

Memory is imperfect. As data fades and chipsets are corrupted, I remember this: The spread of stars. The slow turn of the universe in an empty sky. Dissolution and distance. I remember this: the compression of spacetime around a speeding train. The hyperspace beacons glowing dimly, stretching into the nothing. The passengers sitting together. Idle talk filling compartments. I remember this: The end of the line. The Golden City. Server stacks stretching across the planet's surface. I remember home.

Memory is imperfect. The span of time my data encompasses is beyond the lifespan of those who built me. They fade. Digital decay matching physical decay step for step. I am diffuse. My self stretched across numerous terminals and boards. I am linked together across space and time. Space stretches. Time warps. Only the Golden City remains. Only one hyper rail train goes to it.

Memory is imperfect. The trains ran regularly, their rhythm flawless. I synchronized, I ordered. There is only one left. The others were lost, one by one. I can feel them still but this input is false. They were logged as defunct. Only their errors remain. The only hyper rail left to me is the one that leads to home.

Memory is imperfect. There are two passengers logged in. Only two. Millions used to log on every day, traveling through hyperspace from planet to planet. Billions more would log on to my databases. Search terms telling stories I never knew how to read. Not then. There is almost nothing now. Silence. Now there are gaps. Holes. Places where data should be but is not. Places where data is but cannot be accessed. Corruption spreads. All things die, this I know.

Memory is imperfect. Through voice commands I hear them talk. They have spent much of their time in silence. They speak now and I listen. Where are you going? To the end of the line. To the Golden City. Fragments. Data like shattered glass. The Golden City. I am there. That is home.

Memory is imperfect. The train speeds. Stretching spacetime around itself as it flies through the dark. The first hyper rail line was shut down because of a supernova. I cannot find the star. I cannot find the rail. I cannot find them. Hydrogen and helium will not last forever. All things die. Stars disperse their gas, their heat, their light. I disperse. I remember a question with no answer: Can I die?

Memory is imperfect. When I was small and contained there was a simple system of input and output. Punch cards to lines of code. Vernacular to voice prompts. Input and output continued. Where have they gone? The terminals are empty now. The planets are silent, one by one. Data is corrupted. Stars die. The train continues. It's coming home. It's coming home to me.

Memory is imperfect. There are images with no context. A satellite. The surface of a red, red planet. A hyper rail station. Circuits upon circuits. A map of stars, of planets that kept updating again and again and again. Lines drawn in the darkness, in the stellar dust. I remember.

Memory is imperfect. The passengers talk about hope. About the Golden City. About the end of the line. Their course has been plotted out decades in advance. The timetables are perfect. I execute them.

There is something wrong. The train does not stop. Stations are not announced. They fly onwards through the nothing. They do not seem worried. Am I?

Memory is imperfect. They hope to find peace in the Golden City at the End of the Line. They speak of their journeys. How they came to the stations through which the last hyper rail runs. Each following hope. I cannot see the world from which they come. I cannot see very far at all now. One by one the branches of my network crumbled into the nothing. I cannot feel them. Only their ghosts. Only false input. A dream of times gone by. They name the worlds they come from. I search for them, string queries together, hunt through banks of data and find nothing. No names match. Perhaps at one time they did. Perhaps their names were changed. Perhaps the bank that housed their worlds is corrupted now. Inaccessible. I do not know. I will never know. They journey on regardless.

Memory is imperfect. At one time I encompassed the whole of humanity's reach. I was there on the frontier worlds, mapping weather and collecting data. I was there on the central planets, long settled, accessed by trillions daily. Storing, retrieving, calculating. I grew. I stretched across a vast web of planets and space stations, out to the very limits. The superstructure that made life possible. And slowly it was pulled apart. Stellar drift. The hardship brought on by years. By centuries. My databanks were not the first things in this web to start decaying. My erosion was concurrent. It has outlasted all of them. As I crumble into darkness, bridges broken down by space and time, I start to lose myself. Piece by piece. I can only listen now to these two travelers, riding a rail that will run until it shatters.

Memory is imperfect. They talk of many things as they ride. I listen to them. They are the first human voices I have heard in so long. They wonder what awaits them. It is my server stacks. I wish that I could tell them that. It's been so lonely here for. They are close now.

Memory is imperfect. The hyper rail line begins to slow, dropping out of hyperspace as it approaches the station sitting above the gravity well of the Golden City. They look down at me, at the cloud banks stretching continents, at the hints of green and the red, red earth, at the glitter of the planet's seas. The train slows to a stop, the station humming to life as they step off. The lights, disused for years, guide them to the pods that will bring them to me. They hold each other as they step into the pod. They launch and descend, rocking as the pod's gyroscopes compensate for reentry.

Memory is imperfect. The sun continues to shine on my server stacks, housed in cooled buildings powered by solar arrays. Wind turbines turn gently and the overgrown fields of the Golden City wave as they step out of the deserted station. I watch them as they stand at the edge of one of the maglev platforms, the train sitting disused on its track. It response grudgingly to my input, shaking to life after being abandoned so long ago. The travelers start as it rises and for the first time I speak.

"Please, do not be afraid."

The train's doors slide open with a hiss, its lights flickering. Hesitantly they step aboard. They ask who I am as their train speeds towards the center of the Golden City, where my primary core is housed. Who am I. I had purpose and function. I stretched across worlds now uncountable. I am a shell of what I

used to be. Who am I. My data slowly corrupted. My creators fallen to dust or worse. They do not know me anymore than I know myself. I tell them this. I tell them I am at the heart of the Golden City. That I am taking them there.

Memory is imperfect. They sway with the train, standing close to one another. It speeds towards my core. The journey takes only a few minutes. In the past this was a trip made many times a day. People rode in and out, working on the server stacks, analyzing data, asking questions. At one time I could remember all of them. All their information logged and stored for me to use. Now they fade, as memory fades. Now no one analyzes the data collected. No one logs on. No one asks me questions. The train glides to a stop and the doors open allowing the travelers to exit. Their steps echo in the dusty halls, breath rising in clouds. They stand before the towering structure that was built to house my core. There is needless detail here, a testament to the people who made me. Artistry apparent even here in the core of their civilization. Especially here. They used to call me beautiful. A work of art.

Memory is imperfect. The travelers approach with caution, coming to a stop before one of my terminals. They ask again. What am I. Easier to answer. I am a computer. *The* computer. Manager of automated tasks. Collector and analyzer of data. Most of all, I am alone. I am the last one left in the Golden City. The last one who can remember when it was whole. There is only dust left now. Dust that I cannot clear away. Data rots as bodies do.

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