

LISTEN, THE WORLD IS
ENDING

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WELCOME TO METROPOLIS

I stood in the face of a void in the ground.

It was a large, faceless, dark mass, desperately reaching towards its surroundings. In a way, I thought, it wasn't much unlike people, grasping to survive.

My father's long, bony fingers were in the palm of my small hand, and I grasped them tightly as I gazed into the stale darkness. We stood together, hand in hand, facing the stretching emptiness stirring just a few feet ahead. The strange and unfamiliar sight beckoned my small, frail body to lean further, and I stood on my tip-toes, looming over the void for the best view possible. I felt a scolding tug on my hand, pulling me back. My morbid curiosity quickly retreated, and I looked up at my father.

He was a tall man who loomed over me—over *most* things, really. I traced his unwavering expression, his lips tightly pursed into a thin line and his demeanour focused entirely on the ground splitting wide open. He had brought me to the city's biggest secret because he was afraid to face what he did not understand alone.

I was quite a perceptive five-year-old, suspecting that my father had hoped that I would have pointed at the void and *giggled*, offering some spontaneous, child-like perception which would

miraculously turn out to be a profound insight into what seemed to be the end of everything.

Instead, the ominous view revealed no such thing. I turned away from my father and toward the growing darkness. Strong, pulsing winds whirled around me, pulling me closer toward the pit, and for a moment, I was embalmed in its deafening silence.

The void was a massive pit of nothingness in the ground that reflected a growing blackness. It was an impending reminder that all things, no matter their size or composition, were not *unending*. They were unfinished, striving furiously toward ends.

* * *

“Make a wish,” I heard my father say.

It was the morning.

Eight a.m., to be exact.

I could always tell by the chirping of birds that dissipated after the early morning passed and before the sun began to move across the sky. There was pecking on the glass of a window beside me. A bluebird sat by the windowsill, ringing a unique, *deplorable* sound, a grating, high-pitched screeching digging incessantly into my mind. I closed my eyes, tuning in to the noises around me. The sounds of chirping had a habit of echoing through the empty spaces of the home before descending deeper into the city as the sun rose. I was seated at the end of a long dining table and large windows behind me painted a scene of a city in flux far below, glistening softly under the rising sky. Through the wispy clouds, the busy streets that marked the city were just barely visible, and the people below were reminiscent of flecks of paint.

I sighed. A thin, golden light streamed into the room and the feeling of fresh warmth on my skin endowed me with a youthful bliss that made me almost forget it was my twentieth birthday today.

Twenty.

The anticipation of the near future had blurred into an unease, which had since turned into a slumped disposition in my seat. I shrugged off the stance, shifting my chair closer to the table. I looked down. Littered in front of me was an array of various breakfast foods: eggs, bread, fruit, seeds, every choice one could ever possibly imagine.

Five million people are starving in Metropolis, roughly a quarter of the population.

I picked at the pieces of fruit with my fork but the sharp contrast that entered my mind beckoned a slow rush of dread, suspended only by the weight of needing to make a decision. I stared at the multitude of choices in front of me, unmoving in their offerings. Suddenly, I wasn't hungry.

But now, I felt guilty for wasting my hunger.

A conundrum.

I gazed at the mist outside the windows, starkly aware of the empty, growing silence that had lingered in the air since my father's request. I looked at a wooden bowl of fruit, reserving a thought for my inevitable future, and then I reached for a kiwi, grazing the furry skin of the fruit with my thumb as I thought.

What did I desire?

The bluebird by the window had stopped screeching and shuffled off into the sky. I watched it weave through the thin clouds, descending deeper into the city before vanishing from my sight. I'd hoped that the welcomed silence would offer me peace, a moment of clarity that would shine a light on a wish or desire, but now my half-baked thoughts were stubbornly in full view.

A butler, a young man with an apron hung across his hips, walked across the room toward me, his footsteps echoing loudly. He leaned over a cabinet and cracked open the window. It popped open just slightly. I watched him return to the rest of the staff, tracing his controlled movements with my eyes. I blinked. Who

was he? In the years that he had worked for my family, I had never once asked for the young man's name.

Was adulthood a realisation of all one had not yet done?

I looked at the rest of the staff standing around the dining room. They all stood in a uniform line, waiting to be appointed a task at a moment's discretion. The opened window let in a soft breeze that laid itself across my skin, and I relaxed, my muscles loosening at the sudden sensation of coolness. I glanced at the butler to say "*thanks*" but he avoided my attempt at eye contact.

A car horn sounded from far below and I heard the distant sound of glass shattering. My mother sat at the other end of the table, pausing her reading at the sudden noise.

"Is that another one?" she asked, looking up at my father from behind her newspaper.

My father shrugged and sipped his mug.

"We need to fix that intersection. I'll get someone to call Gary. Maybe he can do something right for once." She scoffed, flattening the newspaper in front of her face. "God knows what he does with the budget we pour into his department," she said to herself.

My mother was known mostly to be absent. Even now, she hadn't looked up from her newspaper since having taken a seat at the table, except glancing at my father now and then when she was struck by the concerns of their city they had not yet addressed. My mother had walked into breakfast late, expecting a moment of rest from a rather frustrating meeting she had earlier in the morning.

"Why isn't the Wi-Fi working?" I'd heard my mother shriek from my bedroom.

She had, though, looked around in annoyance at the decreasing quantity of scrambled eggs, in response to which she had snapped her fingers at the butlers standing around aimlessly.

They rushed in with more eggs.

My mother was never *not* unhappy. When she wasn't engaged in some facet of diplomacy to ensure a spotless image of the family,

she often strolled through the gardens or responded to the city's latest developments in a series of never-ending calls and virtual meetings. The vicious cycle began at the crack of dawn and persisted until the last light of the day. My mother disliked being in close quarters with others and did anything to avoid such encounters. As a result, she spent most of her time alone.

One time, I had caught her gazing at a rather curious-looking bird that had found a resting spot by the window. It was a vibrant creature that reflected all the colours of the rainbow, and my mother had looked calm for the first time, watching the bird with a child-like wonder. I suspected she did not want to face her unrequited desires for a less illustrious, simpler life.

Perhaps a different life entirely.

I looked at my mother again. She was enveloped entirely in her newspaper. Her dark, unruly hair was pinned back and slicked to perfection, and no single strand was out of place. There was a thick gold band on her ring finger that reflected the light.

I read the headlines facing me:

The Regular Night Show returns for another season;

Breaking: Viral video of a night out leads to a high-profile breakup—another rocky divorce for the celebrity power couple?

I poked an egg with a fork, expecting it to do something out of the ordinary, but to my dismay, it remained a poached egg. I poked at it again, and it bounced back under the pressure.

I frowned.

My father watched me from across the table.

“Did you make one?” he asked again through his thick-rimmed reading glasses. He looked at the muffin on my plate, holding a single blown-out candle.

“Yes, father,” I responded dully.

It's a strange feeling to walk through the world knowing that it's ending.

My city was one of many in the world and one of the most advanced. According to my grandfathers, it was *unparalleled* in technological advancement and economic development. It was my great-grandfather who had been the first *Architect*, jumpstarting development with the invention of several structural and financial systems, including housing, taxation, higher education and the ownership of property. The looming skyscrapers that filled Metropolis were all once only ideas in his mind, initially abstract in their entirety. My grandfather had since created a new system of money since, that of a *digital* kind, leaving behind the legacy of coins and paper I only had distant memories of. The city moved fast, changing rapidly in the process, and to every new generation, it was almost unrecognisable. The landscape had a palpable momentum that leered into a slight restlessness.

My grandfather and great-grandfather had subscribed to the idea that words held power, so they'd refrained from ever speaking the *void* into further existence. This rendered my father plagued, alone, with the void. It left *me*, alone, with the future of Metropolis, one I was undoubtedly tumbling toward.

I often wondered what it was like to hold a coin, what kind of physical experience it would offer to the palm of my hand. As I sat in silence at the end of the dining table, I imagined the feeling of a coarse silver edge digging into the smooth surface of my skin.

My curiosity extended to many things, like what my city would be like in the future and what the world outside of my city was like

now. I suspected this knowledge existed somewhere. My prime suspect: my grandfather's large library.

The Emerald Library, I'd named it when I was six years old.

It was in the centre of my grandfather's house tucked away from the hustle of the city, and every time I had the chance, I would sneak past the heavy, wooden doors to get a glimpse of it. My parents would take me to my grandfather's home when I was a child, and I would find myself unfailingly returning to the mysterious room upon taking my first steps inside.

"Let her go," my mother would say, shaking her head as I skirted past my grandfather's open arms up the stairs to the library.

It was a large, never-ending space containing various books and intricate artworks. The walls were tiled with emerald and hallways that contained shelves of knowledge seemed like they extended into eternity. There was an oval opening in the centre, and above was a skylight that allowed for light to travel halfway through the tall room. *Babel* was a name I'd also considered, though I wasn't aware of where the idea came from.

My grandfather had wanted, for some unforeseen reason, to keep all that he knew and had come to know during his life hidden. I sensed he kept a lot of things from me, from everyone around him who knew and worked with him.

"Secrets are safer in some places than others," he would say, waving a pointed finger through the air.

He regularly locked the library at midnight, only once forgetting to hide the key well. So, I stuck my hand in the gap between two crooked atlases in his study and fished out a golden key.

Bingo. The cognitive decline of my grandfather's brilliant mind was tragic but at times, a gift from the world to me. From then on, my grandfather had left the library unlocked because my undying thirst for knowledge was no match for his efforts to hide his collection of books. The only secret the library *truly* held was kept safely away by its own doing. It was a peculiar book with a strangely

shaped keyhole that had rendered its contents inaccessible, and I knew this because my attempts to open the book over the years of my early childhood had been met with no success and only matured disappointment.

The Emerald Book.

It was an old, worn-out leather hardcover, adorned with several colourful jewels that glowed underneath the faint light from the skylight above. In the centre of the book was an engraving, a *keyhole*, in the shape of what I had assumed at the time to be some kind of insect of sorts, though I hadn't seen one like it before.

I would place my hand on the book, and I swore I could feel the book's wisdom—a deep, serious, looming heaviness that vibrated subtly throughout my body. It was a feeling I couldn't quite describe, and whenever I brought it up to my grandfather, he'd promptly remember a task he had earlier forgotten and quickly wander elsewhere. Really, he would just lock himself in his study for the rest of the day. I would hear him pacing back and forth, the floorboards creaking beneath his weight. I sensed that whatever the book contained had a habit of only revealing itself whenever it wanted to, at the right time.

Where was the key?

My curiosity got the best of me, and I once surprised my grandfather in a dark corner of his home after he emerged from the library at midnight, demanding an answer to the mysteries of the book. My grandfather had endured a long night of reading, which lent him weary senses, and when he appeared through the heavy doors, I had jumped out from the shadows, scaring him nearly half to death. I pestered him about the book, to which he responded with the same cryptic clue as always.

At the right time.

My second favourite novel in the library, though, was a book on human biology. It was a dense book containing several diagrams explaining all the parts of the human body. There was a meticu-

lousness to the need to give boundaries to a dynamic group of atoms that happened to have fallen into the shape of a human that I quite enjoyed, and I would trace the intricate diagrams with my eyes until my mind became familiar with the design of the human body. When my parents were resting in one of my grandfather's spare rooms from the exhaustion of the work week, needing to be removed from the public eye for a moment of recuperation, I would sit in one of the two armchairs in the library, closely studying the inner workings of the mind and body.

I would read in silence, not a single sound lingering in my vicinity. It was then that I learned I most enjoyed my own company. Sometimes, I would shut the book I'd picked for the day and sit in the empty silence of my surroundings. I would look up. The wind would rattle against the tinted glass of the skylight above, and I would bask in the merits of understanding and knowing. *There are over a trillion cells in the human body.*

On the days I visited my grandfather alone, I would have the library all to myself and I would watch the emerald tiles begin to glisten with a vibrant dark green as the sun moved across the walls, sometimes counting the tiles on the walls until I fell asleep and dreamt of the same thing. I got lost in the task until the distant calls of my parents brought me back to the waking world.

The sun shed a golden ray on the dining table in front of me and I watched it travel across the dizzying assortment of foods. I held my hand out in the air, allowing the light to touch my skin. I watched it pass over the small wrinkles of my hand, reaching into every crevice. It was a hypnotic sight, teetering on meditative.

My bedroom at my parents' apartment sat on top of Metropolis, offering me an early sunrise and a glimpse into the premature moments of the day. Lights would turn on gradually in the windows beneath me as people started to wake up and begin their day. I'd be perched at the edge of my bed, on top of the world, resting my chin on my hand as I peered below.

I was not one to fear heights.

In fact, I wasn't one to fear many things at all.

"Ignorant," my father called me when I once proudly announced this to him.

I would glance outside upon awakening. The view of the early sunrise would shift my focus from my mind to my surroundings.

From above, the people all looked like fireflies. The world would feel like it was expanding, widening, dilating. I would watch as ageing night collided with the crack of dawn in front of my eyes, an intimate encounter occurring before the breakthrough of first light.

It's a strange feeling to walk through the world knowing that it's ending.

The thought repeated in my mind as I stood on the street waiting for cars to pass.

"Excuse me," a busy-looking man said to no one in particular, as he shoved past a small crowd that had formed on the pavement. He checked the crossing lights before checking the time on his wrist. The sun bounced off the golden metal, and I thought for a moment to compliment him on his watch.

Hey—nice watch.

But then, I envisioned a conversation filled with awkward silences and quickly abandoned the idea.

I crossed my arms.

It was the afternoon, and I'd needed a walk to clear my mind after breakfast. My parents allowed me to move through the city in the form of short strolls but my interactions with the people of Metropolis were mostly limited. Every once in a while, I would be permitted on a *longer* walk so far as I didn't engage with anyone.

Why I couldn't engage with the people of the city, I wasn't sure. I suspected that the status of my family fostered a significant social reputation, one that intimidated the people.

Or maybe, my family just preferred privacy.

A car sped by and brought me back to the crosswalk ahead of me. The sun shone from behind, and the movement from the car passing momentarily rendered me off balance.

I quickly caught myself.

A woman on the other side of the street stepped out prematurely, waving a lacklustre apology to an incoming car that stopped abruptly at her intrusion onto the road.

The car honked at her.

Click.

The light turned green and I was carried through a crowd of people. A soft breeze blew against my bronzed skin, and as I was swarmed by the people of the city, I wondered what they all were thinking. On some level, they were thinking about where they were going or where they would go when their day was over. Maybe they were thinking about what they would eat for lunch.

There was a serious-looking man in a suit walking in my direction. Perhaps he was thinking of the problems that plagued our world. *The end of everything.* He pulled out his phone and scrolled.

He laughed.

He scrolled again.

The crowd carried me onto the sidewalk. *4th and 57th.* I knew the street well. My favourite bookstore was just around the corner. It was a small run-down place offering second-hand novels, one of the few still offering physical books in the city. The people of Metropolis preferred a more convenient option, the ability to transport knowledge as they desired in their pocket. As a result, books were rare, even undesirable.

Sometimes, though, I desired to feel the rough texture of the pages, to touch the tracing of ink as it spilled onto them.

Later that day, I learned that this would be my last encounter with the bookstore for a long time. Perhaps this future discovery had somehow travelled to me earlier in the day, and maybe all that I was experiencing and had ever experienced was just a memory at some point in the future, *relived*.

I shrugged at the jarring possibility.

The store sat on the corner of the street and had a distinct presence of its own. It was an esoteric, velvet-curtained store, embalmed in varying shades of a remarkably noticeable purple yet the people still managed to always walk around it. I had felt a strong impulse to walk in today, a divergence from my short stroll to the coffee shop. I paused. The café was a few streets ahead.

Coffee could wait.

I pushed open the wooden doors of the store and was immediately met with a whiff of incense. It was smoky lavender mixed with notes of sandalwood and jasmine, tinged with a hint of sage. My first step inside was instantly calming, and I was now acutely unaware of the tension I'd been carrying in my shoulders.

Had I been feeling like that the entire day?

There was a woman standing in the corner, leaning against the wall with a pipe in her mouth. She glanced at me. I looked back at her. In the years that I had frequented the bookstore, the woman who ran it had never once looked my way nor offered any conversation. I was beginning to think that perhaps the store was entirely imaginary, and the woman was nothing but a figment of my subconscious process, a nonexistence. The woman let out a puff and gestured towards the back of the store before quickly disappearing behind a glittery, sheer curtain.

I looked around me. The store was empty. Through the windows, I could hear the muted white noise of the street. I weighed my options, gazing into the empty spaces of the store.

Should I follow the woman?

There was a golden singing bowl on a shelf nearby, beside a

deck of cards. I walked over and tapped it with my fingernail. It resounded with a deep frequency that reverberated throughout my body before roaming through the rest of the bookstore. I smiled softly. The sound lingered as it moved through the air, and I looked out the window again at the busy streets. The city would offer me nothing more than my usual stroll, a tiring sameness, a blistering monotony. The torn-up carpet leading me to the back of the store, on the other hand, promised an increasingly attractive prospect of something new, unexpected.

Why not?

I followed the woman through the glittery curtain, my boots leaving slight indents on the velvet carpet as I stepped across the floor. I emerged into a small room that contained strange writings scribbled on the walls. I couldn't quite make out the words until I realised that it was because I had never seen this language before. The woman was seated on the ground. Her hands moved quickly as they arranged a variety of colourful rocks into place on the surface of the low table in front of her.

I quietly took a seat on the ground across from her, clasping my hands together. There was a pertinent feeling of being vividly present in the moment, one that was unfamiliar. I didn't know how I should sit, and I shifted my limbs.

Why was I so uncomfortable?

The woman interrupted my meandering thoughts.

"There are some things you must know today," she announced, pulling out a pile of large cards and shuffling them.

"It's an auspicious time."

The woman brought to my view a small screen that displayed several calculations. I leaned in closer, observing the series of numbers. "I've made sure this time," she said, before putting away the device. "You can't argue with numbers."

She let out a small sigh and set her hands down on the table. On the small surface between us were several little, colourful rocks,

ones I had never seen in Metropolis. *Strange*. The woman must have come from the outside, perhaps at the time my grandfather had permitted a small influx of people into the city to shift perspective and accelerate innovation.

They had, at one point, experienced a stagnant economy, and my grandfather had thought of a unique solution, *opening up the gates*, which had earned him the respect of my great-grandfather who had once been opposed to the idea of letting outsiders into the city.

“You don’t know what they will bring with them,” my great-grandfather had told him.

“We need ideas, don’t we?” my grandfather had replied.

After a few seconds of shuffling, the woman sprawled the cards on the table. The cards fell smoothly into a chaotic mess, and I watched the unfolding intently. The woman closed her eyes and took a breath. She began to draw the cards, one by one, moving with a fluidity that conveyed to me that she was led more strongly by the peripheries of her consciousness than by any deliberate decision-making. There was a free flow to her movements, a rhythm in accordance with something unperceived by the unsuspecting viewer. My eyes moved to the woman’s mouth.

A bright shade of red. I watched as her soft smile suddenly turned into thin, pursed lips. And then, a small frown.

The woman was deep in thought, or lack of thought, or perhaps both. When she had finished, the cards formed an intricate arrangement, buzzing with undercurrents of meaning and significance. As we both looked down at the table, I became aware of a clock ticking on the wall behind me, an unchanging sound that grew remarkable in the present moment for I now felt the passing of time intimately. Together, the cards reminded me of a maze.

They were a series of symbols and numbers splattered across the smooth surface of the table, in no particular ascending or descending order. I gazed at them with blurry vision. And then, I

blinked. The symbols presented provided me with no insight, yet they hummed with importance. The woman opened her eyes, and for a moment, she was quiet. She looked up at me, who had no idea what the cards spelled or what she had seen. She then spoke, blending in with the muted noises of the city just a few feet away.

“A labyrinth awaits your first steps,” she said to me in a hushed whisper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nandita Parmar was born on January 19th, 2001 and is a first-time author. She grew up in Belgium, South Africa, Cambodia, the USA, India and Portugal. She graduated from university with high distinction in 2023 with a BA in Philosophy and is currently based in Vancouver, Canada and Praia, Cape Verde. She's the owner of 333 Publishers, through which she hopes to help authors and artists spread meaningful and important messages to the world.

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