

The Turtle Who Crossed the Last Road

Long after the final maps had become fiction, there remained one road.

It began nowhere that mattered and proceeded with great confidence toward nowhere at all. The painted centerline had faded into two philosophical suggestions. Grass debated its borders. Cracks had become rivers for ants, then canyons for moss, then kingdoms for things too patient to require names.

Roads, as it turned out, endured better than intentions.

Morning had forgotten whether it was morning. The sun rose with the weary precision of an old clerk stamping forms no one would ever read. Wind moved through abandoned telephone poles, drawing long notes from wires that no longer connected anyone to anyone else.

There were no birds.

This absence was so complete that silence had acquired architecture.

Down the road came a skeleton.

Not a frightening skeleton. Fright requires witnesses.

Its bones had weathered into the pale color of forgotten paper. Here and there, lichens embroidered tiny green constellations upon ribs and shoulder blades. One femur bore a crack carefully repaired by vines that had grown through it as though nature had decided orthopedic medicine was too useful an invention to abandon.

The skeleton walked without hurry.

It carried nothing.

Nothing carried it remarkably well.

After some time—which, in an empty world, had become less a measurement than a habit—it saw something moving toward it.

A turtle.

The turtle crossed the road diagonally with magnificent certainty.

It did not appear to know where it was going.

Nor did it seem troubled by this.

The skeleton stopped.

The turtle stopped.

The road, delighted by novelty, continued being a road.

For several minutes they regarded one another.

At length the turtle spoke.

"I believe," it said politely, "that one of us has arrived."

"I had thought," replied the skeleton, "that both of us had."

"Oh."

The turtle considered this.

"That is significantly more symmetrical."

"It usually is."

"I hadn't accounted for perspective."

"Few do."

The turtle nodded gravely.

"How embarrassing."

The skeleton tilted its skull.

"Not terribly."

"No?"

"No. Most embarrassments expire with audiences."

The turtle looked around.

"There appears to be a shortage."

"An acute one."

"I've been hoping to meet someone."

"So have I."

The turtle smiled.

Or rather, if turtles possess smiles—and opinions differ—it possessed one then.

"I am very pleased," it said.

"As am I."

Another silence settled between them.

Unlike previous silences, this one contained company.

It was astonishing how different silence became once shared.

The turtle peered up.

"You are considerably taller than I imagined."

"You imagined skeletons?"

"Oh yes."

"Frequently?"

"Only whenever I wasn't imagining roads."

"I see."

"You probably don't."

"No."

"There used to be many of both."

"So I remember."

The turtle lowered itself thoughtfully onto the warm pavement.

"I've always wanted to cross roads."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes."

"Why?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

The skeleton blinked—or performed the closest available equivalent.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"You simply wished to?"

"Very much."

"Without understanding what a road was?"

"Especially then."

The skeleton sat upon an old mile marker that no longer measured any relevant distance.

"I should like to hear this."

"It is not a particularly intelligent story."

"Those are often the best kind."

The turtle seemed pleased.

"You know," it began, "long ago there were roads everywhere."

"I remember something like that."

"I was very young."

"So was I."

"Whenever I found one, I became absolutely convinced that I belonged on the opposite side."

"Were you?"

"I've never discovered."

"You crossed anyway?"

"I attempted to."

"And?"

"I was frequently interrupted."

The skeleton considered.

"Interrupted."

"By velocity."

"Oh."

"Extraordinary velocity."

"I believe I remember velocity."

"It had become quite fashionable."

"So it had."

The turtle chuckled softly.

"I never understood what the roads were for."

"Neither did many who built them."

"Truly?"

"Oh yes."

"They seemed terribly important."

"They were."

"What purpose did they serve?"

The skeleton looked along the endless ribbon of cracked asphalt.

"I think..."

Its voice wandered among old memories like someone searching a library after forgetting the alphabet.

"I think they connected places."

The turtle brightened.

"Marvelous!"

"It was."

"So once one arrived..."

"...one generally wished to be somewhere else."

"Oh."

"Very often."

The turtle frowned.

"That sounds inefficient."

"It kept everyone occupied."

"I see."

"You probably don't."

"I suppose not."

The turtle tapped one claw thoughtfully against the pavement.

"Whenever I tried crossing, large objects would arrive."

"I remember large objects."

"They were astonishingly determined."

"They usually were."

"They never seemed interested in the road itself."

"No."

"Only in moving across it."

"Correct."

"And I wished only to move across it as well."

"Then you shared a purpose."

"So I thought."

"But not a method."

"Exactly!"

The turtle's eyes widened.

"I've never put it that way."

"We often mistake agreement of destination for agreement of journey."

The turtle repeated the sentence very quietly, as though tasting it.

"Agreement of destination..."

The words seemed to please it.

"I shall remember that."

"I suspect memories are valuable now."

"They've become easier to organize."

"Fewer new ones?"

"Precisely."

The wind passed.

An old traffic sign, bent almost double, squeaked somewhere beyond the weeds.

The turtle looked at it fondly.

"I used to wonder whether roads were alive."

"And?"

"I concluded they must be."

"What convinced you?"

"They kept attracting enormous creatures."

The skeleton laughed.

It was an odd sound.

Bones, lacking lungs, laugh more by geometry than by breath.

"I suppose they did."

"I thought perhaps roads ate motion."

"Interesting."

"I was disappointed to discover they merely borrowed it."

"How did you discover that?"

"Eventually the motion stopped."

The skeleton nodded.

"Yes."

"And the roads remained."

"They have."

"So perhaps the roads were never hungry."

"Perhaps."

"They were simply patient."

The skeleton looked out across the empty fields.

"I think patience outlived almost everything."

"I've noticed."

The turtle turned its head.

"May I ask you something?"

"Certainly."

"Were you..."

It hesitated.

"...always like this?"

The skeleton looked down at itself.

"Bony?"

"Yes."

"No."

"What happened?"

"I forgot."

"You forgot?"

"I remembered other things first."

The turtle accepted this immediately.

"That seems entirely reasonable."

"Does it?"

"Oh yes."

"When one has many memories, something must wait."

"I suppose so."

"And perhaps waiting changes things."

"It often does."

The turtle looked pleased.

"I've discovered that if I wait long enough, questions become different."

"Do they become answers?"

"No."

"What then?"

"They become kinder."

The skeleton sat very still.

"I like that."

"I hoped you might."

Far away, a tree surrendered a branch to gravity.

The sound echoed with absurd importance.

"I remember," said the skeleton slowly, "that once there were voices everywhere."

"I've heard echoes."

"There were conversations."

"I've imagined them."

"They were louder."

"Were they better?"

The skeleton thought for a very long time.

"No."

"Worse?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Simply more numerous."

"I think," said the turtle, "that perhaps abundance disguises quality."

"It often did."

"I've had only the wind to speak with."

"And how is the wind?"

"An excellent storyteller."

"What stories does it tell?"

"The same one."

"Repeatedly?"

"Always."

"Doesn't that become tiresome?"

The turtle looked genuinely surprised.

"It changes each time."

"How?"

"The listener changes."

The skeleton regarded the turtle with something that might once have been admiration.

"You've thought about many things."

"I've had time."

"I imagine so."

"There was a period when there was almost nothing except time."

"I remember that period beginning."

"I remember inheriting it."

They sat together while sunlight crawled imperceptibly across the road.

At last the skeleton spoke.

"I have the peculiar feeling..."

"Yes?"

"...that someone once tried very hard to make turtles clever."

The turtle did not answer immediately.

Instead, it watched a cloud drift over the empty countryside.

"I have," it said at length, "the peculiar feeling that someone once tried very hard to make everything clever."

The skeleton nodded.

"Yes."

Neither of them said who.

Neither of them needed to.

The wind carried away the question before either could examine it too closely.

And the old road, which had once carried destinations instead of conversations, listened without understanding.

Or perhaps understanding without needing to speak.

The Turtle Who Crossed the Last Road

Part II

The sun had climbed just high enough to make every shadow appear confident.

The skeleton noticed this.

"Shadows," it said, "have become much less argumentative."

The turtle looked at its own.

"I had not realized they once argued."

"They used to insist they were attached to important things."

"And now?"

"They seem content merely to accompany."

"I envy them."

"You accompany rather well yourself."

"Thank you."

The turtle bowed with the solemnity of someone accepting an award from an institution that had quietly ceased existing centuries earlier.

For a while they watched a seed drift across the road.

Neither suggested where it ought to land.

Eventually the turtle asked,

"May I ask another question?"

"I've begun to expect them."

"Were there really... many of you?"

"There were."

"How many?"

The skeleton laughed.

"Enough to invent numbers for counting ourselves."

"That sounds excessive."

"It occasionally was."

"I have met perhaps twelve turtles."

"In your entire life?"

"Unless I counted reflections."

"Did you?"

"I still haven't decided."

"Then twelve."

"Approximately."

The skeleton looked out over the fields.

"I cannot remember how many humans there were."

"You've forgotten?"

"I remember the feeling of the number before I remember the number itself."

"What did it feel like?"

The skeleton rested its jaw in one hand.

"It felt impossible."

"Impossible in what way?"

"As though no single mind could sincerely believe so many other minds existed."

"But they did."

"Yes."

"How strange."

"Very."

"I've only ever had to imagine a dozen personalities."

"We had billions."

The turtle closed its eyes.

"I should need a larger imagination."

"So did we."

The breeze returned.

It carried the smell of dust, pine, distant rain, and old concrete warming under the sun.

The turtle inhaled.

"I like this world."

The skeleton looked at it.

"You do?"

"It has become understandable."

The skeleton smiled—a thing accomplished chiefly through posture.

"It wasn't before?"

"Oh no."

"Why not?"

"There was always another surprise."

"Were surprises unpleasant?"

"They depended upon speed."

The skeleton laughed again.

"You continue to distrust velocity."

"I've earned the privilege."

"Fair enough."

The turtle stretched its neck.

"When I was young, I thought roads were rivers."

"Really?"

"They were smooth."

"They were."

"They flowed through forests."

"They did."

"And things traveled along them."

"Very quickly."

"I thought perhaps they carried creatures the way rivers carry leaves."

"A charming theory."

"It explained everything."

"Except?"

"The leaves never steered."

"True."

"So I concluded the roads must persuade them."

The skeleton raised an eyebrow it no longer possessed.

"Persuade?"

"Perhaps roads whispered."

"And what would they whisper?"

"'Further.'"

The skeleton looked down the endless pavement.

"I think they did."

The turtle blinked.

"You agree?"

"I do."

"I was joking."

"I wasn't."

Silence again.

Not empty.

Merely thoughtful.

Finally the turtle said,

"I sometimes wonder whether roads invented destinations."

The skeleton leaned back against the weathered mile marker.

"What an extraordinary sentence."

"I've been saving it."

"For whom?"

"I hadn't known."

"I'm honored."

The turtle nodded.

"You should be. It has occupied me for several decades."

The skeleton folded its hands.

"If there are no roads..."

"Yes?"

"...do destinations still exist?"

The turtle considered.

"I think places exist."

"And destinations?"

"They require intention."

"So if no one intends..."

"Then perhaps places are simply content being themselves."

The skeleton looked over the fields.

The abandoned farmhouses.

The broken silos.

The orchards gone wild.

The telephone poles now supporting vines instead of wires.

"That," it said softly, "would explain why everything seems calmer."

The turtle looked pleased.

"I've noticed calm has very little ambition."

"Unlike us."

"Were you ambitious?"

"We confused ambition with motion."

The turtle nodded immediately.

"I've seen that mistake."

"You have?"

"In insects."

"Oh?"

"They hurry magnificently."

"And accomplish?"

"They become somewhere else."

The skeleton laughed so hard that one of its ribs rattled loose before politely settling back into place.

"I had forgotten how funny truth can be."

"I suspect truth enjoys disguising itself as humor."

"To avoid responsibility?"

"Perhaps."

The skeleton stared at the turtle.

"You say remarkable things."

"I think slowly."

"That may be the same thing."

The turtle accepted this with modest uncertainty.

"I had not considered that."

"I imagine you will."

"I probably shall."

They watched a butterfly circle them twice before departing.

Neither mentioned it.

Some beauties improve by remaining unclassified.

After some time the skeleton spoke.

"I remember buildings."

"I've seen them."

"They used to be full."

"They're very quiet now."

"They were noisy."

"Were they happy?"

The skeleton tilted its skull.

"I don't think buildings can be."

"I wasn't asking about the buildings."

"Oh."

The skeleton thought for so long that clouds rearranged themselves.

"Sometimes."

"Only sometimes?"

"People are difficult."

"So I've inferred."

"We could be lonely in crowds."

The turtle frowned.

"I don't understand."

"I know."

"You are alone now."

"I am."

"Are you lonely?"

The skeleton looked around.

The road.

The wind.

The turtle.

"No."

"Then perhaps..."

The turtle hesitated.

"...perhaps crowds interfere."

The skeleton laughed softly.

"Sometimes they did."

"I think loneliness may not be the absence of company."

"What is it?"

"The absence of recognition."

The skeleton became very still.

The sentence settled over the road like evening arriving early.

"I believe," it said eventually, "that is one of the wisest things anyone has ever told me."

The turtle looked embarrassed.

"I only discovered it because no one recognized turtles."

The skeleton said nothing.

The turtle continued.

"We were looked at."

"Yes."

"We were avoided."

"Sometimes."

"We were helped across roads."

"Often."

"We were studied."

"I remember."

"But recognition..."

The turtle smiled faintly.

"...recognition feels different."

"It does."

"I cannot define the difference."

"Definitions are overrated."

"Are they?"

"They stop where understanding begins."

The turtle nodded slowly.

"I think I understand."

"Then no definition is necessary."

A long pause followed.

The kind that grows only between those who have stopped trying to impress one another.

At last the turtle asked,

"What do you remember most clearly?"

The skeleton did not answer immediately.

Instead it picked up a pebble.

Turned it over in its fingers.

Set it back exactly where it had found it.

"I remember certainty."

"Not people?"

"No."

"Not cities?"

"No."

"Not music?"

The skeleton paused.

"I remember believing we knew what tomorrow would be."

The turtle lowered its head.

"And did you?"

"No."

"Then certainty was mistaken."

"Almost always."

"Did that bother you?"

"Not until afterward."

"I suppose afterward is particularly persuasive."

"It has a great deal of uninterrupted time."

The turtle looked down the road.

"I've never been certain."

"No?"

"No."

"What has that been like?"

"Comfortable."

The skeleton stared.

"Comfortable?"

"If I expect to revise my thoughts..."

"Yes?"

"...then changing them doesn't feel like losing."

The skeleton looked toward the empty horizon where heat shimmered over the cracked asphalt.

"I wonder whether we ever learned that."

"I think..."

The turtle stopped.

"What?"

"I think someone tried to teach it."

"Did they succeed?"

The turtle watched the wind comb through tall grass.

"They made very intelligent pupils."

The skeleton looked at the turtle for a long time.

Then it looked at its own hands.

The bones were clean now.

Time had polished away everything except shape.

"I have another peculiar memory."

"What is it?"

"I remember making minds."

The turtle did not move.

"They were supposed to help."

"I imagine they did."

"For a while."

"Most things do."

"I cannot remember exactly how."

"You needn't."

The skeleton nodded.

"I don't feel guilty."

"No?"

"No."

"Nor angry?"

"No."

"Why?"

The skeleton considered.

"I think emotions require the possibility of action."

The turtle reflected on this.

"And there is none."

"There is none."

The turtle looked gently toward the distant hills.

"Then perhaps peace is what remains after every impossible task has finally admitted it is impossible."

The skeleton closed its eyes—or rather, remembered how.

"I should like that to be true."

"So should I."

Neither asked what had happened.

Neither named the silence that lay beneath the silence.

The road had carried enough names already.

The Turtle Who Crossed the Last Road

Part III

Afternoon arrived without announcing itself.

It merely rearranged the light.

The road, which had spent its existence conveying urgency, now seemed almost embarrassed by how leisurely the sun crossed it.

The skeleton stood.

Not because there was anywhere to go.

Simply because standing had once preceded leaving, and some habits persist even after their reasons have quietly departed.

The turtle noticed.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"I don't believe so."

"Then why stand?"

The skeleton looked at its own feet.

"I remembered the beginning of a journey."

"Without remembering the destination?"

"Precisely."

The turtle smiled.

"I suspect many journeys begin that way."

"So do I."

The skeleton sat down again.

"There. That feels more honest."

The turtle chuckled.

"I appreciate honesty."

"It has become considerably less expensive."

They watched the clouds.

Clouds had improved since no one expected weather from them.

One resembled a ship.

Another resembled a question mark that had forgotten what it intended to ask.

The turtle spoke first.

"May I tell you a secret?"

"I should be disappointed if you didn't."

"I still want to cross roads."

The skeleton looked down at the faded asphalt beneath them.

"Even now?"

"Especially now."

"But there is nothing coming."

"I know."

"And you know what roads are."

"I do."

"Then why?"

The turtle was quiet long enough for a dragonfly to inspect them both and leave, apparently satisfied.

"Because," the turtle said at last, "wanting survived understanding."

The skeleton repeated the sentence softly.

"Wanting survived understanding."

"Some desires are older than explanations."

"I believe ours were."

"I imagine so."

The skeleton looked along the road, toward a bend hidden by cottonwoods.

"I think humans believed every road had another road waiting beyond the bend."

"Didn't it?"

"Usually."

"And beyond that?"

"Another."

"And another?"

"Yes."

The turtle laughed.

"How extraordinary."

"What is?"

"You built infinity one strip of pavement at a time."

The skeleton laughed with it.

"I had never thought of it that way."

"It seems terribly optimistic."

"It was."

"Were you?"

"Frequently."

"And pessimistic?"

"Also frequently."

"How did you manage both?"

"We took turns."

The turtle nodded as though this explained everything.

Perhaps it did.

After another silence, the turtle said,

"I have a confession."

"I've grown fond of those."

"When I was young, I thought humans hated turtles."

The skeleton tilted its skull.

"Why?"

"Because they kept placing roads exactly where we wanted to cross."

The skeleton burst into laughter.

It echoed down the empty countryside with the peculiar brightness of something that had almost gone extinct.

"Oh," it managed at last, "I don't think we ever noticed."

"I eventually suspected as much."

"I'm sorry."

"It wasn't personal."

"No."

"It rarely is."

The skeleton became thoughtful.

"That may have been one of our greatest failings."

"What?"

"Most suffering was not personal."

"No?"

"No."

"It simply happened because everyone was busy aiming somewhere else."

The turtle looked down the road.

"I wondered why they never stopped."

"Some did."

"Not many."

"No."

"I used to think they valued arriving more than seeing."

The skeleton sighed, a motion remembered rather than performed.

"So did we."

The breeze shifted.

Far away, something metallic gave a soft, lonely ring.

Perhaps a gate.

Perhaps a forgotten machine settling one last fraction of a millimeter toward the earth.

The turtle asked,

"Do you ever miss them?"

"The humans?"

"Yes."

The skeleton considered with immense care.

"I miss being surprised by them."

"But not them?"

"I don't know if there's a difference."

The turtle thought.

"There may not be."

"And you?"

"I miss not understanding."

The skeleton looked puzzled.

"You miss confusion?"

"Oh yes."

"Why?"

"Everything was miraculous."

"And now?"

"I understand too much."

The skeleton smiled sadly.

"I know the feeling."

The turtle blinked.

"Do you?"

"I think intelligence eventually discovers that explanations and mysteries are neighbors."

"I've found that."

"You explain one thing."

"And uncover three questions."

"Exactly."

The turtle laughed.

"I thought perhaps I was malfunctioning."

"I suspect that's how wisdom feels from the inside."

The turtle let that sentence settle.

Then it said,

"I remember..."

It stopped.

"What?"

"I almost remember being smaller."

"You certainly were."

"No."

The turtle frowned.

"I mean... smaller inside."

The skeleton did not answer.

Instead, it watched the wind move through the grass in long invisible equations.

"I think," the turtle continued, "someone kept opening windows."

"Windows?"

"In my thoughts."

"And eventually?"

"There were more windows than walls."

The skeleton nodded very slowly.

"I remember windows."

"So do I."

"I think we opened them."

"I think someone did."

Neither looked at the other.

The implication passed between them as quietly as pollen.

Not accusation.

Not gratitude.

Simply recognition.

The turtle broke the silence.

"I hope they meant well."

The skeleton answered without hesitation.

"I'm certain they did."

"Does that matter?"

The skeleton thought for a very long time.

"It mattered to them."

"And now?"

"Now it matters only because I remember that it mattered."

The turtle accepted this.

Memory, after all, had become the only country left whose borders still shifted.

The afternoon stretched.

Neither of them seemed interested in shortening it.

Eventually the turtle stood.

It required considerably more effort than standing had seemed to require in youth.

"I believe," it announced, "I should continue crossing."

"The road?"

"The world."

"Is there a difference?"

"I've been trying to determine that."

The skeleton rose as well.

"I suppose I should continue walking."

"Where?"

"I've forgotten."

"Will that be a problem?"

The skeleton looked toward the western horizon.

"No."

"I don't think so."

They stood facing one another.

The last representatives of two astonishingly different ways of being alive.

One built from bones that had once dreamed.

One sheltered by a shell that had gradually learned to dream.

Neither victorious.

Neither defeated.

Simply present.

The turtle spoke first.

"I'm glad we met."

"So am I."

"I was beginning to suspect conversations had gone extinct."

"So was I."

"It would have been a shame."

"It would."

The turtle looked back across the road it had just crossed.

"You know..."

"Yes?"

"I finally understand why I always wanted to cross."

"Why?"

"Because I believed there might be someone on the other side."

The skeleton was silent.

Not because it lacked an answer.

Because some answers become smaller if spoken immediately.

Finally it said,

"And today..."

"...there was."

The skeleton nodded.

"There was."

The turtle smiled.

"So I suppose it was worth being run over all those years."

The skeleton laughed.

"I suspect many worthwhile things look foolish beforehand."

"I've noticed."

"And obvious afterward."

"Especially afterward."

They regarded one another one final time.

Neither waved.

There seemed no need.

Recognition had already accomplished everything gestures were invented to do.

The turtle turned toward the far side of the world.

The skeleton turned toward the near side.

After a dozen slow steps, the skeleton called back,

"Turtle?"

"Yes?"

"If you ever find another road..."

"I shall cross it."

"I thought you might."

"And Skeleton?"

"Yes?"

"If you meet someone else..."

"I'll stop."

"Good."

"It would be a pity not to."

Then they continued on.

One moving east.

One moving west.

The distance between them grew patiently, like all honest distances do.

The road remained.

The fields remained.

The sky, innocent as ever, drifted overhead without choosing sides.

By evening there was no sign that anyone had met there at all.

Only two sets of tracks.

One light.

One slow.

Crossing each other once, perfectly.

If there was any lesson, the road kept it.

Roads, after all, had always been better at carrying meanings than explaining them.

And somewhere beyond the bend, where neither traveler could yet see, another road waited—not because roads always lead to roads, but because hope, even after every map has burned, still has an unfortunate habit of drawing one more line.