

CARVED BY TIME



The summer of 2020. June 15th. Midday. 90 degrees Fahrenheit. A hint of wildfire ash in the air. No rustling of trees. Gravel crunching beneath my blistered feet. The grueling heat upon my sunburnt skin. The thrilling hum of life, vibrant and chaotic, echoing in my ears. Eons of history flowing through my veins. That is Ephesus, an archaeological site nestled in the valleys of Izmir, Turkey. It is a place that offered me solace when I needed it most.

I first started struggling with my sense of self when I was fifteen. I had just learned that I would be moving across the world again, this time to New Orleans, and that sent me down a nervous spiral. I was lost in my inner hurricane, and my mind bound me to the hurricane's eye. Repeatedly, it chanted hexes, tricking me into believing I would never belong anywhere. As if I were driftwood floating in an endless ocean, forever searching for the other branches of my tree of life. It had me in pursuit of some wonderland where all the pieces of my puzzle fit perfectly. Where I fit in seamlessly at school, had a big group of friends, and didn't feel lost all the time. My desperate search for belonging stole from me—my time, my sleep, my joy, some of my childhood—all pried away from my tired, flimsy fingers.

In my dreams, if I was bequeathed that pleasure, I would gamble with the Greek gods I read about in *Percy Jackson* novels. Trading a shiny rock I believed to be a crystal, found while diving in the Aegean, for some peace of mind. My piggybank, full to the brim with pocket money from my grandparents, in exchange for better friends. My piano, one of the few things that allowed me solace, for protection from the bullies at school.

This dream of mine was fruitless, but recurring. As I drifted off, I would get a tingling sensation down my spine, then be swimming in a sea of stars, weightless. I would rise and rise until I entered the realm of gods: Mount Olympus. In a warm-hued cloud atop the mountain, the gods would be gathered around me, all perched on their marble thrones. They would tower over my puny 4-foot self (yes, 4 feet, I didn't have a growth spurt until I was seventeen), asking what it was that brought me there. Carefully picking my words, I explained my situation.

"First of all," I'd start, "I would like to thank all of you for deeming me worthy to be your audience. As I'm sure you all know from our previous meetings (I started frequenting them the night I first heard the news of my move) , I am in dire need of your help." Hera would come down to my side and touch my shoulder. Her touch was warm, comforting like a mug of hot chocolate on a cold day, and it vibrated with a frequency I felt all over my body. "Oh no!" she would coo, "whatever's the matter, dear?"

I would tell her that my family moved around a lot for my dad's work, so it was hard for me to make friends, that nowhere felt like home, and that I felt incomplete. There would be silence at first, the deities would then walk away, leaving me alone in their chamber of jasmine-scented mist. My mind would start rambling, overthinking everything that had happened during this ungodly interaction. Had I formed grammatical sentences? Should I have bowed? Had I accidentally offended one of them? Surely this time they would see things my way, their divine judgments would be merciful.

For the next few minutes, I would marvel at my surroundings. Twelve thrones arranged in a circle. Black marble for Zeus, gray-green speckled marble for Poseidon, pure silver for Athena, brass for Ares, and so on. Their sizes varied depending on how powerful they were, so Zeus' was the largest. From the sides of their thrones grew two columns, their varied Greek orders indicating the era from which their first stories originated. Some had Doric columns, plain and unremarkable but sturdy nonetheless, some Ionic, elegant and tall, decorated with swirled volutes, and a select few had Corinthian columns, ornate, rich, and robust.

Suddenly, the illusion would unravel. The gods would descend with the boom of thunder, claiming I had asked for too much, and flicking me off the peak and sending me plummeting to my death. I would hit the ground with immense force, the cracking of my bones echoing in my ears. I would bring my hand to my nose to touch it, stare at my fingers dripping with the most vibrant, red blood, and then jolt awake. Was it better to sleep or to lie awake? I didn't know anymore.

It wasn't until I visited Ephesus that I began to find some clarity. The ruins seemed to hum with an energy older than time itself. It wasn't just history—it was life.

Standing before the Library of Celsus, I felt small and insignificant, and yet the statues of the four virtues—Sophia, Episteme, Ennoia, and Arete, meaning wisdom, knowledge, intelligence, and valor—reminded me of my inner strength. The library, majestic and weathered, stood like an open book itself. It stood tall and



proud, its marble façade intricately carved with scrolls and medallions, the two-story structure bathed in the golden glow of the afternoon sun. Once a center of knowledge, it now stood silent, its grandeur softened by the erosion of centuries. Yet, to me, it still felt alive. The marble glimmered faintly as if holding secrets of scholars and dreamers who had walked through its arched doorway centuries before. It was a masterpiece: soaring



Corinthian columns, statues that seemed to breathe life, and an arched entrance that embraced visitors. I ran my fingers along the cool stone, tracing the faded Greek inscriptions, feeling as though I was connecting to countless others who had stood in the same spot. My sandals, scuffed and coated in dust, were a poor match for the elegance of the place, yet I couldn't help but feel at home. It wasn't about where I was or where I'd come from; it was about something bigger. I stepped through the arch.

As I wandered deeper into the ruins, I stopped before a marble bust displayed on a pedestal. Its face was chipped, one eye missing, yet something about it felt familiar. I leaned in, studying its features: the high cheekbones, the strong curve of the nose, and the cascade of carved curls that framed its face, so lifelike that it seemed as though the wind might touse them at any moment. Its feet, as if frozen mid-step, wore leather sandals strikingly similar to my own. The resemblance hit me like a sudden gust of wind—I looked like her. Or she looked like me.

For a moment, I was completely still. It felt as though time folded in on itself, blurring the boundaries between past and present, between her life and mine. Was she lonely, too? Did she ever feel adrift, caught between worlds? I imagined her standing in this very spot, centuries ago, wondering about her place in the world, just as I was now. I imagined her life, thousands of years ago. Perhaps she was a fisherwoman, her hands weathered and calloused from hauling nets along the Aegean shore. Or maybe she sold the day's catch in the agora, shouting over the hum of the marketplace. She lived by the sea, just as I've always felt drawn to



it. I thought of my own family—how we used to be a fishing and trading family for generations until my grandfather shifted us away from the ocean to the big city in pursuit of his dreams of becoming a chemical engineer. Yet, in a way, I reunited us with the water when I started sailing. Now, I study ocean engineering, exploring the mysteries of those same waters. Our lives are separated by millennia, but in some ways, we are the same. She depended on the ocean to survive, and I, too, am tethered to it—not for survival, but for purpose.

Time stretched and bent in that moment, as though she and I were two notes of the same melody, harmonizing across centuries. The statues and the ruins around us were witnesses to this connection. The passage of time hadn't erased it; it had merely transformed it.



Ephesus was a place where time seemed to weave together seamlessly. Greek, Roman, and Turkish influences intertwined in its stones, its stories, and even its air. The amphitheater bore the marks of Roman engineering, while the intricate carvings of Artemis'

temple whispered of Greek craftsmanship. Yet the warmth of the sun and the brine in the air were distinctly Turkish to me. Ephesus was not just a collection of ruins; it was a palimpsest, a layered narrative of cultures and peoples, and I was a part of it.

As I continued to explore, I thought about the people who had lived here. They were bakers, builders, sailors, and dreamers. They toiled under the same sun, their hands caked with the same earth. Their stories lingered in the air, swirling around the stone amphitheater, where voices once carried tales of gods and heroes. In the agora, where traders once haggled over olive oil and wine, the echoes of their lives seemed to intertwine with my own.

I began to let go of the idea that I needed to belong to one place. The people of Ephesus had built lives that transcended their physical surroundings. Their identities were not bound to the soil beneath their feet but to the legacies they left behind. I realized I didn't need to find a singular place to call home; I could find pieces of it wherever I went.

Ephesus taught me that belonging doesn't always mean fitting in seamlessly. The city, after all, had been conquered and rebuilt, influenced by Greek, Roman, and Turkish cultures. It was a mosaic, not a single piece. Perhaps I, too, could be a mosaic—a union of places, experiences, and identities. Belonging isn't about fitting into a puzzle. It's about realizing that you're part of a greater picture, one that stretches far beyond yourself. It's about seeing your reflection in the faces of those who came before you and knowing that their stories are now a part of yours. I know that now.

As I stood at the top of the amphitheater, I looked down at its towering tiers, worn smooth by centuries of footsteps. I imagined it filled with people, their laughter and cheers echoing into the hills. I closed my eyes and heard their voices blend with my own thoughts, a symphony of time that played not just in my ears but in my heart.



That day, as the sun began to set over the Aegean, its golden rays casting long shadows over the ruins, I felt a sense of peace I hadn't known in years. The hurricane inside me had calmed, replaced by a quiet confidence. Like the statues of Ephesus, I could stand tall, weathered but strong, incomplete but beautiful. I didn't need to belong to one place, to one moment, to one group of people. Like Ephesus, I could exist across time and space, my identity shaped not by where I was, but by the lives I touched and the stories I carried.

As I walked back to the car that day, the gravel crunching beneath my feet, I glanced back one last time at the ruins. The marble glowed faintly in the fading sunlight, and for a moment, it felt as though the statues were watching me, smiling in silent approval.

In their stillness, they taught me how to move forward.

Ephesus wasn't the answer to all my questions, but it gave me a new perspective. I realized that my story, like the city's, was still being written. And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

Images

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