

Series 0

Issue 15

Nowhereverse Tales

There are parallel universes, other worlds, each with their own histories, their own cultures, their own biologies. We feel the walls grow weak, sometimes: when the world seems thinner, when the light is just right, when things seem just a little bit off, and we imagine we can reach out, just a little bit...

In the midst of all this, in a lost corner inside the lost space between spaces, a new place is forming. Born from hidden desires and deep longings. A place to rest, a stop along the way for so many. In the middle of everywhere, this is Nowhere.

Maybe you found yourself here by circumstance. Maybe you got lost and came to find shelter. Maybe you sought us out. Regardless, we have a place for you, no matter where you are in your journey.

The light is always lit, and the door is always open.

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Letter From the Editor

We guard our hearts.

Usually for good reasons: We don't know others' motivations. People are complicated. Communication is hard, and assumptions abound. We all have flaws, many of them invisible even to ourselves.

So we guard ourselves. We get to know each other and slowly open our hearts as we do. And sometimes, even with all our precautions, we get hurt. People aren't who we assumed they were, or maybe we just find ourselves at odds.

But sometimes... Sometimes we are known, we know, and we find love. And we find that what we thought was an ending is, in truth, a wonderful beginning.

—Ronyo

Devoted

Antony was a doer, not a decider. And he liked it that way.

He could absorb information like a sponge and present it in five sentences or less. The orderliness of his to-do lists was outshone only by the speed at which they were checked off. And the longer he worked for a boss, the more he learned how *they* decided.

Which meant that his current situation was as far from ideal as possible: treading water in the middle of the ocean.

Yes, Antony learned how to swim. Someone—probably in Boy Scouts—had told him to, so he did.

But it was getting tiring. His pajamas were well past waterlogged, and he was wracking his brain to remember if there was any reason he shouldn't just kick them off. He felt them catch on themselves as he tried to move his legs and made his decision. With a surge of will, he quickly sent his hands below the water to remove his pajama pants.

The action stopped his treading, and he dipped below the surface. It was a necessary risk, despite the water that shot up his nose. He coughed reflexively which brought more water into his mouth and nose straight to his sinuses and—

"You were our top performer at your rank this year, Antony," Carol Davis said. "Based on what I'm seeing, you should be on a management track yesterday. You have lots of room to grow at this company, especially for someone as young as you."

She leaned forward. "Given that," the director said with a wan smile, "why the hell are you applying to be my *executive assistant*?"

Antony smiled back; he'd have been a fool not to anticipate this question. "You're a good boss, and you make good decisions. I want to help."

Carol Davis narrowed her eyes. "You know it's a pay cut."

"I don't care."

"It's not glamorous."

"Why not?"

The director pursed her lips. "It'll be seen by other people as a demotion. It's going to destroy any career prospects at this company, and possibly others."

Antony shrugged. "This is my dream job."

She raised an eyebrow. "Executive Assistant?"

Antony nodded. "You have eight hours in your work day. I can make it sixteen, maybe even twenty." He smirks and motions to his performance review. "I'm really good at following orders."

His face broke the surface. He kicked harder to get back to a more buoyant state as he tried to cough out the water that had gotten in. He stayed treading for a few moments, getting his breath back.

His shirt was easier to remove: it was a button-up. Now free of any extra baggage, he tried to get himself onto his back and maybe save some energy by floating. He gently kicked with his legs while churning the water with his hands: an "elementary backstroke," definitely picked up from Boy Scouts.

He felt a swell of water pass beneath him. He felt himself slide down the back of it head first and hoped it didn't mean another wave was coming.

He glanced to the side just in time to see another wave come in and turn him over. The surprise caused him to inhale another shot of water—

Carol Robertson sat down across from Antony. "How long have you been my assistant?" she asked.

"Nineteen years and two months," Antony said instantly. His face fell. "Oh, no."

Carol smiled sadly. "I'm not firing you, Antony" she said.

Antony closed his eyes. "That's *worse!*" he whined. He looked up and gave her a genuine smile. "Seriously, I assume you're retiring?"

Carol nodded. "I am. I'm not as young as I used to be." She shook her head. "But to your credit, I'd have retired years ago if you hadn't been here."

Antony took a playful bow. "I aim to serve, ma'am."

Carol smiled and held a hand out to Antony. He took it and shook firmly.

"You've been a lifesaver, Antony," Carol said. "I hope your next boss sees that."

Antony shook off the rogue wave—and rogue memories—and got back into his back stroke.

His movements were more sluggish, his legs starting to dip below the surface, his breaths deeper and more ragged. Between his age showing itself and his life apparently flashing before his eyes, he was starting to wonder how much longer he had.

He stopped swimming and started treading again, trying to get a look around.

Nothing. Nothing at all.

He tried to get back on his back, preferring the cloudless sky to the empty horizon. There was no chance of rescue if he wasn't alive. But, in his exhaustion, he kicked a little hard and overcorrected, sending water into his nose—

He sat in his car, the lights of the 24-hour office center shining through his windshield.

He pulled the small pile of papers off his passenger seat and flipped through them. Maybe he was misreading it. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought.

He got halfway through and read it again. And again.

One email said, "The stupid kids are trying to start a union."

The next email said, "So how do we stop it?"

Shit. No way around that.

Still, was he about to do this? Again?

He glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. The grey hair at his temples wasn't going away, and he was actively avoiding counting the wrinkles.

"So good at following orders," he grumbled. "Bastards."

He tapped the papers against his lap to put the stack back in line and walked into the office center. He strode with purpose to the desk and dropped the pile on the counter.

"Need to send this," he said, weary. "Delivery confirmation, signature required, the works."

The clerk nodded. "What's the address?"

"National Labor Relations Board," Antony rattled off. "Ten-fifteen Half Street SE, Washington DC, two-oh-five-seven-oh." He dropped a fresh twenty-dollar bill on the counter.

The clerk glanced down and back to Antony. "Done this before?"

Antony just pursed his lips.

Antony sputtered, frantically treading with his arms and legs, fighting the fatigue every second.

It wasn't enough.

He was going to sink, barely making a ripple in this vast ocean. Just like his life barely made a ripple...

No. That wasn't true. Carol still spoke highly of him. And her kids still sent him memes on occasion. And yeah, his whistleblowing might not have done anything for the people affected, but it did bring some consequences for those responsible.

He looked around one more time... nothing.

He nodded to himself and felt a couple of tears. "Well," he said, his voice hoarse, "it was fun while it lasted."

And he let himself fall beneath the surface.

The water was incredibly clear, enough for him to see a school of fish off in the distance. And below him, as he sank, a kelp forest...

...if kelp was a bright red. Maybe purple. He held his breath a little longer, hoping to get a better look.

He felt himself reach the kelp. It felt like it was wrapping around his leg. He couldn't help but imagine it cradling him, here at the end.

...he wasn't imagining it. Another strand wrapped around his chest and tightened. A couple more held him by his hips.

Well, now things were getting interesting. If only he wasn't running out of breath, he might be able to see where this was going. One particularly vibrant strand tied itself diagonally around his chest and shoulders before pressing against the back of his neck, into the bottom of his skull. His head started pounding, and he wasn't sure if it was the lack of oxygen or the strange pressure from the kelp—

Everything.

Every whale, shark, fish, coral growth, clump of seaweed, plankton, molecule, atom, quark was known, observed, influenced, controlled. The vast Ocean itself teeming with life, each part working in harmony and coordination, driven by a singular will.

Antony stood out, a dark spot of ignorance among the known Ocean. But it was growing brighter, especially his head; water and kelp working to find a way to see, to learn, to know.

And the Ocean was glad to know him. It would be honored to let him rest, to give him a peaceful end.

Antony had none of it. He was awed by the vastness and completeness of the Ocean, even as he knew he was only seeing a glimpse. He was ready, eager, *excited* to serve if

there was a way.

There was. Every atom observed, influenced, controlled. Cells could be changed; a body could be made. A body able to survive and thrive, but without true autonomy, its will subservient to the whole.

Antony begged for it to happen, to be able to spend lifetimes serving something vast and great and *good* and having the experiences it would bring. If there was more to be done, then he was ready to do.

Then let go, and join me.

Antony let the breath out of his lungs, watched the bubbles leak out and float toward the surface with a smile. He closed his eyes and gave into the instinct to breathe. Water rushed in, and he convulsed once, twice...

And Antony was still.

He felt his stillness. His heart stopped beating, the blood slowing in his veins. His muscles seized up, his nerves grew dark. Saltwater filled his lungs, his stomach, invaded his skull. He watched as his old body sank—

He watched!

He watched as his body became known to him again, alongside the kelp wrapping and penetrating it. He saw through the shark's eyes as it diverted to dispose of his remains, felt its drive from mere traces of his blood. He swayed with the kelp as the currents passed. He split with the school of fish as the shark passed by, watched from every angle.

He flowed with his memories and knowledge and will deeper, deep into the crevasses where the sunlight could not penetrate, darker, colder...

And yet infinitely warmer and brighter than anything he had experienced as he was cradled by the Ocean.

Welcome, Antony.

Who... you are Ocean! I know you! How do I know you?

All that is known to me is known to you, now.

As is all I have known... yet I am still myself?

Your self has changed, yes; but I will not destroy something so beautiful.

Thank you... are you "ma'am" or "sir"?

A great laugh rumbled through the deep. I am both and neither. Or more accurately, I do not know. My sister told me of this, but I never considered it for myself. What do you say I am?

You are strong and powerful, traits that are traditionally but not exclusively masculine. You are also elegant and fierce, traditionally feminine. In my world, some say you are "a harsh mistress"; though I know you, and you are not harsh.

Excellent analysis, but what do you say?

I have never felt like anything but male. You are wholly and completely other to me, a being unlike anything I have known until now. And your resolve feels like my first boss. So I would call you female... ma'am.

As good an answer as any.

Thank you, ma'am. What can your servant do for you?

That... is not a good name for you.

It is a role I relish, ma'am.

And it is to your credit. There is no job too lowly for you, no work without merit. But I would not have you be merely my servant.

Then... what would you have me be, ma'am?

I think... yes. Gardener. One who tends and cultivates.

That is acceptable... yes, I accept. What can your Gardener do for you?

There is nothing to do now. You have had a long and full life already. Rest; work will be there when you are ready.

With all due respect, ma'am, I am ready.

Gardener...

I have been forcibly retired for years, ma'am. I am ready to be useful again.

You have no body. Your old one is decomposing and digested among five different sharks, and we have not made a new one for you.

I have your knowledge and will, ma'am. You have managed; so will I.

Gardener, never doubt that you are still yourself.

Never have, never will.

Then go forth; I will call for you when it is time.

First was the sharks disposing of his old body. He encouraged them to move back to their normal hunting grounds, and they did.

Next was a school of fish in danger of overgrazing their pasture. He moved the currents to send them on. A few were stubborn, insisting on staying in the area. Some he inhabited for a moment to get them back to their school.

Others, being so far from their school, ended up playing their part in the food chain.

A reef was nearing capacity and was attempting to grow out. Gardener gently coaxed the cells on the south side to grow. He made a note to come back in a year or so to make sure some anemones had moved in.

A herd of sharks was in danger of growing too large, outpacing the schools of fish they preyed on. Gardener searched Ocean's knowledge for any alternatives, but there were none. The eggs in the next clutch would be less viable.

A kelp forest had also grown too large, but this solution was much less grim. A visit by an extra school of fish brought it back into balance.

Other tasks were monitored or checked off. He ignored Ocean's work in the deep, focusing on the work he was given. Until one day when Ocean called him in...

Ocean drew Gardener's awareness to something new. He looked, seeing a new type of animal he hadn't encountered yet. Ocean guided him to its nervous system, one that looked strangely familiar—

He blinked.

That fact alone took a moment to sink in after so long as an incorporeal being. He blinked again, letting himself experience the low light of the deep in a new way. It was novel for a second before he wished there was more light.

A pure blue light swept through the space.

Gardener gasped and held his arms—his arms!—out in front of him and wished for light again. A pulse of light swept from his head down his arms and torso out to his... tentacles? He needed more light. Steady light.

New instincts connected. He took an inhale through his mouth and felt it go out through his gills. That triggered a different instinct, and he smiled. Another inhale, but most of this one went out his... beak? This sent him rocketing upwards. Another inhale, this time stretching his lower body outward. He held it for half a moment before releasing.

If the first impulse was a rocket, this was like being fired out of a gun. Instantly he was shooting upwards, arms pressed to his sides, as streamlined as he could make himself, until he coasted to a gentle stop in a much shallower, brighter part of the water. Now he could see himself with his own eyes and...

He was a human torso connected to a squid's arms and tentacles, covered in a pure white skin. His hands were still recognizable, even complete with fingernails. He felt his head: hairless, but familiar. Farther down, his abdomen split into eight tentacles, each with a healthy supply of suction cups. From beneath them, he felt his two primary tentacles: twice as long as the others, and tipped with a squid's signature paddles.

He took one of those primary tentacles and felt his underside: sure enough, a squid's beak. And he knew that was the mouth he should eat with. He felt to the sides and giggled slightly, apparently just a little ticklish.

He raised his arms and looked down his torso. On each side were three gill flaps. He felt the water pass through them as he breathed. His skin was smooth, and the muscles lacked definition, though he supposed the fat might be more valuable, especially in the deep.

Gardener ran his hands down his chest and sides, feeling the gentle curves of his new body. He tapped into his awareness and watched himself from every angle. It was new, exotic...

"Beautiful," he said. "I... I can't think of any other word."
As you are and should be, Ocean said.

"I..." He swallowed his words and regained his composure. "Thank you, ma'am."

Are you happy, Gardener?

"Of course, ma'am."

You're holding back.

Gardener nodded slightly. "Only as appropriate, ma'am."

What could be inappropriate, my dear?

Gardener shook his head. "Many things, ma'am."

Currents flowed, and the pressure around Gardener increased. It was gentle, an embrace.

Gardener, Ocean whispered in his ear, you are known to me. I see every thought as it is formed. I hear every stir you make in my currents. I feel your presence in the shallows and the depths. You are part of me, wholly and completely.

"Then you know," Gardener whispered back. "Why should I say it?"

Because you need to, Ocean said. Because you have held yourself at a distance all your life, afraid of your feelings and unable to act.

"It wasn't right."

That was your old life, she said, holding him closer. You are not merely my employee, and our realm is not merely business. We are one, and we must be honest with each

other and ourselves.

Gardener was pretty sure he didn't have tear ducts; and even if he did, how would he know? Yet he swore the sea was a little saltier around his eyes.

Please, dear Gardener, Ocean said. Say it, and let us know each other.

Gardener took a breath of water and pushed it out through his gills. "I love you," he whispered. "You're beautiful and terrifying and majestic and *good*. I..."

He took another breath and spoke louder. "I almost told my first boss, Mrs. Robertson. Back when she was Miss Davis. But it wasn't..." He shook his head. "It wasn't sexual or desire, just... devotion. But if I had said 'I love you,' that's not what she would have heard. And then every boss after that..." He sighed. "I couldn't. There was always something there, some compromise that kept me from being anything more than an employee.

"But you..." Gardener let himself smile. "I *know* you. I know how you think, what you value. I can trust you with..." He held his hands in front of his chest. "With me. With *all* of me." He chuckled. "You already have it, but I can give it."

He gazed into the depths and held his arms open. "So here it is: I love you. Everything I am, everything I can be is yours."

He felt the pressure around him increase gently. I am flawed and imperfect, Ocean said, but I will use you with wisdom. I love you too, my dear, precious gardener.

Gardener smiled before a new sensation surprised him, a rumble and ache from his abdomen...

He giggled, and felt the laughter from Ocean. "Physical body needs to eat, got it," he said with a smirk. "Well, the school nearby needs culling..." With a quick inhale, he shot off towards his breakfast.

Images flashed through Gardener's mind, of places all over the surface world, the dry land connected by the vast ocean he had become. He felt his perspective drift upwards until he was above the shoulder of a giant, a barnacle-covered crag of coral and sand, starfish and anemones, sharks and whales...

And a fierce face made of the purest water wearing a gentle smile.

"Ocean?" Gardener said, his voice small.

Ocean glanced to the side. "Finally decided to rest, my Gardener?"

Gardener looked down at himself: he was still the squid-like creature he had become that day, but his glow was softer, more ethereal. Or maybe he himself was fuzzier, just out of focus. "Am I dreaming?" he said.

Ocean considered her answer. "Yes," she said after a moment, "I suppose you are."

Gardener noticed another giant in their space in front of them, but this one made of towering oaks, great waterfalls, moss and lichen and fur and feathers.

"I offered them refuge within myself," the other giant said, her voice gentle, "and they accepted. I hope one day to send you a missive from Song and Puzzle." She held out her hands: inside them, a great flower with pale blue petals bloomed. Standing—rooted?—inside it were two feminine figures with smooth lilac bodies and hair the same color as the petals: one with hair to her shoulders, the other to the small of her back. They were waist-deep in the flower's nearly opaque garnet nectar.

"It is strange," the giant continued, "though not unwelcome, to have two more voices within me. Likewise, it is strange for them to exist within a greater being like

they do now. We are adjusting, but love is continuing to guide us."

The image faded. Gardener turned to Ocean. "Who was that?"

"My sister, Forest," Ocean said with a fond smile. I just received her..." She furrowed her brow in thought. "I suppose 'letter' would be the best word you have. I had thought I had a new experience to tell her of, but..." She chuckled. "It appears my next letter will be commiserating instead."

She turned to Gardener with a smile. "Regardless," she said, "it is time I introduced you to my siblings."

Other survivors are finding their way...

A Crowded Table

You pull the spaghetti out of the pot with a grunt and dump it into the foil pan. It mixes with the pasta that's already there, steam billowing up and casting a haze over the area.

"How're those noodles, Captain?" your neighbor, Delores, yells through your open front door.

"On the way!" you yell back. You pull a cloth mask out of your back pocket and quickly tie it around your head before seizing the pan of noodles and striding towards your front door.

Delores is there—also masked—and lets you pass so she can close your door behind you. You carefully descend the two steps to your lawn: the rain earlier in the day made them more slippery than normal. You get under the tailgate tent and drop the pan of noodles into the last empty space on the folding table.

You look up. The entire block is here, like they have been every week for the last year or so. But today, instead of all the kids rushing to the front of the buffet line, everyone's

grouped up by house and standing in the road, six feet apart... roughly.

You step out from under the tent and squint in the evening sun. You check your distance, nod, and pull your mask down. "Alright, everyone!" you project.

Everyone stops their conversations and turns to you.

You swallow, the strangeness of the situation making you nervous all over again, like it was the first time you opened your house to your neighbors. "So here's how this'll work," you say. "We'll be making the plates here—" You motion to the assembly line behind you. "—and we'll be putting them on that table over there." You motion to a card table a dozen feet away from you.

You try to smile: it's not a broad smile, but it's honest. "Remember to stay six feet apart from each other," you say. "But we've blocked off the road, so spread out, say hi, and..."

You trail off and glance down at the ground. Part of you really doesn't want to acknowledge anything more than you already have, to just let the moment pass.

You feel Red and Green's presence, still giving you strength after ten years.

Together, Red says.

Even when we're apart, Green adds.

Yeah, you say in your mind, that's kinda how it is for everyone now, isn't it?

You look back up. "I know this is a weird time," you say. "I know things are strange and different, and it feels like the world is falling apart. But," you add with a smile, "we still have each other, even if we're social distancing."

"So thanks for being patient the last month while we figured out how to do this safely," you finish. "Hope it's worth the wait."

You clap your hands twice and grin. "Are you ready, kids?"

"Aye aye, captain!" the neighborhood kids—and a few of the adults—yell back.

"Then let's eat!"

You pull your mask back up and take your place in the assembly line between the local pastor and Delores.

"Still can't believe you turned *Spongebob Squarepants* into a liturgy," Delores says as she takes a plate from you.

"Yeah, well," you say, "Landon asked if I was a 'miss' or a 'mister,' and I just said 'captain.' It kinda snowballed from there."

"They love it," Delores says. "They need it," she adds, a little more quietly. "You're giving us a little bit of hope, Captain."

You blink back a sudden tear, the statement resonating between you and Red and Green. "That's all I wanted," you say.

"So then, 'Captain,'" the pastor says—and you can hear the grin behind his mask—"how are the others doing?"

"Well," you say, smiling despite yourself as you check in with Red and Green, "Eutychia's started the spring planting. Fields are looking good, so it should be a good harvest this year. Their cousin's getting married in a month, so everyone's buzzing about that."

You sigh, and your shoulders slump a bit. "Alec's having trouble finding work. Turns out journalism isn't a lucrative career in either world. They're okay..." You wince. "At least so long as their rent doesn't go up like it did the past few years."

The pastor hums in agreement. "Same old story?"

"Yeah," you groan. "I just wish I could do something."

He puts a hand on your back. It's a comforting weight. "All we can do," he says, "is what we can do."

Green affirms this. It's not a problem yet.

You nod and turn to the pastor. "Like making three pots of spaghetti for a socially distanced neighborhood?"

You see him smile; the mask is in the way, but you see his eyes crinkle. "Exactly," he says with a rumble.

And the two of you focus back on the assembly line.

The Lightbringers will return.

Ask the Lighthouse

Coda asks [REDACTED] / I. T. Fox: So where are you originally from?

So a few months ago I would have said Vanilla Earth (what we're calling Richard's Earth to differentiate it from Courtney's earth where... you know 🦊). Grew up in The South™ and raised on a steady diet of barbeque and macaroni and cheese.

~~Now, though... I'm not so sure. Is that where I'm from? How the hell should I know? It's not like I can Google myself since I'd need to actually spell~~

Sorry, I'm not in a great place right now. Vanilla Earth, southeast USA.

Ask at wndfx.link/ask

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Most importantly, **thank you for reading!**



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