

The Most Beautiful Sunset I've Ever Seen

By Vanessa Koens

This world is desolate, void of human life—or any life, really. The sand is a ruddy shade of merlot, climbing over itself in swift waves to create large dunes and plateaus of unforgiving, hard, cracked earth. A brisk breeze blows across the land, sending grains of this sand skidding in curls of maroon dust.

In the distance, one craggy red cliff rises, jutting into the sky and standing tall, as if it has been there since the beginning of time. Maybe it has, I don't know, maybe it will stand there until the end of time too. Beyond it, the sun slowly disappears on the horizon, turning the sky a shade of vivid orange. The air is beginning to cool now that the sunlight is fading.

In this place, there is only me. Me, in my torn clothes that were once shades of grey and brown but are now dusted red from grime. A single strip of purple cloth is wrapped around my head, protecting my crown from the heat of the day and my lungs from the grains of sand in the wind. In the pocket of my ragged slacks are my last possessions, the only things I've managed to save after all this time.

I am tired; my back is beginning to crook, and my heart is slowing to a dull thump... thump... thump in my chest. As I crest the dune before me, my knees give out, and I spill down the other side. Sand and dust snake their way between my clothes and my skin.

I tumble to a slow stop at the base of the dune, where the rolling sand meets the rigid, cracked clay. Exhausted, I sit up, leaning back on the dune for support. The sand is soft and warm, cradling my weak muscles as if this is the place they belonged. An

expansive view of the brilliant sunset opens before me. This is not so bad a place to stop and rest, I think.

From my pocket, I pull out my treasures. First, a wedge of cheese; the last ration I have. After I eat this, there will be nothing left. Without anything to keep me, I know I don't have the willpower to make it to the next sunrise. It'll be all over.

With a weary sigh, I shove the cheese into my mouth.

The second thing that emerges is a photo. The edges are worn and ripped, with a corner missing. On the left side, the film has begun to peel from the photo, leaving a hole in the sheen. The image is faded but still familiar. A warm feeling spreads through my body as I stare at the face smiling back at me.

Oh, she's beautiful. Her wild hair is pulled up in a ponytail, and her beaming smile spreads to her eyes. She always had a contagious sort of grin, and if I wasn't so tired, I would be smiling right along with her. She is dressed for adventure like always, with a cotton t-shirt, cargo pants, and a backpack.

This photo is years old now, but Wren had the kind of face that never seemed to age. I can picture her face now, the one I had seen just a few short days ago. How many now...I can't seem to remember. Her eyes were closed then, she was at peace, but her features didn't look a day older than they did in this photo.

When we started the expedition, what seemed like forever ago now, we never thought this was what would become of us. Deserted in an ocean of endless sand. We knew there was a chance, but...it was one of those scenarios that seemed impossible until it happened. Now, here I am, alone, destined to die in the dunes.

I miss her more than I can put into words, but I know Wren is better off where she is now than here with me. She was strong, but not strong enough for this place. Neither of us are. We started this adventure together, and she gave it her all to stay with me but I understood. I understand. She had to say goodbye, and I had to let her. I stayed with her for as long as I could, kneeling next to her in the dune.

By the time I left, the desert breeze had brushed enough of that burgundy sand over her that I could be certain she wasn't there anymore, not in the way that mattered. So, I had to move on.

At the time, there had been a chance of finding a way out of this place, of finding a way back home. Wren would've wanted me to find it instead of wasting away at her side. But now I know better. There is no way out. Not with breath still in my lungs.

It is better this way, though. There is no use kidding myself; I am never making it home. Even if I did, I have had a good life, and it would never be the same. No, this was better. This was good.

My head falls against the dune as I hold the photo up. My arm quivers from the effort. In the fading sunset, it is getting harder and harder to make out Wren's features, but that's okay. I'll see her face soon enough.

A gust of wind breezes over me, leaving speckles of red granules in my lap. Soon, I'll be buried beneath the sand, like she'd been. That's okay, though. This way of going is not so terrible; not as terrible as it could be.

I don't have the strength to move or hold myself up anymore. My arm falls, and the photo lands in my lap. My muscles groan and my stomach growls. I am hungry—starving—but no amount of food will save me now. My hands are calloused and

scratched, and my skin is red and welted from the sun. Strange, how the burns don't hurt now. I stare at them for a long time, but the pain that has lingered there for days has disappeared.

With nothing left to do, I shift my focus to the sunset.

The sun is almost gone now. But I use what is left of it to take in the world around me. It's a quiet beauty, this place. Harsh, aggressive, and unwelcoming at times, but also stunning. The peaceful silence, the way the sand glitters like glass in the sun, it's a sight I have no words for.

This really isn't such a bad way to go, I decide. The sunset turns pink as it reflects off the dunes on the horizon. The rays dance across my face, warming my skin. The sky darkens to cobalt around the sun as the curtains close on another day. Yet, the sun seems to sparkle one last time, just for me, like a wave goodbye.

It really is a beautiful sunset. The most beautiful sunset I've ever seen.