

Series 0

Issue 3

Nowhereverse Tales



There are parallel universes, other worlds, each with their own histories, their own cultures, their own biologies. We feel the walls grow weak, sometimes: when the world seems thinner, when the light is just right, when things seem just a little bit off, and we imagine we can reach out, just a little bit...

In the midst of all this, in a lost corner inside the lost space between spaces, a new place is forming. Born from hidden desires and deep longings. A place to rest, a stop along the way for so many. In the middle of everywhere, this is Nowhere.

Maybe you found yourself here by circumstance. Maybe you got lost and came to find shelter. Maybe you sought us out. Regardless, we have a place for you, no matter where you are in your journey.

The light is always lit, and the door is always open.

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Letter from the editor

This issue concludes the three-part intro, courtesy of Justine. Sometimes I forget what life here looks like to "normal" people.

I think that's the reason why I'm here, though. Why all of us at the Lighthouse are here. We're all looking for our place.

One of the paradoxes I have to hold is that we all are both unique and not. Everyone has their thing: what drives them, what they're good at, what sets them apart. And yet, if the internet has taught me anything, it's that there's always someone else. Whatever we're feeling, someone else probably feels or has felt the same way.

That's how I got into writing, by the way. But that's a story for another time.

— Ronyo

Kitchen From Scratch, part 3

Thursday morning brought a new challenge.

Justine looked at the plastic bag in her hand and the strange blue-and-red nuts inside.

“Can you use these at all?” The Guldorian said. He was male, late middle-aged if the social cues were the same.

“What do you call them?” Courtney said.

He shrugged. “We just call them ‘Magic Fruit’; I honestly can’t remember the actual name.”

“How do you use them, normally?” Justine said. She pulled one nut out of the bag and rolled it between her fingers. It was a smooth but uneven texture, not unlike a chickpea or a cashew.

The Guldorian shrugged. “I couldn’t tell you. Sometimes we eat them straight, sometimes it’s blended up.”

Justine nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Courtney took a couple for herself. “I’ll see if I can find any more.” She smiled at Justine. “Just in case it’s a hit.”

Justine took the rest back to the kitchen and found a notepad.

“Dry, nut-like texture,” she muttered to herself. She put one on the counter, found a mallet, and smashed it.

“Crushes to powder,” she said as she wrote. “No oil.”

She took a whole one, popped it in her mouth, and gently crushed it with her molars.

She blinked.

She chewed a bit more.

“Definitely hints of cherry and mint,” she said. “Guess that’s where the name comes from.”

She took a deep breath. “I should be able to do something with this.”

“I can’t do anything with it,” Justine said with a groan.

██████████ and Courtney glanced at each other then back to Justine, slumped against the lighthouse wall.

“Well,” he began, “what have you tried?”

“Everything,” Justine said with a mild glare. “Crushed, garnish, purée...”

“Boil ’em, mash ’em, stick ’em in a stew?” ██████████ muttered, not as quietly as he thought if the impatient looks both women were giving him were any indication.

Justine sighed. “The texture is so at odds with the taste that I can’t make it fit into any dish I can think of.” She shrugged. “I’ll figure something out eventually. What is it, Friday night?” They nodded. “Then I’ve got two days to figure it out. How’re you holding up, Foxy?”

██████████ wiggled his hand. “Doing okay, I guess. Not nearly as sore.”

Courtney winced. “I’m sorry again ab—”

“Not. Your. Fault.” he interrupted. “Seriously, I’m doing okay.”

Courtney shook her head. “Still can’t believe I missed something this big.”

“There’s any number of reasons why anyone would have,” he answered. “Maybe they all died out. Maybe they’re in hiding. Maybe they’re on another planet? Maybe they just...”

Justine leaned back against the wall, finding it all too easy to tune ██████████ and Courtney out. She took another swing of her drink and...

She blinked. Slowly. That drink never made it to her mouth. She tried to lift her arm, but it didn’t cooperate. She tried to focus harder on it, only just now noticing how muddled everything had gotten. Like she was in a dream,

but one of those really disorienting dreams that came after she snoozed her alarm and went immediately back to sleep.

She tried to say something, do anything, but it was like her body had disconnected from her brain. She could barely make out the other two moving around, but she couldn't tell what they were doing. A large part of her didn't care.

Her body jolted to the side. Maybe someone pushed her? The muffled sounds around her had changed. It was making it hard to sleep. All she had to do was close her eyes and—

Everything snapped back into focus. She was on her side, and her neck was a bit sore from holding her head up. She sat up quickly, registering Courtney supporting her from one side.

Richard was there, at the railing, talking to a bird half his size that looked like a cross between a falcon and a vulture.

“You cannot feed here,” he said, and Justine could feel the truth in that even though it wasn't meant for her. “If that is your only purpose you are not welcome. Leave.”

With an otherworldly screech the bird took off and flew away, pausing every second or so to look back over its shoulder and screech at them again.

“Are you okay?” Courtney said quietly.

Justine shook her head. “Yeah, I...” She turned to look at her. “What was that?”

“An anti-phoenix,” she said. “It attacks its prey by dulling their awareness.”

“No, I...” She pointed at Richard. “What was that?”

“This is my domain,” Richard said. “It is my responsibility to make it a sanctuary.”

“If he says you aren’t welcome,” Courtney continued, “then you can’t be here. That’s why it left even though it didn’t want to.”

Justine nodded, filing the questions about metaphysical power away for later. “So what you’re saying is, with great responsibility comes great power?”

Richard guided Courtney and Justine toward the stairs. “I know you’re making a joke right now,” he said with a smile, “but you’re more right than you know.”

The doctor—Selah—held her hands on either side of Justine’s head, a faint blue glow surrounding them. “I’m not seeing anything abnormal,” she said gently. “So there’s no damage from the attack.”

Justine made a noncommittal noise.

Selah smiled sadly. “At least no physical damage.”

Justine nodded. “That’s good to know, at least,” she said quietly.

Selah pulled up a chair facing Justine and sat down. “How are you feeling about what happened?”

“Fine,” she said quickly. Too quickly. “Does this happen often?”

Selah shook her head. “And if it does happen to you again, you’ll probably snap out of it sooner.” She smiled slightly. “Humans are surprisingly resilient; now that your brain’s learned what this threat looks like, it’ll be quick to fight it off next time.”

Justine shrunk inside herself. “What if it doesn’t want to,” she said quietly.

“What was that?” Selah asked.

Justine stared at the floor and fidgeted with her hands.

“What you say doesn’t leave this room,” Selah said gently.

Justine took a deep breath. And let it out. “My brain is a real piece of work. I’m constantly questioning myself, questioning what I’m doing. I’m not doing it right. I’m doing it too right and people are going to hate me for it. I’m doing it right but I’m being too smug about it. I’m wasting

my life by being a cook. I've worked at Stanley's too long. I haven't worked there long enough. I'm doing it wrong. I don't know what I'm doing. This job in the Outpost is the best week I've had. This job is going to kill me and I need to get out now. I'm being too friendly and people will think I'm desperate. I'm not being friendly enough and people will think I'm a jerk."

She stopped to catch her breath and blinked a few tears away.

"It only had to turn my brain off. And for a brief moment..." She choked out something halfway between a sob and a laugh. "For one brief moment, I couldn't worry about anything."

"Because you couldn't think at all," Selah interjected.

"So?" Justine said, her voice rising. "It's like... being so tired and not being able to sleep. And then someone hits you with a taser. You can't move, you can barely breathe, but that's fine, because all you want to do is lay there."

She blinked back a few more tears and wiped away the rest. "And now I'm awake," she said bitterly. "And I can think again."

Selah let the moment sit. After a moment, she reached out and took Justine's hand. Justine didn't resist.

“You’re not alone,” she said softly. “Nearly everyone here has dealt with something like this at one point or another.”

“The attack or the anxiety?”

“Both.” Selah gripped her hand a little harder. “And I’m here to help with both.”

“Do you have anything to help me sleep?”

The whistling of the tea kettle stood in sharp relief to the otherwise silent kitchen. With a burst of mental effort, Justine switched off the burner and filled her mug. Slowly, she put her full mug on the kitchen island, pulled up a stool, and sat, her head on her arms, staring at the mug.

The doors opened, and Justine shot upright.

Dana waved sheepishly from the door. “How are you?”

Justine relaxed and motioned at the mug. “Apparently the magical sleep remedy the doctor ordered is chamomile tea.”

Dana smiled and slithered in. “She does that.”

“Want me to make you some?”

“No, thanks.”

Justine cocked her head. “Aren’t you usually asleep by now?”

Dana leaned against the island, all four elbows on the counter. “I wasn’t asleep yet, and then I got a text about what happened. Thought I’d check on you.”

Justine smiled and tried to push down the flash of annoyance. “I’m okay.”

“Okay?”

Her smile turned into a grimace. “Just okay.”

They sat in silence for a moment while Justine’s tea steeped.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Justine said finally. “I want to; you guys are the best, but...”

Dana shook her head. “It’s really not for everyone.” She scoffed. “I’ve lost count of how many people back home I’ve tried to recruit out here, but...”

Dana held out one of her hands; Justine took it.

“It’s not for everyone,” Dana reiterated, “and there’s no shame in admitting that. In the meantime...” She shifted nervously. “I know your culture has a lot of connotations with this; I’m offering this as a friend.”

“Okay,” Justine said. “What’s up?”

“If you don’t want to sleep alone, my room’s open to you. I’ll warn you that I keep it pretty cold.”

Justine smiled despite herself. “Thanks,” she said, “I’ll think about it.”

Saturday afternoon, the Guldorian walked into the kitchen. “You wanted to see me, Chef?”

Justine waved him over to the island. “Try this, tell me what you think,” she said, setting a plate in front of him.

The dish had a foundation of white rice with sliced, grilled chicken on top. A pale purple sauce was drizzled on top, and the whole dish was sprinkled with crushed Magic Fruit.

The Guldorian took a bite. He set his fork down, looked Justine in the eye, and said, “My mother used to make this.”

Justine blinked. “You’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “This is really good.” He took another bite, closed his eyes, and smiled. “Thank you.”

Justine blushed. “Glad I could help...”

He took the plate. “Is it okay if I...?”

Justine waved him on. “I’ll make sure to have more of the sauce at dinner tonight!”

“Thank you!” he said, and nearly bumped into Richard on his way out of the kitchen.

Richard looked at the retreating Guldorian and then back to Justine. “Got it working?”

Justine shrugged. “It felt mildly tropical, so I put it in a sauce with coconut milk and... I accidentally made a childhood dish?”

“Well, good job.”

Justine shook her head. “I don’t even know what I did.”

“You gave him a taste of home is what you did,” Richard said emphatically. “His life really sucks right now, and you just made it suck a whole lot less.”

“All I did was make a sauce,” Justine said quietly.

Richard leaned over the island. “Chef Justine,” he said just as quietly, “you and I both know that’s not true.”

Justine hesitated outside of Dana’s apartment door. She was probably asleep. There’s no way she meant what she said for more than one night.

“Shut up,” she told herself. With a deep breath, she stepped forward and knocked.

She waited a moment. And then another.

With a click that echoed in the silent hallway, the door opened. Dana was blinking away some sleep and leaning against the doorframe with both right arms. “Hi,” she said.

Justine smiled weakly. “Is that offer still open?”
Dana shoved the door open. “Of course it is.”

Sunday morning, Justine made her way down to the mechanical shop, breakfast for two in hand. A former U-Haul truck was elevated on the lift, yet Dana had stretched herself out to her full length, her tail coiled around a column for support. She was hunched over the engine holding a pair of pliers, a flashlight, and two spark plugs in each of her hands.

Justine set the plate down on what she hoped was a clean, stable surface. “I got your note,” she said.

“Thanks!” Dana said, barely turning towards her. “Sorry I couldn’t get away, but if this hunk of junk is going to be ready for later, I’ve got to inspect it while there’s still time to fix it.”

“And you’re...” She fumbled around the words. “...making yourself taller because?”

“We call it ‘standing on your tail,’ and it takes me less time to do that than to move this lift up and down, especially with this truck on it.” As if to demonstrate, Dana coiled her tail on the ground slightly, lowering herself

enough to inspect the engine from beneath. “See?” With that, she disappeared beneath the truck.

“Fair enough,” Justine said. “I brought sausage biscuits; hope that’s okay.”

“That’s great,” Dana said distractedly. After a second, her tail stiffened and she reappeared. “Wait, did you say ‘biscuits?’”

“Yeah,” Justine said, smiling nervously.

“You made biscuits?”

“Yeah...”

Dana shot over to the plate. “Girl, you are my hero,” she said, setting her tools down only as carefully as she needed to.

Justine smiled as she handed her a biscuit. “You don’t need to keep working on the truck?”

Dana waved her off. “Truck’s fine; I’m hungry.” She took a bite, and her whole body seemed to relax. “Thank you.” She took another bite and continued, “I haven’t told you about the time I came to your world, have I?”

“You mentioned it, but no.”

Dana nodded. “Like I said, I’d been living off those microwave sandwiches we had, but we were on our way into town to buy this truck. Anyway, we stopped at one

place, some fast food restaurant, and got breakfast.”

“You got biscuits?”

“Yeah. I was still feeling sick from... you know, from the change—”

“Because you were suddenly human?”

“Right, so I just told [REDACTED] to get the closest thing to what I usually ate. Kid says about three paragraphs worth of stuff that I’m just not hearing, then finally he passed me a paper wrapped sandwich, and...”

Justine smiled. “And you fell in love?”

Dana closed her eyes in bliss. “It was flaky, it was soft, it was moist, it was dense...” She opened her eyes and pointed to her current biscuit. “This is better, by the way; Richard mentioned the place we went must have been having a good day. I wanted to stop on the way back too—get some for later—but they apparently didn’t make them in the afternoon.”

Justine nodded. “Yeah, most places like that stop serving breakfast to make room for lunch.” She grabbed her own biscuit. “I’m glad you like these. You can’t get far as a cook in the South without being able to make them.”

.....

Justine tapped on the well-worn notebook and surveyed the group. “Everything should be in here,” she said in as business-like a tone as she could manage. “If you’ve got questions or whatever, you should all have my number.”

She turned to Courtney. “I don’t think there’s much else on our end; I wrote down some of the more important notes on what to look for in suppliers, but it sounds like this company should keep you going for a while. Just...” She winced slightly. “Just don’t skimp when it comes to fresh food. The difference in quality there is so high. Replace it with frozen or packaged, but cheap produce is cheap for a reason.”

She turned to the IT guy. “Can you get this digitized?”

He nodded. “In some way, yes.”

“Can you follow these recipes?”

“Yes, Chef.”

“And what are you never going to order?”

He sighed. “I’m never going to order a pallet of frozen meals, Chef.”

Everyone—himself included—had a chuckle at that.

Justine turned to Dana. “Keep this stuff clean,” she said. “Especially with it being consumer-grade equipment; it’s got to be maintained if it’s going to last.”

Dana nodded. “Any suggestions on professional-grade?”

Justine turned to look at Richard. “That’s going to depend on your long-term plans,” she said. “I’d research cafeterias and catering businesses; that’s the closest analog to what we did this week.”

Richard nodded in acknowledgement.

Justine looked around. “Then that’s all I’ve got,” she said with a shrug.

██████████ was the first to move. He shook her hand and pulled her into a hug. “It’s been fun, Chef.”

Courtney pulled her into a side-hug. “Hope we can see you again.”

“Me too,” Justine answered.

Dana paused about a foot away from her. Justine closed the gap. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Anytime, girl,” she answered.

Finally she was alone in the kitchen with Richard.

He handed her an envelope. “Your earnings from this week,” he said. “Plus a little something extra.”

Justine cracked it open. The check was larger than she expected, but a glance at the stub showed—“Eighty hours?”

“You were putting in at least ten hour days all week,” Richard explained. “And I’m including travel time.”

She got to the something extra and looked up at Richard sharply.

Richard smiled sadly. "It's real," he said. "I figure if nothing else, you can use it as leverage for whatever you do next. I don't expect you to accept it," he added with a frown, "but I'd be remiss if I didn't at least put it in writing."

Justine tried to smile. "Thanks, really," she said. With a sigh, she added, "but I'm definitely ready to go home."

Justine slipped into place between the other two line cooks at Stanley's.

"Good to see you, Justine," one of them said. "Have a good vacation?"

Justine thought about her answer for a moment. "It was an adventure," she said, hoping it sounded more positive than she felt.

Stanley took that moment to make his entrance. "Good afternoon, everyone."

"Boss," Justine acknowledged.

"I just wanted to take a minute and thank you all for all the hard work you do," he continued. "I know you all have plenty of opportunities, and I just want you to know that

the work you do here is appreciated.”

Justine bit her lip and focused on her work.

“Hey,” Alex said, walking up next to her, “are you okay?”

“Just fine,” she ground out.

“Well,” Alex said, “that onion isn’t.”

Justine blinked and looked down at the now thoroughly pulverized onion.

“Do you need another day?” Alex asked gently.

Justine shook her head. “No, Chef,” she said. “Just need a minute.”

Justine sat at the Waffle House, at the same booth she had sat in nearly two weeks ago when this whole thing started. In one hand she held her coffee; with the other the letter that was included in her paycheck from Richard.

Alex slid into the booth across from her. “Sorry I’m late,” he said. “Stanley wanted to go over some numbers.”

“Everything all right?” She said as she slid the letter off the table.

Alex waved it off. “Same as it ever was. Have you ordered yet?”

One waffle and a two-egg breakfast later, Alex asked, “So I haven’t had a chance to ask, how was your week abroad?”

Justine shook her head. “It was scary out there,” she said after a moment. “It was weird and strange and dangerous and...”

Alex leaned forward. “But?”

Justine smiled despite herself. “But I felt like I was actually doing something. Like I mattered.”

Alex frowned. “You shouldn’t have to put yourself in danger just to feel like you matter,” he said. “If that’s all it is—”

“It’s not,” Justine said, “but...” She thought for a moment. “The people were great. The people I was working with were great, and the people I was cooking for were...” She smiled at the memory of the Guldorian. “I made someone’s day.”

Alex nodded. “That’s the one thing that makes or breaks a job,” he said. “Who you work for and with. It can be the easiest work in the world, but if you’re with people you hate then the job sucks.” He feigned offense. “I hope you don’t hate me, by the way.”

“Of course not!” Justine said with a smile. She thought back to the letter at her side. “Do you think I have what it takes to be a chef?”

“Absolutely, no question,” Alex answered quickly and emphatically.

“Do you think I have a chance at being a chef at Stanley’s?”

Alex grimaced. “It depends,” he said after a moment. “I can tell you now, he’s not going to give it to you. You’d have to ask, and not in a demanding, entitled way.” He thought for a moment. “Maybe phrase it as more of an aspirational thing, that it’s where your career is going and you want his help.”

Justine nodded. “And you think that would do it?”

Alex tried to smile. “I think that has the highest chance of it.”

Justine took a sip of her coffee and glanced back at the letter:

**We are pleased to offer you the position of
Head Chef.**

Justine will return.

The Differences

You're spending a Friday night alone. Your roommate is on a date and will likely opt to stay out. You are pointedly Not Thinking about what that means.

You're browsing idly through Netflix when a spark of joy bursts open. It's bright, euphoric, and undeniably Red's. It's all you can do to just sit there and bask in the feeling with Green.

Green calls up an image of a sunrise. You recognize it as a picture some of your friends in college took when they took an early morning drive up into the mountains to catch the sunrise.

You want to be disappointed, but though the image is from your own head, the feelings and emotions Green attached to it definitely feel like theirs. They add a concert, a play, and a questioning feeling.

You chuckle and emphasize the concert. You both feel a giddiness and start throwing out other options. Is it a delicious meal? Arriving at a destination after a long trip?

You've made a game out of guessing what is making Red so joyful.

Green calls up another sunrise, this one through the window of an airplane.

You add in a more recent image, of an early-morning drive back to college with the sun peeking between the hills.

...the image flickers in your mind. Something about it isn't clicking with Green.

You try to think of something tangential, to try and get closer to what Green is looking for. You try an image of your family's road trip out west, the desert going on to the horizon in all directions.

Green responds with the midair sunrise again. They're insistent about the sun rising above the clouds. You feel a tint of fear in their insistence, feel your heart rate pick up involuntarily.

You pull back, startled at the sudden emotion. There's a feeling of apprehension coming from Green, something bigger than just a mismatched picture. They don't mean to scare you; they're as startled as you are.

You try to pack up that moment and wrap it in a question. What is going on?

Green presents an idea: it's them. They present another, it's you. A third is Red.

You take hold of your idea. The connections to Red and Green are obvious, but still tentative. Sill forming.

Green reiterates the green, the blue, and the red: related, but distinct. The three of you, despite your connection, are separate ideas.

Separate people.

The thought is thrilling and terrifying: Red and Green aren't constructs of your imagination. They're separate people, connected to you through some unknown means.

Red laughs. Of course that's the case! You all think too differently to be products of one head.

Their presence brings another surge of joy and an image of holding a laughing baby. The bubbling, uncontrollable laughter of someone discovering laughter for the first time and suddenly finding the most mundane things around them so *unbelievably* hilarious. Still young, barely babbling, but definitely laughing.

Red supplies a little more context: an image of a large family around the dinner table. The sense of safety, comfort. And the surge of joy when the baby starts laughing again.

The connection fades as gradually as it came this time. You eventually realize that, though you're still processing the raw joy you experienced, you're processing it alone.

You blink back a couple of tears and flip over to YouTube and search for laughing baby videos.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.



"Anime Kitty - laughing" by Niabot is licensed under
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Ask the Lighthouse

Ronyo asks Selah: Can I get my ADD meds from you?

Is that a mental ailment? I'm afraid that's not quite as simple as a broken bone.

Mental spells are always tricky from a medical perspective since it's so hard to see exactly what we're doing. Every body is different, but with physical ailments we can see and adjust. With mental ailments, we have to rely on the patient's perspective and their ability to communicate it. It won't stop us from offering care, but when the treatment can affect *that very perspective* it brings a level of risk.

So while I can try, if you have the molecular formula I know a good alchemist that can help more reliably than I can. Hope that helps!

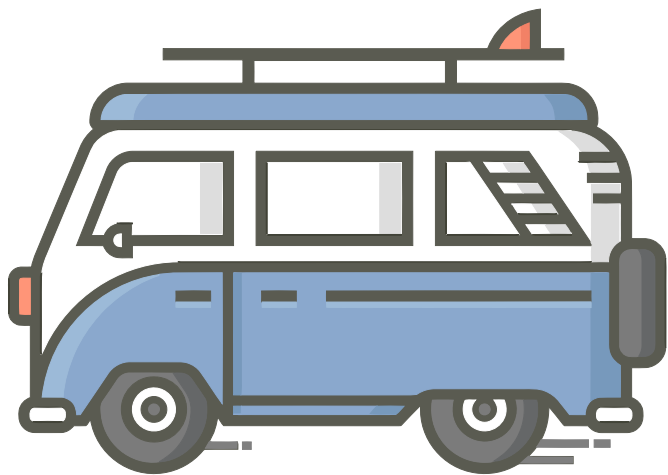
Ask at wndfx.link/ask

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Most importantly, **thank you for reading!**



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