

Somewhere In The Ether

*There is a place no man can see clearly,
Images flash before my eyes,
A sight, a smell, a sound,
A silent vision,
Worlds coincide and vanish just as quickly,
Into that place,
Floating in the ether about us,
Waiting to be discovered.*

He awoke on the beach, surrounded by warm sand, a gentle breeze whisked across the water making an oddly comforting sound as it passed, as if it knew how silent the place would be without it. He sat up, bringing his hand to cradle his head as he looked around in confusion, 'Where am I?' he wondered, standing up, brushing the sand from his tuxedo, and casting a long stare at his surroundings. White sand stretched on either side of him until it disappeared into the lush jungle of the island. At least, he believed it was an island. The Beach lasted for about half a kilometer before the jungle began, and rose upwards on the slope of the mountain at the centre of the island, whose peak was so high, it was covered by clouds. The Beach was littered with patches of long grass rising above the surrounding earth, each like an island in the vast sea of sand. In the distance, just before the Beach melted into jungle growth, he spotted a large white tent-like structure whose canvas roof stretched high into the blue, cloud spattered sky, as if it were constantly on the verge of being lost to the wind forever. The pavilion had an enormous golden pole erupting from the apex of the roof topped with a long, flowing triangular red flag. He was drawn towards the white tent, and as he approached he noticed smaller plumes of white canvas fluttering in the wind surrounding it. Each smaller tent had a triangular red flag

protruding from the top as well. The flag atop the pavilion was different from the others; in the centre there was embroidered the likeness of a golden pocket watch, shimmering in the bright sunlight. Then he spied something which rose above the tall flagpole, glinting, half invisible, like a spiderweb one can only see when it rains. He passed the smaller tents as he walked, glancing inside one to find large white beds and other amenities, though the tents did not look lived-in. He entered the main tent, which was even larger than he thought, and gazed around in the pleasant shade. The tent was divided into two distinct areas, one was littered with musical instruments, books, paper, scientific devices, and tables. A heap of canvas lay in the corner beside the slanted grand piano, half sunken into the sand. The tables were covered with numbers, diagrams and calculations. He strolled to the tables and looked upon the interrupted work of interrupted masters until his curiosity interrupted him, and forced him to continue his exploration. The other half of the tent had rows of wooden chairs facing a weathered oak stage, upon which sat an immense clock which didn't seem to be working, it's hands stuck at six thirty-two. Rising up from beneath the stage, protruding through the wood sat a boulder, which had a gleaming golden wire fastened tightly to it. The golden wire ran up, out through the open side of the tent and through the clouds, toward the mountaintop. It seemed to be pulled taught by some incessant force beyond. He suddenly heard a voice behind him,

“Beautiful isn't it?”. He spun around to find a man in a tattered gray suit. His face was deeply lined, yet he had penetrating blue eyes, whose gaze was soothingly focused on the task at hand. He spoke softly and kindly, as if he was tired and resigned to a long wait. In one hand he held the golden pocket watch whose likeness was embroidered on the flag. “Too bad, you just missed it, the others left yesterday.” he said leisurely,

“The others? Who are you? Where am I?”

“Let the interrogation begin.” he smiled to himself, “I am the Station Master, and this is the island where you wait, more specifically, this tent.”

“Wait for what exactly?”

“The Balloon. It comes down every so often to take people away when it’s their time. Everyone left yesterday, I’ve never seen such a mass exodus.” The Station Master chuckled.

“Where does it take them?”

“Up, but how should I know where? They never come back to explain. Every so often the Balloon comes down that golden line,” the Station Master gestured to the wire, “and in the basket, there’s a list of who’s to get in, and once everyone on the list is aboard, the Balloon goes back up the line and through the clouds.”

“Why are you still here? I thought you said everyone left, why did you stay?”

“I wasn’t on the list. It wasn’t my time. I guess I just continue doing my job.”

“Which is?”

“I keep an eye on this,” the Station Master showed him the pocket watch, whose hands were stuck at 12 o’clock, “and when the time is right, I let people know that the Balloon is coming and gather them here for the landing.”

“It’s not moving. Your watch I mean, it’s not working.”

“Yes it is. When the hands start moving, the Balloon is coming, and when it gets here, the hands stop moving. It’s always twelve hours from the time the Balloon starts moving, to the time it gets here.”

“I see. Couldn’t you have just gotten onto the Balloon with the others?”

“The Balloon won’t take off unless it has exclusively everyone on the list.” The Station Master sighed and looked longingly at the top of the mountain, before shaking his head and turning back

towards the man in the tuxedo. "Well then, what's your name?" The man in the tuxedo thought for a moment; thought for several minutes before saying,

"I can't remember." He looked confused and frightened, "I can't remember anything before washing up on this island." He stared into the sand for a moment, silently weeping.

"I see. Come, sit down." the Station Master walked him over to the stage where they sat in front of the massive clock. "You know, when I first got here I didn't know who I was, I couldn't remember anything at all, but..." he was interrupted by a female voice coming from the entrance of the tent,

"Hello?" it called. The Station Master rose, turned to him and said,

"Just a moment, I should greet the newcomers." The Station Master strolled over to the entrance of the tent and began conversing with the new guest. The man in the tuxedo rolled onto his back, lay on the stage and stared at the massive, unmoving clock.

By nightfall, at least twenty people had arrived and been settled into the small satellite tents outside. Some had come in middle-aged couples, holding hands, some mothers arrived carrying their toddlers, some elderly people arrived, treading carefully on the shifting sand. All of them seemed to know who they were, though they didn't call each other by name, they spoke of things they loved and people they knew. One elderly man found a violin amongst the various items in the tent, and played for everyone as they clapped their hands to the music and danced around a cheery fire. A young couple in formal attire even started dancing an elegant waltz, while others found instruments and joined in. The Station Master and the man in the black tuxedo were sitting away from the others, on the stage, hidden in shadowy silence until the man in the black tuxedo broke it,

"Is the clock the same as the pocket watch? Does it only move when the Balloon is coming?"

The Station Master stared into the sand and took a long time to answer,

“No. It once worked, a long time ago. Back then, there was no Station Master, the clock used to herald the coming of the Balloon.”

“So, what happened to it?”

“Somebody got impatient; they were sick of waiting and watching the clock bringing escape for everyone else, so they broke it. The next day, a golden pocket watch appeared on the stage here, along with a letter indicating that the one who broke the clock had to take up it’s mantle. That person became the first Station Master.”

“So,” the man in the black tuxedo hesitated, “how long have you been waiting?” The Station Master shrugged,

“Not long enough” he said. The firelight cast long shadows, hiding the Station Master’s face from view, though the man in the black tuxedo knew that a reflective frown was creasing his it as he strode away, exiting the tent. That night, the gentle sound of the waves on the shore covered the approach of the Balloon.

It was, without a doubt, one of the most magnificent things the man in the black tuxedo had ever seen. The circular shape of the great golden Balloon was so perfect, it seemed nearly divine, yet it’s basket of simple woven reeds was remarkably familiar and inviting. It seemed to glisten in the bright sun, and radiate light in all directions, warming the people crowding around in a way the hot tropical rays never could. It was nearly mid day before the Station Master rose wearily from his tent and stumbled through the sand in his tattered gray suit, entering the pavilion and rubbing his eyes. When he saw the crowd surrounding the Balloon, the colour drained from his face and his hands felt through his pockets in a panic. His eyes met those of the man in the black tuxedo and at once he understood his distress, as he dove into his pockets in search of the watch. The Station Master, finally retrieving the pocket watch from the folds of his suit, fumbled with the catch, opened the watch and

inspected it with a creased brow. The man in the black tuxedo made his way through the small gathering and approached the Station Master, “What’s going on?” he asked.

“The watch isn’t working. It didn’t move.”

“Well, who’s it for?” They looked over at the ever patient Balloon, still winking at them in the light. The Station Master cleared a path through the drove of people, making his way over to the Balloon. He reached into the basket, drawing out a brown parchment envelope; on the front, it read in majestic black cursive, ‘For: The Station Master’. There was no list, no names were mentioned. The Station Master, dazed by the appearance of the letter addressed to him, wandered over to the stage, sat beneath the clock and slowly began reading the letter. The man in the black tuxedo immediately decided to take charge, letting different combinations of people into the basket, filling it, leaving only one person, but the Balloon never moved. The people began to dissipate, along with their excitement when they realized the Balloon hadn’t come for them. The Station Master was sitting silently on the stage, staring blankly at the sand as the man in the black tuxedo walked over, “What did the letter say?” he asked.

“It doesn’t make sense. It was a set of directions.”

“Directions for what?” asked the man in the black tuxedo. The Station Master looked up with a faint smile,

“Fixing the clock.” he responded. The man in the black tuxedo was immediately overjoyed for his friend,

“That means once you fix it, you can leave!” The man in the black tuxedo froze when he said this, “Actually, the Balloon isn’t moving, and everyone else has already been on it.” The Station Master cast him a wild glance, looked determinedly at the Balloon and rose to his feet. He walked over to the Balloon, hesitating, and gently, almost lovingly, put his hand onto the basket. The Balloon

immediately rose from the ground and became almost agitated in it's movement. The Station Master turned to the man in the black tuxedo,

“It's my turn.” He smiled, “I think that letter is for you. Take good care of this,” he said as he placed the golden pocket watch in the hands of the man in the black tuxedo, “hopefully you won't need it.” The Station Master was about to step into the basket when the man in the black tuxedo asked,

“What happened to your memory when you got here? You said you couldn't remember anything either.”

“What happened? I figured that what happened before doesn't matter anymore. Not here and not where we're going.” Then the weary Station Master boarded the glorious golden Balloon, and was lifted up, out of sight, beyond the clouds.