

## Two Men on a Sidewalk by Junko Anderson

I was disgruntled when I boarded the sidewalk, having already lost precious minutes to a small mistake at the office. My words were sharp when I gave my address to it, sharper when I told it to just go already. Just as the paving stones purred to life, another man ran on. He was out of breath, red faced. He doffed his well worn fedora and gave me a large smile.

He spoke his own address and settled into a comfortable stance.

After a moment of silence when it became apparent neither of our destinations were coming soon, he spoke again.

"Lovely weather this evening."

I gave him a look that he did not catch, his eyes locked on some point in the satellite strewn sky visible above the city.

"It always is," I replied.

He threw me an intrigued glance. "What if it wasn't?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if we didn't always have such agreeable weather? What if we didn't have such control over all? What if things were unpredictable again?"

My skin crawled at his implications, and I found myself shuffling towards the edge of the sidewalk furthest from him.

"Again?" I echoed, my voice hollow. He turned to me completely now, his briefcase by his feet and his fedora gripped tightly in his hands.

"Yes, again," he urged. "Did you know there was a time when we couldn't predict the week's weather? Much less control it? Can you imagine?"

I shook my head vehemently. "No, sir, I can't."

He stepped forward, his eyes outshining the blinking lights of the aeromobiles.

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"There was a time when there were no aeromobiles, no cities in the sky, not even satellites! We had not the rudimentary technology to even look at ourselves from thousands of miles away! Is that not incredible?"

"It sounds awful!"

He stepped closer again, now spreading his arms to gesticulate wildly.

"It's not awful. It's wonderful! Look at the progress we've made! We live in an age where the planet is as far from us as the sky! Where creatures with no wings are given the means to fly! We spend summers on the moon, and we retire to distant galaxies in our old age! Are we not a wondrous thing?"

"We are what we are! And this is what we are!"

He shook his head, smiling gleefully. "But don't you see!" he persisted, "We are not simply as we are! We built ourselves from the ground up until we had the strength to launch ourselves into the atmosphere! We are not as we are, but as we *were*! And as we were, we did not always have such lovely weather!"

With a fast movement, he took my wrist and backpedaled, pulling me after him. I tore out of his grasp and he lurched after me, although he did not make contact again. He smiled sadly.

"I would not wish you to fall from the sidewalk," he said. I looked behind me and realized that I had stepped to the edge of the sidewalk, and was terrifyingly few inches away from a fall to Earth.

"Thank you," I said curtly.

Turning back to the city, he murmured, "Think nothing of it."

Silence fell between us once more, and it seemed he was readying himself to step off the sidewalk. Indeed, after a few moments, it slowed to a stop in front of a street some three hundred

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feet above the ocean. He departed, nearly without a word, but at the last second he turned. With one foot on and one foot off, he said to me, "Sir, do not fear that which is different. If anything, fear that which is constant." The sidewalk spoke its soft warning, "Please step on or off the sidewalk." The man complied, and went on his way down the road.

As the sidewalk came to life once more, I noticed that his briefcase remained lying on its side about two feet from where he had stood. I trotted towards it, my scarf fluttering. I picked it up and yelled, "Sir! Sir, your briefcase!" I lifted it over my head, trying in vain to get someone to see it, but no one noticed. As I shook it, something fell out. It was thin, no thicker than a hair. It was white, with some sort of print on it. It was almost illegible, but oddly familiar. It took me a moment to place it as English, but written in such a way as I had never seen. The shapes were irregular, no particular pattern to their spacing. It seemed impossible that a computer had printed this. After much hardship, I was able to see it was a schematic for some incomprehensible machine. At the foot of the page, written in that same, near unreadable font, it read, "Do not play with the toys of gods."

I looked up at the street over the ocean, dismayed to find I was already too far inland to see it. The night air whipped about me, thrashing at the paper in my hands. A noise unlike any other rang through the world, like the groans of a thousand dying men. Electricity sparked through the sky, and I screamed. I tried to find a falling street, a tumbling sidewalk, even a burning satellite, but nothing more seemed to want to disturb the air. Nothing but the moisture.

A drop of something chilling hit my forehead. Another on my nose. On my cheek. They hit me in faster succession, more and more. The paper began to sag in my hands, and I turned my face up to the heavens. Water, light and icy, was falling from the sky.

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The paper, now heavy with moisture, tore in my hands, sliding wetly across the sparking sidewalk. The briefcase rattled in its wake, both threatening to fall off the edge. As they were lost to the destruction of the sky, I imagined I could hear the man saying, "Lovely weather this evening."