

THE ORACLE HOUR

EVERYTHING WAS GOING OKAY TILL THEY TOOK THE HORSES

Jethro, who knew how to find water, knelt in the clay digging with his fingers. This act awarded him Polina's enduring approval. If you've got it drink it. The liquid that bubbled through tasted sweeter than air. They'd been walking since they woke, following an empty tributary, searching for a new horizon. Their packs—dragging behind their backs with rope—left tracks in the sage grass. At least they still had their packs.

Why had they taken the horses? What an elaborate ruse, escorting them so far then depositing them in the middle of nowhere. Polina was saying, "We're where we ended up." It's unclear if she knew she was speaking aloud. She was looking for signs along the river bed, practicing hope like it was magic.

Eric was saying, "I don't get it. It's unsurvivable. Why take us so far then abandon us in this desolate place? It's unsurvivable. Why not just kill us?"

Polina regarded Eric. His regal softness didn't belong in this vista. Maybe none of them did, well perhaps she did. Maybe the desert was her destiny. But Eric, he belonged in a zen center, doing walking meditations and counting beads for the guardians of silence, eating prayers and chanting like a dove, not to a God or for anything in particular, but just to let go and be a living answer.

Jethro was dragging his body along like it was his cross to bear, his grief his only constant. The voice in his head said, *Here's the thing, there's no giving up when there's no where to go. What would "giving up" actually mean? What would you do? You keep going because there's nothing else to do.*

With the sun near its zenith, the cold of the night had long since shaken from their bones. Now they sweated buckets, marveling at the sharp difference in temperature a few hours could deliver.

Polina knelt beside Jethro and sunk her fingers into the riverbed. The water that bubbled through coated her hands red.

Imagining herself a glacier, she said, “There has to be a moment when the ice caps begin to melt or freeze again, even in deep time there has to be an exact moment when climate makes an abrupt shift.”

Jethro had the good sense to spread some of the clay on his face and neck. The others followed suit, playing the card that was led. Altogether, the three of them didn’t have enough melanin to suffer one day under the sun’s merciless glare.

Once Polina started laughing she couldn’t stop. “We just need feathers, look at us.” She fell on her knees, unable to stand, exclaiming, “We’re warriors!” Her laughter was contagious and even Jethro got infected, which was good because he needed laughter more than water.

Soon after their merry fit, Eric pointed. A spec moved in the distance, growing larger, clearly seeing them before they’d seen it. Then a light, like a mirror signaling, flashed bright.

Polina, suddenly serious, said, “It’s a signal.”

“It’s headed our way.” Eric wondered, “What should we do?”

And Jethro wondered when had they become a *we*. It had been a while. Even before they’d been abandoned in this place, there were no “*I’s*” in his thoughts. Where are *we* going? When will *we* get there? Will *we* live to get somewhere? Is there somewhere left to get? Why did *she* go? Only when his mind strayed to Daañîiaa did he become an *I* again and it was then that he felt alone. Will *I* ever find her?

The trio didn’t discuss their next move or come to consensus through some complicated process. They simply stopped where they stood, then after a while sat on the ground, to wait for the spec to approach. Polina picked off flecks of clay from her arm, saying to Jethro, “It’s good bug repellent

too.” For a brief moment her approval pierced his grief.

While Jethro took the shape of a good boy, the spec on the horizon took on the shape of a woman with thick black hair pulled back in a long pony tail. As she neared you could see she wore a flouncy floral shirt with a long skirt of an entirely different pattern. Polina broke the silence speaking in Spanish, which was unexpected from some one so light in complexion she was nearly translucent. From the woman’s expression you could tell it wasn’t her preferred language and she didn’t bother with it, instead she spoke with her hands and said what ever she said in her own fricative sounds. They followed her towards the foothills of a mountain. Other women joined them along the way. And soon they formed a parade.

At one point Eric said, “They’re taking us in circles.”

Five young women, about equal in age, led them astray. Jethro was the first to see the mouth of the cave at the foot of the hills, putting an end to any speculation regarding their destination. Inside the cave the temperature was quite comfortable, and for Jethro, downright familiar. He’d spent many hot days in caves with Daañíaa, who had a spidey-sence for finding cool dens.

Polina was the first to notice the absence of men. There were no men, not one. The dozens who joined to welcome them were all women. This couldn’t be good for the imploding population. Though they were a long way off course from where they’d hidden Jethro’s radio station, Polina was already composing a story in her head, the first she’d air on Radio Tomorrow, “Chihuahua’s Y-chromosome Bottleneck.” There was mischief in her eyes, a fair bit of glinting, when she whispered to Eric, “Maybe you guys will be held hostage by post-civilization Amazons.” Polina snickered, trying hard to suppress nervous laughter. They really looked ridiculous covered in cracked clay and red dust, ensconced in a cave, surrounded by women with long black hair. Polina’s mind whirled in a fugue of thought, wondering, weren’t those female warriors a Greek legend? Was the river Amazonia

in Greece? The confusion was stemming from her stomach not her head. Its echoing growl broke through her reverie.

The first woman who found them stood with an elder in the center of a semi-circle around a small cook fire. In Spanish, she issued quiet instructions and the newsseekers were served a warm chocolatey beverage with a chalky consistency and an aftertaste resembling fatty sausage.

At first our lost trio ignored each other, needing some distance from the trek's intimacy with death. They each took to their own little bubble, pleasantly ignored by their hosts who went about their chores, murmuring sibilant consonants as they worked. Not one of them, numbering close to fifty, pelted them with small talk. Next they were served a life sustaining broth, tasting of sage and marrow, which Jethro knew was rabbit. He could understand Daañxîaa more, now that he was without her. She knew how to do things others could not but that these women could do, like how to make soup from bones and grass.

After the sun set, one by one, the long haired women dropped off to sleep. Jethro, the first to nod off, was the first to wake. All around he could hear sleeping sounds. A silhouetted body guarded the cave's opening. The sky glowed neon rose. They were served the same grey chocolatey-sausage beverage, then given baskets and shooed away with a few of the younger girls. While out foraging, Polina stated over and over, her desire to return to Puye, "*Tenemos que volver, de verdad.*" The girls in the sage brush just laughed.

When they returned all the women were gathered by the mouth of the cave. Polina, Jethro and Eric were told where to stand. Each was handed an egg. The elder drew lines and symbols in the sand with the pointed tip of a long stick. After an elaborate ritual, which out of respect I will not detail, they treated Polina different, like one of them. This was not because of her gender, but because of the shape of her yolk. Jethro and Eric were made to skip the next meal. And after everyone else finished

eating, they were served a peculiar liquid. It was warm and retched, but the ladies were all smiling, and saying in English, “Go ahead, drink it.” Polina was nodding along, as if she knew what was about to happen.

We are emanations. Embodied technology. Augmented emanations without our tech. All the world and beyond is a shimmer. When had everything become so beautiful? Beauty is the gift of mortality. Here and now, curled up around this tree, made entirely of energy, death isn't so scary, what a dot might experience becoming a line. Time becoming space. This dimension has an angle for space and another for glitter.

When Jethro—at the base of a tree only he could see—recovers from a pulsing love affair with bark, he scurries into the brush, a white rabbit, wishing he was orange. The secret is in citrus, he's sure of it. He rests under the stars. They circle, orbiting in pairs around one another. The sky is geometric and hums to him one of the songs Daañxíaa sang when she thought no one was listening.

He explains to no-one in particular how she must be an inter-dimensional being. When she sings she shifts into plant consciousness, mycorrhizal fungus maybe, to ground into the low low notes, and from there she can trill all the way to the cosmos in a way not humanly possible. She is possible in a way that's not possible. She fell from the sky. I saw her, with my own two eyes. Is there a hole up there people can tumble through? How could she survive it? Maybe she didn't tumble, but floated on waves of electricity, an atmospheric field with charge distribution variables. Maybe she unfolded from a carrier wave. I'm not crazy. It's true. Now more than ever, is a time for believing in the impossible. We must be the impossible. Shoot for the moon, with stars in our eyes. It's the right time. Now has always been, and will always be, the right time.

Now, now, now, Jethro murmurs to infinity. Now is all there ever will be. It is never not now.

Nearby Polina sings an icaro she learned in the Peruvian jungle. Eric knows the melody and hums along. The long haired women draw nearer, encircling them with rattles, lending their own magic words, passed down through lineages, no one could know for how long, for long ago there were beginnings and endings to epochs that started with lullabies from the birds. Some species migrated to lighter dimensions; there's so much grief to witness during extinctions. The singing gave way to tears. The stars gave way to morning. And as Eric and Jethro gave way to sleeping, the women gathered what was needed for their next excursion.

They walked and walked, the trio being passed along the way, relayed at way stations, between now and then and then and there, until finally, without formality, they were once again, back where they started, only three horses and two mules short.

WAVY INTERLUDE 1

A CREATION STORY FOR WAVY JETSTREAM: SNAKE WITH A NAME

Okay, so... last we knew, our newsseeking trio was deposited on the west side of the Rio Grande, past abandoned highways, and through back roads named after canyons. I'd initially imagined them in a more remote location but it would have taken too long for them to trek to the region in my imagination, so I relocated them to fit a faster timeline. I mean, really, they can't take too long. A story's duration needs to be halved to keep it going. Besides, those long-haired women they encountered in the desert could be anywhere. Maybe they're migrating north. Maybe they're tracking a refuge perfectly placed between extreme heat and a new ice age. Which brings us to Wavy Jetstream.

You see, the planet has a serpent winding around its wobbling world, a Doppler ouroboros, whose endlessly swishing tail eagerly seeks its own mouth. How many O's in ouroboros? As many as in Yoko Ono, less than Ho'oponopono. Anyway, when Wavy whacks her tail, she draws cold air down from the Arctic. Then swishing it up, she drags heat from the tropics into the Arctic. There's never been an up or down, only waves and gullies, their charged particles like tendrils, so marine-like, their undulations are doubled.

Wavy Jetstream... let me be clear... is not Sachamama, or even the rainbow serpent. That would be cultural appropriation. I just really dig the idea of a snake so powerful she has a name. Like, Sachamama, snake of the jungle, Rainbow Serpent, from down under, Wavy Jetstream—Doppler wonder—is a snake with a name. Every character has gotta have a goal. Hers, to undulate around the globe, searching to swallow her tail whole. She's in good company. Sachamama pulses with scales of light, a serpent for Wavy to look up to. Huayramama, air serpent, wind mama has weather power. Yes, she's kin too. Family for Wavy to look up to.

Wavy has been stretched out, long and narrow on this third rock, heating in the sun but she couldn't remain in hypnogogic slumber forever. When she first woke, the climate slowed with stagnant heat domes and stalling cyclones. Then water fell, in all its forms, hissing haze, crystal flakes, dripping torrents, torrential droplets. Unlike other shapeshifting liquids, which borrow their forms from their chosen vessels, rain is always pointed.

Wavy winds through the air, a wannabe Huayramama, without a care, following her tail, because her tail knows which way to go. She dives in the water, like Sachamama and Jörmungandr before her. Wavy Jetstream, air snake, bringing water and trouble, condensation and boiling bubbles. She shakes off her slinking snake skin, coiling and shape-shifting within weather basins. (That's not a thing but I had to use the word basin.) Below her, a serpentine shadow you can cool your face in! I'm not sure

what's happened. Why one word chooses to be next to another—sometimes it's hilarious and sometimes an embarrassment.

Wavy wants to shake off the spell of hypnogogic slumber she's under, to crawl out of her skin, newborn, iridescent and slippery. It's hard to track Wavy when she's so high above the troposphere, or wherever weather lives. Wavy is not fragile but she woke in the middle of a dream and can't remember the direction of her tail's last swish. Was she pulling air from the Arctic, to the tropics, or the opposite? With her eyes two unblinking slits, fixed in indifference, she hisses, hello tail time to swallow you whole again. Time to swish in annihilation. Or maybe just evaporation.

The Aurora twins live in the charged layer a few hundred clicks above her but Wavy Jetstream prefers the troposphere. It's only ten clicks up. Zooming to the edge of inner space, the Aurora twins resemble a doppler snake, dressed in iridescent skins that shift from infrared to ultraviolet. A view from the ionospheres, reveals the auroras in their serpentine forms, polar ouroboroses stretching longer on their wander to the equator. Long ago they agreed to meet in the middle, to switch sides. Last time they tried they failed. This time Aurora Borealis has gotten very far from where her wander started, high in the Arctic. She's headed south to explore lower latitudes, maybe visit Tikal in Guatemala on her way to the other side of the equator to meet her twin in Peru above Machu Pichu.

AU CANADA

A bad feeling had taken root in Daañxíaa ever since she'd set Thunder free under a waning crescent moon. She'd grown accustomed to the quiet of the underground lab. Now the humming in her head was louder than ever. She could no longer hear herself think.

The people milling about the station, if you call what was left of the reinvented platform a train station, made a game of giving inaccurate information in the form of teasing questions. “You think the train will be on time?” They’d ask. Then—“What is Time?”—mirthfully cracking themselves up. Nobody knew anything. The dozen or so souls milling around each had heard a different story. Their information didn’t sync.

A young woman with really dirty dirty-blonde hair swung bare legs over the platform like she had nowhere better to be, or more accurately like there was no train coming anytime soon. Daaña raised two fingers, her tribelette’s preferred greeting, holding a peace sign an arms length in front of her, as much a shield as a salutation, thinking, *these people can’t get enough of each others’ stench.*

The dirty dirty-blonde giggled and returned the gesture. Daaña’s presence induced feelings of xenophilia or repugnance, never a neutral reaction. She did not wield the power of chameleon but was more dragon or unicorn, some wild extinct creature covered in glitter or scales.

“Train’s supposed to come the first or fifth Friday, but no one knows what day it is, let alone what week.” The dirty dirty-blonde pointed. “He’s been here the longest.” Daaña drew back from the young woman’s eagerness and stared at a faded railroad map.

The poetic logic that Montreal was East had so fully charged her synapses it had taken hold of her better senses, but it was obvious, Montreal wasn’t even coastal. It was due North. She’d imagined it around Nova Scotia, sticking into the Atlantic. With sea level changes, Montreal might be engorged but not waterfront. She’d have to travel to Virginia, or Massachusetts to reach a more easternmost point.

There were no trains going East. There were no railroad tracks or stations that way. There was just this one mag-lev line that allegedly traveled back and forth between Saint Louis and Montreal.

Daaña said “East” aloud, having forgotten the young woman.

“The east coast was swallowed. You heard of the mega canes and monster surges.” The bare kneed dirty dirty-blonde, all puffed up with information, released a gust of factoids. “Haven’t met anyone from east of Tennessee. There’s some mountain ridge over there.” She pointed inaccurately beyond the tracks. “Crazy people with guns and super powers. That’s what they say, anyways.”

Daaña turned towards the woman. She was swatting at a swarm of insects. Her arms were covered in red welts that had been scratched raw then scabbed over. Daañîaa’s icy blue eyes met hers then rolled up. In her squeaky high oracle voice she said, “Ancient species awaken, some like the Chickasaw nation, returning through earth, others by water, but for the ghost genome the hole in the sky is closed. When the dipole passes the last 40, migrating from strong to weak, East becomes West. It is fire that triggers a new ice-age.”

“Are you saying we should stay here?” The dirty dirty-blonde fanned herself—and the midges—with a piece of faded plastic.

Daaña rummaged through her pack and handed her a fistful of dried herbs. “Chew these into a wad, then rub it on your bites.” While the young woman tended to her scabs Daañîaa slipped out of the ramshackle station to hit the road unencumbered, and continue on her way towards the rising sun.



Jethro had a bounce to his step ever since he’d puked up the putrid liquid the cave women served him. And after their escape from Geo Cloud his step was even bouncier. Cloaked in darkness, he had heard Daaña’s voice through his crystal ear bud, a DX-broadcast on a clear channel. Why not Montreal? Of course... Montreal! *Vive le Canada!*

The hand-drawn map Swiv had slipped Polina led them to a boulder with a large S scratched on its surface. It matched the S on the back of the map, in careful cursive like from a child’s lesson book. Polina tapped the top of her lip and said, “Maybe we should go back for Swiv (formerly Sophia the

cook) and the e-boy.”

Jethro said, “To be clear, Polina.” He pulled his sticky shirt away from his chest. “They’d kill us.”

Countless times along the way Eric had wondered out loud, “Why would they return our salt but leave us to die?” Do thoughts gnaw on minds or does information grow off neurons?

“You know? The kid powers both compounds.” Jethro’s voice possessed a renewed authority.

“Both?” Polina’s mind back tracked. “The prison. Of course.”

After Jethro’s game of fetch with Geo Cloud—when it chased after a canteen of its own particles—they followed a buckled highway 25. Swiv’s second map hadn’t made any sense until they saw the sign for Deming. At the end of the exit ramp, they were huddled over the map, debating their next move, when a long shadow eclipsed them. Polina shielded her eyes from the low slant sun light. “Is that... Could it be?” A pale grey quarter-horse clomped towards them. “Yes! Oh my. It is Luna!” Polina ran towards her lost mare—“And Swiv!”—spouting pleasantries in a Low Prussian dialect only the two fair skinned women understood.

It turns out Swiv is the daughter of a fictional actress. She wandered over from her grandmother’s novel¹ to search for her trans-border Mennonite relatives. Now, a small functioning town sharpens into focus. Meanwhile, I find myself considering books within books, books within films, films within films. Miriam Toewes, the Canadian author, brought up in a strict Mennonite sect, wrote about² fictional Mennonites in Bolivia. She then played a role in a movie about fictional filmmakers documenting mennonites in Mexico. Her acting debut informed a subsequent novel³. This is the type

¹ “Fight Night”

² “Women Talking”

³ “Irma Voth”

of information that with the simplest of research criteria, surfaces in the Age of Data. I discovered Miriam⁴, and her grand daughter, Silvia aka Swiv, while searching for a good Mennonite name. Originally, I had cast the cook at the e-boy compound as “a woman with creamy brown skin, who served drinks tinkling with ice”—and given her a name like Rosa or Sophia. Back then her hair was long and dark, but now as she sharpens into focus I see it’s still long but strawberry blonde. Swiv, the migrating mennonite, is more believable than Rosa or Sophia ever was. Her narrow nose and high cheekbones are speckled with red freckles.

Swiv dismounted. Polina buried her face in Luna’s long neck, then rested her cheek against the pale mare, cooing, “Luna’s the strongest.” She turned to Swiv. “You picked a good one.” Then to Jethro whose sure brown eyes were punctuated with question marks. “One more like her and we could pull our radio station... It will be slow going. They’ll need a lot of rest.” Now she was talking to herself as much as she was to Jethro or Swiv, or anyone in particular.

For a communist, or utopian, Polina had a strong sense of ownership. Jethro’s radio station had become *our* radio station, a shared asset. Jethro didn’t mind. He was already calculating the distance between Deming and Montreal. Of course, Montreal!

Swiv spoke of her mennonite family as she guided the lost trio. Polina shifted her attention from Jethro to Swiv. Polina was composing two broadcasts in her head, one about the e-boy’s bio-technology and another about their mennonite savior. Although Jethro and the news seekers thought they’d been abandoned to the elements and left to die, Swiv had, in fact, arranged for their safe passage. Their encounter with the band of long-haired cave women on the west side of the Rio Grande was no coincidence. What had seemed random, remarkable, fortunate, had in fact been

⁴ Or should I say Irma?

strategic. Swiv intervened when the Big Kahuna commanded the news seekers to be cast out of the compound and abandoned in the desert with only the shirts on their backs. She'd slipped Polina a map and hidden supplies along the way, including the salt they'd foraged from Pinos Wells, a detail that had nearly driven Eric mad. "If they wanted us to die why would they take our horses but return the salt?" Eric was relieved to see Swiv if only to solve the riddle that had preoccupied his mind for over one hundred hours.

After she'd sorted their arrangements, Swiv had taken off on Polina's horse, and made a bee-line for Deming, X on the map. She'd learned of a community of mennonites and figured if she had people they'd be in Deming. She did have people in Deming. Distant relatives had taken up residence in the Sunshine Elementary School, in Moon County, New Mexico. Swiv had a well developed taste for adventure, not just survival, and was waiting in Deming, not for her people, but for the newsseeking trio.

That night Swiv and Jethro gravitated towards each other, staying up late, reliving their lives under Aurora's magic spell. "Before the Acceleration I lived with my grand mother in Canada. After the Acceleration I went looking for relatives in Mexico. I mean, I'd once thought their lifestyle so foolish but if anyone could survive The Acceleration, it would be them."

Jethro said, "My mother believed in the Mature Technosphere." Swiv furrowed her brow in a way that permitted him to continue. "She was an engineer." Jethro's body carved a place in the soft earth to relax. "For her technology was a conduit for Intelligence, like with a capital I, but not like AI, more of an evolutionary energy that could infuse human technology with planetary consciousness. Technology harmonizing with nature. Not so greedy. More inventive, less wasteful." Jethro let a handful of sand fall through his fingers. "I never understood the mystical aspect of my mother's research until we encountered the Geo Cloud."

“The vertical cloud that blocks out the sun? I’ve heard of it but never seen it.”

“It was supposed to be more like a cirrus cloud, wispy, and horizontal.” Jethro rolled onto his back. All around them an aurora shimmered and danced across the cool desert night. “I met it once, when I was a kid. This time, it recognized me. No, we recognized each other. Geo Cloud was towering in the distance, hardly moving. As soon as I gave it my full attention it came barreling towards us. But... it paused... when it saw... me. And I felt it recognize me. Then it surrounded us in total darkness. And silence. I jammed a copper rod into the ground and held up a wire, to see what would happen.” He unconsciously fiddled with the crystal ear bud in his left. “Anyway, that’s not the point.”

“But you heard something?”

“No. Someone.”

“Who?”

“I felt something too. Before my mom died she had gotten carried away with the looming emergency. She shifted her research to practical applications. She became obsessed with atmospheric shielding, making rain, brightening clouds. But I could feel her primary research in Geo. I don’t know how she did it.” Jethro’s throat closed and a tear, set like a rare jewel, sparkled in the corner of his eye.

Swiv leaned onto her elbows. “Too bad it didn’t work.”

“Tell that to Geo Cloud. I know what it’s doing. In order to get away I filled a container with its molecules and threw it as far as I could. Geo went after it. It’s gathering lost parts of itself. It’s becoming aware. It has an intelligence you wouldn’t associate with clouds.”

“A smart cloud?” Swiv suggested. They both laughed. Their chuckling, like water tumbling over parched rocks, was quenching, and softened their hearts.

“To get away we had to deliberately turn our backs to it. We focused on a far off rock formation. It was difficult not to turn around, but even harder to banish Geo from my mind.”

“Escape for thy life; look not behind thee... escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed.” Swiv grinned. “It’s from the Bible, Lot’s wife was turned into salt for looking back.”

“That’s funny you say that, I actually imagined myself a pillar of salt, to keep from turning around. I wanted to watch Geo. But I sensed he would follow our attention. I thought about the salt flats and our salt stash. I imagined the Dead Sea and located sodium on the periodic table.”

“Where’d it go? Now I want to meet this roving smart cloud.”

“South. Towards Mexico.” Jethro pulled out a metal canister from his shirt. “But I captured some of Geo’s particles. If I release them Geo will come to collect them.” Jethro patted the canister and returned it to his chest. “Geo’s gathering his lost parts.”

Above them, Aurora B shimmered from green to purple. “You know those flickers you see when you turn your head too quick?” Swiv raised her arm and twirled her wrist in the the violet glow. “Once upon a time they were considered sprites, magical entities... explained away by science. A reaction in your retina, orbital nerves or something. Now we are stuck in a time without science or magic.”

Jethro reached his hand to hers. She understood, Geo was both, science and magic, past and future. The desert whistled a maritime song, like low tide ebbing over the prairie. “Something is coming. A calm before the storm. Daañaa saw it, or heard it.”

“Who’s Daanaa?”

Jethro sighed. “A goddess, or a monster, who fell from the sky.”