

Nemesis Returns

The sun rose for the third time that day and carried with it the remains of the lands it had previously crossed. The wall of heat passed over everything and left in its wake nothing. Everything that could burn did and vanished as the Earth gathered speed and flung itself sunward. And so, though it would be days before the man-made structures of concrete and steel melted and fell—and still weeks before the gravity of the sun pulled the Earth itself apart, one could argue that the world was already dead.

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The automated robotic welding arm froze after completing its final weld, and then fled back to its preprogrammed home. The Analog Robot lifted the metal form now fastened into its new shape. His back ached from the hours of torturous labor that left him in his current state. Overhead an alarm buzzed signaling 10 o'clock post meridian and the end of the second dayshift, but Analog did not hear it, his mind was filled with other things. A tap on his shoulder brings him back. His co-worker BetaBot, for friend would be an over-statement, pointed at the large atomic digiclock fastened to the wall above all of their heads.

"Its time to go, my friend," said BetaBot smiling and patting him on the shoulder, "I'll get the car."

Analog shunned his thick work gloves and wiped his face leaving more grease than he removed. He made his way past the machines cutting and hammering the raw metal stock and out into the open air and night sky. Not more than a minute passed before BetaBot pulled up, radio blaring, and swung open the passenger door for Analog. They rode together in silence, finally arriving at Analog's apartment complex.

"You could say 'goodbye'," yelled BetaBot through the open window.

Without turning around Analog waved farewell and continued towards his abode. Passing a young girl who was quietly sobbing to herself in the grass he found his door, fumbled for his passkey, and crossed into his home.

Analog pulled a six-pack of libation from his fridge and rooted himself on the couch in front of the vidiscreen, but after only fifteen minutes collected what remained of the drinks and removed himself from the domicile.

Outside he found the same lonely girl, unmoved but still clearly crying, wiping her eyes whilst sitting on the green, landscaped, man-made lawn. Without a word he swung the bottles in front of her whereupon she looked at them and then up at him. He gazed into the hazy night sky and shrugged.

"Thank you," and she took one. She stuttered through the tears and offered, "It's nothing, really. Nothing important. People can never truly be what you hoped for. You know?"

And he nodded for he did know; he simply sat down next to her. They both pulled a sip from their bottles. She, Ariel, talked for a bit, but not about that which had upset her tonight; both of them listening to the quiet evening sounds between

vocalization. In this way an hour passed and Ariel fell back among the grass blades and was immediately asleep. Analog lingered on for a bit thinking of nothing at all, before he too fell back into the Earth's lush flooring.

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In a white room Analog and Ariel stand opposite each other.

Now, both in the center of the room noses only inches apart. They stare into each others eyes. There is a soft *click*, and BetaBot enters the room from a door that did not exist seconds ago. Slowly, a bulb descends from the rafter though there are no rafters above. The single light-bulb glows intensely for a moment then fades to near darkness. Ariel intakes a lung full of air and the bulb begins to shimmer and grow back to full shine, thereafter BetaBot taps Analog on the shoulder.

"It's time to go, my friend." He points the faulty luminous orb hanging from a single strand of wire. He places his hand on Analog's shoulder, "Now is the time, Analog. Time to go."

He disappears, specter like, into the door that does not open and never existed. Now they are together, he and Ariel, face to face. Then, they are on the floor side by side staring through the rafters that hold up a roof that covers no room. They see the stars of the night through the hazy shingles.

"Beautiful."

Once again, the bulb dives into darkness and recovers. The boundary is broken.

The wind gains energy and begins whipping Ariel's long hair about. Analog opens his eyes to trees swaying above his head. He blinks and the sun beats down upon him. The wind rushes about him and he closes his eyes. Yellow turns to black and he opens them. Darkness. The trees shudder in the midnight breeze. Sleep overtakes him once again.

In the white room Ariel holds him. "Tell me I'm not nothingness," she cries to him.

Suddenly, the walls give way and the natural light of the universe surrounds them. The bulb above shines one last time before exploding into shards of glass, light, and hope. Ariel is gone. The white walls collapse. Left standing, Analog is alone with the universe.

"I could love you," he whispers and folds his hands. He opens his eyes.

Like madness, the wind beats around him. Ariel still rests on the grass her eyes flicking in REM sleep. He leans over her and to his surprise her eyes strike open. She sees him and smiles.

"Analog."

He leans to kiss her, but on the horizon the sun rises for the third time today carrying with it the remains of the lands it has previously crossed. The wall of heat passes over everything and leaves in its wake nothing. Everything that can burn does and vanishes.

Time has caught up.

And so, four hours and six minutes after midnight, day broke. The Earth started its day and ended it just minutes later.