man himself sat on his balcony beneath no ceiling but the stars. The lights of his penthouse apartment were off, and every bit of it was as spotless as it had ever been. He sat by the light of a candle which had nearly burned itself down to a pool of wax. He'd made the candle himself, meant to last only as long as he would. What was the point, after all, in leaving a stem of wax behind when he was dead? The man set down his glass and leaned back in his chair; it was a plush cushiony thing that had taken him fifteen precious minutes early that day to drag from his bedroom to his balcony. Dying after all, he thought, should be done comfortably. His mind briefly drifted to his few friends. Where would they be? Would they be hidden inside? Perhaps even underground? Or would they be braving the

darkness as he was? He supposed it was rather unimportant, as he wouldn't see them again anyway. He would face this alone.

Or almost alone.

A moth had joined him, drawn to the flame. It was no remarkable being in color or shape, being small and the color of dead grass and a half an inch in size. No, the moth was not remarkable to the eye of the man, but she was remarkable in that she was alive. The man could not help but find interest in this tiny creature's dance around the flame of his candle. It would be an irony, he thought, if the moth was to perish by no fault of her own by venturing too close to the fire that interested her so. More than an irony, it would be an injustice. It seemed only right that this tiny creature should perish as he did, in a fearful blazing moment.

The man leaned forward —careful not to startle her — and pinched out the candle with two fingers, burning both lightly in the process. It was a small price to pay for the company of the moth, which he assured by unlocking his phone, inviting the creature back by artificial light. The moth saw no difference between the candle and the screen's light, perfectly content to hover in blissful unawareness.

The man was almost jealous.

“I am extraordinary, you know,” he told the moth.

And he was. He had lived a very long time, long enough to force a change in identities thrice and to find the activities of lower creatures rather dull. There was no reason for him to concern himself with those who would perish before he did, he had thought. Now that he was at the end, he wished he knew what to call this creature other than moth. Surely if a mere mortal man could classify such a being, it would have been no trouble for him. These humans had, after all, known of this impending extinction. Its vehicle had been tracked through space for months. The man had assumed they would deal with it as they always did when faced with their demise. Perhaps a missile could destroy it, or perhaps humanity would finally venture off their planet. Neither occurred, and the humans had resigned themselves to their fate. It was almost fitting that the human race would not be harmed by the plethora of other potentially fatal catastrophes of their own design brewing, but would rather be killed by a cosmic fluke. Anything remarkable, from the birth of a species to its demise, was a grand miracle anyway. The man would have vastly preferred that their poor decisions catch up with them, but such was life, he thought.

This was why he had never had children, really. Immortality was his curse, and though he thought himself better than any mortal human, he thought it cruel to bring another one of his kind into the world. If he could not interfere among these humans and be a god among men, why should his offspring suffer in silence? He was better than the other humans, he knew in his heart. How could he not be? He had been born to ordinary parents and grown up in ordinary circumstances. It was his being that was extraordinary.

Unless it wasn't. Unless it was all some accident among the cosmos, much like this asteroid.

Unless he was no angel on Earth, but simply an accident of natural selection.

Assuming divinity suited him better, and the man had long since cast away any doubts of his origin. They did not serve him.

He wondered if the moth knew anything of him, of what he was. Could it sense that he was different? Had it met another human before to even know the difference? Or was this by some cruelty of nature its first night alive? He would never know, and she would never tell. Such was the nature of moths and humans.

An alarm pinged from the wristwatch of the man, an alert he had set that morning. Five minutes until the end.

The man silenced it, his gaze resting on the watch for a moment, then sliding past it, and to the second watch upon his arm. It was broken and old, having belonged to the man's father and his father before him. He supposed it was an antique, though there was no worth in it. No watch-maker he'd brought it to had been successful in fixing it, and it was scratched and tarnished beyond remedy. He seldom wore it, but rather kept it on display upon his mantle. It made for an interesting conversation piece, and served as a reminder of where he'd come from. Perhaps, he thought, someone would find his body here, sat upon a chair overlooking the city wearing this ancient metal thing, and think him a king. His bones would remain, he hoped, as the planet died.

The moth would not. She would be consumed into flame and ash. She still danced in the false day of the screen, pausing to rest upon it when it suited her. She was unaware of her fate, and yet she seemed perfectly happy. It was rather unfortunate, the man thought, that the moth did not know what was to come. Such a small and insignificant creature couldn't even fathom that the world as it knew it was about to cease. It couldn't imagine the way flame would consume its wings, burning through them as it would paper. It did not know that even if it rose up and away from the fire, it would be choked by ash in the sky.

Truly, such an existence was puzzling. A creature such as the moth could live only in the moment, and experience what it saw then. Disaster was irrelevant, as it was still in the future.

In the near future, the very near future.

Two minutes, but really that was just a guess.

The man sat back in his chair, hands resting upon the padded arms, head tilted up to the sky. A shooting star flickered across the sky, then another. For a moment, the man's ancient heart swelled with hope. Could it all have been untrue? Had humanity thwarted death? He sat back and closed his eyes, exhaling.

Humanity had not, in fact, experienced a second cosmic fluke, the man had simply chosen the wrong direction from which to observe the blinding impact, which occurred just a mile or so behind him. In the end, he was as blind as the moth to their shared fate.

And yet, as the man sat in fearful darkness, the moth perished in glorious light.