

The Train

Tim clapped his hands sharply above Trama's head. Trama woke from a deep, dreamless sleep.

"You owe me for yesterday," said Tim. "Fly over the lake and check on the black streak."

Trama rolled over in bed and looked through the window in his floor. It was dark. The sun hadn't risen yet.

"O.K." said Trama, rubbing his eyes. "By the way, I never asked. How did the rest of the meeting go?"

"It wasn't a meeting, it was a discussion. And we won, but it was close," said Tim.

As the sun rose, Trama flew. He didn't do a very good job of checking on the black streak. Soon after takeoff, Trama's glider found an updraft. Trama let the wind carry him up and up. His glider was whisked away into the clouds. Trama's head was in the clouds too. His glider didn't seem flimsy. He felt like he was facing the world from the cockpit of a powerful airplane. Nothing could stop him. Everything was good. And everywhere he looked, he saw Dee.



Later that day, Trama kayaked towards the library. A sailboat was docked in the redwood cove. Dee was onboard. Dee set down a flask of lake-water and turned her attention to Trama.

Trama said, "I was going to leave you a note in library."

Dee said, "You can still leave me a note if you'd like." Dee turned her attention back to her work. She corked the flask and placed it in a crate. Trama sat in his canoe.

"Well, go on," said Dee, playfully shooing Trama towards the library. Trama feigned disappointment. Dee moved her lips inwards and upwards. Her smile was as clear as day. Dee pulled on a rope. Her boat's sail billowed with the breeze. She didn't look back as she disappeared into the distance. But right before Trama turned towards the library, he thought he saw sunlight glinting off of a silver telescope.

Trama found Common Methods of Limnology and opened it to the first page. A note fell out of the book. Dee had already written to him.

*Trama,
Would you like to go for a picnic?*

*Sincerely,
Dee*

Trama turned the note over and wrote a reply on its back.

*Dee,
Sounds great! How about Tuesday at 4:00? Lets meet outside the library. I'll bring sushi.*

*Sincerely,
Trama*

There is an expression that goes 'misery loves company.' It might be true. I am not sure. I do believe that misery often rides on the coattails of happiness. It seems common for the tumultuous extremes of emotion to bump into each other. That is what happened at the house on stilts. Trama's great happiness was accompanied by another's sadness.

That evening, Tommy didn't show up for the house on stilts' nightly

communal dinner. Neither did Benny or Trama. Benny had cooked a pot of stew. Benny invited Trama to eat with him on one of the house's small, private porches. The two of them sat in rocking chairs. Trama ate in silence. Benny barely ate a spoonful.

"Trama, I'm leaving Yellow Lake early. I'm leaving right after this dinner," said Benny.

Trama had known something was off. He turned towards Benny.

Benny's face glowed more than ever as he said, "I'm joining a monastery- a group of brewer monks who live deep in the Manganese Mountains. They emerge and let new monks join 'em once every ten years. If I want to join, I have to get to the Manganese by the summer solstice."

Benny looked down at his food and then back up. Now his face was scrunched up, and he wore a puzzled frown.

Benny said, "I'm worried about Tommy. Keep an eye on 'er for me, will you?"

Benny got up and left the porch. Trama finished his stew. Trama took pleasure in the solitude of the porch. Big changes seldom happen slowly. Benny was gone. Dee had entered Trama's life. Trama felt big changes exploding around him like fireworks. He felt alive. Trama let his mind wander. Then Trama went searching for Tommy.

Trama found Tommy in her room. Tommy was sitting on her bed, holding a postcard. Tommy didn't say anything. She looked at Trama with mild interest but no hint of emotion. Then she handed Trama the postcard.

Tommy,

Sushi Man told me that, in his homeland, people say goodbye with postcards. I didn't know how to say goodbye to you in person so... er, here goes nothing.

I'll miss you, but I'll be fine. I might have mentioned it, but my monastery's moto is 'to strive for wholeness through excellence in beverage refreshment.' I think I'll be happy there.

I care about you. I hope you have a wonderful life. Always keep detailed records of your brewing process.

The postcard was unsigned. After reading it, Trama thought that

Benny and Tommy probably had shared a world which he knew nothing of. There was something despairing about Tommy's emotionless face. Benny was gone, and Tommy looked like her world had collapsed.

Trama did his best to comfort Tommy. But Trama's happiness left him incapable of sharing Tommy's sadness.

On Tuesday afternoon, Trama and Dee had their picnic.

"Why do you carry that telescope on your back?" asked Trama.

"Oh, its an old habit from sailing- and I like having a telescope. Telescopes are one of my favorite things," said Dee.

They talked about their favorite things. Trama sensed that there was mutual ground between Dee's world and his own. He delighted in learning about her. As they talked, Trama began to feel like he was very similar to the person sitting across from him. Whenever a thought popped into Trama's head, he said it. There didn't seem to be any point to holding back.

Trama and Dee snuck into the library and read novels together (only Sigs were supposed to be there on Tuesdays). Afternoon faded into evening. Evening blossomed into night. The details of that night belong to Trama and Dee. In short, they made each other laugh, enjoyed each other's company, and held each other close for a very long time.

Dee woke in Trama's arms. They were nestled in the roots of a red-wood tree. Dee's first thought was of the tree's roots. Something was wrong with the roots. Their color was off. For a moment, Dee thought it might just be the color which roots reflect early in the morning. It wasn't. There was a deep blackness to the roots. She shuddered. It was viscerally evil.

Dee untangled herself from Trama. She made her way around the tree. She looked out over the lake. The black streak had changed. Yesterday, it hadn't been truly black. The streak had been a very dark liquid. Now the streak reflected absolutely no light. It barely looked like a liquid at all. The streak had also grown in length. It snaked off into the lake as far as Dee could see. Smaller tendrils of blackness reached out towards the roots of red-woods. These tendrils bulged above the water and might have been subtly throbbing. Somehow, the utter blackness of the streak was more disturbing than the tendrils. When Dee looked into the inky blackness, she felt herself being drawn in.

Trama walked up and stood beside Dee. They looked out over the water.

Dee said, "I read something a few days ago. It seemed impossible

then, but now I might believe it. I might know what the streak is, but we need to see it from above. We need to see this from your glider.”

The bleary eyed Trama didn't know exactly what was going on, but consented. Sight and perception are very different. Trama and Dee saw the same streak, but they did not perceive the same blackness. Trama saw that the streak had spread, but didn't feel its potent evil. Trama moved towards Dee's sailboat. She stopped him.

“No! Not the lake. This way. If the streak is what I think it is, we might not have much time.”

They jogged to the house on stilts. Trama led Dee up the spiral stairs and through the house. Trama's house was mostly silent. It was very early. However, light spilled out from beneath Tommy's doorway. Trama slowed as they passed. He could hear quiet sobbing from behind the door. They moved on, making their way to Joe's observatory.

Dee said, “The girl whose room we passed. Did something recently happen to make her unusually sad or angry?”

Trama nodded.

“Oh no,” said Dee.

“You think that might have something to do with the streak?” asked Trama.

“It might,” said Dee. Then, looking towards the glider, “So how do we fly this thing?”

“Well,” said Trama, “I built it for one person. But you don't weigh too much.”

“I don't weigh much,” agreed Dee. “Strap me to your back.”

Trama thought about this and then, again, consented. And so it was that Trama and Dee strapped themselves into the glider on an odd, atmospheric morning. Trama wore flight goggles, and Dee wore her silver telescope.

Trama pulled on a rope. A motor whirred and gears meshed. The metal oculus opened above them and light poured in. As the glider rose, Trama heard wind whistling across the roof.

“Takeoff might be a little rough,” warned Trama.

“I can handle it,” said Dee.

Half of the glider was still indoors when its wings caught wind. The glider's brake lines and lowered wing flaps did nothing. The gust lifted Trama's flying machine and flipped it like a quarter. One moment they were

upside down facing the sky. The next moment they were staring at the side of the house on stilts. Then the cloth wings fully unfurled. The sound of the wings catching air was like a deep, satisfied inhale. The glider swooped beneath Trama's house, in between two stilts, then upwards and inches from a pine tree.

Trama gained control and the glider leveled out. He realized that he had been clenching the glider's controls very tightly. Trama loosened his grip. They approached Yellow Lake's ridgeline. Air whistled past Trama and Dee's ears, but it was mostly quiet. The sun shone warmly on them. There were no clouds. They soared past the library. The black mark on the lake didn't seem very important to Trama.

Dee tapped Trama's shoulder and pointed downwards. She carefully handed him the telescope. Trama almost dropped it the moment he looked through. The snaking blackness now reached all the way from the library to the Sig's end of the lake. What had startled him, though, was what moved within the blackness.

Evenly spaced pairs of light shone through the streak, making their way along its inky trail. The lights were slowing down.

Dee whispered, "it's a train. There's a train stopping beneath the lake."

Two things happened at the same time. Trama handed the telescope back to Dee, and a massive crossbow bolt ripped through the glider.

When they had taken off, the glider had flipped like a quarter. Now the glider fell like a stone. Trama pulled back on brake lines with all his strength. He desperately tried to get traction from the glider's tattered wing flaps. The glider tilted crazily. It rolled. A flapping piece of canvas was pressed against wood. They corkscrewed dizzily. Dee and Trama hit the lake with tremendous force.

Trama's vision faded in and out. There was a whining sound in his ears. Canvas separated Dee and Trama from the water. Black liquid poured in from all sides and pooled around them. The canvas was lit from underneath. They had landed on top of a light, and the light wasn't moving.

Dee's careful hands untied herself and Trama from the glider with a sailor's speed. Dee stood precariously on splintered wood and canvas. With difficulty, Trama sat up.

The black streak surrounded them. Bubbles were rising from the lake. The Sig's porch was a short distance away. A few birds were chirping. It

was still midmorning.

Whatever ominous presence Trama had failed to sense, Action felt it very clearly. He stood on the Sig roof next to his massive crossbow. He spotted Dee.

Action shouted, "Quick Dee, swim to shore."

By now Trama felt that the blackness wasn't safe. But, more than the strange light or creeping tendrils, Action's fearful voice convinced Trama of the danger.

Trama yelled back, "I should swim first, to see if its safe."

Action considered this. "Actually Dee, wait--"

Dee made her own decision. She jumped off the wreckage and into the blackness. Trama struggled for footing on the sinking canvas. Dee swam. Trama saw eyes peering out of the murky liquid. They were moving towards Dee. Action saw them too.

"Dee! Watch out!" called Action.

Trama jumped into the lake, swimming after Dee. A slimy green head ducked out of the lake. The inhuman thing was wearing a snorkel. Action swung his crossbow towards the lake and let a massive bolt fly. The slimy green head became a slimy green mess. Nearby, two more goblins peered out of the water.

"DEE," screamed Action, reloading his crossbow. Then Dee disappeared under the surface. She only had time for the briefest scream as something pulled her away. Trama furiously swam towards where Dee had been. Action took a running jump off the Sig's roof, over the porch, and into the water. Without a word, Trama and Action dove down into the inky blackness. Somewhere in the blackness, a train's whistle sounded.

There was a current in the blackness. As Trama swam blindly after Dee, the current sucked him further downwards. The current grew stronger. Yellow lights glowed beneath Trama. No sunlight penetrated the liquid. Trama felt like he was moving quickly, but the lights grew no closer. Trama's lungs burned. He needed oxygen. He needed to save Dee. He swam onwards towards the glowing lights. Tendrils of blackness reached over the lights. The blackness was intensifying. All light were disappearing. Then, in an instant, Trama had broken through the inky blackness.

Trama was floating in a round tunnel. There was air in the tunnel, but no gravity. Trama gasped. The tunnel was surrounded by lake water. Looking out from the tunnel, the lake water didn't appear black. Trama

could see the bottom of the Sig's porch, all the way at the surface. In the center of the tunnel was a train. Intense yellow light poured from each of the train's windows. A train whistle blew once more. The train started, very slowly, to move.

Above him, Trama saw Action. Bubbles rose from Action's nostrils. Action struggled directionlessly in blind terror. Action was drowning. Trama reached upwards towards Action. Trama stretched. Trama moved forward. Trama's eyes were enveloped by lake water. In the lake water, the blackness was now absolute. Trama's hand grasped at Action's ankle. Action writhed desperately in Trama's direction. The two of them tumbled into the tunnel.

Action took quick, shallow gulps of air. He wore a look of terror from his near death experience. The look of terror was also related to what Action was seeing. Half a dozen train cars down the tunnel, three goblins wrestled with Dee. The goblins were on top of a train car. Dee's wrists were tied together. Dee elbowed one goblin as another grabbed at her flailing legs.

Trama saw Dee at the same time as Action. Trama kicked off the top of the train, propelling himself through the zero gravity tunnel towards Dee. Beneath Trama, the train was gaining speed. Dee was moving away from him. The air seemed thick. Trama flew far too slowly.

Trama watched in horror as one goblin opened a hatch on top of the train. Two other goblins stuffed Dee inside and disappeared after her. Again, Trama kicked off the top of the train. He gained some momentum.

The remaining goblin had moved to the end of a train car and was fiddling with something. The goblin looked up from his fiddling. Trama grew closer to the goblin's pale green eyes. With an audible grunt, the goblin pulled out a bolt. Ever so slightly, train cars began to separate. Trama was almost close enough to touch the goblin.

Then both the goblin and half of the train disappeared. An empty tunnel lay before Trama. Out of instinct more than anything else, Trama grabbed at the end of the train car beneath him. He stopped. He was at the end of what remained of the train. Trama looked out over an empty tunnel.

"Hey!" a voice shouted.

Trama looked down the side of the train. A man with a handlebar moustache had stuck his head out of one of the train's glowing yellow windows.

The man said, "There'll be a flash of light. Then this train will fall off

of a cliff. If you want to survive, jump off the train right after the flash.”

The man disappeared back into the train. Trama stood on top of an accelerating train car. There was no air resistance. There was no noise. The tunnel’s surroundings changed. Lake water morphed into nothingness. Stars faded into view. The stars were brighter and clearer than Trama had ever seen. As the train continued to accelerate, stars blurred into streaks. Then there was a blinding flash of light.

As the train flew off the cliff the arch of its path reflected on water below. A silhouette in the moonlight jumped from one of the cars. For a moment, both train and silhouette fell in silence.