

# The Conductor's Funeral

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TIME IS SPINNING AWAY FROM the human like fraying thread but the human does not reach out an aged hand to grasp and struggle as clockwork unspools, delicately fluttering, inch after spiraling inch. Perhaps it helps that this human is not alone, or perhaps this human is wiser and older, though the word *older* is losing its meaning, and the human is becoming aware that its soul is as young as the laughing infants and as ancient as Gravity himself.

This human dreams itself as a woman. And so she is a woman. And she is aware of another person beside her as she falls toward the light, offering her relief across leagues of unimaginable distance, comforting her against a loss that seems too much to bear, and they are wrapping one another into a glowing pulsar of love and acknowledgement, acceptance of the tides of absurd unknowing that surround them.

This is why she is not afraid, even as she opens their eyes tentatively, barely breathing, and inhales the cold wind of the twilight otherworld.

The tide is coming in.

Marla stands in the lapping waters and giggles. The water musters enough courage to surge against her knees then retreats shyly into the endless beyond, and she feels the way the sand is pulled away beneath her feet in little eddies and vortices.

She breathes the cold ocean air, but as she exhales she is aware that this vision is forbidden to her, and that it will be forgotten as soon as she has been pulled into the clutches of the story that awaits her somewhere behind in the all the tangled streets of a little village quieter yet more tumultuous than the dying city where Mr. Bjorvan is casting his gaze across leagues of billowing smoke. This will all be gone when she opens her eyes, so in this inhale of grace, she casts her eyes far across the sea, across pitching miles of sparkling water where a solitary wandering albatross stretches its wide wings, gliding so close to the surface that she cannot distinguish it from the hazy mirages and silvery highlights on the water. The ocean courses through colors, pale greens and full blues interlocking in an amorphous jigsaw puzzle. The wash and spray of the water whispers a lullaby. She can smell the salt bleached rocks strung with kelp. The wind blows her hair into her eyes and the vision is lost.

She breathes out. Centuries pass.

The clouds and fog hang so heavy here that she cannot see more than a few feet in either direction. Men and women are gazing despondently at their shoes or peering through portholes as if now is the moment that the vaporous curtains shall be drawn away to permit them to see the landscape beyond.

The boiler roars like a loud, endless sigh. Above them, the cords anchoring the basket to the balloon creak tautly.

“Where are we going?” asks Marla brightly, crying out with delight as she realizes they are flying, *flying*, no doubt through some unimaginable chamber so large that they might soar for hours before they reach the other side.

“Keep your voice down,” says a woman grimly.

“Oh,” whispers Marla. “Are we escaping or something? Is it dangerous?”

An old man with silver spectacles shakes his head. “It’s a tragedy how quickly the young neglect the Principles. When I was a lad, me and my friends were the first to the orchestra hall and the last to leave.”

“I apologize,” says Marla, smiling patiently. “I just got here. It’s all a bit hazy at the moment, but if I remember correctly...”

“Marla...” says a young girl laughing. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean what?”

“What do you mean you just got here?”

A village huddled against the wolves and things worse than wolves that they know patrol these lawless wastelands on either side. Barren stonework blasted and sculpted by the acid rain. Great streaming trails of smoke at each corner of the horizon like wispy watchtowers. Jagged clouds like spidery writing on a black ceiling so far above them that Marla, as she staggers into the town square, dizzy and alone, cannot even make a guess as to the size of the room. This must be the biggest chamber in the entire world, she thinks to herself.

“Only a few books remain,” says the old man with silver spectacles, and Marla shakes her head sadly.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“Don’t apologize for wrongs you had no hand in committing,” says the man, waving his hand. “Bad habit.”

“Oh, but I did commit *that* wrong,” she says, averting her eyes.

The man squints at her without understanding, and she does not speak of the Festival of the Desecrators, and the mountain of sacred texts and Classics, and the lottery to determine which young desecrator, freshly armed with passion from the training camps, would be allowed the honor of setting the first match against the yellowed paper and then, laughing, retreat from the consuming flames and dance with his brothers and sisters to the music of the crackling bonfire of knowledge.

But there’s no more time for guilt, the man told her long ago, when they were standing at the edge of the village and peering into the mouth of the black canyons on either side and watching vague shadows on the distant hills. You were born into a world of lies extricated from the memory of truth, carved into every paragraph of every book of ritual. So is everyone.

“I cannot help the stab of fear when I find myself using an adjective,” she

says miserably, one night when the rest of the passengers are asleep, and the pilot is too hypnotized by the monotony of his task to pay attention. "I try to say that it is a *grand* view and I feel a stab of guilt."

"That's to be expected, young one," he says kindly. "You must learn a new way of understanding the world."

Everything is infinitely interesting, if you pay close enough attention. Or at least, that's what Marla feels, reading the few surviving dictionaries and learning a new vocabulary to process the world, finding that in the acquisition of these words, the objects themselves are subtly changed. She listens to the soft guitar music of a lonesome pilgrim and understands that the textures of the music are *ominous* and *eerie*, that his voice is *gravely* and *matured*. Even in the glimpses she catches in the mirror, waking up in the early morning to get breakfast in the common area with the rest of the village, working the tangles out of her hair, she begins to describe herself, and in the describing, change herself. Her hair is *golden* and *shiny*. Her eyes are *sympathetic*. She is *curious* and *excitable*.

Not much excitability around these parts, the old man with the silver spectacles tells her. Excitement is drawn from the new, and this is a land of struggling remembrance. There is nothing new in a world of sulfur and spreading apocalypse, of oncoming twilight that pursues her at every turn through the firelit village. Remnants of a city that stood for so long that the world had accepted it as a natural outgrowth of the stone. Charred skeletons of buildings surround her dreams, dwarfing her even in their destruction, metal beams like broken bones dangling from bodies that bleed flames into the sky and find no hope of rebuilding. A perpetual cycle of violence, and a man sitting in the heaps of destruction, looking out at her as she waits in the village, standing in the freezing cold.

The old man with silver spectacles tells her his name but she cannot remember it. It's enough to know he is the Conductor, a title from which he unsuccessfully pleads innocent like a desperate convict who, finding the verdict unfavorable, shoulders the burden of his oncoming fate with reserved dignity, raising his chin against his accusers as if to say, "Enough then. I submit."

He submits as if frustrated to his responsibility but Marla secretly suspects that he finds some sense of fulfillment. After all, when librarian's son suggested that he might try his hand with the baton someday, the Conductor's face, frozen in a static smile, seemed to project such condescension that Marla could not help but remember how her own father had smiled at her when she pulled at the pages of a book with clumsy hands, succeeding only in tearing dozens of little strips of paper but sparkling with joy in the attempt. She threw the shreds in the air like confetti and looked up, watching them drift lazily to the ground like paper snow.

The orchestra meets every week, which means nothing here. When she arrives at the hall, day or night, rain or heavy rain, they are playing, and the old man with silver spectacles is paging through the last book of symphonies and pausing

every few measures to deliver some line of sharp criticism to the assembled players.

“This is all we have,” he says to her on board the hot air balloon. “This is all we have ever had. This first, last, and only symphony. It is our mission to perfect it, and beyond perfection, to transform it. I will not rest until we have fulfilled its purpose.”

Marla’s confusion abates as she spends weeks in the empty auditorium seats, watching as the Conductor raises his baton and announces, “second movement, third measure, brass only please!” then counts an empty measure, listening to the trumpets and trombones narrate their contrapuntal melody strangely exposed and cold, lonely without their brethren. He closes his eyes and picks out every individual timbre, listens to every phrase and crescendo, then he shakes his head.

“Wrong, wrong, wrong!” he cries. “Where is the humanity? Where is the grace? I hear you play these notes as if you are solving a math problem. A plus B plus D... There is a story in that phrase, and you are neglecting it entirely, and I can hear it! Again, again!”

But if you haven’t achieved it, Mr. Conductor, Mr. Old Man with Silver Spectacles, then you won’t achieve it, will you, taking your position as the leader of the multifarious rituals and stomping his foot in anger at the dozens of mistakes he perceives yet lacks the energy to criticize.

So we journey onwards. Are we dispelling the clouds or merely becoming one of them, bodies dissolving in a southern wind? Marla stands at the edge of the basket and gazes into the pale abyss and, although she dimly senses the staggering altitude, she cannot remember any world that did not consist of clouds.

The Conductor taps his baton upon the stand and says, “Movement one, measure one. Play the whole thing through,” and then he lets his baton chase invisible vertexes, dictating strange constellations of rhythm and desired expression, as his left hand motions “come hither” as if coaxing from its cave some mighty dormant dragon that, when it stretches scaly wings and crushes the mountains between its talons, will so transcend this little village that its inhabitants shall return shocked into a familiar yet slightly changed world where all the daily tasks of gardening and cleaning seem like privileges granted a lonely prisoner. He says it is possible. He says it is coming and that no one can stop it but that we can make it come quicker if we try our hardest. Perhaps, he imagines in his deepest despair, he will never achieve the perfect performance, but there will at least be a perfect *measure*, a sudden alignment of hearts, the entire orchestra looking up in astonishment and realizing that they are no longer reading music, they are merely playing what is *right*, and that what is right happens to conform perfectly with the master score. It’ll happen one of these days, just you wait, if that word means anything.

Marla asks where they are going, and someone says they are seeking the Composer, an annual pilgrimage to the great temple in the mountains where he

will sit waiting, endlessly compassionate and endlessly brilliant, narrating the music of the world with his quill pen as heartbreaking melodies pour from him instinctually like babble from the mouth of a madman.

And just beyond this next bank of impenetrable clouds he will sit at the edge of a cliff looking down into a broad valley of crystal waterfalls and he will look up at the hot air balloon and say, "Welcome, my musicians!" but they emerge from the clouds again and again and there is no Composer, there is no music to echo in the deep mountains, and they are once more making their return journey to the little village where the Conductor will disembark and scream, "You failed me! You failed all of us! You failed the music!" at no one in particular, and the musicians hang their heads in shame.

They try again.

He raises his baton and says, "Fourth movement, twenty seventh measure," then begins conducting before any of the musicians can flip to the proper position. False starts and dissonant tones. The Conductor says, "You should know this by heart! No! Put down your music! Play with your soul! You should know this all!"

But they don't know it. The violinists peer sadly at the Conductor and look to their fellow musicians for help, but it would appear, regardless of the years they have spent rehearsing, that no one has memorized the music. The Conductor whirls his baton but the orchestra sits baffled and silent until tears burst from behind his silver spectacles and he hurries off stage. When he returns the following day, his words are grimly serious.

"I sustained my people in the wastelands," he says in a whisper amplified by the acoustics of the concert hall like a gentle cymbal solo. "I brought my people out of the Desert of Nothingness and led them to a land of life and water. It hasn't been perfect. I admit that. But we have survived. And it is time to move beyond survival and achieve that pinnacle of sophistication that only humans are capable of achieving. This..." he taps the Book of the Symphony, "is the last recorded music in the world. And until we have read from that book and understood its meaning we shall be just as lost as we were when we floated aimlessly through the void. We must understand the Composer completely, we must replicate without error the music he imagined and in doing so, resurrect him in all our minds. Only when we have done that might we say we have achieved our rest in this cruel and unforgiving world. Only then might we feel his soul running through our own and glimpse the divine order."

Marla, having listened to the orchestra rehearse for century after dizzying century, returns to her own home one day having bartered away a few memories for a stack of paper and a pen. She doesn't know how to write music, but there is music in her mind, and, opening her eyes as if from a murky sleep, she begins to scribble on the paper.

It begins with a drum roll, light hammers tapping away on the timpani,

and then the horns enter in a bright, joyous fanfare, before quieting down into twinkling filigree accompaniment, accenting a pompous melody carried primarily by the strings.

Years later, when the Conductor discovers Marla's music, he furrows his brow in concern.

"My child," he says without anger. "You are getting ahead of yourself. Only when we have fully understood the music of the past might we forge ahead into the music of the future. Oh, believe me, I have thought of composing many times myself, but that is not my role here. First we must come to know the true Composer."

"But there is a melody in my mind," she says. "And I want to write it down."

"There are melodies in all of our minds," he says sadly. "But we must learn to recognize their ephemeral nature. We must learn humility. We must remember that the composers of the past drew upon a long tradition, and we have only one symphony remaining to remember them by. Only through careful study of this piece of music, over generations, might we come to an understanding, albeit incomplete, of that old tradition. And only when we understand the old tradition as best as we can, only then might we move on to a new tradition."

Everything has already happened, and the ultimate fate is known to all, plainly, waiting outside their doors with a blank smile, following at a few paces behind down every street. Yet when it arrives, they look up with a flash of surprise and stammer out excuses, alone in the shadows that are rapidly swelling out like soft wings to enfold them.

Marla wakes up.

The hot air balloon hums and creaks *threateningly*. That's the word she happens upon, shifting to a sitting position and breathing on blue fingers to warm them against the nighttime air. At the tiller, the Conductor stands still like a statue... *stone statues in conflict a knife in a bony gray grip and a shimmering mirage in the air...* but as she adjusts her eyes in the dark, she can see him breathing almost imperceptibly, faint steam like candle smoke escaping his nostrils. He is old and weary and she has watched him die time and time again, a failure, abandoned by all, slipping into beyond in a last moment of annoyance and anger. There's children outside. They're far too loud. Get them to shut up will you. *Get them to shut their goddamn mouths!*

Marla has leaned close to the Conductor on his death bed and listened to his faint whisperings, accompanied him as a final friend during those torturous weeks of timeless illness, affliction that spread through all that had been and all that would be. He told her that he wouldn't wish this on his worst enemy, and then paused and said maybe he would.

"Conductor," she had whispered to him, last kindness splashing fruitlessly against stubborn bulwarks. "Conductor, can you hear me?"

“Don’t call me the Conductor,” he had said, straining to enunciate each syllable. “You are to call me the Composer. I understand him now. My musicians fell short, but I have finally heard the music as it was meant to be played. He is my friend now. He told me to tell you this.”

Marla had paused and gazed with wonder and eventually found herself asking, “What is he like?”

“Well, he’s actually a lot like me.”

Marla shifts to a more comfortable sitting position and says, “This has been a longer journey. Are we not seeking the mountain?”

“No. I must return to my homeland in search of the ancient libraries. Perhaps one survived. There is always hope. There is always hope. There is *always* hope.”

On his death bed, the Conductor had wept. He said, “If only there were paper left in this accursed village.”

The Conductor says, “I hear music. I’ve heard it all my life.”