

## The Wanderer

Danny threw the tennis ball up, watching it slowly rotate as it slowed its ascend and drop back into his hand. He adjusted his aim and tossed it once more, trying to hit the painted yellow circle on the ceiling. It rarely took him many tries. It was meant to resemble the sun. Danny wasn't quite sure how much he believed it anymore. He had a hard time envisioning that the sun had streaks of pink and orange. Was it really lined with perfect triangles? His mom had always told him that. But she'd never seen the sun either, so she wasn't too reputable a source. His grandfather was the only one in their family who'd ever seen the sun. The stars. The sky. He'd been a carpenter before the outbreak. He had always told them about the outside world, but exclaimed how dangerous it was. He had described a cheetah to Danny once when he was a kid and Danny kept trying to leave the bunker. His grandpa yelled at him about following the rules. His mother had sided with him. He'd never tried to leave the bunker again.

Every night after that his grandpa would tell him bedside stories about the outside world. How the world had woken up and the sky was on fire. How all the world's technology had turned against the people. How the rivers and seas drained, and the crops all died. How the world essentially fell apart overnight. He told a new story every single night, until he put his back out and never recovered enough to sit by Danny's bed at night like he'd always done. He'd tell Danny about how he misses being able to go to a hospital and being taken care of.

“...but I did it for you and your mother, Danny. I did all of this for *you*.” He’d said. Danny couldn’t help the feeling of guilt in the bottom of his stomach when he thought about all the times he’d tried to sneak out of the bunker behind his back.

Danny caught the ball again, this time stopping his mindless movement of tossing the ball. He spun it in his hand, letting his fingers run over the worn green fabric. It seemed like an artifact. A distant remnant of the world he never knew. But it wasn’t an artifact. It was a tennis ball. It belonged to his grandfather, then his mother, and now him. But there wasn’t a person who’d see it after him. Not a soul who would know of him or the tennis ball. That tied him to it, in a philosophical way. They were both made up of the same matter, yet they would both be unknown, undiscovered. Danny would stay in the bunker until his death. Funny. The tennis ball would stay intact longer than him. His body would decay without anyone even knowing he existed.

“At least you get to live.” He’d said, before telling stories of kids that wished they could’ve lived in Danny’s place.

But what was the point of it? Every single day was spent lying in bed or rereading the same book that he and his mother had read as children. There was nothing tying him to a life in the bunker. No future, no plans, nothing. He was living just to live, his body a hollow shell with no real soul inside. How was he meant to reach for the stars he would never even see? He let the ball roll out of his hand onto the floor.

He pulled himself off the bed, hearing the wooden frame creak. The cold concrete felt warmer than usual. The lights seemed brighter than usual. He didn't pay it any attention. He left the room, walking past his mother's room. The door was open, but she was nowhere in the room. Danny continued walking down the hallway, each step triggered his mind to tell him to turn around. Still, he walked, each pace closer to the door he took the butterflies in his stomach seemed to dissolve. He stepped on the first step, imagining the stars. He stepped on the second step, imagining the sea. He finally stepped on the top step, imagining the air. Would it smell like smoke? Would there be no air? Would his lungs simply collapse the second he breathed it in? He turned the handle of the door. The door creaked loudly as it opened. Danny heard his mother calling his name, her voice filled with panic. He pushed the door open, nonetheless.

He wasn't fully sure what he was expecting. Maybe he was expecting the sky to be ablaze. Or maybe he would step out of the bunker and fall into nothingness. But that didn't happen. He stepped out of the bunker into silence. The sky was a certain color of blue that he'd never seen before. It was bright and full. The only blue he'd ever seen was a faded, tired teal that had been the color of his walls for as long as he could remember. He squinted his eyes and raised his arm to shield them. The sun was blinding. It was brighter than the too-bright lights in the bedroom hallway. Brighter than the make-shift sun on the ceiling above his bed. It wasn't perfectly circular. It didn't have perfect triangles encircling it. It didn't have streaks of orange. It was just a giant ball of light. There was no color. It was so strange looking in comparison to the pictures in his mind. But it was so much better than all the warped ideas of the sun in his imagination.

And the ground. It was different. It was different from anything he'd ever seen. It collapsed under his feet. Everywhere he stepped, it seemed like he was pushing down the world.

It wasn't solid, like the concrete floors he'd walked on all his life. It was covered in something strange. It was like a fur coat wrapped around the world. The grass was soft and imperfect. Some strands were longer than others. Some were strong. Some broke as soon as Danny's fingers made contact with them. He looked up into the sky once more. This time, he didn't have to squint. The sun seemed less bright. Was that even possible? He didn't know if he was dreaming. Maybe this was just a hallucination. It was a good one, if it was. Danny was unsure of why he was enjoying this. This should have confused him. He should have been angry. The sky was supposed to be on fire. There wasn't meant to be any remains of the earth. Was it a lie? Was everything a lie? But why? Why did they even live in the bunker? The bunker was safe. It would hold for as long as it needed to. They could grow potatoes endlessly. But why did it exist in the first place? If there was nothing wrong with the earth in the first place, why was the bunker created? Danny inhaled the air, ensuring that it was breathable. It was so much better than the bitter air that had been stuck in the bunker for decades. It smelled like plants. Like the soil in that he'd grown potatoes out of. It smelled like waking up in the morning, completely rested. It smelled like freedom.

“Danny!”

Danny whipped his head around, making eye contact with his mother. Neither of them spoke; he just looked into her eyes, looking for some emotion, some reaction. Her eyes moved off of Danny and around him. She looked at the sun. It blinded her. But it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. She slowly ascended the stairs out of the bunker and into the world. The real one. She stepped on the muddy ground, tripping over her own feet. She shook her head,

repeating the word 'no' over and over again. Her hand rose to cover her mouth, her head tilting in curiosity. She looked into the sky, into its endless blue, and then looked at her son.

"No...this isn't...Danny, come back inside, we have to go back inside!" She said. She put her arms on his shoulders, shaking him to try and knock some sense into him, but it wouldn't work. He'd already attained the sense she was trying to give him. The sky wasn't on fire. It never was. The air didn't make his lungs collapse. It never would have. She shook him violently. Danny looked into her tearful eyes and shook his head.

"Let's go." Danny mumbled, taking his mother's hand. She stopped shaking him and let him guide her. He walked slowly through the grass, taking in the environment he'd been convinced was simply a memory. He wandered; he held his mother's hand and they wandered. They wandered through the woods. She held her hand out and touched the bark; it was unusual. Then again, everything about this world was unusual. And then they left the woods and found themselves in an open field again. Danny looked to his left and saw people. A little boy and his mother. The boy sat on a seat attached to rope, the rope attached to a metal beam. He swung back and forth, feeding off of the momentum from his mother pushing him forward. She looked over and saw them. She smiled and waved them over.

Danny pulled his mother towards the others. They walked towards the contraption. Danny sat on the seat next to the boy. The boy stopped swinging for a moment and looked at him. He smiled and laughed, extending his hand out to wave at Danny. Danny smiled back at him, waving back. He felt his body move forward as his mother began to push him on the swing, copying the other mother. He looked over at the kid once more. He was gone. The kid and his

mother had vanished. They had vanished, leaving Danny alone on the swing, rocking back and forth in wonder, pushed by his mother, as if he were the little boy. He was the little boy. He was a child to this world. He soared through the air on the swing, as if he could reach up and touch the sky if he tried.

Word Count: 1715 Words