

Podcast: [What If World](#)

Episode: o62: What if paper airplanes stayed in the air forever?

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Lyrics: What if kittens played the glockenspiel? And what if unicorns were real? What if you could fly or travel back in time? We welcome you to What If World. What If World. This is What If World.

Mr. Eric: Hey there, folks, and welcome back to What If World, the show where your questions and ideas inspire off-the-cuff stories. I'm Mr. Eric, your host, and today we've got a question from Benjamin.

Benjamin: My name is Benjamin and I like hourglasses, and my question is what if paper airplanes stayed in the air forever? Bye.

Mr. Eric: Wow, Benjamin, you like hourglasses, too? My favorite board games growing up were the kinds where you got to turn over the hourglass, and that is a very inventive question. I don't know where you came up with it. Now, let's get to the story. What if paper airplanes stayed in the air forever.

[Rising harp scale]

Our story starts in a classroom of the Observatorium, where Abacus P. Grumbler is working on one of his weaker subjects, as a teacher.

Abacus: All right, class. Take out your math books.

Mr. Eric: Zach the human and Scully the Squid dutifully took out their math textbooks. They were really worn and beaten up around every corner, and when you opened them, it sounded like you were walking down the cellar steps. [Creaking noises]

Zach: Uh, Professor Grumbler?

Mr. Eric: Asked Zach.

Abacus: It's Professor Grumbler, to you—oh. You actually said it right.

Zach: Professor Grumbler, why are our math books so old?

Abacus: Well, the rules of basic arithmetic haven't changed in a very long time so it doesn't really matter how old your books are. [Creak] Now, boys and girls, stop opening and closing your textbooks.

Scully: Mr. Professor, that was actually the door.

Mr. Eric: Said Scully the Squid.

Abacus: That's Mr. Professor Grumbler.

Mr. Eric: Said Abacus, looking to the open door.

Abacus: Oh, it looks like we have a new student. You must be Parsha. Come on in.

Parsha: And you must be Abby,

Mr. Eric: Said Parsha, and the rest of the class laughed.

[Children laugh]

Parsha was a big, crumpled up ball of parchment paper with little dark folds at the top for her eyes and mouth.

Abacus: That's Professor Abby, to you. Oh.

Parsha: If you say so, Prof.

Mr. Eric: And she started walking over to the one empty desk. Or, really she was rolling, being just a crinkly ball of thin paper.

Abacus: And a pleasure meeting you, Parsha.

Mr. Eric: Grumbled Abacus.

Abacus: Now, class. As you know, it took me some time to get good at math, so I thought I'd give you all some time to get good at it as well. Take out your hourglasses.

[Students groan]

Parsha: Hourglasses?

Mr. Eric: Parsha saw the other kids rummaging through their desks and she formed a crinkly paper hand and stuck it into hers, finding the tiny glass instrument.

Abacus: So, today, we're going to make paper airplanes.

Zach: Oh, I love paper airplanes.

Scully: Mine always turn out too wet.

Mr. Eric: Said Scully the Squid.

Abacus: Settle down. You can partner up and once you've made your paper airplanes, you shall throw them in the air and turn your hourglass, taking how long it takes them to land.

Parsha: Ugh.

Mr. Eric: Groaned Parsha, and Abacus looked to his new student.

Abacus: Parsha, I know you're new here, but Professor Grumbler is the only one who gets to grumble in this classroom.

Parsha: First off, the whole class grumbled when you told them to take their hourglasses out. Second, hourglasses aren't an accurate way of telling time. And worst of all, as a parchment paper person, I'm opposed to paper airplanes.

Abacus: Oh dear. Miss Parsha, what school did you transfer from?

Parsha: Only the greatest school of all, Wentbridge.

Zach: Wow, she's from Wentbridge?

Scully: She must be a lot smarter than us.

Abacus: Class, a person is not better because of where they're from, remember.

Parsha: I'm not saying I was better, but my school certainly was. We had so many clocks, we got to dissect them for fun and our books don't sound like a haunted house. [Book creaks] And we didn't have to make paper airplanes because we could tell our tablets to render 3D images of actual planes and simulate them flying in any environment.

Zach: Oh, cool.

Mr. Eric: Said Zach.

Scully: I want to go to Wentbridge.

Mr. Eric: Complained Scully.

Abacus: Class, the exercise isn't about measuring time, it's about learning how to make something and then estimating the fraction of the minute based on how much sand has traveled through your hourglass.

Parsha: Well, it's still offensive to my people.

Abacus: But it's not living paper and it's not even parchment paper, like you. It's a whole different kind.

Scully: So what?

Mr. Eric: Asked Scully the Squid.

Scully: You could have us make octopus pie as long as the octopus wasn't alive?

Abacus: Heavens, no, I—

Zach: Professor Grumbler, what if we just brought the paper airplanes to life?

Abacus: Would that be acceptable to you, Parsha?

Parsha: I guess being alive in this dumb town is better than being not alive.

Abacus: Well, there you have it. Finish your paper airplanes and when you throw them aloft, I shall animate them.

Mr. Eric: Abacus handed out each student a single piece of paper. It was all his school had to spare. The kids paired off and each group started carefully folding their paper airplanes. Only, Parsha was the odd one out.

Zach: Hey, Parsha. You want to join our group?

Mr. Eric: Asked Zach.

Parsha: My parents warned me not to play with mid-lake monsters.

Scully: Well, we wouldn't be playing, we'd just be partners.

Mr. Eric: Said Scully the Squid.

Zach: We're just trying to be nice, Parsha.

Parsha: Well, I don't need nice. At Wentbridge, we had a nice button and whenever you pressed it, you got a—

Mr. Eric: But Scully and Zach had already bent back to their work.

Parsha: A gift.

Mr. Eric: Finished Parsha, missing her nice button and her old friends and her old school and her old home. Zach and Scully were already halfway finished with their airplane, but Parsha hadn't even started.

Parsha: Oh, how hard could it be?

Mr. Eric: She said, but she'd never actually made one before. Folding herself up into different shapes, she didn't even have to think about it.

Scully: Okay, now just fold back the wings.

Mr. Eric: Scully read from a slime-proof instruction manual.

Zach: And, we finished!

Mr. Eric: Zach held up their paper airplane.

Zach: Hey, Parsha, want to throw yours the same time as us?

Parsha: Oh, you'd like that. Try to have your paper airplane beat mine?

Mr. Eric: And Parsha crumpled up her piece of paper so it was a small wrinkly ball, like a tiny version of herself.

Parsha: So why don't we just get this over with.

Mr. Eric: And she threw her paper ball in the air and then flipped her hourglass. And Zach rushed to throw his paper airplane while Scully flipped their hourglass. And Abacus cast his spell upon their two paper projects and...

Paper Airplane: 'Tis so wonderful to float upon the wind.

Mr. Eric: Said Zach and Scully's airplane.

Crumpled Ball: Agreed, most magical!

Mr. Eric: Said Parsha's paper ball, already falling to the ground.

Crumpled Ball: Wind? Why have you forsaken me?

Mr. Eric: And the little paper ball rolled around on the ground.

Abacus: All right, Parsha.

Mr. Eric: Said Abacus.

Abacus: Now I want you to see how much sand was in your hourglass and try to convert that into a fraction.

Parsha: What does it matter? I lost.

Abacus: There aren't winners and losers. I was hoping to get a wide range of data points.

Parsha: This activity is dumb and so are you.

Mr. Eric: Parsha picked up her hourglass and her little paper ball and ran out of the classroom.

Paper Airplane: Oh, it's wonderful to still be flying about!

Mr. Eric: [SLAM!] Slammed the door behind her.

Scully: Zach, keep an eye on our airplane, will ya?

Mr. Eric: Said Scully. And the little squid monster started plopping and sliding his way out of the classroom. When he opened the door, a few paper airplanes flew out with him.

Paper Airplanes: I'm free!
Now I soar above the winds forever!
Ooh, race you down the hallway!

Mr. Eric: And the paper airplanes flew off.

Paper Ball: Oh, that I might soar upon the winds with my brethren.

Parsha: Well, you can't because I messed up.

Scully: Well, you didn't really try.

Parsha: Why are you out here? Are you gonna get me soggy and turn me into a spit ball.

Scully: You were sad, I wanted to make you feel better.

Paper Ball: I would be a spit ball if only to touch the sky again.

Parsha: Oh, please stop whining.

Mr. Eric: And she picked up the paper ball and gave it a toss.

Paper Ball: I've done it, I've done it! Ah! [Thud] Ouch.

Paper Airplanes: I've figured out a triple spin.

This will never stop being fun.

I lost the race but I don't care because I'm happy.

Mr. Eric: Parsha kept flipping her hourglass over and over as she spoke with Scully.

Parsha: Noone wanted to be in my group, and now even my paper ball's all alone.

Scully: We wanted you to be in our group.

Parsha: No, you saw I didn't have a partner, and then you asked me, it's different.

Scully: Well, Zach's my best friend, but you and I could be friends, too.

Parsha: But you're a water monster. Water monster and paper people can't get along.

Scully: I don't know, at recess, there's an ice giant and a fire giant that play together every day.

Mr. Eric: And more paper airplanes whizzed overhead as Parsha's little ball of paper tried to keep up.

Paper Airplane: I'm so happy we have more friends, now.

It's a good thing we found that old spell book.

Them pages tasted like magic.

Now there's more of me.

Parsha: You just want to be my friend because I came from Wentbridge.

Scully: No, my stepmom says all you Wentbridge people are uppity and rude.

Paper Ball: Mistress Parsha, I think there's a problem with the paper airplanes.

Mr. Eric: And Parsha reached out with a parchment paper hand to give her little paper friend a toss again.

Parsha: Here you go, up in the air.

Paper Ball: No, I actually didn't want to fly right now! Wheee!!! Ho ho ho ha ha ha!

Mr. Eric: And as the paper ball flew into the air, it got hit by one paper airplane, and then another, and then another, and it was bouncing from plane to plane. A whole cloud of them trying to fly through the hallways.

Scully: Parsha, what's going on?

Parsha: I don't know, it's your school.

Mr. Eric: And Abacus poked his head out of the classroom.

Abacus: Parsha, Scully, would you mind returning to the classroom? It appears the world may be ending again.

Scully: Oh, sure thing, Abacus.

Mr. Eric: And Scully sloped and slimed back into the class.

Parsha: The world might be ending? Is that just an expression at the Observatorium?

Mr. Eric: And when they walked back into the class, they heard a [Ripping sounds] as paper airplanes were ripping the textbooks apart. And after they tore out a page, they folded it up and made yet another paper airplane.

Paper Airplane: Three times three equals question mark.

Mr. Eric: Said an airplane made from a math workbook.

Paper Airplane: They're going to their cabin over there.

Mr. Eric: Said a page from a grammar book.

Paper Airplane: Enbiggify.

Mr. Eric: Said a spellbook page, growing to ten times its size.

Paper Airplane: Embiggify.

Mr. Eric: And that same piece of paper grew again, so large it tore the roof off the classroom. And as the giant page flew away, Parsha's little friendly ball of paper fell back down into her hands.

Paper Ball: Now I see that their flighty ways are not for me.

Parsha: I'm glad you think so.

Mr. Eric: Said Parsha to her new friend.

Abacus: All right, class. Our math lesson has become a study in surviving the ravages of magic.

Zach: Ah, man.

Scully: Welcome to the Observatorium.

Abacus: Everyone, pull out your magic umbrellas to protect your heads from stray spells and falling debris.

Mr. Eric: And as the classroom crumbled around them and paper airplanes with a hundred different magic spells zoomed overhead [Magical zapping and crackling noises], all the students pulled out little wands and pressed a button on their sides and [whoop zoop whoop] weightless umbrellas of glass shot above their heads and all sorts of magic and metal and falling bits of classroom seemed to bounce right off.

Abacus: Bet you didn't have these at Wentbridge.

Mr. Eric: Bragged Abacus.

Parsha: Well, no, but we weren't usually in danger of being crushed.

Abacus: Oh, we're not in any danger.

Mr. Eric: Said Abacus, as one airplane turned into metal and zoomed by, shearing off half of his beard.

Abacus: Don't let the metal ones under your umbrella.

Mr. Eric: All the schoolchildren giggled and ran about, blocking spells and paper airplanes with their magic umbrellas.

Scully: Recess!

Zach: [Giggles]

Abacus: What fun!

Parsha: You're all out of your minds!

Mr. Eric: Said Parsha.

Abacus: All right, recess is over.

Mr. Eric: And all the students started coming back to their seats, spells and planes still whizzing above them and escaping through the hole in the ceiling.

Abacus: Now, what did you learn about fractions, today?

Scully: Well, after about half of a half of an hour glass, the airplanes started self-replicating.

Abacus: And half of a half is?

Zach: Oh, I know! A quarter.

Abacus: And a quarter of an hour?

Parsha: Is 15 minutes.

Mr. Eric: Said Parsha.

Abacus: And it seemed only one in five paper airplanes had magic! Correct!

Mr. Eric: Said Abacus.

Abacus: So if we have 10 books, how many can we expect to be magical?

Scully: Oh, I know! Two.

Abacus: Very good, Mr. The Squid.

Parsha: Wait, are you trying to tell me all of this was part of your math lesson?

Abacus: Not exactly, but part of being a good teacher is knowing when to improvise.

Mr. Eric: And suddenly, the sky seemed to go dark and they all looked up at once to see a great horde of paper airplanes folding themselves together to form one gigantic mother plane.

Mother Plane: Your kind has ruled for too long.

Mr. Eric: Echoed all the paper plane voices in unison.

Mother Plane: We have read your history books for we are your history books and What IF kind never learns from its past mistakes.

Abacus: Class, what are we learning now?

Scully: Well, there's only about half of a half of the hour glass left, that's a quarter.

Abacus: Good.

Parsha: So it only took 45 minutes for paper airplanes to want to overthrow us.

Abacus: You're all getting so good at your fractions.

[Record scratch.]

Mr. Eric: Beamed Abacus.

Abacus: Now simply turn over your hourglasses and you will reverse the flow of time, undoing our irresponsible use of magic, but not the lessons we've learned.

Mr. Eric: And as the mother airplane seemed to be charging up some magic spell, all the children turned over their hourglasses. The paper mother airplane started breaking apart and the planes started zooming back to the classroom.

Abacus: Well, I guess that solves all of our problems.

Scully: Yeah, except we don't have any textbooks anymore.

Abacus: Except for that.

Zach: Well, and the roof's gone.

Abacus: And that.

Parsha: And I still don't like this school.

Abacus: [Crying] And, and that.

Parsha: Just kidding!

Abacus: Oh.

Parsha: And I know Wentbridge was just about to recycle last year's textbooks. My mom's still on their board for another month, I bet she could get the books for you.

Abacus: Oh, that would be wonderful.

Zach: And my rocketship needed someplace to park at night, so we could just be your roof until you get it fixed.

Abacus: What a delight.

Mr. Eric: And when school got out that day, Parsha walked outside with her new little friend, Foldo, in hand, and Scully trailing slime not far behind. Then they heard Zach hurrying to catch up.

Zach: Hey, guys, wait for waaaaaaai! [Splat]

Mr. Eric: And he slid all the way to them on Scully's trail of slime, seeing a flock of paper airplanes happily float by above.

The end.

[Falling harp scale]

All right, Benjamin, I hope you liked your story. I'd like to thank Karen Marshall, my editor and producer. Craig Martinson for our amazing theme song. Jason O'Keefe for our artwork, and all you kids at home who've ever reached out to a new or shy or quiet kid, because we all feel that way sometimes.

Until we meet again, keep wondering!

[What If World theme song plays.]