751 Words

Rainbows May be Circular, but the Average Observer Only Sees an Arc

“Come on,” he says, taking her hand, “let’s see if we can catch it.”

She doesn’t pull away, but neither does she start to move. “Impossible,” she says. “Rainbows don’t exist in real space. They’re just optical illusions, a game your mind plays with light.”

“Spoil sport,” he says.

“Did you know that when the sun is setting and all the shorter-wavelength light has been scattered, you can see rainbows that are nothing but red? It’s a rare phenomenon, but possible,” she says, unfurling their picnic blanket.

“Would you run towards one of those?” he says.

“I might,” she says, sitting down, “but I’d probably just take a picture.”

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Because she doesn’t know what to say, she is talking again. “Rainbows caused by sunlight only ever appear opposite the sun,” she says, arranging the picnic things on the still-damp grass. “And because of the angles involved, it’s nigh impossible to see them at noon.”

“Like star-crossed lovers,” he says.

“Not in the least,” she says.

He raises an eyebrown and begins to peel a tangerine.

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“I wish we were bees,” he says. “Then we’d see extra colours.”

“I don’t think male bees have much fun,” she says.

“Well then, we could be dogs. They have fun.”

“Dogs’ eyes have only two cones for colour: yellow and blue. To them, rainbows just look like bands of yellow and blue tones.”

“Huh,” he says. “Still, we could chase after sticks.”

“Must be a bit dull,” she says, pausing to sip weak lemonade from a plastic cup. “At least the seeing bit.”

“Not if you don’t know any better,” he says. “Not if you don’t know what you’re missing.”

“Many animals can see colours during the dead of night,” she says.

“I’m beginning to wonder if you’re unable to see colour by the light of day,” he replies.

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“Speaking of dogs,” he says. “There’s one sitting under our rainbow.”

“Where?” she says raising her hand to her forehead to block the sun.

“There,” he says. “Now she’s rolling around in the grass. Told you dogs had fun.”

“I never disputed it,” she says. “Oh, there she is.”

“I wonder what it’s like to sit under a rainbow. I wonder what it looks like to her.”

“It looks,” she says, “like air. Thin air. You can only see a rainbow forty-two degrees from the direction opposite the sun. The dog might see her own rainbow, but it won’t be over her head. It’ll be off in the distance, unobtainable, just like it is for us.”

“So you mean right now you and I could be sitting under someone else’s rainbow?”

“Maybe,” she says. “But we’d never know it.”

“Still,” he says, “I’m a little jealous of that dog.”

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“No two people ever see the same rainbow,” she says.

“Don’t say things like that,” he says.

“No two people can occupy the same space at the same time,” she says, “so yours will always be different from mine.”

“You’re bringing me down.” he says.

“Keep looking up,” she says. “It will fade before you know it.”

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“It’s not a real colour, is it,” he says, examining the damp that has soaked into his jeans. “Indigo’s just a knock-off shade of blue.”

“When Newton first described the rainbow,” she says, “he only identified five colours: red, yellow, green, blue and violet. He added orange and indigo later, because seven seemed to him a better number.”

“What did Newton know?” he says.

“More than you,” she replies. “But not much about colour.”

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“It’s getting late,” she says. “Guess we better pack up.”

“Reflection,” he says, “Refraction. Dispersion of light.”

“When you move towards a rainbow,” she says, “the angles change.”

“It’s only a meteorological phenomenon,” he says. “An optical illusion. Rainbows don’t really exist.”

“Sometimes,” she says, “if you want to see things clearly, you have to shift perspective.”

“We’ll never see the same thing as each other,” he says. “Is there any point?”

“Well,” she says, “Maybe not. But then, does there need to be one?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “It’s gone now, anyway.”

“What’s gone?”

“The rainbow.”

She shrugs. “Only from this perspective. There’s bound to be plenty of angles from which one is visible. There’s bound to be a rainbow around here somewhere.”

He squints at the horizon. “I don’t know,” he says.

“Come on,” she says, taking his hand, “let’s see if we can catch it.”

He doesn’t pull away, but neither does he start to move.