

A SUITCASE OF TEN CLOCKS

A A R A V



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please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

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Dedication

For those lost in the hallway.

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About the Author

An Actor, Stand-up Comedian and a Published Author, he explores the surreal intersections of the human psyche. After debuting with *Nasty Firefly's Memoirs*, his work continues to challenge traditional narrative structures. Currently pursuing his craft in the Global film industry, he balances the discipline of circuit training and performing with a deep study of linguistics—viewing language as the 'bones' of performance and prose alike. *Suitcase of 10 Clocks* is his latest exploration of time, isolation, and the frequencies of the undiscovered.

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ORANGES

The sun over Bangkok was a brutal, fluorescent bulb that afternoon. It baked the concrete of Sukhumvit until the air shimmering above the clogged arteries of the Sois looked like gasoline fumes rising from a getaway car.

I was on the twelfth floor, out on the balcony. It was a narrow strip of grey stone, just wide enough for a chair and a small wooden table. The air was heavy, smelling of charcoal smoke and impending rain. On the stereo inside, the *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack was howling—Dick Dale’s “Misirlou” ripping through the humid silence. It was the kind of music that demanded you do something reckless.

I wasn't doing anything reckless. I was meticulously peeling an orange.

I don't just peel an orange. I *dissect* it. I was using a ceramic-blade knife—sharp enough to split an atom. I lay the peel out flat, a single, unbroken spiral, like a miniature orange snake sunning itself.

"That's a very specific kind of OCD you've got going on there."

The voice came from my left. I didn't turn immediately. I finished the final cut, placing the ceramic knife down next to the perfect orange spiral. Then I looked.

She was leaning against the railing of the adjacent balcony, separated from mine by a three-foot gap of empty, terrifying space. She was Latin—her skin the color of toasted almonds, her hair a messy dark bob that looked like she'd just woken up from a very complicated dream. She was wearing a men's oversized white shirt and holding a smoldering cigarette like it was a weapon.

"It's not OCD," I said. "It's a ritual. There's a difference."

"The difference is usually just the person describing it," she countered. She had a slight accent, vowels that rolled like marbles on silk. She blew a plume of smoke out toward the Chao Phraya River. "I'm the new neighbor. Moved in two days ago. I've been watching you peel fruit for forty-eight hours. You're like a monk, but with more Vitamin C."

"I'm just a guy in a heatwave," I said.

She leaned further over the rail, her eyes—dark, sharp, and restless—locking onto mine. "Do you believe in it today? The spectrum?"

"The what?"

"The idea that love is **an imaginary notion, which is designed like a spectrum where people exist on different levels.**"

I pushed a segment of the orange into my mouth. It exploded—sweet and sharp. "That's some heavy philosophical jazz for a Tuesday afternoon in the Big Mango," I said. "Most people are just wondering if the Skytrain is running on time, and you're defining the architecture of human connection."

"Most people are boring," she said dismissively. "I've loved men who were at the bottom of the spectrum—heavy, grounded, like lead weights. And I've loved women who were at the very top—so high-frequency they were practically invisible. They flicker out before you can even say hello."

She flicked her ash into the abyss. "I think I prefer the middle. It's where the friction is."

"And where do you think I am?" I asked.

"You?" She looked at my blue ceramic plate and the precision-cut fruit. "You're static. You're the empty space on the radio dial. You're vibrating on a frequency that hasn't been discovered yet. Or maybe you're just hiding behind that orange."

"The peel is the protective layer," I said. "It takes the heat so the heart stays sweet. Don't disrespect the peel."

She laughed, a short, dry sound that was lost in the roar of a long-tail boat on a nearby canal. "You're a romantic disguised as a technician. That's a dangerous combination."

She reached out across the gap between the balconies, her hand open, palm up. It was a long reach. One slip and she'd be a headline in the *Bangkok Post*.

"Give me a piece," she commanded. "Let me see what level you're tasting today."

I picked up a translucent segment and reached across the void. For a second, our fingers brushed—a brief, electric contact in the 38-degree heat. Her skin was cool, which seemed impossible.

She ate the orange segment slowly, never breaking eye contact.

"High-vibration fruit," she remarked, her voice dropping. "But it has a bitter finish. You're living on a level that's a bit lonely, don't you think?"

"It's quiet," I said. "I like quiet."

"Quiet is just another word for waiting," she said. She crushed her cigarette out on the railing and turned back toward her open sliding door. "I'm going to go play some records. If you decide to move up the spectrum, the door isn't locked."

She disappeared into the shadows of her apartment. A moment later, the sound of a dusty flamenco guitar began to drift across the gap, tangling with the surf rock coming from my own speakers.

I looked at the charred remains of her cigarette on the railing. The sun didn't care about our spectrum. The city didn't care about our levels. But that brief, violent contact of skin... that was something you could feel.

I went back inside to finish my orange. The music was cool water. I ate the rest of the segments, one by one, savoring the sweetness and the bitterness. Both felt necessary. Both felt like a level I could live on—at least for today.

THE LAST REHEARSAL

The sun over the campus was a flat, white disc, hanging in the sky like a giant unblinking eye. It was the last day of school, a day characterized by a peculiar kind of collective madness that smelled of ozone and permanent ink. All around me, the graduating class was engaged in a frantic, ritualistic destruction. They were busy ruining their crisp beige uniforms, scrawling names and hollow promises across each other's backs in black marker. They looked like a flock of birds covered in charcoal graffiti, desperately trying to anchor themselves to a timeline that was already dissolving into the humid air.

I wasn't wearing the uniform. I had opted out of the collective identity months ago. I was wearing cargo pants—heavy, multi-pocketed things that felt like armor—and a grey Superdry t-shirt that sat against my skin with a cool, synthetic weight. I told the teachers I was dressed this way for the final play rehearsal, but that was a convenient fiction. The truth was simpler and more arrogant: I wanted to feel the air on my skin differently than the others did. I was the school's star, the "upcoming magnificent talent" that the teachers whispered about and the girls watched from the corners of their eyes. I moved through the crowded hallways like a cat that had found a secret passage through a burning building. I was there, but I wasn't *of* there.

But for three years, my magnificence had been a hollow shell. I had been living with an obsession so quiet and so deep that it had become my primary internal weather. Every thought I had, every book I read in the dim light of the school library, every heartbeat during the long, lonely walks home—it had all revolved around her. It wasn't a typical high school crush; it was a structural

necessity. I had constructed my entire personality as a response to her existence.

I knew it was a distortion. I knew, with the cold clarity of a mathematician, that it was unhealthy. She had made her choice. She lived in a world of bright sunlight and uncomplicated laughter, a world that didn't have a chair for me at the table. She was happy. She moved through the corridors with a grace that seemed to defy the very laws of friction. I had memorized the way the light caught the amber flecks in her eyes and the specific, rhythmic way she tapped her pen against her chin when she was bored. But as the silence between us grew over those three years, I began to realize that I was only looking at a fragment of a much larger, more terrifyingly beautiful map. I was a man standing in front of a single brick, claiming I knew the whole cathedral.

And then, the talking stopped. The silence wasn't a wall; it was an ocean. We stopped exchanging even the smallest of pleasantries. In that void, I was forced to look at myself. Without her as my North Star, I had to find a new way to navigate. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, I began to change. I grew. I started lifting weights, feeling

the satisfying ache of muscles repairing themselves. I became productive. I wrote plays; I painted; I became a creator of things. I looked in the mirror one morning and realized that the person looking back was no longer a ghost of someone else's desires. I was solid. I was creative. I was someone I could finally recognize without needing her validation to prove I existed. I didn't know the details of her life anymore—who she talked to, what music she listened to—but from a distance, across the crowded quad, she looked whole. She looked happy. And for the first time, that didn't hurt.

The rehearsal was set for the afternoon. The amphitheater was a brutalist semi-circle of concrete and wood, tucked away behind a grove of ancient, leaning trees. I arrived early. I liked the theater when it was empty; it felt like a lung waiting to take a breath.

I was standing in the wings, half-hidden by a heavy velvet curtain that had absorbed the dust and shadows of forty years. The air back there was cool and smelled of old timber and stage makeup. A single, sharp shaft of sunlight cut through a gap in the rafters, illuminating millions of dust motes that swirled in the air like microscopic galaxies.

From my position in the darkness, the world was a narrow, vertical slice of light.

And then, she appeared in that slice.

She was forty meters away, standing exactly in the center of the seating area. She wasn't writing on anyone's shirt. She was just standing there, looking at the empty stage. I had built a new life, a stronger self, a "magnificent talent," but seeing her there, framed by the concrete and the light, felt like a sudden, violent drop in atmospheric pressure. My chest tightened. It was as if the three years of growth were being tested by a single, silent image.

She looked toward the wings. She couldn't have seen me in the shadows, not clearly, but she knew I was there. She smiled. It wasn't the smile of a stranger, nor was it the smile of a lover. It was something else—a recognition of a shared history that had never quite made it into the light.

Then, the gestures began. It was a silent conversation, a pantomime carried out across the vast, sun-drenched distance of forty meters.

She waved with one hand—a simple, elegant movement that seemed to cut through the heavy afternoon

air. I stayed in the shadows of the curtain and waved back with both hands, the performer in me unable to keep the gesture small. She gave a thumbs-up, a strangely mundane signal that felt absurdly profound in that setting. I returned it.

Then, she brought her hands together to form the shape of a heart. She held it there for a long time. I mirrored it, my fingers trembling slightly as I formed the shape. It felt like we were sending signals between two different planets, across a vacuum where sound couldn't travel.

Then she blew a kiss.

I stumbled. My heel scuffed against the wooden floorboards with a sound that felt like a gunshot in the silent theater. My heart, the one I thought I had trained so well to be stoic and productive, began to hammer against my ribs. What was happening? Were we rewriting the ending? Was this an invitation to bridge the gap? My feet felt a terrifying, magnetic pull to run out onto the stage, to jump the forty meters, and to tell her everything—how I had loved her fragment, how I had hated the silence, and

how I still, despite everything, found her to be the most compelling thing in the universe.

But I stayed where I was. I gripped the velvet curtain until my knuckles turned white.

In that moment, I understood something vital. I had loved a version of her that was essentially a character in my own internal play. She had lived a whole, sprawling, complicated life far beyond that fragment. Desire doesn't simply vanish because you've become a better person; it just becomes a different kind of haunting. Sometimes, love isn't about reaching the other person. Sometimes it's just about witnessing them from a distance, acknowledging the growth in both of you, and letting the gestures pass across the light like echoes.

To run to her now would be to regress. It would be to demand that she fit back into the fragment I had once carved for her.

The stage manager called out from the back of the house. The rehearsal was beginning. I had to step out. I had to be the star.

I stepped out onto the stage, leaving the safety of the velvet shadows. The sunlight hit my face—it was warm, indifferent, and blindingly bright. I looked toward the center of the seating area, but she was already moving away. She was walking toward the exit, a small figure in a white uniform, disappearing into the glare of the afternoon.

I told myself to forget it. I told myself that the wave, the heart, and the kiss were just the dying embers of a fire that had finally gone out. I was a magnificent talent. I had a future. I had lines to deliver.

But as the rehearsal began, the machinery of my mind stripped a gear. I stood center stage, bathed in light, looking out at the empty seats where she had just been. My first line was supposed to be about the nature of time, but it wasn't there. It had vanished into the forty meters between the wings and the seats.

Sunlight hit my face. Applause would soon follow. Let's just forget what happened.

And now, when I think about it, I had forgotten six dialogues in that rehearsal.

THE ARTIST'S CURSE

The apartment was located on the thirteenth floor of a building that felt less like a residence and more like a cooling tower for a massive, invisible engine. The elevator ride up was a ritual of mechanical digestion; the car groaned, the cables hummed at a frequency that vibrated in the teeth, and the fluorescent light overhead flickered with a slow, clinical stutter.

Inside the unit, the air was perpetually still, smelling faintly of ozone and damp cedar. The walls were a hard shade of white, a sterile color that offered no comfort. She sat at the kitchen table—a slab of grey Formica—with a sketchbook that felt heavier than its size suggested.

She was seventeen. To the girls at her school, she was a frantic, neon spark. She was the one who laughed the loudest in the courtyard, her dense curls bouncing with restless energy. She told stories that left people breathless, her hands moving in wide, expressive arcs. She lived loudly, brightly. But the moment the door to the apartment clicked shut, the energy disappeared.

Inside her chest was a cold, stone-lined room. It was a deep cavern of sadness that had no name and no clear origin. It was simply there, like the weight of her limbs or the rhythm of her pulse. She didn't fight it; she lived in it. She was a deep-sea diver who spent her days pretending to be a bird.

Across from her sat the person she loved.

He was a quiet boy with eyes that always seemed distant, as if he were watching something far away. There was a small crescent-shaped scar near his left eyebrow, pale and barely visible unless the light hit it directly. He kept adjusting the cuff of his white button-down shirt, smoothing the stiff fabric between his fingers the way he always did when he was nervous.

On the table sat two glasses of lukewarm barley tea. The condensation clung to the glass in small, unmoving beads.

“Don’t move,” she whispered. Her voice was flat, stripped of the manic cheer she used outside. “I need to get the light right. The way it falls on your shoulder.”

He nodded slightly and tapped his finger once against the table before stopping himself.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said. His voice sounded thin, like a weak radio signal.

She opened the sketchbook. The paper was off-white and slightly rough. She picked up a 2B pencil.

She had heard the theory in a basement jazz club where the air was thick with smoke, and the piano player only used the black keys. The Artist’s Curse: the idea that the soul is not a permanent tenant of the body, but a fluid energy that moves toward the strongest point of focus. If a drawing becomes too precise—if the artist’s attention is intense enough—the subject’s essence shifts. The paper becomes the reality; the body becomes something empty left behind.

She began to draw.

The sound of graphite against paper filled the room.

She didn't start with his face. She started with the space around his neck, the shadow where it met the collar of his shirt. Her movements were careful and controlled. At school, she drew quickly, with messy enthusiasm. Here, her hand moved slowly, almost mechanically. She wasn't creating; she was extracting.

The lighting in the kitchen shifted. It didn't grow darker; it became flatter. The shadows lost their depth, turning into simple shapes. The hum of the refrigerator grew louder.

"It's getting hard to breathe," he said.

He cleared his throat quietly, as if embarrassed by the complaint.

"Keep your eyes on the clock," she said.

She moved to his jawline. As the line formed on the page, something strange happened in the room. The straight lines of the kitchen—the tile edges, the wallpaper seams—seemed to tilt slightly toward the sketchbook.

She could feel the cold room inside her opening wider. The sadness moved down her arm, through the pencil, into the graphite. It felt as if she were pouring that quiet weight into the drawing.

“I can’t feel my hands,” he whispered.

He looked down at them, turning one palm over slowly like he was testing whether it still belonged to him.

Their edges were losing clarity, turning grainy, as an image zoomed too far in. The skin was slowly becoming the pale color of paper.

She didn’t stop.

She moved to the eyes.

This was the dangerous part. The eyes were the opening.

Her curls fell over her face as she worked quickly, intensely. She captured the exact contraction of his pupils. She drew the way his gaze seemed to retreat deeper into his skull, searching for somewhere else to go.

The apartment began to vibrate. Not the floor—something in the air itself. The tea in the glasses didn’t

ripple; it stiffened slightly, almost solid. Time felt slower, heavier.

“I think... I’m forgetting my name,” he said.

For a moment, he frowned slightly, like someone trying to remember a word that had just been on the tip of their tongue.

His voice felt more like a vibration than a sound.

She pressed the pencil harder. She wasn’t just shading now; she was digging the lines deeper. She fixed him to the page. She captured the terror in his gaze—not the terror of dying, but the terror of being misplaced.

The fluorescent light overhead gave one final violent flicker. The flash turned the room into a brief negative image—white shadows, dark light.

Then the pressure vanished. The refrigerator returned to its low, steady hum.

The chair across from her was empty.

There was no sound of departure. No door had opened. The boy, the white shirt, the quiet presence across the table—everything had simply disappeared.

The glass of barley tea remained. It was still lukewarm.

She sat quietly, breathing slowly. The stone room inside her felt slightly heavier now, as if something new had been placed inside it.

She touched the sketchbook.

The paper was warm.

She looked at the drawing. It was him. More precise than he had ever been in person. The graphite lines seemed alive with faint energy, as if something inside the page were pressing outward.

He looked back at her.

The small scar above his eyebrow was there too, perfectly captured.

She closed the book. It felt much heavier now.

She stood and walked to the bathroom. The tiles were cold through her socks. In the mirror, she adjusted her curls and practiced her smile. She lifted the corners of her mouth until her teeth showed. She brightened her eyes until she looked like the girl who told the best jokes in Shinjuku.

She looked radiant.

She looked like a girl with no secrets.

She picked up her bag, slid the heavy sketchbook inside, and walked to the door. The hallway was quiet. The elevator hummed as it arrived.

Outside, the city glowed with neon and traffic lights. People brushed past her, apologizing to the girl with the bright smile and wild hair. She laughed easily, the sound blending into the noise of the street.

Inside her bag, the sketchbook felt warm.

She knew that if she opened it again, the boy in the white shirt would still be there, waiting inside the graphite lines.

But she wouldn't open it.

She would keep it in the dark, like the cold room inside her.

She walked toward the subway station, her curls bouncing in the wind. She was young, the life of the party, carrying a soul quietly in her bag.

The city didn't notice a thing.

In a world full of bright lights and constant motion, a missing person is just a small error—one frame missing from a long sequence.

She stepped into the station and disappeared into the crowd, leaving behind nothing but the low mechanical hum of the city and the faint smell of rain.

THE RESET

The humidity didn't just sit on you; it colonized you. It was a thick, wet blanket that smelled of jasmine, diesel exhaust, and the slow decay of centuries. I lived in a high-ceilinged flat where the walls seemed to sweat in sympathy with the tenants. At night, the distant glow of the city felt personal, as if it were a giant radiator pumping heat directly into my bedroom.

I was there as a guest lecturer, invited to teach an intensive on-scene work. I wasn't interested in the theory of theater; I was interested in the physical architecture of human interaction—how people stand when they are lying, and how they breathe when they are trapped. My students

were mostly young and earnest, trying to find their footing in a world that felt increasingly liquid.

All except one.

Or rather, the girl who sat in the back of the room and didn't belong to the class at all.

She was the step-sister of one of my students, a girl named Su. The step-sister, however, was a different species. She was half Korean, two years older than me, and possessed a stillness that made the rest of the room feel like it was vibrating at a frantic, unnecessary frequency.

The first day I noticed her, her hair was the color of a bruised plum. The next day it was a shade of electric moss. By the third day, it was a defiant, chalky white.

She sat in the shadows of the rehearsal space, watching me work with Su on a simple encounter between two people, her eyes following my movements with a clinical, detached interest. She didn't take notes. She didn't participate.

She simply existed there, like a statue carved from neon.

We weren't friends. During a break, while Su was practicing her breathing, I walked to the back of the room. The girl was scrolling through her phone.

"What's your favorite food?" I asked.

It was a clumsy opening, a desperate attempt at normal dialogue.

She didn't look up.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious," I said. "I'm trying to understand the tastes of the people in this room."

"Curiosity is a precursor to possession," she said, her voice a flat, melodic monotone. "And you can't possess a ghost. Besides, knowing what I eat won't tell you anything about me. It'll just tell you what I'm destroying today."

"What do you do?" I asked.

Finally, she looked up. Her hair that day was a stupid, brilliant shade of sunset orange.

She didn't answer with words. She simply turned her phone screen toward me.

It was an Instagram profile.

The follower count sat at **248K**.

The grid was a masterpiece of curated psychosis: photos of her in various cities, always with a different hair color, always with an expression that suggested she was bored by the concept of existence.

“I’m an influencer,” she said, as if she were admitting to a rare blood disease.

“I influence the way people spend their boredom.”

Two weeks later, she was in my bed.

Nobody knew.

In the digital world, she was a goddess of light. In my apartment, she was a chaotic glitch.

Our life together unfolded through silent, midnight rituals. She would arrive after the city had finally quieted down, her clothes smelling faintly of ozone and burnt sugar. The first thing she would do is go to the bathroom and change her hair.

She had a bag full of semi-permanent dyes—colors that didn't exist in nature, colors that felt like they had been stolen from a high-voltage laboratory.

I would lie in bed and listen to the running water, imagining the pigments swirling down the drain—a kaleidoscope of discarded identities.

“Why do you do it every day?” I asked her once.

Her hair was a shade of neon turquoise that made her look as though she were underwater, even in the dry-season heat.

“To reset the circuit,” she said.

“If I stay the same for more than twenty-four hours, the world starts to catch up. The algorithm begins to predict me. If I'm predictable, I'm practically dead.”

It was during these weeks, deep in the heart of the city, that the boundaries between the scenes I taught and the life I lived began to dissolve.

The city itself felt like a stage—the crumbling colonial buildings, the monks in their saffron robes, the sudden,

violent rainstorms that would begin and end as if someone had flicked a switch.

Our relationship wasn't built on conversation. It was built on strange, ritualistic acts.

She would spend hours taking photographs of things that weren't her: the shadow of a fork on my kitchen table, the microscopic bubbles inside a glass of warm soda.

"You're teaching scene work," she said one night, her limbs tangled with mine. Her hair was a dusty rose.

"But you don't understand the scene you're in. You think you're the teacher, but you're just a prop."

I didn't argue. I couldn't.

She was only two years older than me, but she felt like she had been born at the dawn of the internet and had lived long enough to watch every human interaction collapse into a metric.

One afternoon, I was teaching a session on how to exist in a space without speaking.

I felt a strange tingling—a mild electric shock at the tips of my fingers.

I looked toward the back of the room.

The chair was empty.

The girl was gone.

I hurried back to my apartment.

The door was unlocked. The smell of dye and chemicals hung heavy in the air.

I rushed to the bathroom.

The sink was stained with the most impossible color I had ever seen—a shimmering, translucent silver that looked like liquified moonlight.

My phone was sitting on the edge of the sink, exactly where she usually kept her dye bottles.

I picked it up, my heart hammering.

There was a notification on the screen.

Video Saved to Camera Roll.

I pressed play.

It was a recording of me, sleeping.

But she had filmed it using my own device, my own lens. She had added an AR overlay through a third-party app. Lines of code scrolled across my sleeping face—mathematical equations and a digital timer counting down to zero.

“He thinks he’s teaching,” her voice whispered from my phone’s speakers.

“He thinks he’s the one observing. But he’s just a prop in a scene he’ll never finish. Look at him. He’s already part of the grid.”

The video ended.

As it did, my phone’s screen flickered and went black.

The device felt unnaturally cold in my hand, as though the processor had been hollowed out.

I walked into the bedroom and sat on the floor.

The golden light of late afternoon bled through the curtains, turning everything in the room a flat, unearned yellow.

The loop closed then.

I remembered the first day of the lecture. I remembered talking about how to perceive what isn't there. I remembered the electric hum in my fingers.

I looked at my hands.

My fingertips were stained with that same translucent silver dye.

I tried to rub it off, but it sat beneath the skin, as though it had seeped into my bloodstream.

She hadn't been a girl I was sleeping with.

She hadn't been an influencer with crazy followers.

She was a manifestation of the very thing I had been trying to teach.

She was the scene work itself—the hidden subtext made flesh.

She hadn't left because she was finished with me.

She left because the lecture had concluded.

The followers weren't people; they were spectators of a performance that had finally reached its final curtain.

And by recording it on my phone, she had made me the curator of my own disappearance.

I went back to the rehearsal space the next day.

Su was there, looking lost.

"Have you seen my sister?" she asked.

“The circuit was probably reset,” I said.

I sat in the chair she used to occupy.

I realized that my entire life in that city had been a beautifully constructed set.

And she had been the only one who knew how to strike the scenery.

I looked in the mirror.

My hair was beginning to turn silver at the roots.

Not the silver of age.

The shimmering, stupid silver of a girl who knew that to stay the same was to be caught by the world.

I wasn't sad.

You can't be sad when a scene ends.

You just wait for the next one to begin.

I touched my hair.

It was a stupid color.

It was the only real thing I had left.

RAIN'S CHILD

“**T**he triangular ones are better because they have more points to lose,” a voice echoed.

The voice did not come from the hallway or the window. It was a sound like a dry finger circling the rim of a crystal glass, vibrating at a frequency that made the boy's molars ache. It was a sound that had no shadow.

In the attic of the new house, the air smelled of mothballs and the slow, sweet decay of wet cardboard. It was a space that didn't belong to the renovated, high-ceilinged floors below. Downstairs was a sanctuary of marble counters, recessed lighting, and the expensive,

suffocating scent of his mother's Jo Malone candles—Pomegranate Noir, a smell that felt like being trapped in a velvet box. Up here, it was just the boy, the voice, and the quiet sense that the world outside was waiting for a reason to dissolve.

“Points are just temporary,” the boy whispered. He was sitting cross-legged on a dusty tatami mat the previous owners had left behind, a straw-scented relic in a house of stone. His dark curls were slightly damp with sweat from the summer heat trapped in the rafters, falling into his unusually large eyes. He didn't push the hair away. He was busy rolling a white, rectangular eraser between his palms, feeling the friction of the rubber against his skin. “Once you use them, they become rounded. Like stones in a river. I think the circular ones are more honest. They don't pretend they won't change.”

“Honesty is a luxury for those with nowhere to hide,” the voice said. The boy could feel its presence now—not as a figure he could see, but as a cold pocket in the air near the rafters, a localized winter. “A triangular eraser lives a life of sharp edges until it can't anymore. It fights the paper. It resists the smudge. There's something worth watching in

that. It's more interesting to see something lose its shape than to have no shape at all."

The boy considered this. He liked the word tragedy. He had discovered it in a book downstairs and kept it in his pocket like a smooth pebble. It felt heavy and cool, like the silver spoons his mother kept in a velvet-lined box, the ones they only used when guests came to talk about "logistics" and "market fluctuations." He reached out and touched a rusted nail sticking from a beam. The rust stained his thumb a deep, dried-blood orange.

"The move has made you cynical," the voice added.

"The move has made me nothing," the boy said. He leaned his head against the wood, his eyes fixed on the eraser. "It's just a different window. The sky is the same grey. The people in the street look the same, only their coats are more expensive here—stiffer wool, sharper collars. At the new school the desks are lighter wood, but the gum stuck underneath them is just as old, just as grey, just as tooth-marked."

The city was a maze of glass and steel, a vertical forest where the sun struggled to reach the pavement. His family

had moved for his father's promotion—a senior partnership at a firm that dealt in “Logistics,” a word the boy found suspiciously vague. To him, the city felt wound too tight, like a piano wire stretched until it began to hum a note only he could hear.

At school, he moved through the corridors without friction. The other children passed around him like water around a stone, their laughter clean and rehearsed, their shoes unscuffed, their lives already arranged into neat, forward lines. They were “Logistics” children. They knew where they were going.

But the boy was different. His eyes lingered too long on things—the pattern of cracks in the plaster that looked like lightning, the way light bent on polished floors to reveal the footprints of people who had walked there decades ago, the quiet tremor in a teacher's hands when she thought no one was watching.

He had a rule: he didn't blink. Not if he could help it.

He had discovered that if you kept your eyes open long enough, the world's “refresh rate” began to fail. The marble floors would ripple. The clean white walls would

show the "scuffs" of history—the ghosts of old posters, the stains of leaked pipes from 1984, the shadows of children who had graduated before his parents were born.

"He doesn't blink enough," a girl named Min-ha had whispered during lunch. "He looks like he's watching a movie that ended an hour ago," a boy added.

They weren't wrong. He was watching the "Static Underneath."

"They're looking at your shoes," the voice told him during morning assembly, its tone vibrating in his jaw. "They're wondering why you don't care that they're scuffed. They think a scuff is a failure of character."

"Scuffs are history," the boy thought back, his eyes burning as he stared at the principal's forehead. "They're a map of everywhere I've walked. If I polish them away, I'm just a ghost with no trail."

"But they don't want maps," the voice replied, sounding almost like a cello now, deep and resonant. "They want mirrors. They want to look at you and see exactly what they expect to see. You are giving them a glitch, and people hate glitches."

The attic was his sanctuary, but the balcony was his altar.

On the third Tuesday of the month, the air changed. The "Logistics" of the city began to fail. The wind stopped being a breeze and became a pressure, pushing against the glass windows of the high-rises.

"It's coming," the voice said, shifting from the rafters to a place behind the boy's left eye. This was where it lived most of the time—in the space between his thoughts, like a bookmark in a heavy, forgotten book.

The boy felt static on his forearms, the fine hairs standing up as if reaching for the clouds. Before leaving his room, he had sprayed a little of his father's Tom Ford perfume on his collar—a sharp, metallic scent of tobacco and vanilla. It was a mask, something that didn't belong to him, a scent for a man who closed deals, not a boy who watched the rain.

He stood up, leaving the erasers on the attic floor—the rectangle and the triangle side by side in the dust, like two different philosophies waiting to be proven. He climbed down the ladder, moved through the silent, beige

hallway that smelled of expensive candles, and stepped out onto the balcony.

The city was held in a breathless grip. The light had turned a bruised yellow, the color of a coin that had been handled by too many desperate people. To most, this was gloomy weather, a reason to cancel golf or call an Uber. To the boy, it was the beginning of the "Reset."

"How long?" he asked. "Two minutes," the voice whispered. "The clouds have come from across the sea just to break over this specific coordinate."

His heart began hammering. A strange, electric joy rose in his chest. The sun was too exposing; it made everything feel fixed, permanent, and boring. But the rain loosened the bolts. It changed the laws of physics.

The first drop fell. It struck the glass railing with a sharp, isolated sound, like a finger snapping. Then another. Then the sky opened, and the city disappeared behind a curtain of grey.

He walked to the center of the balcony and looked up, his eyes wide, defying the urge to shut them against the deluge.

When the water hit him, the transformation began. In the dry world, the voice was a whisper, a suggestion. But as the rain soaked through his shirt, clinging to his skin like a second, colder layer of muscles, the voice expanded. It wasn't one voice anymore; it was a choir of everyone who had ever stood in the rain and felt themselves dissolving.

“Can you hear me now?” the voice roared over the thunder. “I can hear everything,” the boy said, his voice lost in the wind.

He wasn't just hearing the voice anymore. He was hearing the city's nervous system. He could hear the water rushing through the gutters forty floors below, carrying the city's filth toward the river. He could feel the pipes in the walls of the apartment tightening under the sudden pressure. He could hear the faint, indistinct currents of thought moving through nearby rooms—the anxiety of a mother, the boredom of a businessman, the loneliness of a cat. He laughed.

“They're so small,” he said, turning slowly, his arms outstretched. Rain spun from his fingertips in long, silver arcs. “Why are they hiding from this?”

“Because they think their edges matter,” the voice said, vibrating in his very bones. “They think they end where the air begins. They think their skin is a wall. But you—”

“I don’t have walls,” the boy finished.

He gripped the railing. The wind pushed against him, trying to throw him back into the safety of the marble-floored living room, but he leaned into the void. The feeling wasn’t fear. It was expansion. He felt as wide as the storm.

“Tell me about the girl,” he said, remembering a fragment the voice had dropped weeks ago.

The voice paused, the sound of the rain momentarily softening into a hum. “She lived in a city that isn’t on the maps anymore. A city of wood and paper that burned down when the sky stayed dry for too long. She loved the rain because it was the only thing that didn’t try to label her. She counted drops until she became one. She’s part of the cycle now. Some of her might be in the water running down your spine right now. Some of her might be the salt in your eyes.”

The boy shivered—not from the cold, but from the terrifying closeness of it. Each drop felt like a touch. Not a memory, but a physical contact with the past.

The next day, the sun returned with a vengeance. The city looked scrubbed, artificial, and cruel—like a film set being reset between scenes by a crew that didn't care about the actors.

The boy sat in the back of the classroom. His hair was still faintly damp at the roots, carrying a trace of rain and that expensive, stolen cologne. He looked at his hands. They felt too solid. Too heavy.

“Open your textbooks to page 142,” the teacher said. Her voice was thin, like paper tearing.

He didn't move. His eyes were fixed on a puddle on the playground outside. The sun was trying to evaporate it, to turn it back into a gas, to erase the evidence of the storm. The surface of the water trembled slightly in the heat.

The voice hummed a low, mournful note in his left ear.

The teacher approached his desk, her shadow falling over his book like a shroud. “Is there something more interesting outside, Min-jun?”

The boy looked up at her. He didn't blink. He watched as her face began to ripple, the "Logistics" of her features failing. He saw the tired woman she would be in ten years; he saw the young girl she had been thirty years ago. He saw the scuffs on her soul.

“The present tense is just a transition between two different kinds of rain,” he said. His voice was steady, but it sounded like it was coming from a long way off.

The room shifted. A pause. A few students snickered, but the sound died quickly. There was something in his eyes—a depth that shouldn't belong to a twelve-year-old—that made the teacher step back.

She lingered for a second, her hand hovering near his shoulder, then she moved on, her heels clicking rhythmically on the linoleum. Click. Click. Click. Like a clock counting down.

The boy looked back at the window. He could already feel the air thickening again, gathering. The "Logistics" of the sky were already preparing the next reset.

He picked up his triangular eraser. He looked at the sharp, perfect points.

"Honesty is boring," he whispered, echoing the voice.

He pressed the point of the eraser against the hard wood of the desk, pushing down with all the weight of the attic, the rain, and the city. He pushed until his knuckles turned white.

Snap.

The triangular point broke off. It didn't just crumble; it snapped clean, like a bone. The broken tip rolled across the surface of the desk, caught a draft of air, and dropped out of sight into the shadows near his feet.

"Tragedy," the voice said softly, with a sound like a satisfied sigh.

Something cold and damp rested, briefly, on his shoulder. It felt like a hand made of mist.

He didn't move. He didn't blink. He just watched the puddle outside disappear into the sun, knowing that he was the rain's child, and he understood the shape of losing oneself better than anyone else in the room. He was a triangular boy in a rectangular world, and he was finally learning how to let go of his edges.

I WANTED A DOG IN THE FIRST PLACE

The spaghetti was exactly four minutes from being finished when the doorbell rang. I stirred the pot with a wooden spoon, watching the starchy bubbles rise and fall. It was Tuesday. I didn't expect anyone on Tuesdays.

I turned the flame down to a simmer and walked to the door. I opened it.

A woman stood there holding a cardboard box. She wore a yellow raincoat, though it hadn't rained in three days. Her hair was pulled back into a tight, severe bun.

"I can't keep it," she said.

"Keep what?"

She tilted the box. Inside, a small, white dog with one black ear looked up at me. It had wet eyes and a nose that looked like a damp raisin.

"I wanted a dog in the first place," she said, her voice flat. "But now I don't. My husband says it smells like old pennies. Do you want it?"

"I'm making pasta," I said.

"It's a good dog. It doesn't bark. It just watches."

"I don't even know your name."

"The dog's name is Maru," she said. She placed the box on my welcome mat, turned around, and walked down the hallway. She didn't use the elevator. I heard her footsteps fading down the concrete stairs.

I looked at the dog. The dog looked at the wall. I picked up the box and carried it into the kitchen.

The dog stayed.

I drained the spaghetti and ate it with butter and black pepper. I gave Maru a small bowl of water. He drank half of it, then sat by the refrigerator. He didn't wag his tail. He didn't sniff the corners of the room. He just sat, staring at the hum of the cooling coils.

The next morning, I went to the store. I bought:

- Two bags of premium dry food.
- A blue leash.
- A rubber ball that looked like a planet.
- A ceramic bowl with a heavy base.

When I got back, Maru was in the exact same spot. The sun had moved across the floor, lighting up the dust motes in the air, but the dog hadn't moved.

"Time for a walk," I said.

I clipped the leash to his collar. He followed me out of the apartment. We walked through the park. I threw the planet-ball. It bounced off a bench and rolled into a bush. Maru watched it go. He didn't run. He didn't blink.

A man in a grey tracksuit stopped us. "That's a strange-looking dog," he said.

"It's just a dog," I said.

"It looks like it's waiting for a bus."

"We're just walking."

We went home. I made toast. I listened to a record of solo piano pieces. The dog sat on the rug, staring at the spinning black disc.

Three days later, the phone rang at 2:00 AM.

"Is he still quiet?" a voice asked. It was the woman in the yellow raincoat.

"He's quiet," I said. "He doesn't do much."

"He's processing," she said. "Don't feed him anything red."

"Why?"

"It complicates things."

She hung up. I went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. I had bought a pound of ground beef that afternoon. I looked at the red meat in the plastic wrap. I looked at Maru. He was staring at the microwave clock.

I put the beef in the freezer.

A week passed. The rhythm was steady.

1. Wake up at 6:30 AM.
2. Walk Maru for thirty minutes.
3. Work at my desk translating technical manuals for washing machines.
4. Feed Maru dry pellets.
5. Sleep.

On Friday, I found a suitcase in front of my door. It was old, made of brown leather with brass buckles. There was a note taped to the handle: *For his comfort.*

I brought it inside. Maru stood up for the first time without being prompted. He walked to the suitcase and scratched at the buckles with a single claw.

I opened it.

The suitcase wasn't full of clothes. It was full of clocks. Small travel alarms, gold pocket watches, digital bedside tickers, and heavy brass chronometers. There must have been fifty of them.

And they were all synchronized.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

The sound filled the apartment like a mechanical heart. Maru stepped into the suitcase, curled his body around the pile of ticking metal, and closed his eyes.

I sat on the floor and watched him. The sound was heavy. It felt like the room was sinking an inch into the earth every minute.

The next morning, the dog was gone.

The suitcase was still there, but the clocks were silent. I opened one. The gears weren't moving. I opened another. The battery was missing. I checked the digital ones. The screens were blank.

I called the number from the woman's previous call. It was disconnected.

I walked into the bathroom to splash cold water on my face. I looked in the mirror.

I wasn't there.

I could see the shower curtain. I could see the toothbrush in the glass. I could see the tiles. But where my face should have been, there was only the reflection of the wall behind me.

I lifted my hand. I could feel the skin of my cheek. I could feel the stubble. I could feel my teeth when I ran my tongue over them. But the mirror showed nothing.

I walked back into the living room. Maru was sitting on the sofa. He wasn't a dog anymore.

He was a man. He was wearing my clothes—the blue sweater and the wrinkled khakis. He had my face. He had my hands. He was holding the rubber ball that looked like a planet.

"I wanted a dog in the first place," the man with my voice said.

"Who are you?" I asked. My voice sounded thin, like it was coming from a radio in another room.

"The woman was right," he said, tossing the ball into the air and catching it. "The red meat complicates things. But the clocks... the clocks fixed the timing."

He stood up and walked toward the door.

"Wait," I said. I tried to grab his arm, but my hand passed through his shoulder like smoke through a screen door.

"You can stay here," he said, opening the front door. "The spaghetti is in the cupboard. The dry food is under the sink. It's not a bad life, as long as you don't mind the silence."

He stepped out into the hallway.

"What am I supposed to do?" I shouted.

He paused and looked back. He had my eyes, but they were wet and dark, like a damp raisin.

"Just watch," he said.

He closed the door. I heard his footsteps—my footsteps—fading down the concrete stairs.

I went to the kitchen. I sat by the refrigerator. The cooling coils hummed. I looked at the wall. I waited for the sun to move across the floor.

FOR YOU I WOULD...

In the humid, gray heart of Seoul, the rain doesn't merely fall; it **softly erases**, blurring the sharp edges of the skyscrapers until the city becomes a smudge of charcoal against a fading sky. It claims the neon signs of Gangnam, turning the high-definition reds and greens into blurry, bleeding watercolors. It claims the silence of the *hagwons*, where the air is thick with the smell of pencil lead and the collective exhaustion of a thousand teenagers. And it claims the sixteen-year-old boy sitting on the emergency staircase of a thirty-story apartment complex, staring at a space where a person used to be.

He didn't have a name he cared to use. In the school registry, he was a string of characters and a student ID number. At home, he was "you," or more often, a quiet presence that moved through the kitchen like a draft under a door. His parents were architects of a life he didn't quite inhabit—successful, busy, and existing in a different time zone even when they were in the same room.

He was sixteen, an age that felt like being trapped in a diving bell at the bottom of the Han River. You can see the light above, but the pressure is enough to crack your glass.

The girl from 1402 had been the only person who looked at him and saw something other than a background character. She lived directly below him. They had a system: three sharp knocks on the water pipe in the bathroom meant “*Are you awake?*” Two knocks meant “*Look out the window.*”

One Tuesday in July, during the height of the monsoon, the knocks stopped.

The police came, their blue lights pulsing against the grey rain. They interviewed his parents. They interviewed the security guard. They looked at the CCTV footage,

which showed her entering the elevator at 4:11 PM and never leaving it. The elevator had opened on the fourteenth floor, empty.

"Runaway," the adults whispered. "The pressure of the exams. It happens."

But the boy knew. He sat on the cold concrete of the staircase, his back against the railing. He knew because the silence coming from the pipes wasn't the silence of an empty room. It was the silence of a vacuum—a place where air and sound had been surgically removed.

He went to his room and sat in front of his television. It wasn't plugged in. The black screen reflected his own face—pale, angular, with eyes that seemed to be looking at something three inches behind the glass.

Then, the static began.

It didn't come from the speakers. It came from the air itself. A low, rhythmic thrumming, like the purr of a giant mechanical cat. The screen didn't turn on, but shadows began to move within the blackness. They formed the shape of the Namsan Tower, but it was inverted, reaching down into the earth instead of up into the sky.

A voice, thin as a shaving of cedar wood, drifted out.

“For you, I would have waited,” it whispered. “But the gravity changed.”

The next day, the boy skipped his advanced mathematics class. He took the subway toward Itaewon. The trains in Seoul have a specific vibration—a metallic shriek that feels like it’s trying to peel the skin off the city. He got off at a station that felt too deep underground. The tiles were cracked, and the air smelled of ozone and dried squid.

He found a record shop tucked between a closed tailor and a shop selling vintage clocks. Inside, a girl was leaning against a counter. She looked about his age, but her eyes suggested she had seen the invention of fire. She wore a heavy, charcoal-grey wool coat. It was 32°C outside with 90% humidity.

“You’re looking for the crevice,” she said. She didn’t look up from the record she was cleaning.

“I’m looking for someone,” the boy said.

“Same thing,” she replied. She finally looked at him. Her pupils were slightly different sizes. “People don't just leave Seoul. The city is too heavy. To leave, you have to find a place where the weight lifts. A ‘Second Seoul.’ It’s built out of all the things this city throws away: broken umbrellas, expired dreams, and people who forgot how to breathe in sync with the subway doors.”

“How do I get there?”

The girl in the wool coat pulled a small, silver key from her pocket. It wasn't a key for a door. It was a key for a wind-up toy.

“You have to go to the 24-hour GS25 convenience store near the river. The one where the lights flicker in a pattern of three short, three long. Go to the back, behind the banana milk. Don't look at the clerk. The clerk isn't human; he's a collection of discarded receipts held together by a uniform.”

“Why are you telling me this?” the boy asked.

The girl smiled, a sad, crooked thing. “Because I'm a shadow collector. And your shadow is already halfway

there. If you don't go get her, you'll be transparent by next Tuesday."

The convenience store was a temple of artificial light. It stood alone on a corner near the Han River, humming with the sound of a dozen refrigerators. The clerk sat behind the register, his face obscured by a visor, his movements jerky and rhythmic.

The boy walked past the rows of instant ramen and salty snacks. He reached the dairy section. The yellow containers of banana milk stood in neat rows. He reached behind them, his hand disappearing into a space that shouldn't have existed.

The air turned freezing.

He pushed through a curtain of plastic strips and found himself not in a storage room, but on a landing. Below him was a staircase. It was made of the same grey concrete as his apartment building, but it spiraled down into a darkness so absolute it felt solid.

He began to descend.

He lost track of time. In the Second Seoul, time doesn't flow; it pools. He passed landings where strange things were happening. On the 50th floor down, a man was meticulously polishing a pile of discarded bicycle bells. On the 100th floor, a woman was teaching a choir of stray cats to sing Schubert.

His shadow, he noticed, was now walking three steps ahead of him. It looked more solid than he did. It moved with a purpose he lacked.

Finally, he reached the bottom.

It was a replica of a Seoul street, but the buildings were made of translucent glass. The sky was a deep, bruised indigo, and there were no stars—only thousands of glowing white balloons drifting aimlessly.

He saw her.

The girl from 1402 was sitting at a bus stop. The bus sign said: **NOWHERE – EVERY 15 MINUTES**. She was wearing her school uniform, but it was bleached white. She was holding a book, but the pages were blank. When she saw him, she didn't seem surprised. She looked at him with a gentle, hollow melancholy.

“You shouldn't have come,” she said. Her voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a well. “The air here is too light. If you stay too long, your memories will float away like those balloons.”

“I came to bring you back,” the boy said. His own voice sounded strange to him—heavy and clumsy.

“I can't go back,” she said. “Up there, the weight was too much. The exams, the silence in the kitchen, the way everyone looks through you. Here, I'm light. I'm finally thin enough to be free.”

“But you're not real here,” the boy argued. He felt a tear track down his cheek. In this world, the tear didn't fall; it drifted upward, a tiny crystal orb.

“Real is just a word for things that hurt,” she whispered.

A figure emerged from the shadows of the bus stop. It was a tall man in a well-tailored suit, but instead of a head, he had a large, ornate birdcage. Inside the cage, a single blue light flickered.

“The boy wants a trade,” the Birdcage Man said. His voice echoed as if spoken into a grand canyon.

“I want her to go home,” the boy said.

“In the Second Seoul, nothing is free,” the Birdcage Man said. “To give her back her weight—to make her ‘real’ enough to live in the world of gravity—someone must take her place. Not her body, but her absence.”

The boy looked at the girl. She looked like a sketch that was being slowly erased. He thought about his own life: the quiet apartment, the cold dinners, the feeling of being a ghost in a city of millions. He realized he had been preparing for this his whole life. He was already mostly empty.

“For you,” he whispered, looking at her, “I would.”

“What will you give?” the Birdcage Man asked.

“My reflection,” the boy said. “And my ability to feel the warmth of the sun.”

The Birdcage Man laughed, a sound like dry leaves. “A heavy price for a young boy. You will walk in the sun,

but you will always feel the winter. You will look in the mirror and see only the wall behind you. Do you accept?”

“Yes.”

The girl reached out and touched his hand. For a second, he felt a jolt of electricity—a sharp, stinging heat. Then, she began to change. Her uniform regained its color. Her eyes grew dark and focused. She began to slump, the gravity of the world above suddenly reclaiming her.

The boy, conversely, felt light. He felt as though he might drift away if he didn't hold onto the bus stop sign.

“Go,” he told her. “The elevator is waiting.”

The boy woke up on the roof of his apartment complex. It was the Blue Hour—that fleeting moment before dawn when the city is caught between dreams and reality.

He stood up. His limbs felt like they were made of balsa wood. He walked to the edge of the roof and looked down at Seoul. The city was waking up. The first buses were crawling through the streets like bioluminescent beetles.

He went down to his apartment. He passed the 14th floor. The door to 1402 was open. He saw the girl's mother standing in the hallway, sobbing, clutching her daughter who was sitting on the floor, looking dazed and shivering.

The girl looked up as he passed. For a heartbeat, their eyes met. She looked at him with a flash of recognition—a memory of a staircase and a boy who gave away his sun. But then the light hit her eyes, and the memory faded. To her, he was just a neighbor. A boy from the floor above. A stranger.

He entered his own apartment. His parents were in the kitchen, drinking coffee.

“You’re up early,” his father said, not looking up from his tablet.

“Yes,” the boy said.

He walked to the bathroom and looked into the mirror over the sink.

There was no one there. The mirror showed the white tiles of the shower, the silver faucet, and the half-used tube of toothpaste. But where he stood, there was only a slight blurring of the air, a ripple in the light.

He stepped into the living room and stood in a patch of direct morning sunlight streaming through the window. He saw the light hitting his clothes, but he felt nothing. No warmth. No prickle of heat on his skin. It was as if he were standing in a freezer.

He sat at the kitchen table. He picked up a piece of toast. It tasted like paper.

He was young. He would live a long life. He would finish school, he would get a job, he would walk through the crowded streets of Myeong-dong and the quiet alleys of Samcheong-dong. But he would always be a few degrees colder than everyone else. He would be the man who never appeared in photographs, the man whose shadow was always a little too dark.

He reached out and knocked on the kitchen table. Three sharp knocks.

Are you there?

From somewhere deep in the architecture of the world—or perhaps just from the room below—he heard two knocks in return.

I am.

It was a sad sound. It was a beautiful sound. It was the sound of a debt paid in full.

The boy picked up his backpack and headed for the door. Outside, the sun was rising over Seoul, gold and indifferent. He stepped out into the light, shivering in the heat of a midsummer morning, and began the long, quiet walk of a ghost who chose to stay.

OUT OF FOCUS

The guest lecture at Waseda had ended three weeks ago. I think. I had stood in a room that smelled of floor wax and old paper, talking about the structural integrity of bridge cables, but my mind was already out the window, tracing the neon veins of Shinjuku.

I never went to the airport. I just stayed.

The Airbnb was a concrete cell tucked behind a pachinko parlor. It had a bed that felt like a folded gym mat and a kitchen consisting of a single electric burner that groaned when I turned it on. The bathroom didn't exist in

the traditional sense; there was a plastic nozzle over a drain in the floor next to the fridge. If I showered, the toast got soggy.

So I stopped going back. I lived on the streets, my Nikon hanging around my neck like a heavy, black heart.

The rain in Shinjuku doesn't fall; it just dissolves into the air.

I was standing outside a Golden Gai bar called *The Alibi*. I was trying to photograph a puddle that looked like a map of a different planet. I leaned too far, my knee hitting the wet pavement.

"You're missing the girl," a voice said.

I looked up. A man was leaning against a vending machine, his face obscured by the steam from a can of hot coffee.

"What girl?"

"The one behind the glass."

He pointed to a second-story window across the narrow alley. There was a mannequin in the window. Or at least, I thought it was a mannequin. She was wearing a

heavy wool coat and holding an umbrella, even though she was indoors. She was perfectly still.

I pointed my lens. I adjusted the aperture. *Click.*

"She's been there since 1984," the man said. He took a sip of his coffee. "Waiting for a guest lecture that never started."

"I'm a guest lecturer," I said, my voice sounding rough from three days of silence.

"I know. You look like you're losing your structural integrity."

He dropped the empty can into a bin and vanished into the fog. I looked back at the camera screen. The photo was empty. The window was there, the umbrella was there, but the girl was gone.

I hadn't eaten anything but convenience store egg sandwiches for four days. My stomach felt like it was full of dry leaves.

I walked into a basement restaurant that had no sign, only a blue curtain. Inside, it was just a counter and a man chopping onions. He didn't look up.

"I want the thing that makes people forget where they live," I said. It was a stupid thing to say. I felt the heat rise to my face.

The chef didn't laugh. He reached under the counter and pulled out a small, ceramic jar. He poured a clear liquid into a chipped cup.

"Don't take photos of the fish," he said.

"What fish?"

He pointed to a tank in the corner. It was empty. Just green water and a single, rusted bicycle gear at the bottom.

"I don't see a fish."

"Good," he said. "That means you're halfway there."

I drank the liquid. It tasted like cold metal and mountain air. My head began to swim. The walls of the restaurant started to pulse, breathing in and out. I grabbed my camera. I had to capture the breath.

The flash was too bright. It blinded me. When I opened my eyes, the chef was gone. The restaurant was gone. I was standing in the middle of a crosswalk in

Shibuya. The crowds were surging around me, thousands of umbrellas clashing like the shields of a Roman legion.

I decided to go back to the Airbnb. I needed to sleep. I needed to see the non-existent bathroom.

I walked the streets of Shinjuku for hours. I knew the turn by the 7-Eleven. I knew the smell of the trash near the karaoke bar. But the building was gone. In its place was a small park with a single swing set.

A girl was sitting on the swing. She was wearing a heavy wool coat. She was holding an umbrella.

"You're in my room," I said. I was swaying. My Nikon felt like it weighed fifty pounds.

"The room moved," she said. "It does that when the guest lecture goes on too long."

"I missed my flight."

"There are no flights," she said. She stood up. Her umbrella opened with a sound like a gunshot. "There are only transitions."

She walked toward the swing's frame and stepped *through* it. Not under it. Through it.

I followed her.

The other side of the swing set wasn't Shinjuku.

It was the lecture hall at Waseda.

The room was full. The students were sitting in their seats, their pens poised over their notebooks. The smell of floor wax was overwhelming.

I was standing at the podium. I looked down at my hands. I wasn't holding my Nikon. I was holding a piece of chalk.

I looked at the front row. The girl in the wool coat was sitting there. She was staring at me.

"Continue," she said.

I looked at the chalkboard behind me. It was covered in photographs. Thousands of them. Photos of the streets, the puddles, the man by the vending machine, the empty fish tank.

And in every single photo, I was there.

But I wasn't the photographer. I was the subject. In one photo, I was a cat with a runny nose. In another, I was

a mannequin in a window. In another, I was the rusted bicycle gear at the bottom of a tank.

"I'm not the lecturer," I whispered.

"No," the girl said. "You're the slide."

The lights in the hall went out. A projector clicked on behind me. A beam of white light hit the back of my head, and I felt myself stretching, flattening, turning into a two-dimensional image.

I felt the grain of the film. I felt the chemicals.

Someone in the back of the room coughed.

"Next slide, please," a voice said. It was my voice.

The world clicked.

I'm still in Shinjuku, I think. Or maybe I'm in a carousel of 35mm slides in a basement in Tokyo. Either way, the light is perfect for a photo.

THE CONVERSATION.

“Just one, then?” He didn’t really ask. It was a statement of gravitational pull. He held the pack out—a crumpled soft-pack of Seven Stars, battered like it had survived a minor war. One filter poked out, tilted at an angle that suggested a broken neck.

I took it. My fingers were stained red—the specific, aggressive hue of a Pilot Hi-Tec-C. “One,” I said. My voice scraped against the air like gravel. Forty-two essays on *12 Years a Slave*. Forty-two mid-sentence collapses. I had left them on the mahogany table in the common room—white rectangles of failed ambition huddled under a buzzing fluorescent tube.

The hallway was long and dim, smelling of floor wax and the ghosts of damp gym clothes. The lockers stood in silent, olive-drab rows, vents like gills that had stopped breathing. Outside, the sky bruised plum—the kind of light that makes you feel like you’ve forgotten something vital.

He struck a match. No lighter. He liked the sulfur, the brief violent flare before the steady burn. He cupped his hands—thick, calloused, with grime etched into the lifelines—and offered the flame.

"You're bleeding," he said, nodding at my ink-stained fingers.

"It's just the grading," I said, leaning my shoulder against the locker. Cold metal seeped through my cardigan. "They use adverbs to hide the fact they have nothing to say. Quietly. Sadly. Slowly. Bandages on an empty chest."

He exhaled; smoke drifted toward the ceiling like a tired prayer. He didn't look like a janitor. He looked like a man who had stared too long at what most avoid.

"The brain likes adverbs," he said. "Little boxes. Labels. Keeps the mess from leaking out. But the mess... that's where the blood is."

I watched him. I knew the file. Dropped out of clinical psychology—six credits short. Bipolar I diagnosis, hit like a freight train in a tunnel. Then the felony—something with a sledgehammer and a fountain. Property damage. A “break with reality,” the report said.

"They told me you wanted to be a doctor," I said. "I wanted to be a map-maker," he corrected. Eyes dark, opaque, like stones at the bottom of a well. "I thought if I could categorize the madness, I could own it. But the other half of the mind... it doesn't like being owned. It doesn't care about the 'why.' Only the 'is.' The curve of a shadow. The way a scream sounds like C-sharp."

He tapped his temple with the glowing cherry of his cigarette, too close for comfort.

"In the ward, they gave me lithium," he said. "It was like living in a house where all the windows had been painted gray. No highs. No lows. Just a long, flat hallway."

He looked down the corridor. Lights flickered—thrum, click. Thrum, click.

"The felony wasn't a crime," he said quietly. Voice caught. "It was an architectural correction. I saw the way

the light hit that fountain. It was trapped. I just... let it out."

He shrugged faintly.

"The judge called it a manic episode. I called it a Tuesday."

A cold shiver traced my spine. Fifty-seven. Thirty-five years teaching children to build cages out of grammar. Every impulse buried so deep it had probably turned to oil.

"Do you regret it?" I asked.

He looked at me long.

"I regret that I can't see the fountain anymore," he said.

"Now I only see the sledgehammer. That's the medicine. Fixes the brain. Kills the ghost."

He flicked ash into a small brass tin.

"You've got a ghost too, Teacher," he said. "I see it behind your eyes. Starving. That's why you're still here at seven, killing those kids' papers. Hoping to find something in the margins that isn't there."

He pushed off the locker, movements slow, heavy.

"Try grading with your left hand tonight," he said, turning toward the mop bucket. "Switch the poles. Let the logic sleep. See what happens when the ink just moves."

The wheels shrieked against linoleum, a wounded bird. I stood until the smoke vanished, replaced by bleach.

Back in the common room, silence reigned, broken only by the hum of the vending machine. I sat, red pen in left hand.

It felt like holding a live wire. Clumsy. Wrong.

I turned to a fresh paper—a girl named Snow, who wrote like she was filling a tax return. I didn't look for adverbs. Left hand wandered. Ink didn't form letters. Jagged peaks, deep valleys, loops almost like nooses.

Regret seeped out.

The art school application I burned in '88 because my father said poetry didn't pay for heat.

The man I loved who lived in mirrors, the one I left because he was "unstable."

I realized I hadn't been teaching English.

I'd been standing guard at a cemetery.

I looked down. My left hand had scrawled a single dark smear across Yuki's paper. Not a word. A shape.

It looked like a bird falling from a great height.

A strange urge rose—half laugh, half scream. The right brain wasn't a playground. It was an ocean. I was sinking into it.

Heart hammering like a trapped moth, I gathered my things and walked to the exit. Passed the janitor, mopping near the heavy glass doors.

He didn't look up.

But in the wet sheen of the floor he'd just cleaned, I saw the moon—distorted, shattered into a thousand jagged pieces of silver. Beautiful. Terrifying.

I stepped onto the wet tile, ruining his work with sensible shoes, and walked into the night.

AVA

The city was laid out in a grid of perfect right angles, but I always felt like I was walking in circles. The sun was a flat, white disc that bleached the concrete and made the shadows look like ink. I was staying in a room that felt more like a hallway—too long, too narrow, with a ceiling fan that clicked like a metronome.

I was supposed to be there for a series of lectures on urban planning, something about the "rhythm of the modern space," but the lectures had ended a week ago. I just didn't leave. I liked the wide, empty boulevards and the way the trees lined the roads in disciplined rows. It felt

like a city designed for someone who didn't want to be found.

Most days, I just walked. I had my Nikon draped over my shoulder. I clicked photos of the Brutalist architecture, the sharp edges of the government buildings, and the way the light caught the dust in the roundabouts.

And then there was Ava.

Ava lived in a different city. We had met at a small bookshop where the air conditioner was broken and everyone smelled like damp paper. We had exchanged exactly three sentences about a collection of short stories, and then she had written her handle on the back of my receipt.

Online, Ava was a storm.

My phone would buzz at 11:00 PM, and it wouldn't stop until 2:00 AM. She was a master of the "not shutting up." She sent me long, sprawling paragraphs about the color of the sky, about how she hated the way people ate popcorn in cinemas, and about her theory that the city was actually a giant circuit board waiting for a battery.

“I think I’m made of glass,” she messaged one night. “Not the expensive kind. The kind they use for soda bottles. I feel like if I sit still for too long, I’ll just shatter into a thousand green shards. Do you ever feel like you’re vibrating?”

I’d lie on my narrow bed, the fan clicking above me, and read every word. She was white, with pale skin that seemed to absorb the glow of her phone, and brown eyes that always looked like they were searching for a missing piece of a puzzle. She wasn’t conventionally pretty—her face was a bit too asymmetrical, her hair always a bird’s nest—but she was engaging. Looking at her was like reading a difficult book that you couldn’t put down.

But in person? In person, Ava was a ghost.

We tried to meet. We really did.

We’d agree to meet at a coffee shop in Sector 17. I’d arrive early, my camera on the table, watching the people pass by in their crisp linen shirts. Ava would show up, looking exactly like her photos but somehow smaller, as if the air was pressing down on her.

"Hey," I'd say. "Hey," she'd whisper. "The weather is... hot." "Yeah. Very hot." "Do you want a cold brew?" "Sure."

And that was it. The clock would start ticking. After two minutes, the silence would settle between us like a thick, grey fog. She'd look at the table. I'd look at the street. She'd pick at a loose thread on her sleeve. I'd adjust the lens cap on my camera.

She'd stay for maybe ten minutes, but we wouldn't speak. Then she'd stand up, mutter something about an errand, and vanish into the bright, white heat of the afternoon.

Twenty minutes later, my phone would explode.

"I'm so sorry! I'm a disaster! I had so many things to tell you about that dog I saw on the way, he had a little sweater on even though it's 40 degrees, and I wanted to ask you if you think buildings have souls or if they're just hollow shells, but the words got stuck in my throat like dry crackers. Why am I like this? Please don't hate me."

I didn't hate her. I loved the noise. I just didn't understand why it couldn't survive the air between us.

The guilt started to grow in the back of my mind. I was a writer, or at least I told myself I was. I was supposed to be good with words. But sitting across from her, I felt just as paralyzed as she did.

One evening, I was at a park, photographing the way the shadows of the trees stretched across the grass like long, dark fingers. Ava was texting me about a dream she'd had where she was a lighthouse.

"I was just standing there, blinking," she wrote. "And people were crashing into me because they thought my light was a warning, not a welcome."

I stopped walking. I sat on a concrete bench. I felt a sudden, sharp pang of jealousy. I was jealous of the screen. I was jealous that she could be so vulnerable, so loud, so *herself* to a piece of plastic and glass, but not to me.

I did something small. Something petty.

I stopped replying.

I watched her type. I watched the "..." appear and disappear. She sent three more messages. Then five. Then she stopped.

The silence from the phone was louder than the noise of the city. I felt a surge of power, and then an immediate, sickening wave of guilt. I was punishing her for being scared.

I picked up my camera and took a photo of the empty bench next to me. The light was fading, turning the concrete a bruised purple. I sent it to her. No text. Just the photo.

She replied instantly. *“Is that where I’m supposed to be?”*

“Yes,” I typed. *“But only if you bring the lighthouse with you.”*

I realized then that I was tired of the layers. I didn't want the abstraction of the digital storm. I wanted the simple, messy reality of the girl who couldn't talk.

I walked to her sector. I didn't call. I didn't text. I knew which apartment was hers because she had once sent me a photo of the view from her balcony—a specific angle of a water tower and a flame-of-the-forest tree.

I stood outside her door. It was a plain wooden door with a small brass number.

I knocked.

I heard a scuffle inside. A thud. Then silence.

"Ava," I said. "I'm not leaving."

"Go away," she said through the wood. Her voice was muffled, but it didn't sound like her text messages. It sounded human. It sounded fragile.

"No. I'm going to tell you a story," I said. "And you don't have to say anything. You can just listen."

I sat down on the floor in the hallway. The floor was cool against my jeans. I started talking. I told her about the room I was staying in, about how the ceiling fan sounded like a heartbeat, and about how I had overstayed my time in the city because I was afraid that if I left, I'd forget the way the light looked here.

I talked for a long time. I didn't use big words. I didn't talk about "urban rhythms." I talked about being lonely in a city built on a grid.

The door opened.

It didn't swing wide. It just cracked open a few inches. Ava was standing there. She wasn't wearing shoes. Her brown eyes were red-rimmed. She wasn't pretty in that moment; she looked tired and raw.

"You're not supposed to be here," she said.

"I know."

She looked at me for a long time. The two-minute mark passed. Three minutes. Four.

"I had a lighthouse dream again," she said. It was barely a whisper.

"Tell me," I said.

She stepped out into the hallway and sat down on the floor next to me. She didn't look at me. She looked at the opposite wall. And then, slowly, haltingly, the words started to come. They weren't the polished, fast-paced sentences of her texts. They were jagged. They were repetitive. She stumbled over her thoughts.

But she didn't shut up.

She talked about the fear of being seen. She talked about how she felt like a guest in her own life. She talked

until the sun went down and the hallway lights flickered on, casting our shadows against the wall.

It was simple. It was direct. There was no plot twist, no surreal intervention. Just a girl and a guy sitting on a dusty floor in a city of right angles, finally finding a way to talk in the space between the grids.