

Head in the Cloud

The setting sun plays with the colors in the sky, illuminating the desert and disturbing the stillness surrounding the empty parking lot. I turn on my overhead light. The Cloud illuminates the sky, but not enough for me to see my book. The lack of lights in the parking lot and outside the transfer facility highlights the abandonment of this world. They didn't expect anyone to want to return home. Not really. The purples and greens pulse through the sky as if the northern lights lost their way, the only way any human would end up here.

Accepting that my impending headache cannot be held back any longer, I sit back, admitting defeat.

Penelope should be here any minute. Assuming security doesn't give her any problems, which is a big ask. It's going to be a pain to bring anything back with her after her visit to the Cloud. Of course, she's going to do it anyway.

"Why do you think I'm going?" she asked me when I pointed out the inconvenience of traveling to the digital. It's even worse on the way back. Leaving your body and uploading an exact replica of your brain into the sky is bad enough. To turn around and put yourself into

another body is just exhausting to consider. Trusting technology to sort your mind out in the translation is complete insanity.

“I don’t know. I assumed you were bored.” Bored with this world. Or with me. Why else would it be worth the risk?

She stared at me for two solid beats. “I’m not bored. I’m curious. There’s a giant Cloud in the sky.” Both hands were pointed toward the massive Cloud in the sky above us, as if I had missed this massive shift in society. “It’s interesting.”

“I know it is!” I had said. I didn’t find it interesting. I still don’t.

It’s not real. I mean, I know they all believe that’s where they are, all their synapses intermingling in the new-world-web. There is something to be said for your reality being what you believe it to be, but it just seems like they have decided to dream professionally. It’s like that thing people used to ask - if a tree falls in the woods and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Thinking about doing something isn’t the same as doing it. What counts as my action? The whole thing is odd. And unnerving. I want no part of it.

Nothing against technology. I had social media accounts like facebook, hell, I had an account when it was The Facebook. But when it’s a requirement to have an account to be in the same species as everyone else, to continue to be a part of society, I’m out. How can the Cloud be any different from a giant chatroom? We are all supposed to toss our souls into this bowl and trust everything is going to work out ok, that we will be the same people? No way. Camping is fine as long as I get to continue to be myself. Human.

It’s weird. Thinking back now, about how I was ready to go along with everyone else, without a thought. Transfer. Off into the new world, but did I want to go? When I met Penelope, I hadn’t set up my account yet, but I intended to. It wasn’t about my body. I probably would’ve

recycled, even though the thought of handing over my body for others to borrow is now unsettling. Maybe I would have been okay with an upgrade.

My eyes look my face over in the rearview mirror, not finding anything remarkable. In either direction. I'm not in good shape or anything. It was never really a priority. Would they have even kept my body? It wouldn't be chosen for any marathons or scaling any mountains. Transferring would most likely give me the illusion of health and physicality. All good reasons for me to transfer. Yet, here I am waiting in the car, unsure of what I am waiting for.

There is nothing to do while I wait. Static. No radio, internet, anything. The entire world is now on airplane mode. A CD or cassette tape would still work, but there isn't anything better than silence right now. It washes over me, diluting my thoughts, my doubts. If only it could weaken this relentless headache.

How can everyone could be so on board with this whole thing? I mean, yeah, there are a lot of pros, but they are all theoretical. No one can know what they are walking into before they go. Like, if the system was hacked, wouldn't everyone die? Are you really you after coming back? I guess the environment was a big factor for the move. Before the transfer, there were estimates that the Earth would rebound the equivalent of the last 500 years in a matter of decades. Once society moved to the Cloud, there's no undoing it. I had given all of this no thought before I met Penelope.

We had been at an end-of-the-world party. They were all the rage the month before the transfer. Featured, were people hooking up, crying, processing the weird emotions that came with fundamental changes to the world as we know it. Some took the time to tell a few lucky individuals off.

Not much different than usual parties, but there was a finality that hung in the air.

I had been watching the chaos from the bar, avoiding a couple when Penelope sat down next to me. Not in an attempt to get my attention. She didn't even see me. That was because she was too busy avoiding the guy tight on her heels.

"How can you not be going? Everyone is going," he said.

"Not me." She said. They appeared to be in a fight. I didn't offer to help and wasn't sure what I would have done to help.

"You have to." He looked hurt, as if she had broken his spirit but left his loyalty to popular belief intact.

"Not true." She said it simply, presenting herself, sitting at the bar, as exhibit A.

After failing to argue his case, he settled his eyes on her.

"Well, you just don't have any fucks to give, do you?"

"I have plenty of fucks, Paul, but I'm all out of wrapping paper," she had said, dismissing him from the discussion, and based on the context, their relationship.

"You're going to stay here. Alone." Paul wasn't done. Or didn't take hints well.

"I'm staying too." I announced, before realizing it. They were both surprised at my interjection and possibly my existence. I had surprised myself. His wide, angry eyes were trained on me now. She locked arms with me, prompting his eyes to shift back to her.

"And we have some place to be," she told him, standing to leave. I stood, too. Either out of solidarity or because I didn't want my arm to go all awkward, diminishing our dramatic exit. I can't remember.

We left the bar, almost in step as the cool night air brought life to the relief I felt. Walking with her, through the parking lot that night was the last time I remember the sky being truly dark. The last night without the Cloud. She glanced at me after we made it partway across

the parking lot, but then straightened her gaze. When we got to her car, I stopped, letting go of her arm.

She looked at me and shrugged. "I'm going to the library." She said it as an invitation. In that moment, I realized how much I did want to go with her. How much I didn't want to transfer, to give up my body. So many things I hadn't realized I wanted until right then. I opened the door and paused, feeling her eyes on me. She started the car after we were both inside, grinning as I buckled my seat belt. That was the second my life began.

The truth is that I did want to go with her. Or stay with her. She threw me a lifeline, and I took it. It's not like I was dying or anything. Just not really living. Not considering which parts of my life were for me. Most weren't. When I told her yes, that had been for me.

I didn't realize how much I cared until she left. She had to take her work to the Cloud if she wanted to stay relevant. I knew that. I understood. But what if she didn't come back? It felt like a punch in the chest.

I told her how I felt. That I loved her and wanted her to be happy. She hadn't said anything, not that I expected her to, but I needed her to know. We had talked about this kind of thing before. Disappointing relationships. People who made us feel like bargaining chips. We promised not to do that. It felt like I had.

Penelope should be here any minute.

I roll down the car windows, letting the breeze hit my face. Nothing is going to help this pain in my head. The sky fills my gaze, the swirling purples, blues, and greens look like they could have come straight out of my old astronomy textbook. Beautiful photography was the main reason I took the class in college. If she does decide to stay up there, at least I will have a beautiful point of reference.

The despair chips away at my poorly constructed emotional barriers, reaching my eyes. The tears sting. My headache ebbs slightly once I crumble. I let myself collapse onto the steering wheel, Disney princess style, exhausted.

The car door opens and shuts, causing me to jump to attention.

“Hey,” Penelope says out of breath as she shuts the car door. Despite her looking nothing like the Penelope that left, there is no doubting it’s her. The green in her eyes pulse with the same energy radiating from the sky. If the light wasn’t still present above us, I would have assumed she was running after stashing the world into her bag.

“How was your trip?” I ask, mood improved. “I like the new getup.”

“Thanks,” she says, taking her coat off. “I have the coolest tattoos. Sorry it took so long. I had to reload three times. Some of the individuals who graciously chose to recycle had some *questionable* taste in body art.” The exaggerated eye roll gives me a few ideas to what they might have been.

I laugh while wondering which of the new artwork is her favorite.

“Did the cloud-dwellers enjoy your book?” I ask while starting the car.

“Yes! Well, no. They read the whole thing. They liked it okay. They said, ‘We might be able to find someone to buy it.’ She says it as if she’s got billboards already made with that tagline. “Oh, and,” she says, pausing as if a drum is expected to roll while she digs through her stuff. “New books!” She produces them for me to admire.

“Wasn’t there a study done? Books now outnumber people a million to one. Why do we need more books?” I ask even though I know the answer.

She stares at me without dignifying my question with an answer. While putting the books back in her bag, she says, “Oh, I got you something.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes!” She pulls a cassette out of her bag and plays it. Familiar music fills the silence. I look at her, confused.

“They had a concert while I was there. A serious tally in the pro-Cloud column is that you can get a recording of any event that happens there.” She says while motioning with her hands in a mysterious fashion. “The catch is when you take music with you, they print it out on a cassette tape because this is the 1990’s.” She points to the desert, reflecting the light show above.

“I’m fine with that,” I admit, happily. “I have something for you, too.” I pull out the thermos I packed that morning before my drive.

“Coffee!” Her eyes go wide with excitement, taking the container and a big drink in a fluid motion. I know it won’t burn her mouth. I made it long enough ago that it should be perfect.

“I’m sure cloud-coffee is better.”

“Coffee doesn’t get better than this. Made by someone you care about,” she says, grinning, closing the thermos. She pauses before saying, “I have one more thing for you.”

The desert surrounding us comes alive with the glowing pulse of the Cloud in the sky. It’s as if the desert holds its breath with me while I wait for Penelope to produce more cloud-gifts from her bag. She places a thick folder in my lap.

“It’s a life insurance plan,” she tells me while I stare at it.

“What does that even mean?”

“I know you don’t feel like the whole Cloud thing is a real life, but everyone else does. The world is up there, living or something like it. Without you.”

The silence is thick, suffocating.

“I accept that,” I say. She grabs my hand as I start to shift the car into gear.

“I’m not asking you to change anything. It’s a gift. If something happens and you change your mind, or you know, something happens to you here, there’s a place for you. Up there.”

“So what you are telling me is you hid a bunch of monopoly money for me in heaven?” I ask, grinning at her.

“That’s not what I mean.” The papers fly out of my hands as Penelope flips the pages open to show me something. “There is an AI version of you in the Cloud, living a life you would like, a life you would live here.”

“That’s insane. And creepy.”

“I know. But if you change your mind, you still have a place in the world. In a community.” A little house with my car sitting in the driveway is pictured on the page she shows me. “And its pretty close to what you have now. Well, I guess not now. Before.”

“Where do you live?” It’s a question that has been burning my throat, but didn’t feel appropriate to ask until now, looking at the fake-real estate in the literal sky.

Her eyes drop for a second before she closes the folder.

“I have a house too.” After a second, she adds, “Its next to yours. Just like now.”

She locks her eyes on mine. A weight is lifted off my shoulders, and the throbbing in my head finally subsides. I hold her hand, properly.

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”