

## A Wilder's Farewell

Meg Charest, 25, Hardy Girls

My tenth grade English class weeps when we read Act Three of Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*. Everyone except me, that is, because my eyes are rolled back in my head so far I have a better chance of getting eye strain than of shedding even a single tear. I grit my teeth at bubbly kazoo noises made by wet lines of snot being sucked back into their respective sinuses as Emily Webb bids her loved ones and the world goodbye in burdensome particulars.

I slam *Our Town* shut, smacking it down on my desk. Emily is annoying. Actually, everyone in Grover's Corners is annoying, but Emily, with her blindness to the delight of her environment until circumstance sweeps it out from beneath her, makes me want to shred the waxy covers of my paperback into a squall of trite confetti. I think the self-proclaimed brightest student in school would possess the basic capacity to realize the world. But she's too late. Every bit of the world, so much of which we won't get to know. She misses it all.

Startled by my outburst, my English teacher, Mr. Sims' eyebrows knot together. Ridges of disapproval gnarl into his slick forehead. He grumbles about respect and school property before placing my copy of the play back in my hands. I fold my arms coolly instead of asking questions he has no answers to. He looks relieved. Mr. Sims' face softens when he turns back toward the lamby eyes of his dutiful, teary students who eagerly swallow the bait when he asks some question about how Emily "humanizes the notion of existential tragedy."

"I just think Wilder's portrayal of nostalgia is so *timeless. Exquisite*, really," Taylor Porter crows, her eyes hungry for Mr. Sims' endorsement of her assessment. Timeless. What an idea, transcendent relevance, even in this moment. My gaze wanders to the windows and the stewy haze outside. Today is the third day of the second week. Double digits, baby. On day ten, our external temperature surpasses 130 degrees. Gasoline prices rounded fourteen dollars per gallon yesterday, and water must be at least twice that. But I can't find any. Fisher and Indie can't either, so there's no way to know for sure. The latest report says between five and six-and-a-half weeks remain, according to the latest models. Timeless. This moment is anything but.

*These are unprecedented times! Scientists are working 'round the clock to find the solution to the smog threatening our very existence. The Chicago Cubs will play the Little Rock Rays indoors tonight at the Exxon Megaplex.* The TV is on again, blaring cable news, when I arrive home from school. Fisher, stretched out along the length of the sleeper sofa, dozes in the screen's glare.

"If they didn't cancel baseball when Tampa fell into the ocean, I guess it's no big deal to finish the series before the oxygen runs out." This is Indie. They always enter a room so quietly. I still jump and shudder almost every time, even eighteen months into our relationship. Indie takes a fistful of my ponytail, turning me so my face is an inch from theirs. They kiss me—gentle and quick, their lips arching into a grin upon contact. It is a tender reflex by now. I wonder if I will know when it is the last time.

The kiss makes me think again of English class and Emily. What was it about *Our Town*? About *her*? Did my classmates find romanticism in all of this end-times morbidity? Did they need to over intellectualize the fact that in less than two months we will all run out of resources and die unless the scientists can find a compound to dissolve the decades of damage that created the pernicious smog? Or is it that when we feel powerless sometimes the easiest thing to do is what we have always done? Go to school; go to work; watch the news. Read a play published in 1938 because it's canon; watch baseball because *dammit if on the precipice of extinction we aren't still Americans.*

I don't know. A reality aside from my rage and grief feels beyond my capacity. I am not Emily, a newly-minted angel saying a final farewell on a path toward heaven. I am faceless, reconciled with waking each morning to continue a long goodbye to my beloved home. I am not Emily, but, if I were, I would implore others, in these impossible parting weeks, to take that famed "one last look" the way I see it.

One last look. A look through savvy eyes at our Earth home turned like grains of sand on a beach eroded by the receding tide. This is a world constantly and irreversibly shifting, carved away, remixed, and redeposited until what remains is delicate in excess of viability. One last touch of wiggling toes in warming seas, a soft dip through the surface of the marine wonders too grand to chart, but fragile enough to damage and pollute beyond repair. Goodbye to crustaceans and fish. Goodbye to

plankton so tiny and whales so magnificent. Goodbye to all that made their presence known, and all the living beings who endure as forever mysteries. Goodbye to lonely ocean ice and goodbye to effervescent reefs rendered still.

One last look at clear blue skies that watched my memories become and the Milky Way that heard my dreams. Goodbye to the spilling flush of the rising sun and to her brilliant descent. Will we realize when it's done? Goodbye to rainfall, sudden and sure. Goodbye to first snow and crisp autumn, to solstice magic and deep freeze. Goodbye to all it promised—to the endless roaming days of an un-frightened future and to *forever is a long time*. Goodbye to fears solved by a held hand and *I love yous* longer than numbered years. Long live *you've got time* and *maybe someday* as a merciful surprise.

*It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.*