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The Father, The Sun, and The Seeker

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Fifteen tons of metallic colored steel, gleaming in crimson streaks from the fading sun, hurled itself down the Indian desert highway like an irreverent asteroid ripping through the cosmos. Noise from the laboring machine clanked and rattled beneath Phillip's faux-suede covered plastic seat, but he sat wholly unbothered as he surrendered to the thought that this was all somehow deserved. Phillip embraced the bus's freeness, its unnerving will to go, and reveled in this sensation. He did not know what he wanted, but he wanted to go.

Phillip placed his head up against the window and searched for an unknown something through the jaundice-afflicted plexiglass. The plains that surrounded this predestined concrete path lay so flat that it looked almost as if the entirety of the environment were a one-dimensional depiction of itself and, if you wanted to, you could cross the entire desert in one step. And yet, as each new strand of terrain presented itself, one could not help but feel you'd already passed that *exact* rock-formation just minutes ago, so then, one further began to ponder whether or not you had moved at all. Phillip grappled with this cosmic paradox but decided that this was his mind's roundabout way of trying to address his own existential issue—the one he suffocated each time it reared its head in his mind's eye.

In an attempt to distract himself from the incessant fire that burned inside of him, Phillip focused on the earth's idiosyncrasies that lay smoldering under the sun's dying glow. Along the tropic zones during the late summertime, this unforgiving orb hung more like the last leaf on an autumn tree—ready to fall at any moment—rather than some celestial object passively floating some 92 million miles away. Phillip stared intently at the ground, deciphering its true hue, listening to the words that it spoke, and feeling the suffering it endured. To look at this ground was to look at Sisyphus himself, trudging the boulder of his existence to the mountaintops, only to start over once again as the sun rises.

Though the harshest rays had somewhat softened, with a keen eye, one could still detect the ground bemoaning the day's strife, which was only made visible by the waves of quivering heat that emanated towards the sky. At first glance, the entire barren landscape appeared to be one monochromatic color of burnt clay, having acquiesced to its environment long ago. However, at the corner of Phillip's peripheral, he noticed small appreciations in the land: no larger than the size of mango seeds, these stones stood magnificently shining in a carmine sheen, defiantly perspiring in their eternal dance of resistance. Phillip surveyed the whole of the earth before him; the charred remains of what once was, the silent-hollers from the dead-ground, the struggling resilience of the red rocks, and thought that he too was like the ground.

Instilled with a righteous furor, Phillip took out his notebook and wrote a poem:

“For The Sun”

*I say July is the cruelest month, for
what Life can spring from a dried-up well?
The unrelenting ravi¹ desiccates the souls
of those buried below, preserving them
in their immaculate misery. Momentarily,
I stand atop, vigilantly keeping watch,
so that I may not wither away and become a part
Of this eternal play.*

After Phillip finished writing the last word, he glanced up from his notebook and noticed a dark pall of clouds accumulating overhead, which obscured the sun’s stealthy getaway and bestowed a thorny halo on the twilight sky. The terrain had put on its evening cloak, and Phillip felt comfortable in its fit—as if it had concealed him from existence and all of its unwanted cohorts.

In the waning minutes of the day, the bus joggled to a screeching halt in front of a shanty-styled tea stand. The driver motioned '5 minutes' by thrusting his palm towards the passengers. Perhaps the rest were spellbound, but only a few, including Phillip, wearily staggered outside. He patted both of his breast pockets, looking for a cigarette, but quickly realized he'd left them in his bag. Phillip sighed, but before he could take a step toward the bus, a cigarette appeared before his eyes, accompanied by the enigmatic grin of an old, slender, and spectacled face. Like he'd bummed a thousand smokes from this man before, Phillip took the cancer-stick with a feeling of easy automation. The Samaritan proceeded to light Phillip’s cigarette in that smooth and effortless way that can only come from an old man’s shaking hands.

Phillip wanted to return the favor, so he asked, "Can I buy you a tea?"

Without really responding, the old man gave a half-shrug, as if only open to the idea if it pleased Phillip. It dawned on him that this man might not speak English, so he walked over to the bubbling cauldron of frothy milk and ordered two chai’s. Phillip laid the coins on the counter, reached over the huffing pot, taking the two paper cups by the rim, and walked over to the old man.

Phillip handed the tea over and said, "Be careful, it's hot," only to remember he was speaking an alien language.

¹ Hindi for sun, or sunshine

However, as if telepathically rebuking his assumption, the man stated in a soft and unidentifiable accent, "Much obliged, young man."

Half-shocked but further intrigued, Phillip took a seat next to the man and stretched out his hand, "Phillip, and say, thanks for the cigarette."

The man grabbed his hand with an unexpected youthful ardor and said, "Most people call me Professor. Are you a student? You look like a student."

Phillip gave a wry sort of smile and sighed, "I was, but not anymore...I need to figure things out..." His voice trailed off into the oncoming vacuum left by a passing freighter truck.

The Professor began to eye Phillip and then asked, "Do you think just because I am a professor, I have ceased to be a student? Do you think just because I no longer teach at a university, I have ceased to be a teacher?"

Phillip took a hurried drag from his cigarette. He replied, "I suppose you are right, and I get the whole, 'When you stop learning you start dying' thing, but I've spent the past few years devouring all kinds of philosophies, theologies, political treatises, literary classics, and still I have found no practical meaning in any of it. How am I supposed to learn, or rather what is the point of knowledge, if it is all temporary and will die anyway? If *I* will die anyway?"

The old man expressed a pitied and somewhat pained look as if he knew and experienced the same suffering Phillip was going through. Before the Professor's lips parted to speak, the driver shot his head out of the bus door and aggressively pointed to his watch. As if disturbed that somebody would interrupt this sacred dialectic, the Professor shot a look at the driver and willed the intruder away merely with the authority of his stern eyes.

The Professor proceeded, "A long time ago, longer than I'm willing to admit, I left my home to travel to Germany. I was a curious and ambitious student, a seeker of the Truth, like you. I was so tired of all these mystical, esoteric, Oriental philosophies. I thought the answers to my questions *must* lie in the hallowed institutions that produced the enlightened minds of Heidegger, Arendt, and Kant. My story might seem like the opposite of yours, but we mirror each other, you see."

The old man said these last few words as if laughing at a joke that only he was privy to.

The Professor took a deep drag of his cigarette and continued, "There were two phrases, but more really concepts that I learned while abroad. Maybe you will find them useful, maybe not. The first is a term called *Mangelwesen*, which essentially says, humans are deficient creatures who are ill-equipped to handle the challenges and stresses of their environment. And I've found this to be true: though some are good at hiding it, the stresses and anxieties of society are gnawing away at people's insides. We have become so self-absorbed, ironically, we have

forgotten to care for and cultivate our true selves and our *levensperspectief*, the thing that makes our lives **worth** living."

With a certain quickness, Phillip asked, "Well, what makes your life worth living? What is your *levensperspectief*?"

The Professor gave Phillip a grin and said, "It took me many years, but I discovered teaching to be the thing that gave meaning to my existence. The greatest gift any individual can give to another is that of Life: illuminating that which was once dark, giving air to what was once suffocated, and quenching the thirst of what was once parched. Make sure to keep this in mind: one should not simply espouse their philosophies, but embody them through their action."

Before Phillip could respond, the Professor flicked his cigarette and said, "Go on without me, I've got to use the washroom."

He nodded his head at the old Professor and walked toward the bus. Upon Phillip's approach, the bus driver shoved the keys into the ignition and woke the slumbering steel beast. As the process of internal combustion slowly worked its magic on reviving the machine's heaving heart, Phillip noticed that only the left headlight lit up while the right one flickered a few times and then completely vanished.

Before Phillip even had a chance to take his seat, the driver already shifted into the first gear. Concerned that the old man would get left behind, Phillip stood up and shouted for the bus to stop, only to once again realize he was futilely speaking a foreign language into an earless void. Everyone on the bus gave Phillip a brief look of absurdity and proceeded to do whatever it was they were doing. A sense of helplessness settled over Phillip. He stared out the rear window as the bus began to speed up, but the professor seemed to have disappeared amongst the dust. Whether the man was left behind or reached his destination, Phillip did not know, but he muttered to himself, "Wisdom has now left this bus."

With night now fully shrouding the plains in its darkness, Phillip's eyelids grew heavy. As his mind wandered to that place, which is neither here nor there, the Professor's words came dancing by: *The greatest gift any individual can give to another is that of Life*. Phillip's consciousness unconsciously waltzed with these words, not trying to rationalize their meaning but merely understand their nature and figure out how they existed in relation to his own life.

Color, sound, memory, and sensation all began to collapse on themselves; undecipherable images and strange utterances melded together, as joy and sorrow walked along hand-in-hand ...

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CRACK. The bus halted to a sudden stop, and Phillip's head jolted forward, hitting the seat in front of him. Phillip groggily rubbed his hands across his face and fingered around his newly acquired abrasion. He poked his head down the aisle and noticed only a handful of people had stood up, while the rest were still in a deep, wholesome, and ignorant slumber. Phillip attempted to stand, but his head began to spin, and he abruptly came crashing back down onto his seat. Frustrated with his current state, Phillip took a deep breath and carefully tried to find his

footing and regain his composure, but could not shake this odd feeling that he was somehow not in his own body. Almost as if he had not quite woken from his sleep, the reality around him began to take on a dream-like quality: the Absurd became the pre-eminent force, while all social paradigms and so-called 'laws of man' fell to the wayside.

When Phillip reached the front of the bus, he looked through the driver's window and saw a scene that had the distinct quality of appearing both theatrically manufactured yet undoubtedly real. The one working headlight illuminated two bodies that laid still on the ground. Initially, Phillip stood in a state of petrification, mirroring the scene before him. The few people who ventured outside wearily looked at the bloodied men and stepped back. The driver of the bus seemed to have skipped out.

Phillip cursed the driver for not being there, and he cursed the professor for leaving, and he cursed himself for being such a damn coward. Every fiber, sinew, tendon, muscle, and bone within Phillip's frame was fettered in iron chains: he knew he could not escape, but neither could he continue to just watch. Once again, the professor's words came musing by like a primordial mantra, which Phillip always knew but never quite grasped until this moment:

One should not simply espouse their philosophies but embody them through their action.

Phillip stepped down the stairs and walked outside. The smell of wet iron and diesel filled the air. He stood before the men who were lying motionless on the ground. Engulfed in fear, anger, and despair, Phillip began to scream at God, the sun, his father, and anyone else who would listen. He began to shout the only word he knew in Hindi at the crowd, “**PANNI! PANNI! PANNI!**” but yet again, was presented with stares from the Absurd.

Amid Phillip's hysteric screaming, a little girl, no older than 7 or 8, stepped down from off the bus and tightly grasped a 2-liter water bottle that seemed as large as her small frame. The little girl did not look at the men sprawled out across the floor, nor the spectators who watched her with interest, but headed directly over to Phillip, handed him the water bottle, and simply said, “Panni.”

Phillip felt rejuvenated as if this little girl struck her staff on the ground and brought water to this barren land. He smiled at the little girl, and she gave a sheepish grin then scampered back to her pleasant world of dreams.

Phillip turned his attention to the man who was lying closest to him. He splashed water on one of the men's dusty, crimson-sheened faces, and he reacted instantly. The man's eyes flickered for a brief moment, and he attempted to say something but could only open his mouth enough to receive a sip of water. Phillip placed a cap full of water to the man's lips so as not to drown him in Life. However, as he was doing this, he noticed a gash on the man's left temple, which had begun to flow free. Equipped with the knowledge of two summers of lifeguard training at the YWCA, and having watched nearly every episode of the show *House* with his mother, Phillip knew that he had to stop this man from bleeding out.

He stood up and grabbed a dingy but still vibrant bandanna from his pocket. Phillip eyed the piece of cloth intently: it was the only possession of his fathers that he owned and the only tangible memory of his existence. His father had never given him a birthday or Christmas present, so when Phillip left for India after the funeral, he dug out the bandana from a pile of his father's things. The memories of him working on his Shelby GT with the oil-stained bandana tied around his head flooded Phillip's mind.

Before another bitter-nostalgic thought crossed his head, Phillip decided to tear the bandana into two-pieces. He gently lifted the man's head and bounded the wound with a gentle but firm knot to bring the two separated slices of flesh together: Phillip was only semi-successful. The man winced in pain at this but seemed to regain consciousness.

Phillip hurried over to the other man and repeated the same motion of splashing water on his face. The man shot up, but his eyes told Phillip that he had just seen Death. Almost the same instant that he was revived, the man collapsed back down to the ground and lay slumped on the floor. Phillip placed his index and middle fingers on the vein of his wrist. The pulse thumped faintly. He placed a cap full of water to the man's lips, but it merely dribbled down to his chin and pooled upon his now still chest. Phillip wiped the sweat and dried tears from the man's face with the bandanna and feverishly whispered to him, or perhaps his father, or maybe himself, "You cannot die. You cannot die. You cannot die...."

In the distance, an ambulance wailed down the street.

