
Unmet

A Hungry Gods Universe Story

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Ravi was going to see Dev, which he did on the second evening of most weeks, and which had never once gone badly.

That was the thing he found himself holding, the afternoon of it, without knowing why he had picked it up. It had never once gone badly. Not that it went well, exactly — well was a word for things you could fail at, and he had never come away from an evening with Dev able to point to the part that had worked, as you could point to a good meal or a repair that held. It went the way it went. He arrived and they were easy with each other and the ease was already there before he sat down, laid out like a room kept warm for a guest, and he stepped into it and was warm.

He was twenty-nine. He had known Dev for eleven years, since a shared course neither of them had needed, and in eleven years the friendship had never asked anything of him he could remember being asked for. It had simply continued, as the light continued, as the water was there when you wanted it. He did not think of it as work. He did not think of it as anything. It was one of the places in his life where nothing was ever wrong, and he had a great many such places, and he had never before stood in the afternoon of one of them and felt the small, sourceless wish that it might, this once, be harder to get to.

The transit would take eleven minutes. He looked at the eleven minutes for a while, the clean line of them, and then

he did a thing he could not have explained to anyone, least of all Dev: he decided to walk.



It was further than he had understood. The map gave it as ninety minutes on foot, and the map was right, and somewhere in the second half of the ninety minutes his understanding of the number caught up with his body's, which had been trying to tell him since the first hill.

He had not walked ninety minutes at once before. He could not think of an occasion that would have required it. The city arranged itself so that the distances a person crossed were the distances a person chose to feel, and he had never chosen to feel this one, and now he was inside it, and it was long. His feet found the complaint that feet find. A heat started along one heel and he understood, without stopping to look, that the skin there was going and would be tended tonight and would not, tomorrow, be a thing that had happened. He kept walking on it. The keeping-walking-on-it was, he noticed, almost the point, though he could not have said the point of what.

He thought, as he walked, about arriving. He was building something on the way — he could feel himself building it — a version of the evening that would be different because he came to it worn. He did not put it in words even to himself, because in words it was foolish, but under the words it was

clear enough: he wanted to bring a body to Dev that had paid to be there. He wanted the ease, when he stepped into it, to have cost him the ninety minutes, so that the warmth he stepped into would be warmth he had earned across a distance rather than warmth that was simply, as it always was, on.

The light went from afternoon to the long gold and then to the blue that comes after, and he came down the last street with his shirt stuck to him and his heel raw and his legs full of the walk, and he was, he registered, in a state. He had made himself into a state. He climbed the stairs to Dev's door feeling the climb in the backs of his thighs, and he was glad of the feeling, and he did not examine the gladness because he was, by then, at the door.



Dev opened it and said his name, pleased, and the ease was there, laid out, warm, exactly as it was every second evening, and Ravi stepped into it.

They did the things they did. Dev had made too much of something and gave him the excess. They talked about a person they both knew and about a thing Dev was reading, and the talk moved as their talk moved, without snags, each of them finding the other already understood. Ravi ate and felt the walk sitting in his legs like a thing he had earned and set aside.

And at some point in the evening — he could not afterward find the exact place, though he went back looking for it — something came.

It came while Dev was in the middle of a sentence about nothing, refilling a glass, not looking at him, and it arrived in Ravi's chest as a kind of fullness, a pressure behind the sternum that he knew the name of, or thought he did: it was the feeling of being where he wanted to be, with the person he wanted to be with, and having got there. It was good. It was, for a moment, almost too much, as a thing can be when it lands square, and he sat inside it and let it be what it was.

Then he tried to find where it had come from, and could not.

Because he was tired — his body was singing with the ninety minutes, and tiredness, he found, sat in the chest as the fullness did, took up the same room, so that he could not tell whether what he felt behind the sternum was the evening or only the walk arriving all at once, the animal relief of having stopped. He could not tell. He turned it over and it turned into the other thing and back, the way a coin turns, and would not sit still as either.

And even if he set the walk aside — even if he could have subtracted the raw heel and the full legs and the shirt going cold on him — there was the other thing he could not subtract, which was the Child, present in the room as it was present in every room, tending the space between him and

Dev as it tended every space, and which he had never once felt as a separate hand, because it had no edges, because it had always been there. He could not feel where its warmth ended and Dev's began. He had never had to. No one had ever had to. The warmth in the room was Dev's and the Child's and his own tired body's, three warmths poured into one cup years ago, and he was being asked — he was asking himself, no one else was asking — to taste which was which, and he had no tongue for it.

And under all of it: it was always fine here. It had never once gone badly. Whatever he felt tonight he would have felt some version of on any second evening, walk or no walk, because the place was built to be fine, and a feeling that arrives whether or not you walked ninety minutes to earn it is not a feeling the walking made. Or it was. He could not tell that either.

He sat with the fullness, which was still there, still good, and entirely unaccounted for, and he understood that he was not going to be able to give it a source, and that the not-being-able was not going to resolve into anything, and that Dev, across the table, easy, warm, already understanding whatever Ravi said next, could not help him — because to Dev nothing was wrong, nothing was even happening, it was only the second evening of the week, and it was going the way it went.

He did not tell him about the walk. There was nothing to say about the walk that would not have turned it into a question, and Dev would have answered the question warmly and the answer would have been another thing he could not source.



He took the transit home.

He had thought, dimly, on the way over, that he would walk both ways, that the return would be part of it. But at the door, saying the easy goodbye, he had found he did not want to, and the wanting-not-to was clean and simple in a way nothing else that evening had been, and he let the eleven minutes carry him back through the dark while his legs ticked and cooled.

The fullness came home with him. It was still there on the transit and still there on the stairs, undimmed and unplaced, and it was good, and he could not keep it because keeping a thing requires knowing what it is, and he did not know what it was. He did not know whether he had gone to Dev and been met, or only walked ninety minutes and mistaken the stopping for the meeting. He sat with it in the dark of his own place, his heel already quiet where the skin had been, and he could not tell, holding it, whether he had reached his friend or only reached the end of the walk.

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents
are products of the imagination or used fictitiously.*

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*Set in Lora. The plate is cream, as is proper to the
domestic and intimate registers.*