Goodbye, Sweet World: A Memoir

“Brannie? Do you remember sourbee honey?” Her tired voice whispered to me from her wheelchair, one of her four arms reaching for the closest of my hands and weakly clasping it.

 “Yeah, Mamu,” I responded. I noticed a tremor in my own warbling voice that I didn’t understand yet. I leaned forward and folded my free arms on cold metal rails.

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We were standing together, my mother and I, beneath a huge hive of industrious sourbee. There were fat drones, as big as our blunt fists, that floated in a bumbling fashion from one branch to the other. There were sleek guards zipping in and out, shaped like silvery bullets inspecting us suspiciously from the tree trunk. My biologist father sometimes would tell us about the bloated queen living deep under the gray bark.

I held a wide brimmed hat onto my head. The sourbees ignored the breeze ruffling glades of rotgrass and rippling fish ponds. A few agitated green striped thrashers called high above, flapping masses of patchy feathered white wings like mossy cirrus clouds. Mamu and I seemed to mirror them in matching white dresses and loose hair.

 My mother approached the tree trunk, stepped very softly over red evening grass, and touched a finger to the bark. I had stayed back in a daze, eyes wide with fear and awe. I’d been stung by a vigilant sourbee guard before and my leg still ached when it came to mind. I tried to do as a foolish child what she did now with such a serene grace I couldn’t bring myself to protest.

 I watched her drag her finger down crinkled grey bark, a translucent glob forming when she pulled away from the tree. Her long white hair crumpled in a pile in the grass as she bowed toward the tree then slowly back up and this seemed to calm the agitated guards.

 “Hold out your hand,” She had told me, so I did. A drop of the strange stuff stuck to my palm for me to taste. It was a strange gel that seemed to bob and jiggle from any movement, like a bubble with mass and weight.

 I licked my palm then spat it out. It was bitter and hot, stinging my tongue and making me retch. I desperately lapped at my sleeves and wiped my soiled hands on my clothes. My mother giggled lightly at my distress, flinging the rest into a pool of Stillwater for the moss dappled fish to gag on.

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 “Did you understand?” She breathed under the countdown. “You were such a little one then.” Her hand squeezed mine, the other three fidgeted with her skirt and handmade blanket. She raised her lower left hand to her mouth, covering a meek cough.

 “No, it was terrible,” I answered again. I didn’t think about what she meant to teach me with sourbee honey, only that she pulled a mean prank. I realized now that this was contradictory to her spirit as we both watched the far away planet gently spin on.

 “Our planet was beautiful, is beautiful,” Mamu corrected herself. “The sourbees make their honey for themselves, they love it more than wine.” Her voice lilted in a giggle, something I hadn’t heard since we came to the evacuation satellite. I squeezed her hand back, thinking I understood what point she meant to make.

 “It’s nearly time, Sendrea,” My father appeared beside us, the bitter smell of the colonist’s coffee on his clothes. My mother nodded slowly, never taking her tear colored eye off home.

 I watched one in a gray Interstellar Policar uniform pass in the window’s reflection. They looked at us with a flat, bored face. The woman we watched now glared down a few Quatton youths exchanging meal coupons for TUA Credits. Something we learned quickly was no matter the color of their uniform; blue, gray, black, even green, they were to be respected and obeyed.

At home, we called these strangers colonists. It wasn’t a creative nickname for them, but they were too proud to be human for us to call them that. We had space travel before they were here, we knew our own anatomy and had our own colleges and schools and cities before they were here. Our people policed ourselves and maintained our own laws before they landed in our grass. We’d been among the stars and met them on distant moons years before they taught us astronomy in our own classrooms.

 “The colonists don’t like the honey either,” My mother went on. I nodded as if I needed the rest of her explanation.

Very long days, red grass that lived in the morning and died at night, bitter honey. Our planet had stagnant pools of water from rain, our rivers were few but long and wide before reaching a single massive sea. Planetary natives or ‘Quattons’, as the humans from the Empire called us, spent however many ancient years becoming accustomed to this. In our schools, they explained concepts of our photosynthetic skin and white hair that we had understood since we were children.

 The countdown slipped into double digits, the crowd around us grew.

 My father put his hand on my shoulder. He had a hood pulled over his face, but his grip trembled and his shoulders shook. I knew not whether it was sorrow, anger, or a toxic mix of both.

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 “The skin of natives to D-354, or Solum Quattour, contains cells similar to *E. crispate* from Earth1. The sea lettuce slug’s digestive system allows it to…” Professor Dailey trailed off his statement and scanned the bored panels of students. “Ms. Furl, what does the digestive system allow it to do?”

 “I don’t know what the slug does, but I know what I do,” Hanette leaned on her hand, propping her elbow on the table. The class laughed quietly, careful not to offend the professor. Dailey gave her an impatient scowl.

“Quattons process the chloroplasts thriving in rotgrass and deposit them in skin cells. This makes the most of the long days and few food sources.” She rattled off in a bored sigh something the rest of our xenobiology class already knew, though some wondered what ‘sea lettuce’ was and what Dailey meant by ‘slug’.

 Dailey nodded to the body of students that he was so clearly an unwanted outsider in, pointed a finger to the anatomical model on his board, and continued his broken record lecture. The bald colonist with dark skin like furlwood bark stood in heavy contrast to the studentry’s cloudy white waves of hair and gleaming blue ‘monoeyes’ as he called them.

 A gesture of his dainty hand shifted a projection slide, showing a silhouette of an androgynous native with four arms outstretched and large hands spread as if reaching. Two sketches of rotgrass lie on either side, the bright green on one and the warm red on the other.

 “*P. vermiculo*, or rotgrass grows in abundance wherever it can take root,” He clicks a control at his terminal, highlighting a yellow circle around both grasses. “Each living thing on Solum Quattour depends on them for sustenance because…” Dailey scans the auditorium again and settles on me. “Why, Ms. Baulk?”

 “There are few other plants that adapted to the rotgrass fungus as well as it did,” My response is rehearsed from years of health classes. “Native organisms who eat it have plenty of food, but have to keep doing so to keep from getting sick themselves.”

 He pauses then continues, “Yes.” The professor sounds uncomfortable but clicks again at his terminal and changing his slide to a few more native species.

 I never took notes, I never saw anyone else take them either. Even when he tried awkwardly going over our species’ reproductive system, the class held no interest besides a few well-warranted brown blushes.

 And we would all go home, not knowing that in less than one Earth1 Standard Year every living citizen would be carted away to this clinically white and silver satellite. We would walk in the sun, eat our dinner, listen to our news, unaware of how quickly this planet failed to be of use to the humans who usurped it.

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 The strange voice with the strange accent counted down from thirty and my mamu squeezed my hand. We stared at this red and blue home dotted with spots of gray, abandoned cities. People crowded around us, the population silent save for the loud voice counting twenty-eight, twenty-seven, twenty-six...

 I felt someone push against my back. I heard a babe whimper. My mother coughed again, so father and I huddled closer to her wheelchair with hands holding hers and pressing into her small shoulders.

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 “Sometimes we get the rotgrass fungus, colonists call it red thread,” A native doctor explained. At the time, we were wealthy enough to afford avoiding human practices. Mother’s fatigue, the discoloration on her legs, how her body thinned out was because of their invasive strain of weak grass.

 “On Earth1, trees and large plants have great longevity. Our species is similar, but our grass has a resistance to the fungus. Since we eat it, we have a resistance like all the other animals,” He stuffed one hand into his coat pocket. “They brought their grass with them to try crosspollinating the immunity. It’s much weaker to the fungus that’s plentiful here, Mr. Baulk.” He sounded very solemn and nervous as he spoke to my father, pinching at his pale blue coat and looking between Poppo and us just outside the room. Everyone in the room knew how additive digestion worked. “Some of that E1 grass might’ve mixed with-“

 “I understand,” Poppo was gruff. His face was harder and more chiseled then, even just a short while before we came to the satellite. My father finished their exchange, I didn’t listen to the rest. The ruling was she would live with very painful arthritis, the medication could help with sleeping and restricting the fungus to her legs. Hopefully she would get old with Poppo and I.

 We installed stone paths through the woods around our country house. I pushed behind her, a stockier and blank version of my mother before the rot. Long strips of gray through the crimson expanse, broken with gray trunked trees and masses of green sourbee hives. Blue still water rippled as a fish dipped a fallen sourbee from the surface. I looked in the mirrored entryway whenever I wheeled her back in, imagining the younger Sendrea and Brannie Baulk trailing in behind us.

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 “10,” The voice heralded the end. Looking over, tears stained my mother’s eye red. Her fingers trembled around mine and she made a choked sob.

 “Mamu, did you like sourbee honey?” I struggled to ask, finding tears tucked in my own face. I couldn’t see the planet turn, time felt very slow and still. Poppo squeezed my shoulder again.

 “I loved it,” She sobbed, laughing very faintly. There was a chorus of choked whines in the throng behind us, beside us. The observation deck was thick with a heavy melancholy, like a funeral before a death. I leaned toward my father before he moved to my mother’s other side, the two of us like simpering sentinels against the end of the world.

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I remember again as I read a history of the Terran United Allegiances. My people’s history is whittled down to a footnote about the TUA’s exploitation, the rancid and infected grass they brought with them, their strings of business and real estate failing as colonists lost interest in a planet with few beaches and too much sun. Our leaders petitioned for renewed independence and were subjected to defamation lawsuits then imprisoned for insubordination.

Frequent attempts to free them led to stronger and stronger restrictions on planetary natives to Solum Quattour, though these aren’t in history books. News of our presidents, kings, and my own chairman were kept from us. News slowly trickled into dwindling native journalism about failing tourism. Plans to evacuate and destroy came soon after and Solum Quattons would be treated as foreigners where ever we might roam.

 I would be here two standard E1 years from now, this dirty apartment three systems away, remembering this loss again and again. A photo of my mother in her final weeks, her pale mint skin stained with red speckles and her eye a weak, watery blue pinned above my textbooks and medical journals. My arms are tight around my trunk, the whirr of factories and choking dust trying to subdue nested memories. It’s funny to think there was a time when I didn’t know you could see or taste air.

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 The explosion was silent. We all expected some a massive cathartic bang to echo back to our protective prison two terameters away. We, gathered in premature remembrance, heard nothing but our own sorrowful gasps while Solum Quattor burned away its own atmosphere.

 “So, this is how the world ends,” My father croaked while hunks of rock bounced vainly away from the station’s shields. Myself and those around us, we finished the phrase in our heads. The surviving populace of a world was all lined up against stories and stories of railing to watch rubble fly and bounce away into some asteroid belt or burn off on an alien world. We, like those endless boulders and pebbles, were vagrants in this universe.

 “Bye, bye,” A child’s voice whimpered in its naiveté.