

# Vagary

## Lauren Welter

From her desk close to the window, Emili could see the edge of the world.

Not actually the edge of the entire world—there were too many of those to count. No, from her vantage point inside the classroom she could see one edge of the world that bordered her small village. The teacher was drawing a diagram of their planet in sand in the center of the classroom, fingers swirling the silt across the molding floorboards. She had been teaching geography for twenty minutes now, but Emili’s mind had drifted.

She knew what she needed to know about the geography of her planet: it was built like a cake with four tiers. The bottom tier where Emili’s village squatted was home to the lowest class of individuals. Those who sold their wares or service or bodies for meager coin, living dangerously close to the edge of the world. The tier above was a bit more dignified, Emili had heard. Her mother was from that tier. It was home to respectable merchants and traders, those with enough money for bread every week and shoes made of leather or cloth. The tier above was even more affluent. They boasted governors and congressmen, families of high esteem that owned buggies that moved across the planet like magic.

The upper-most tier was the stuff of daydreams. Emili had heard whispers about their lives, though she didn’t know what was true and what was false. She had heard that there were only six families that resided there. Each had a handsome family crest embossed on their doorways. They had spigots of water that shot hundreds of feet in the air in their gardens, though their gardens grew all manner of

flowers and not tomatoes or zucchini or anything else worth eating or selling. She had heard that they enjoyed the most amount of sunlight on the planet, reveling in their long hours and throwing parties that lasted days, only ceasing to nap in their homes the size of ten of Emili's huts. They didn't have to worry about money or food, didn't have to scrub their faces clean every night from dust that settled thick like a second skin.

Emili would make it there someday. She wasn't sure how or when, but someday she would leave the perpetual stars that dotted her sky for the light of the sun.

The class ended and Emili found herself outside the school, staring once more at the edge of the world. She should be hurrying home to help her father sew vests and trousers for his cart at the market, but she hesitated.

Craggily bushes clawed their way from the cracked soil. The ground near the edge was more split the closer Emili walked to the lip, and soon she was avoiding cracks the length of her forearm, staying on the balls of her feet to avoid stumbling. One thick braid sat heavy on her shoulder, feeling like a stern hand summoning her away from the edge. She tossed her hair over onto the small of her back and lay on her belly, crawling towards the edge of the world.

Stars met her. Not the stars that hung dim and sickly above her, drowned from the light of suns she could gather warmth from. No, these stars were unperturbed, untarnished, untouched. They burst from the fabric of the universe like pinpricks of diamond. Emili's eyes sparkled from their brilliance, and though her eyes began to burn from their heat she could not look away.

This was not what she had expected. She had expected more of the same, a faded universe surrounding her faded world. A universe that moved sluggishly, greenish like a film of mildew over its surface.

This was a universe of possibility, of dreams and promises. Why would anyone sacrifice this view for the sun? Did those at the top know what they missed out on, sitting atop the planet on their gilded pedestal?

Emili reached into the pocket of her trousers and pulled out the small nub of charcoal she used to write her times tables on her desk. She reached her hand over the lip, hand suspended out into empty space.

She released the charcoal.

It dropped like a fallen star, disappearing quickly down the length of the planet. Emili held her breath, straining to hear when it hit the bottom. She listened intently for thirty seconds, one minute, two. At five minutes she was convinced she had missed the sound of impact and looked around for something else to drop. There was cracked slab of dirt nearly separated from the dry ground, and Emily pried it the rest of the way free. She dropped it into the void, this time wriggling forward so her ear was not pressed to the dirt but instead hanging over the planet and into space. She felt a sudden sense of vertigo, of slipping from the ground, but she dug her fingers into the dirt and held steady.

Thirty seconds, one minute, two minutes. Five minutes. Seven.

Finally, Emili scooted back so that her eyes were peering once more over the edge. She could see nothing but the fabric of space and the blooming of stars. Her heart thudding, she shakily scooted away from the edge and sat up.

She hadn't heard a thud because there was no bottom. You could fall forever through space, accompanied by the stars, living in possibility.

Emili ran home on legs renewed of a strength she hadn't known she had. Her dreams of reaching the top of her planet streamed behind her, torn from her shoulders like an old, tattered cape she had no more use of.

She was going to live among the stars. She just had to figure out how.

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Emili had decided on one thing: she was not a piece of charcoal or rock. She could not simply hurl herself over the edge and hope for the best. The thought of it made her muscles lock, her stomach clench in fear. She didn't have the courage to throw herself into oblivion.

She had to do it against her will, in a way that when fear gripped her at the final second she couldn't stop herself.

Her village was perpetually cold, covered in frost that never seemed to thaw or harden into ice. She had grown up swaddled in layers of cloth and fur, wrapping her feet in it many times to keep her toes from breaking off like those who couldn't afford extra for shoes. She had always considered this a disadvantage, fueled her longing to see the top of her planet and feel the warmth of the sun on her face.

Now, she saw it as an ally. There was a small body of water that was always slick and frozen over on the edges. Children a few years younger than her, those who were too young to be much help at home and were better out of the house and out from underfoot, would gather there with sanded down boards of wood slicked with grease or oil on the underside. They would get a running start and throw themselves atop the plank and go skittering across the ice, whooping and hollering all the way.

Of course, a few of them ended up skittering towards the center of the ice and were lost to the bottom of the lake. While the thought made Emili shiver, that wasn't the part she was fixated on. The fact was that once they flopped onto the board, they were at the mercy of their own momentum. They couldn't stop themselves if they stayed near the edge to safety or if they flung wildly to drown.

That's what Emili needed. A device that would propel her into the stars, her own momentum carrying her past her own fear.

The day after her discovery, she dug up the jar she had buried in her backyard.

The jar was years old, the label on it so faded she had forgotten what pickled vegetable or syrupy fruit it had once held. When she pulled it from its bed, the clinking made her fingers tingle.

She had been saving money for years in order to buy passage to the tier above her own. The plan had been to wait until she was done with her schooling, spend a few years learning a trade or some sort of profitable skill, and then steal away into the middle of night, unable to fathom the look of good-bye in her parents' faces. There were other jars buried in the same vicinity, within them more clinking coin that had been intended to buy her way upward.

A few coins from this jar would buy her a large board of wood from the market and a small tub of grease. She thought of all the extra jobs she had taken, sewing until her thumb bled from the needle and butchering any furry animal that wandered too close to their hut in order to sew rough pairs of slippers or hats or gloves for those who could afford them.

For a moment, she hesitated. But the momentum from her discovery still hurtled through her bones and she untwisted the lid, pulled out a handful of coins, and shoved them in her trouser pocket.

She left the jar beside her parent's cot with a note written in the dirt, letting them know where the other jars were. Maybe her father could take a few days off work to rest his sore hands. Maybe her mother could come home for more than a few weeks at a time, leaving her hunting group for the embrace of her aging husband.

She tried not to think of their faces when they realized she was gone. It was nearly unprecedented for a family on the lowest tier to not have more than eight children to help with collecting coin and managing whatever service the family provided. Her parents had only had one, and she had never asked why and they had never offered. And here she was leaving them. It sat like a lump in her throat, but it didn't stall her stride. Wasn't this what she had been planning to do all along? It was only a few years early. This had always been her end goal: freedom.

That's what she reminded herself when she handed over the coin for the wood and tucked it under her arm. She didn't look the seller in the eye; she knew her father and was prone to chatter.

The grease was slightly harder to come by. Many people couldn't afford their own meat and hunting was a thing that required months of time in groups, like what her mother did. Their many sources of food were whatever grew in the garden and whatever wild plants could be found on a walk to and from wherever you were going. Fire-warmed drink flavored with alcohol and cinnamon kept them warm from young children to the oldest villagers. Emili had a flask tied to her hip and she offered the man who sold her the grease a sip. He was old and stooped, fingers cracked and face splotchy. His hands shook when he took the flask, and his eyes closed as the drink hit his lips. It dribbled down his chin and after a long moment, he handed it back. It was nearly empty now, but Emili realized it didn't matter. She wouldn't need it out in the universe, where her own wonder would fuel her like it had the day before.

Emili set out with the grease slung over her shoulder and the plank jammed under her armpit. She was headed for the school then thought better of it, changing her trajectory to slightly more south where only a few huts squatted a

respectable distance from the edge. She didn't want to risk being found out and spotted from the window of the school. She hadn't gone today, hadn't seen the point. Now, she almost wished she had said farewell to the squat building if only to affirm to herself that she craved more than what those four walls could bring her.

The edge came quickly, and she found herself standing near the lip, even closer than she had ventured to stand yesterday. She took a deep breath and peered over the edge, body tilted forward, heart fluttering in her chest.

The stars stole the breath from her lungs as quickly and violently as they had spirited it away the day before. Somehow, they seemed even more brilliant... and this time she heard a voice.

It was soft at first but grew steadily until she could make out the words. They buried their way into her chest and hooked into her heart.

“Leap true and jump steady,” they went. “For only those with wonder in their veins and restless spirit in their hearts can join us.”

Emili shakily set down the wood plank a few feet away, fingers hastily rubbing the lard across the bottom in broad strokes. Suddenly, this all felt very urgent. The stars had chosen to speak to her. What if they changed their mind and decided she was not worthy?

She had to act quickly.

And then she was ready.

She set the board down and backed up, sending one last glance around her planet. It didn't call to her, or whisper to her longing. It sat like a thing dead around her, and she would be happy to be rid of its weight.

She was running faster than she ever had, soles of her feet aching where they slapped the ground and thighs burning from exertion.

She pushed off the pads of her feet, leaping onto the wooden plank.

She fell heavily on her bottom, teeth rattling like pebbles in her mouth.

The edge of the world approached her faster, speeding towards her, carried to her by her own momentum, brought to her by her own choice and pure longing.

For a moment, she was suspended between the edge of her world and the rest of the universe, and she could truly feel the gaze of the stars against her cheek.

She closed her eyes and was not afraid.

She joined the stars.