

A Letter for the End of the World

Pastors are always the optimistic ones; they say it's a test of our faith, and even if the world were to be submerged in catastrophe, it is God's will, so why fight it? The broadcast comes through the receiver with the sound of fizzing soda, and just like the drink, it is sweet, albeit artificial. As I flip the channel, the screen's pixels crackle angrily, before rearranging into the face of some vaguely familiar newsperson. Her face is folded clay, with creases between the eyes that punctuate her strained expression. Through the static and her tear-scarred voice, she tells the world to go embrace their loved ones before the atom bombs come down.

My thoughts are racing so quickly that my body parses in its response. Emotions envelop my physical state in an earthquake of rasping breaths and a pounding in my chest. I can't think straight—I can't think at all—there are so many things I haven't done, and who to do them with? I will die alone at the feet of my own isolationist habits! Where's God when the world's getting way too violent? The panic in my core morphs into a melancholy weight the longer I contemplate the situation over the television screen. A small graphic at the edge of the visual is counting down, with a little less than two hours left. The anchor's mascara is smudging as she explains,

“Atom bombs are expected to drop on all major cities, experts say that the fallout will be incompatible with life...”

In an attempt for a last bit of pleasure, I look to the familiar Seattle skyline, with the summit of the highest towers just barely brushing the sun's horizon, as if in a last futile attempt to stop time and prevent the advancement of the end. I wish my mother were here. Despite the circumstances, the sunset looks magnificent, with fuzzy oranges and yellows melting together, reminiscent of a watercolor painting. Mother loved painting. Though she may be long gone, in some dust-covered part of my memory, I know that I have one last chance to be with her.

I sit in the window seat facing North to Seattle, where the sun is setting and the bomb is expected to drop. With trembling hands, I hold the shoebox labeled "For Phoebe" in her italic handwriting. It is the one item from her will that I had not mustered the courage to inspect yet. When I open the lid, I am greeted by a polaroid of my mother and I in her Bellevue apartment. Both of our faces are illuminated by the sliced squares of golden sunlight coming through the windows. Her shallow-set eye ridges and cheekbones are contoured softly by the light, and through the blur of the photograph, her dark irises are warm and welcoming. I am a small blob of baby fat swaddled in a canary yellow blanket, held close to her chest. At the bottom of the photo is the jarring caption: "Love you till the end of the earth"

As the final hour draws near, I sift through the pile of photographs, letters, and paintings. The more I look through, the more I remember that I am an image of my mother. All of her photos are a monument of my features; her smile perked on either side like mine, her face is defined by soft and welcoming slopes. The queue of letters is

briefly interrupted by an interim of magnificent watercolor portraits of relatives long past, and illustrations of picturesque views from the apartment. Even her soup recipe written on a notecard is an exact copy of the way I made the dish earlier today. With the memory, I catch an evanescent whiff of beef broth and celery. After reading each minutiae of information, I slip it out of the windowsill, and watch the papers float into the courtyard. They look like white doves.

Intermittently, I glance at the television to see the expected time of impact, and pace the reducing pile of memories to the television anchor's raspy voice counting down:

Twenty minutes...

Ten minutes...

Five minutes...

Finally, I am at the last memory at the bottom of the pile. It is a letter, handwritten by mother in her signature font. With each progressing line, a lump swells in my chest and tears stream down my neck to dot the empty box. A weight feels lifted off my shoulders and I smile for the first time in a long while, and the last time in forever. As I look up from the letter and out to the city, a brilliant orange light fills my vision like watercolor pigment on wet paper.