

Rules After Sunset by Emma Scrivens

Every night, the sun eases itself across the sky and nestles into the jagged, impossible purple mountains at exactly 9:34 p.m. Nobody knows why. Some things, nobody has time to question. Every night, at 9:34 p.m., the sun takes its leave and plunges the world into an inky black, and an entire village disappears from the face of the earth. Not a soul out in the streets. Not a sound under the stars. No sunset has ever been enjoyed here. Not one.

At 7 p.m., the townspeople bustle about energetically. Loquacity is of the utmost importance. Sunrises are much less predictable than sunsets; it could be hours before you speak again. Errands are run, children push little trikes and scooters around the town square, and fish tossers in the public markets shout the daily deals. That's our first o'clock rule. Continue on as usual while the sky is light. Enjoy the protective glare of the sun. Soak it into your skin. At 7 o'clock, we are tasked with the living of a normal life. A safe life. A willingly ignorant life.

At 8 p.m., restaurants close as the sun begins to cast long shadows on the prickling grass. Final touches are long past completed on architectural projects, and by official decree, all employees must be sent home immediately. Failing to do so could result in public discipline, but nothing of the sort has happened here in years. Mothers call their children in from the streets, and the children trip over themselves to obey. Our second rule. Obey those that keep us safe.

At 9 p.m., the feeble rays of a dying sun bend the light of the fading day. The mountains stand, stark and powerful, against the wind and atmosphere. The sky burns red and orange, flickering like the flames of a patiently waiting afterlife, reflecting the ghosts of our punished ancestors. Each swirling cloud, each gust of dust and ash reminds us of the curse that will follow us to the grave. Still. The wild, oft occurring daydream of hiking to the tallest peak, leaning back against its ancient stone, and watching the sun sink into the hidden ocean behind the mountain range is tempting. Almost tempting enough to indulge.

But no. It is not to be. Only the most ornery and daring of individuals can be found outside of their homes at this time. Many will be cited. Repeat offenders find themselves locked in a cell long before the sun even begins to set. It's less of a punishment than insurance against recklessness. A locked cell sounds nice about this time. There are many repeat offenders. Sun patrols only stay out for an extra fifteen minutes. Their safety has to overrule the idiocy of others at some point or another. Our third rule. Be in your home. Lock your doors.

At 9:30 p.m., mothers and fathers hurry to ensure every window in the house is locked. They usher small children into their shared soundproof bed chambers. The older children have been tucked into bed an hour ago, graduated from the soundproof chambers, their hands gripping tightly the blanket shared with at least one other child. For those unmarried, divorced, widowed, orphaned, or childless, community homes provide safe lodging until independence through dependents can be regained. Our fourth rule. Nobody sleeps alone.

At 9:34 p.m., not a single light remains. Pitch black silhouettes sit etched against the inky black of the sky, casting shadows on indigo grass that reflect the emptiness of a starless sky. My kin cower in their beds, curtains drawn and shutters slammed. We shake and we cower under the sheets, but we try to act unbothered. We speak in morse code, cuddle pets that have long since had their vocal chords snipped away, and fight with those we share blankets with for warmth in the deafening silence. We pray that not a single whisper of an utterance of a sound is made, anywhere in the village. Our fifth rule. When the sun inevitably sets, we drown in silence. Nobody makes a sound. No matter how many sickly stench fill the air, or fences we hear crushed, or howls are heard in the everpresent wind.

When the sun finally rises over the mountains, the town is in disrepair. The architects work quickly, and the markets are open within the quarter hour. Villagers farm and weave and sell and purchase, painfully aware that any day could be their last. I think that is our final rule. Nothing, ever, is wrong.

We have rules. After all, who knows what lurks out there in the darkness? Nobody has ever told us. Nobody knows why. Some things, nobody dares to question.