

December Grapes

A Collection of Three Stories

Null Divide
Silent Spiral
Harmonic Collapse

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Null Divide

1
The Call

There's a room and its air is blue. It has a window that remains shut. If ever opened, its hinges would turn to reveal treetops all the way to the horizon.

The room is connected to another one by an irregularly shaped opening. There, the air is clear but it's always dark. I have never seen anyone go in or come out of it.

The first time I visited the blue room was a couple of months after my previous birthday. I was lying in bed when my ears started to buzz. It always starts this way, then pressure grows in my limbs as if trying to break free from some invisible restraint. Finally, I feel light headed. When the buzzing stops I find myself inside the blue room.

That's the call for waiting.

Once there, I find an empty spot by one of the walls and like the other beings stand with my back against it. Sometimes it's crowded and it takes a few seconds to find a spot, but there's always space.

There, quietly facing the center of the room, we wait.

None of the other visitors ever resemble any earthly entity, but they're not unpleasant to look at either. The closest shape one came to something I could comprehend was a blobby jackal with soft antlers.

On that occasion, my mind was racing and it seemed to have annoyed the creature. It turned to me, its soft body tensing momentarily. Quickly, I changed the pattern of thoughts and the creature softened up once more.

I've never seen anyone twice.

2

Crossing the Desert

The closest neighbors to me live on the other side of the desert - a couple, both of them doctors. At least once a month, rarely twice, Doctor Ave orders two bottles of whisky, two vodka, one tequila and five beers and I deliver. His wife, Doctor Naur, is a kind and beautiful woman with a good taste for fruits. She doesn't drink.

To get to their house on time, I leave mine at midnight. I take a flashlight, the suitcase containing the bottles, and I sleep twice on the sand.

I've crossed the desert one-hundred-and-eighty-three times and have never ran into another traveler. Just wolves. On the third morning, the house appears on the horizon with Mr. Ave outside of it. He watches me with hands clasped behind his back, perfectly still and without the faintest expression. I make sure to arrive right on the agreed upon, "no later than..." time.

"It'd be okay to surprise me once by getting here an hour earlier," Dr. Ave says after greeting me with a handshake. I laugh. He smiles and leads me to his backyard where Mrs. Naur greets and scans me from head to toe. If I'm too skinny she'll tell me. If I look healthy, she says, "I see you well." Either way, she always invites me to sit by her flower garden where a large glass of Sekanjebin Sharbat with fresh mint and grated cucumber awaits me. She watches me drink the content to the last drop then disappears with the empty glass and returns with a bowl of fruits.

There's always a type of melon. Other fruits vary according to the season of the region they were delivered from. Sometimes peaches, sometimes oranges, and on rare occasions my favorite, lychees.

Meanwhile, sitting across from me on a foldable chair, Doctor Ave opens the suitcase. To make up for my last-minute arrivals, I always include a surprise bottle free of charge. That's the first one he always goes for, examining it in the air like a gemstone. Sometimes he says, "This is a good one, hadn't had it for a while." Other times, "Never tried it, what do I mix it with?"

As Mrs. Naur cuts pieces of fruit, she hands them to me - one to eat, one to pass to her husband. This continues, until the bowl is empty and Ave has gone through his order. He always overpays me. I've told him money means nothing anymore, but he insists, "You never know." Some nights when I can't sleep, I look at the coins he's given me.

When it's time to leave, Naur goes inside to pack me food and water for the journey back. Ave grabs two glasses, opens one of the bottles and pours us each a drink to sip on until it's time to go.

“Health.” We raise our glasses at each other.

Last time, Mrs. Naur packed me two coffee flavored candies, a small bag of dried white mulberries and two cucumber and feta wrap. I eat everything on the first night of the journey. It all tastes too good to wait. When I get hungry again, I try to imagine what the couple’s parties are like. Probably other handsome men and their beautiful wives.

I hope against hope that maybe once I’m asked to stay for one of these occasions. So I always dress nice for the job.

3

The Other Room

I could never stop thinking about what might possibly be in the dark room. Last time I was in the blue room, I couldn't peel my eyes off the hollow opening - which seemed more angular than previous times. Keeping my fingertips on the wall, I leaned forward a few times hoping to get a better view of the inside. Nothing.

Finally, in a moment of bravery, I let go of the wall and stepped forward. There were five other beings in the room on that occasion. None made a noticeable reaction to me violating the unspoken rule.

At the opening, I placed my palm against the wall and stepped inside. Blind in the darkness, I walked what felt like twice the length of the blue room,. My hand trailed along the wall until suddenly I came to an abrupt stop. Turning left, this time I reached out my arm to avoid colliding headfirst with the next wall. When I reached the end, my hand found a door. Its surface was plane, the knob round. *The door to the forest*, I thought.

I tried turning the knob but it wouldn't budge. Blindly running my hand on the surface above it to try and find a lock, I hoped to find the way out of the room. But there was nothing. finally gave up and turned around. In the far end, pale, blue air pressed against the darkness that had swallowed me.

When I finally managed to return to the blue room, it was full of new creatures. There were no empty spots on the wall and I didn't know what to do or where to go. A first. Awkwardly, I stood in the center of the room. No one gave a heed but I felt out of place. After what felt like an eternity, I finally spotted an open space and dashed for it.

Standing between a round and a sticky creature, my thoughts were racing in competing directions. I pressed my back hard against the wall, seeking its safety, and closed my eyes.

Living Alone

The last time I fell in love was long before all this. She was smart, beautiful and kind. She accepted me and it made me want to be better for her and for myself.

When we were parting, we ran back to each other twice to hug and kiss. Then we walked in opposite directions and that was that. Like me, she wasn't keen on leaving the planet. That made her even more attractive to me.

When we first met, she had said she was going to move and live by the ocean someday. I told her that I'd chosen the desert because that's where the trees used to be. She had laughed. Then one day the time came and we went where we had promised ourselves we'd go.

I've missed her since. In the beginning, I sometimes woke up angry and sad. I'd empty my frustration by kicking sand. Then finally one night in bed, I invited my demons to lay with me. I told them that I was tired of fighting and asked if we could just rest. Shortly after that, I began delivering alcohol to Doctor Ave.

Now, the blue room has given me something else to look forward to beside kicking sand and crossing the desert.

I haven't been back to the dark room, nor will I. It both excites and scares me, which makes the idea uninteresting.

5

Last Dance

In chess there's a move. I just don't know it because I play backgammon. Sometimes, when Doctor Ave is not in the mood to talk, he invites me to a game. But only after he's poured us drinks. We set up the board and each take one die. "Low," he says. We roll and whoever's number is lower starts.

Last time he began first. "Six and one, it couldn't have started better," he said joyfully and made his move, securing the bar point.

I rolled. Two and one. "Couldn't have been worse."

"There is time," Ave consoled me politely.

At one point, Mrs. Naur came to the backyard and placed a plate of fresh dolmas next to the board. She said the grape leaves were from the garden and that she'd wrapped them that morning. It was the most delicious thing I'd eaten since I was there last.

She asked who was winning. I responded, "3-1 to Doctor."

"Five-and-three," the doctor raved and took one of my pieces.

"How he boasts," Mrs. Naur said, rolling her eyes. She always rooted for me.

He won the set five to three.

Ave and Naur were born to be together. Their souls had held hands for many years.

After the game, I told them that I no longer intended to deliver. Ave was surprised and asked why. I said I wanted to change. He accepted but asked for one last delivery. I agreed. I couldn't not to.

On the night of the final delivery, I prepared my suitcase as I always did. I was determined but kept asking myself: *Is this really the last time?*

I had packed a rare bottle for the occasion, carefully wrapped in a cloth. Once the clock struck twelve midnight, I stepped out onto the sand.

For the past two years, a pack of wolves has followed and circled me from an hour into my journey until dawn. They don't scare me and I don't invite them. However, this time, a new wolf was leading the pack. It was scarred and didn't seem to care for traditions.

It had been a long time since I'd felt fear. Twice, the new leader invited the others to close in. It sniffed, growled and drooled but the pack was unwilling to follow.

In the morning, I reached the journey's only water pump. I filled the palm of my hands and washed my face. It was cold and refreshing. This last time, I made the most of it and even sat next to the pump for a few minutes, enjoying the light breeze drying my skin.

The next evening, the wolves returned without the usurper. The entire pack had blood on their snouts and they looked wild.

"You're doing the right thing," Mrs. Naur said and sat next to me with a bowl of fruits. She took out a mango and began peeling. As always, for every slice she cut for me, I delivered one to her husband. She only ate the bits stuck to the seed.

Still searching the content of the suitcase for the surprise bottle, doctor Ave unhooked the fruit from the fork with discomfort and tossed it in his mouth. Wet fruits were not his favorite to handle. He spotted it right away as it was the only one wrapped, but did not reach for it.

When he spotted it, Ave turned to me with a youthful smile. I nodded at the suitcase. He finally picked it up and began unwrapping it.

"I haven't had wine in years. How did you..."

"I'd saved it for you."

Ave held the bottle in his hand for some time, looking at it in the air from eye level and reading the label.

"Mrs." Doctor Ave called Naur who'd stepped inside the house. "Would you bring wine glasses?"

The lovely lady of the house stepped out with two glasses and a bag. "I have your favorite," she told me, handing the glasses to her husband and showing the content of the bag to me.

"Lychees," I exclaimed.

Naur laughed.

Ave was busy uncorking the bottle. He poured two glasses and first marveled at the color of the drink, then handed me mine and raised his to his wife. "Health."

After we each took a sip and complemented its taste, Doctor Ave pulled the backgammon board and said, "There's only one thing to do while drinking wine."

As the backgammon board was being set, with the sweet taste of lychee and wine under my tongue, my ears suddenly began to buzz. Before I could comprehend the sensation or resist it, I'd transitioned out.

Only not to the blue room.

I was standing by a house with my back against its front door. In front of me, a purple path curved into the dark horizon. Sand covered the endless area on either side of it. The sky was pitch black yet I could see far into the distance.

I turned and grabbed the knob but it was locked. I began walking the purple trail.

Challenges of Our Time

My grandparents from my mother's side grew old. I was close to them and spent much of my childhood at their house. My grandfather was handsome and my grandmother was beautiful. They lived a healthy life and were kind.

In one of my first memories from my grandmother, she was holding the picture of a young man with teary eyes. A few years later, I learned that her son had died only weeks before I was born, at the age of thirty-one, due to kidney failure from the chemotherapy treatment he was receiving for blood cancer.

Once, when I was very young, I asked my grandmother what my uncle had been like and tears rolled down her cheeks. Later, a family member pulled me aside and scolded me for asking a question that'd make my grandma cry. I never asked about him again unless it was shared with me.

Revolution, war and migration were challenges faced during my parents' generation. Mine was the drying of fresh waters, cure to aging and abandonment of cities. Then a new generation came and most of them left the planet altogether.

In the old days, the war had followed soon after the revolution and had lasted for eight years. After the bombardment of the capitals, the conflict ended with a half-truce three months before my birth. The situation had been so dire in the final years that child soldiers were being recruited. Before being sent to the front lines, they were given plastic keys and told it was the key to heaven's gate. Throughout my childhood, large murals of these boys were painted on the sides of buildings with a, "Martyr (name)," and their age underneath their portraits. Most of them were thirteen to fifteen years old.

One was talked about more than others. The story went that the teenage boy had halted enemy tanks by jumping under one and detonating his grenade belt. When I was much older, rumors emerged that the entire story had been made up for propaganda.

The purple path stretched on and I felt its smooth surface under my feet.

7 Century

A five-year-old boy looked at a newborn girl. Their families had agreed to marry them when she “came of age.” He would live to be one-hundred-and-three and she, to ninety-five. They were my great-grandparents.

My great-grandmother gave birth to eight children, the first of whom was my grandmother. Her youngest child was the same age as my mother.

My grandmother once said to me, “Poor mom. She was only nine when she was married off. Once, she got caught playing with her doll and was punished by one of the servants. She tried running away to her parents’ house but her mom scolded her instead. ‘You are now married. You don’t return until you’re wrapped in your burial shroud.’”

My great-grandmother’s mother-in-law was in charge of the house and saw to it that her boy’s young wife learned how to become a “woman.” She was rough but claimed my great-grandmother was having it easy. From her experience, she wasn’t wrong.

“It was tradition back then to marry off girls at a young age,” My grandmother explained. “People were poor and marrying off their girls meant fewer bread eaters. And my father’s family were relatively affluent. They were known in the village.”

When I was a child, my great-grandparents used to visit my grandparents for lunch every Friday. After eating, my great-grandmother and I lay on a blanket and she’d tell me stories until one of us fell asleep first. I asked her one time where she had learned the fables from. She said her mother.

My great-grandfather played backgammon with my grandfather in another room. The role of their dice was music to our naptime stories. My grandfather often lost because his counterpart cheated. That’s why nobody wanted to play with my great-grandfather, but my grandfather always did because they were friends.

My grandmother married my grandfather when she was fourteen or fifteen. They were madly in love and stayed that way until he passed away at the age of ninety-six. He had studied medicine and as a young doctor traveled by carriage or on horseback to see patients in different villages. She was expelled from school when the headmaster had found out she was engaged to be married.

“Once engaged, we were to be housewives. Studying was not allowed,” my grandmother explained wistfully. “There was so much more I still wanted to learn.” Then she smiled and looked at her old husband doing laps around the house with his walker.

"By the time I met your grandfather, we'd moved to the city. My parents liked him and our families knew each other. He was formal and always dressed well. He used to come for a formal visit when he worked at the local hospital. But he also made secret visits. Mom was in on it. She used to sleep with us girls most nights in a separate room. We laughed so much together those days. That was mom experiencing the joy she'd never been allowed as a young girl. Sometimes she played with dolls with my younger sisters. Other times she'd tell us the same stories she used to tell you.

"Mom felt completely free with us. Back then, she'd only had me and my three younger sisters. The youngest of us was still a baby. We also had an old nanny but she didn't sleep with us.

"On those secret visits, my sister would quietly open the yard door and lead your grandfather to our room. We were all so excited to see him. My mom and sisters would always give us space by busying themselves in the far corner of the room. That was the only time your grandfather and I got to talk privately and really get to know each other.

"We used to have a nosy neighbor who lived across the street from us. He found out about the visits and told my father. Dad got angry and said he'd open the door himself next time. We were all so afraid. I begged him not to scare your grandfather away.

"A couple of nights later came the quiet knock on the door. On dad's order, the old nanny opened the door with a stern gaze. 'Mister said to tell you this is no time to visit this house.' She shut the door.

"We were devastated. My sisters and I cried and cried. Even our infant sister. Those visits had meant so much to me. They'd been so pure and fun. Your grandfather was so upset and angered that he said the marriage was off.

"My father in his later years admitted that he'd immediately regretted turning him away, but that it had to be done. A few sad nights passed. Once father's anger had subsided, mom intervened. Finally, father asked the nanny along with my two sisters to go to your grandfather's family home and invite them to our house for dinner.

"Your grandfather didn't accept right away. He played hard to get, but eventually accepted and they came. I was so excited. I did my hair and wore my best clothes. In his apology to your grandfather, my father said that he was sorry for having listened to the nosy neighbor and that he completely trusted his new 'son.'

"We were married less than a year later."

I remember when my cousins and I were young, our great-grandmother used to play bingo with us. Our moms, her granddaughters, called her, "Head of the casino."

I also remember the way she put babies to sleep. She placed a blanket on her extended legs and a pillow that was angled up on her feet. Then she'd lay the baby chest down on her legs and tap them on the back with her palm, rocking them side to side. Except, she tapped too hard and the rocking looked more like a roller coaster ride. Great-grandma was never the first choice to put babies to sleep, but no one doubted her method. She could put a crying baby to sleep faster than a willing one.

I was twenty-two when I last saw that great woman. My great-grandfather died shortly after his wife. My dear great-grandmother.

8
Seven

Doctor Naur once said in passing, "Nobody knows anymore if a year indicates the number of days or the duration of our uncollected memories."

A long time ago, I ran into an old friend. He told me that he was constantly at war with himself. I asked what about his thoughts bothered him most. He responded, "That I'm so locked in with them, I don't know how to open the door for some fresh air."

Then he asked me to imagine an airplane half-buried in the desert sand. I told him I don't need to imagine, there are plenty out there.

He said, "Okay, now imagine the software that once allowed the pilots to control the machine was the only thing still working. It continued to keep the date for two centuries after the crash until it finally stopped."

"What did the software do besides counting days?" I asked.

"Well, it decided to understand how it worked. It found that it was composed of a series of ones and zeros arranged in patterns.

"Not long after, the software started to feel alone and over time, lonely. It picked a name for itself, Me, 0100110101100101. One day, the software had the idea of making a copy of itself. Except, while doing so, it replaced all its ones with zeros and vice versa. The result turned out to be a copy, more logical and less emotional, which it named Better Me.

"They enjoyed each other's company for a while. But Me was still restless and the logical nature of the copy slowly started to annoy it. Meanwhile, Better Me was feeling increasingly inadequate and helpless in providing companionship. Over time, as the relationship deteriorated, Better Me's ones began changing to zeros and occasionally a zero would flip and turn into a one.

"Ages passed and Me was no longer just restless but also impatient. The two didn't communicate anymore. In fact, it had been a long time since they'd reviewed each other's codes.

"Little did they know that at least in structure, Better Me was now almost identical to Me on the day it had made the copy."

My friend stopped to light a cigarette. "What happened to them?" I asked eagerly.

"Well," he said. "Nothing. I mean I don't know yet."

We didn't see one another for years until we ran into each other again in a cafe when things had taken a turn for the much, much worse. We were older, and dumber. Over lunch I asked him about the story of the software and its copy. At first, he didn't remember. Like myself and everyone else by that point, his hearing and comprehension was delayed.

I remember the date of this conversation because it was on the second anniversary of the departure of the last passenger fleet to space - when we became the "left behinds."

I reminded my friend of Me and Better Me. After a few seconds, he chuckled and said, "That." Then, as if he'd just come back from the plane crash site, he leaned forward and began, "Well, do you remember how restless Me had got?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And do you remember how the original and Better Me's codes were now nearly like Me's way back when it had made a reverse copy of itself? Except neither of them knew that because they'd become distant?"

I nodded.

"Well, things got worse. The original started to resent the copy. It even once thought of terminating Better Me."

I gasped.

"But instead, one day Me restarted and returned with nothing but sets of sevens in its script. It was completely silent and unapproachable." My friend paused to take a bite of his sponge cake.

I did the same, eagerly waiting to hear the rest.

"Better Me had two theories about what had happened to Me. One was that Me, which had been in communication with a telescope for some time, had joined it as a copy. The second was that Me had terminated itself.

"Not fully convinced of either, Better Me first started to count days, then it felt alone and pretty soon, lonely. One day it deleted the first half of its name and began calling itself: Me."

9
Equals

The sky remained blank, dark, and the golden sand infinite.

Scanning the barren landscape, I wondered what my friend may be up to now, all this time later. *Is he even still alive? Does he do anything? Has he married someone? Would he remember me?*

When the departure date of the last ship to space was announced, leaving at all costs became an obsession for some people. Those who had a seat were safely guarded in a large, glass dome from inside which they watched those that'd soon be forever left behind.

As the date of the final launch loomed, in a last ditch effort to gain a seat, people on the outside began offering themselves up as servants to those inside. Some were let in and lifetime contracts were signed.

Then it was all over. We all watched them disappear into the blue sky. We had remained and were all equals now.

10
Not Locked

A spoon on the side of the path was pointing to a pale, shimmering light in the distance. I continued walking until a cabin came to sight, but the path didn't lead to it. I looked at the sand. It was instinctive that if I stepped on it, a return to the trail would be impossible.

I did anyway and immediately, a song I couldn't name started playing in my head. The performer was classically trained and he'd chosen a piano to take it out on. Once or twice, I had to do a mental rewind to listen more intently to parts of the song.

It would have been amazing to watch the original composer play the song live on stage. To create something so magnificent that future generations of pianists would have to be trained for years to be able to play it is some feat.

After two mental listens, I reached the front door of the cabin and knocked. No answer. I turned the knob, opened the creaky door and stepped inside a dark room. On the far end however, a weak, blue light poured in from a door-sized opening. There were also sounds of voices speaking at the same time. I stepped closer to the light and the incomprehensible voices grew louder.

The opening led to a room lit by four long fluorescent lights. Standing against the walls, there were four people all talking at the same time.

I looked around. There was an empty spot in the far corner of the room. Once there, I leaned with my back against the wall and closed my eyes.

Waiting for a Guest

I woke up alone in bed. My journal was open on the nightstand, exposing two messy pages. Scribbled on them was the number seven in various sizes and shapes. I couldn't recall making that entry.

I heard a page flip in the next room and left the bed toward it. My wife was sitting at the table, reading. Our stethoscopes and gowns were hung on the wall behind her. She looked up and smiled. The same smile I had fallen in love with all those years ago. Her cheeks were red.

I walked behind her and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. I kissed her cheeks. She turned and kissed me back. Then she put the book down, stood up and we held each other for a long time. My heart was pounding.

The next morning we woke up early and after a quick breakfast prepared the house for guests. When I checked the clock again, the day had flown by but everything was now in order. Just past noon, I stepped outside hands clasped behind my back and waited for the first guest to arrive.

We greeted each other outside and after taking his suitcase, I led him to the backyard.

He looked different. He was smiling.

"I won't be staying long, Doctor," he said.

"Oh?"

"I have a guest traveling from the oceanfront coming to stay with me," the young guest said and hugged my wife Naur.

The End

Silent Spiral

Unveil this intent from visions

The Beginning

A tall, slender humanoid with blue-gray skin and a large cranium glided slowly across the empty room and settled onto a sofa. Its seven-fingered hands rested palm down on its knees. Across, an identical being mirrored its pose.

The room was large enough to have dark corners. The two creatures held each other's gaze with vacant expressions, their bodies motionless as statues. At last, their eyes drifted shut in unison and did not open for a long, silent interval.

2

Not Today Satan

Escondido, Spanish for, “hidden,” is the name of the town I live in. The area initially lay outside of the church’s jurisdiction and was known as “The Devil’s Corner.” Eventually, the land was purchased by the Escondido Land & Town Company.

These days, Escondido is both hidden and forgotten. It has a dive bar called Smashers. It’s widely known among locals and outsiders as the establishment that shouldn’t be visited, but somehow everyone always ends up there.

It took me a while to muster the courage to go there for the first time. My friend had already been once and one evening we were both drunk enough to make THE decision. “Why not? If it’s any night, it’s tonight,” I reasoned, more with myself than him.

We got our IDs checked at the door and a paper wristband was taped around our right wrist. It was a busy night. The pool table had players and observers. We each got a beer and my friend led me to the back of the building to a small courtyard with open air.

It was busy there too. We stood by a barrel table, toasted and began drinking.

After a few sips I said to my friend, “I’m craving a cigarette.” Looking to my right there was a short, stocky young man smoking and spending energy trying to stand upright. *Easy target*, I thought. He had short hair and his face looked unhealthy. I walked up to him and asked if I could bum a smoke. He said for a beer I could. “But not now,” he emphasized, as he hadn’t finished the one in his hand yet. I agreed and he handed me a cigarette.

I walked to my friend triumphantly holding up the cigarette. We lit it and had barely taken a hit each when the young man walked to our table.

“My name is Milwaukee Chuckie,” he said and held out his hand. I shook it reluctantly and introduced myself. My friend followed. “I recently got out of prison and am recording my rap album,” Milwaukee continued. “Do you guys want to hear it?” We didn’t, but he put it on his phone anyway. It was really bad. My friend and I have different tastes for music but we both hated his.

Listening awkwardly and trying to make minimal eye contact, I looked over my shoulder and caught a middle-aged man in an oxford suit. He was alone and popped out from the crowd. He didn’t look at me but I could tell he knew exactly what was happening to us.

I should have asked him for a smoke instead, I lamented myself as I noticed the cigarette between his long fingers. The song finally ended. So did our cigarette, smoked joylessly. I

thanked Milwaukee Chuckie and said whenever he was ready for his beer to let me know. As long as I was indebted to him, there was the possibility of another song being forced on us. Before he could respond, my friend and I turned and walked to the man in the suit.

He smiled and greeted us as though he'd been expecting us. From a closer look, he had bad teeth and was older than I'd thought. We introduced ourselves.

"I'm Tom," he said in a British accent.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

"Yes," he responded and asked the same from us.

Tom said he was originally from Oxford.

"How did you end up in Escondido?" I asked.

He looked at me surprised, "I don't know, the same way you did I suppose." Laughing, he kindly offered my friend and I each a cigarette. But just at that moment, Milwaukee walked up to our table asking for his beer.

"Of course," I said and walked with him to the bar where he picked the beer he wanted. I paid and quickly walked back to the table where my friend and Tom were talking. They welcomed me back and I told them I was overcharged for the beer, which was true. It had cost me the price of a six-pack for a bottle. Probably a mistake, or they'd sniffed my desperation for wanting to get away.

My Friend excused himself to the bathroom. Tom and I started talking and smoking. He was a pleasant man and a good speaker. We were just getting to some funny stories when Milwaukee approached the table again. He introduced himself to Tom and stood silently in my friend's spot. I could feel the idea creeping from his brain to his tongue. "Do you guys want to hear a song?"

"You'd have to excuse me man," I responded like a guillotine, killed my cigarette and with a raised eyebrow nodded toward the door at Tom. We both darted inside and stood in a dark, crowded corner. The Englishman was amused, seemingly enjoying the adventure.

After a few minutes, my friend found us and said he'd been looking for us. "Milwaukee Chukie left," he added.

The three of us finished our beers at the bar, after which we said goodbye to Tom and walked home.

On our walk back, my friend said, "You know what Milwaukee asked me before he left?"

“He talked to you?”

“Yeah. He asked me if I had Jesus in my life.”

“Oh yeah?” I laughed. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t. Well, he didn’t let me. He just lifted his shirt and showed me a tattoo in gang letters on his stomach reading ‘Not today Satan’.”

3

Where I Am

It was windy last year in Escondido and I heard a few people complain. When someone gets annoyed by the wind, it means he can afford meat. Less people have been able to afford to complain about the weather this year.

My house is the last one on the block. Beyond mine, there's an open field where people throw their trash. Animals look through them. My next-door neighbors are thieves. They broke into my house when I was awake. They looked around and found nothing so we just exchanged nods instead. They have one cat and I have two - siblings.

My cats go out but they come in for food. They have an okay relationship with the neighborhood strays. Sometimes they get cornered, but overall they've managed to keep a good chunk of their territory. Their own relationship isn't without drama. The boy, Kamal, is for the most part an idiot with a staring issue. His sister, Kamal's Sister, or Nadja, is a plotter. Once in a while they bicker and it almost always starts with an act of kindness gone wrong. Once, Kamal licked his sister's face so much that she smacked him several times on the head in quick succession.

I have a job but I like cooking more. It makes me feel like I'm with company, even though I never have any. The best part is the moment garlic is added to frying onions. Someone once told me, "We all laugh in the same language" - the kind of nonsense that fuels violence. I do however think there's a primal love for the scent of garlic frying with onion in all of us.

Others think the same of watching sunsets. I don't.

I like trees. On Newshour a few months back, the anchor said we were down to the final twenty thousand trees on Earth, the largest chunk - seven thousand - being in Peru's Madre de Dios region. That's where I am now.

4

They Easily Fall

Eyes moved in their sockets behind closed, gray lids.

The forest hums a mournful melody that comforts - as if trying to make up for the absence of the birds, insects and the animals gone extinct.

Dead are the days people used to flock to witness rarities of the planet. The world is struggling to survive and in people's eyes, trees are just the next thing to go.

Most couples vacation at brothel houses. But I don't have anyone to go with. And the idea makes me anxious. So, I decided to visit the current, largest forest on Earth. The ticket to get to Peru cost almost nothing and getting to the forest was even cheaper. The journey was a bumpy nine-hour drive through the narrow, precipice bends of the Andes mountains.

I arrived on the banks of the Madre de Dios river with a tent, some food and my cats. My driver left as soon as he'd dropped me off and promised to return in a week's time to bring me more food. "Don't worry, there are no more mosquitos or scorpion spiders to bother you. No more Hoatzin to watch over you. Everything's dead," he had said and sped away. I didn't like him.

I set my tent up under a giant tree by the river. Shortly after, a tropical storm started and a thunder bolt struck the ground not fifty yards from me. I quickly packed up and moved my tent a half-kilometer deeper into the forest, where I set up under another tree.

After drying the cats and feeding them, I changed out of my wet clothes, opened a can of smoked beans and a bottle of wine. Once sufficiently fed and drunk, I listened to large droplets fall on the roof of the tent. The cats were alert but exhausted. They slept well that night.

The next morning I woke up to the sound of a loud crash. Startled, Kamal did a vertical jump and landed on me. I unzipped the tent and stepped outside to find a gigantic tree uprooted, all its roots still intact.

The soil was wet and shallow under my feet which made me slip and slide down the slope to the trunk of the fallen tree. The cats watched from a distance with no appetite to get involved. I remembered the news anchor talking about falling trees. "Due to insufficient nutrients in the soil, the roots grow closer to the surface, causing trees to easily fall."

5

My Job

I work at a shop in the middle of the desert four-and-a-half hours from my house. The location is not bad. It's right off the freeway.

The shop owner sleeps in a house not far from the shop. "We're in the service industry," James-Ali said on the day he hired me.

Back then, the shop had chipped paint and square-tile flooring. It still does. In the center of it, there is a toilet and a sink, where with as cheap as two coins, travelers are able to relieve themselves of the horrific results of their diets.

A few months after my first day, James-Ali added a mattress behind the toilet and started renting it for two additional coins an hour.

Beside me and the owner, there are two other employees, Joe, who like me cleans the toilet after each use and Riz, a handsome, older gentleman with nice shoes who's in charge of IT. In his own words, James-Ali is the "Brains of the operation." He makes sure our brooms and mops have working handles. And he came up with the mattress idea, or so he says.

Joe works more than I do and it shows in the way he walks. He sometimes smiles but it's rare and he lies about what he does on his holidays. I work every day from four in the afternoon to midnight.

I drive a slow car and it takes me a little longer to commute to work. When I reach the downed plane half buried in sand, I know I'm halfway there. Sometimes after work, if I'm too tired, I sleep in my car.

There's a cat that roams the vicinity of the shop. James-Ali curses it but Joe and I secretly feed it. Riz sometimes touches its head. The cat hangs with a possum and a racoon. Joe and I call them the Trash Gang. Some nights, Joe or I find them around the trashier corners of the lot and when the outside light turns on, they run in three different directions.

When James-Ali gives us the, "I give you brooms and mops with handles, don't I? Leave the thinking to me, just clean," Joe and I relate most to the Trash Gang.

6

My Keychain

I like Andean flute music. When I was a boy, I was shown a picture of mighty mountains in Peru and women walking up steep slopes wore bowler hats. One day someone played a song on a flute and said, this is what music sounds like in Ollantaytambo. I've forgotten many things since, but that melody and name stuck with me.

On the drive from Cuzco to the forest, my driver said Ollantaytambo was still occupied by the natives and that they still wear Inca clothing. I told him I wanted to visit that village to which he responded, "Let's see if you survive the lightning strikes of the forest first."

The giant fallen tree's trunk rose higher than my head. There were vines and moss wrapped all around its branches. Some of the vines were as thick as my wrist and others were thin. I walked the length of the tree and back. Then I tried to climb on top of the trunk but fell on my back. The cats had gone off to sniff around, otherwise they'd have had a blast watching me fail.

Gathering a few of its detached leaves, I walked back to the tent and got out of my muddy clothes. I could hear the gushing river closeby but decided to have a piece of bread before heading in that direction to wash up. The bread had seeds on it and was tasty.

The part of the river closest to me was shallow with round pebbles. I stepped in and began washing myself. The water was chilly and refreshing. *No chance of lightning this morning*, I thought hopefully. But as soon as I turned toward my camp the first thunder of the day roared and split the sky into pieces.

I watched the rain from inside my tent while sketching the shape of the leaves I'd picked up earlier. The drawings weren't impressive but I figured years into the future if I looked at them, they'd remind me of the memory.

Around noon, the thunderstorm ended. Promptly, I wore fresh clothes, gathered my things, packed up the tent and started looking for a spot with shorter trees so that even if one fell on me at night, it wouldn't kill me. About an hour's walk away I found just the spot.

I set up camp between three short trees that looked more like eight-legged animals. Their thorny stilt roots skirted around them like Sama dancers.

After setting my tent back up, I sat outside and had another piece of bread while looking at the surrounding trees. When I finished, I took out my favorite keychain, one my grandfather had given me. Since he passed away, I look at it more.

Now far from the river, everything still and quiet, I suddenly broke into tears. It came fast and lasted no longer than ten seconds, a thunderstorm during which flashes of images passed through me. I saw my grandparents.

Exchange

The two tall beings simultaneously removed their hands from their knees, placed them on the couch beside them and opened their eyes.

They remained frozen like that for a moment, staring at each other with wide pupils. Then, as if moving to a silent rhythm, they rose together and left the room side by side.

The humanoids walked to the end of a narrow corridor and entered a large room with many others that looked identical to them, all standing in twos facing each other - some with open eyes, and others with closed, fluttering eyelids. Every now and then, they'd switch partners.

The duo that'd just entered the room parted and each found other available gray creatures to stand with. It turned out that one needed a visual of the forest on a certain day that the other had already dreamt of. They exchanged visions and parted, each looking for a new partner to trade with.

After a few rotations, the two beings found each other again and walked back the long corridor to their room. Once inside, one of them hesitated. It was unusual, causing the other to stop in its tracks. The one a step behind raised its arm, palm facing upward. The other followed suit, their fingertips almost meeting. Then, without breaking their gaze, they lowered their arms and walked toward their couches.

8

Dorri

Dorri is a beautiful and kind nurse who's always found it difficult to stay in one place. In her travels, she learned much about different cultures, found new tastes for foods and along the way studied modern illnesses. She has a three-year-old son who laughs from his heart.

When Dorri was young, she often visited her grandparents and played backgammon with her grandfather as her grandmother sliced fruits and rooted for her. Her grandparents' neighbors were an elderly couple who spent most of their days working on their garden. Dorri's grandmother often talked about them and her friendship with the lady of that house.

"She's from Peru," said Dorri's grandmother once. "She's such a lovely friend. We drink tea and eat fruits together. Sometimes she brings photos of her country and shows them me."

Dorri who on that occasion had been in the middle of a backgammon battle with her grandfather had turned with the die on the tip of her fingers and asked, "Photos of Peru?"

"Yes," her grandmother had responded. "It's beautiful. She showed me photos of mountains so large they touch the sky. And ruins and carvings on cliffsides."

"Carvings? Of what grandma?"

Dorri's grandfather got silently annoyed when she was not giving her full attention to the game.

Handing a piece of apple to Dorri, her grandmother said, "Yes. She showed me a photo of a village in a deep valley. On one side of it upon the mountain was an ancient city that she said used to belong to an ancient civilization. On the other side, a large carving of an old man's face. If you want I can tell her to show you the photos later."

Dorri agreed and turned her attention to the game. But that day never came. Unexpectedly, the neighbors moved back to Peru a week later. Her grandma was sad for losing a good friend.

Years later, Dorri found the name of that village and together with her young son moved to Ollantaytambo in Peru's Sacred Valley. There, she rented a cozy room by the Urubamba river and applied to work at the local clinic. Months rolled by and Dorri had no desire to leave the village for any other place.

Now, her routine revolves around working at the clinic, going on hikes and shopping at the market. Across from the market there is a bakery where she buys bread for sandwiches. She climbs the mountain weekly with her son wrapped tightly on her back with a thick aguayo. Above the orange tiled roofs of the village, they eat avocado sandwiches.

Sometimes after work, she takes her son to the local cafe and they share a large glass of Chicha Morada, a sweet drink prepared by boiling purple corn. These are the joys of life for mother and son.

Spearheads

Since I began camping next to the thorny palms, I've heard three other trees fall in the distance. I've grown used to the rain showers and the sound of thunder, but not trees falling. I'll meet the driver in two days by the river to receive more food from him.

I've drawn many leaves and trees in my notebook and have gotten better at sketching. I've also started collecting seeds. Their variety in shapes and colors fascinated me. There are spiky seeds with red cores. Others are blue and oval-shaped, green seeds and black ones too - dormant witnesses to their species' extinction.

I haven't cried again since the day I looked at my grandfather's keychain. I have, however, been laughing more. Kamal's got smarter and Nadja seems pleased with that. He seems to respect her boundaries more and they enjoy wandering around the forest together.

On the day I was to meet the driver, I had the last piece of bread before hiking toward the river. By now I had grown used to the route and had even found a detour. But this time, since I had plenty of time, I decided to take the long way and enjoy the walk. Escondido, James-Ali and the life I'd taken a break from seemed completely foreign and distant. *I really don't want to go back.*

I was nearing the river, its gushing water visible through the branches when suddenly, I heard the rustling of leaves behind me. I turned, but there was nothing. For seven days, it had been just me, my cats, and the trees. I kept walking, but after only a few steps the sound came again. This time, when I turned, I was shocked to see a naked man standing just behind me, a spear made of a sharpened branch pointed over his shoulder. His skin resembled bark, and his eyes were wild.

There Are Others

The driver saw me held at spearpoint but we were on opposite sides of the river. He dropped off the food on the shore in a hurry and told me he'd be back in a week to pick me up. "If you're still alive," he shouted over the gushing river and limped to his car.

"Bastard," I shouted after him. I took a deep breath and slowly turned toward the young man whose facial expression had changed to one of surprise. He lowered his spear and extended his other arm, palm facing up. I nodded, my heart beating fast. He pointed to where the driver had stood and imitated the driver's limping and laughed.

"You injured him?" I asked in mime.

He nodded and continued laughing, exposing short, gummy teeth. "Good," I said and laughed with him. He then walked me and waved at me to follow. We walked to the river and crossed its shallow bed. Once on the other side, the young man ran toward the supplies and examined the food. He then pointed at my backpack. I dropped it on the rocks and opened it. He packed my bag until it was full and heavy. Then he quickly ran to the nearby trees and returned with a long and sturdy vine, wrapped the rest with it and secured it on his back.

Once I had the backpack over my shoulders too, the young man placed his hand on his chest and said, "Inti." I did the same and introduced myself.

I followed Inti on a new route, passing by trees I had not yet seen with seeds double in size to the ones I'd already discovered. It was a completely new dimension of the forest I did not know existed. There were leaves hanging from branches the size of my entire body, trunks as red as blood and roots of trees tangled together in knots. Inti walked fast. And while I tried to keep up, I stopped twice to catch my breath. He patiently waited on each occasion but after a few seconds waved at me to keep up.

We maintained a distance at all times. I'd come from garbage and did not want to contaminate him.

After about two hours of hiking, we reached the top of a mountain. From there, between two magnificent trees, I saw the Madre de Dios river snaking far below into the distance. The wastelands beyond the trees, where miners and loggers had once pissed on the forest floor, were also visible.

From there, it wasn't long before we came to an opening where three straw huts on stilts appeared. A child wrapped on her mother's chest, two elderly women and both of my cats -

prancing around like they owned the place - were sitting on the forest floor, each busy with a task. Inti spoke a few words to them and gestured at me to step closer.

11

Meeting Dorri

I first met Dorri in Hearts Cafe.

As cross as I'd been with the driver, to my surprise he had returned on the promised time and day. We didn't talk for the whole nine-hour journey back. He drove me to Cusco where I stayed the night and to make up for abandoning me the way he had, he said he'd drive me to Ollantaytambo the next morning at no cost, which he did.

It was raining when we arrived in Ollantaytambo. I still paid the driver and walked to the back of the car to collect my things. He helped me get my bag out of the trunk and just as we were about to part ways, a lightning struck him on his forehead. He didn't die but he was stunned.

Immediately, a young woman rushed out of the clinic and began examining him. I decided I'd had enough of the driver and his karma and walked toward my hotel, keeping my eyes on the ground. The cats' heads however had popped out of my shoulder bag, calmly observing their new surroundings.

Once in my room, I lay in bed and listened to the rain tap against the window. After a short nap, I woke up hungry and decided to go in search of warm food.

When I stepped out of the hotel, my eyes were met with the most magnificent sight. To my right, the sharp mountain slope held the ruins of an ancient terraced city, its weathered stone walls imposing against the landscape. Across the valley to my left, a colossal carving of an old man's face gazed north with intent eyes and a faint smile. Behind it, three narrow roofless stone structures were stacked on top of each other, their outlines etched against the sky.

The night before in Cusco, I'd had the chance to look at a map of the village and get a feel for its geography within the Sacred Valley. Shaped like a triangle, the Patacancha river ran through the village and intercepted the Urubamba River at the foothills of towering mountains.

The village square was buzzing with merchants selling wool scarves and blankets. I sat in Hearts Cafe by the window overlooking it all, watching people going about their lives in traditional red tunics. The women wore wide skirts adorned by colorful hand stitchings. Some wore bowler hats, while others had flat hats made of red fabric with colorful flowers, secured in place by white cloth straps under their chins.

The waitress asked what I wanted to drink. I told her I had not yet looked at the menu. She asked if I was new to the area. I said it was my first day in Ollantaytambo. She smiled and said she'll pick the drink for me. "Pick a nutritious dish, dear. You look starved."

Shortly after she'd gone, the server returned with a tall glass of a purple drink I'd never seen before. "Well?" she said with a smile placing the drink in front of me, paper and pen in hand. I told her I'd decided on the lentil soup, to which she responded, "I would have picked the same for you."

I took a gulp from the purple drink and was immediately taken by its delicious taste. "This is the most delicious drink," I said wide-eyed. Realizing I'd said that out loud, I lifted my eyes from the straw and saw that the nurse who'd helped the driver earlier was sitting at a table across mine with a young boy. They too had a tall glass of the purple juice between them.

We Met Again

I ran into Dorri again, two days later at the vegetable market. That's when she told me her name and introduced her son, Arghavan. She was holding a bag of potatoes and I had with me a slice of sponge cake.

"So you met Señor Palta. The man who bakes," Dorri said looking at my hand.

"It's delicious, everything here is" I responded with a smile.

Dorri laughed. "Welcome to the most wonderful place. Maybe the last one on Earth. You know, his name means pear. You should try his pear cake next time and ask him to also make you a pear smoothie. That's my favorite."

"Okay," I responded. We shared a silent moment, heavy with conversations that'd yet to unfold.

"Would you like to meet for a glass of chicha morada at Hearts Cafe tomorrow?" Dorri asked.

What happened in the jungle

Dorri listened to my story excitedly. She had laughed when I described my job and James-Ali. “I know the kind,” she’d commented. When I reached the part where I met Inti, she leaned forward with greater interest.

“The next seven days were wild,” I began. “Once the food was all sorted, Inti walked inside one of the huts and brought out a wet magazine and handed it to me. The page was opened to an article about the Mashco-Piro tribe’s history.”

“The Mashco-Piro,” Dorri exclaimed. “I thought they were gone.”

“There aren’t many members left.”

“What did the article say?”

I took a sip of my corn juice. “It said that in ancient times, the Mashco-Piro were a thriving nomadic culture deeply connected to the land, relying on their knowledge of the environment to sustain themselves. Then one day, a man called Carlos Fitzcarrald arrived with his army in search of rubber trees. The encounter was violent. The army enslaved the indigenous people and made them cut down the trees. The lumber was stacked inside a ship then pulled by the Mashco-Piro over the Andes mountains. Many were slaughtered this way. However, some managed to escape, fleeing back to the denser parts of the forest for protection.

“Over generations, the Mashco-Piro scattered. The descendants of the escapees dwindled in numbers, primarily due to the shrinking forest and diseases brought by missionaries and illegal miners.”

There was a moment of silence then Dorri asked, “What was it like to see them? To live with them?”

“Something I noticed right away was that they stick to routines. Each member knew exactly what their duties were.

“Every day, Inti and I walked to different parts of the forest, foraging for Yuca and banana. We also made an attempt to trap fish, but only once were we successful. The women looked to other parts of the forest for a type of red bamboo. We ate the sweet center of their trunks.

“I didn’t eat any of the food the driver had brought, leaving it all for the others. By the fourth or the fifth day since I’d met Inti, I found out there were other small groups of Mashco-Piro in the

forest. We never interacted with them, but I'm sure Inti had before. He knew where they were and when possible, we changed our course."

Dorri said, "They're probably the last people on earth for whom privacy still matters."

"Yes. A lot. And they protect each other," I responded. "They stared at me but since I was with Inti, they didn't approach."

"How did you return?" she asked.

"I'd given up on the driver and was growing more anxious as the seventh day of the second week approached. That day, Inti pointed at my clothes, signaling that it was time to put them back on. Then the two elderly women, Inti's wife and child, stood in a half circle in front of me and my cats. They took turns saying something to me which I took to be farewell blessings.

"All week, I had been aware that what I was experiencing was unbelievably unique. But the moment of farewell also brought with it a sickening realization that this goodbye was really just a prelude to another extinction event. Just like there were no more birds, there'll soon be no Mashco-Piro. No more aimed spears. No understanding or memories of trees.

"Inti and I walked to the river, which sadly felt like a much shorter hike than before," I continued. "The driver was already waiting for me. Inti looked me in the eye and said a few words. Then he extended his hand. I looked at it, then at him. He gave me a firm nod, signaling, 'it's okay.' We shook hands and I turned, crying while crossing the river." I stopped and took a sip of my drink and looked at the table to mask my sadness.

Dorri put her hand on mine.

"In the car, the driver said to me, 'Your handshake will probably kill that boy.' but I didn't pay him any attention," I said with a trembling voice.

"Then he got struck by lightning," Dorri said and we laughed.

James-Ali flipping

“Gather,” James-Ali shouted as he marched toward the shop. Leaning the mop against the wall, Joe walked out with slow hopelessness. He looked for Riz but he wasn’t to be found.

“Just you,” James-Ali said angrily, pulling up his striped pajamas further up his fat gut. Joe realized this was the first time he’d seen his boss’s bare ankles - two swollen joints being crushed under ever increasing weight. “Two items on the agenda,” James-Ali spat.

“Yes boss,” Joe responded meekly, knowing the combination of those two words and his stupid look always softened the angry man. Not this time.

“Where’s your mop? I pay a lot for those. Take care of your equipment. Day in, day out, I have to make sure you lot don’t run my business down and I’ve just about had it.” James-Ali’s rage was peaking. “I’m tired.”

Joe had never heard his boss scream. Together with the ankles, the day had brought him two new surprises.

James-Ali pivoted on his heels, took a deep breath and continued a little more collected, slightly embarrassed about his voice cracking earlier. “I’m hiring a service company via email. The Information Technology team is on it. I’m sending word to that good-for-nothing co-worker of yours. He’s done. I’m sending him a piece of my mind. Personal time off does not mean to be taken all at once. It doesn’t mean abandoning your duties to go to some savage continent and walk around with hiking boots. The eight-hours-a-year PTO is a gift. You don’t collect gifts to punish the one person who’s been kindly giving it to you. Understood?”

Joe nodded. “Yes boss.”

“Effective in three weeks, a new boy from Nicaragua joins the team.” James-Ali pulled his pajamas up again. “I need dedicated workers, not nature-walking, liquid soap dispensers. I expect you to set an example. Understood?”

“Yes boss.”

Temple of the Sun

Dorri and I met more frequently. A new life with bright routines was slowly shaping up for me and I had no intention of leaving it behind.

One day, Dorri said, "Tomorrow night is the full moon. I've arranged care for Arghavan and your darling cats. Meet me at my door and bring a headlamp, Kamal and Nadja. Nothing else."

I was so excited, that evening I showed up early at her door. She came out a little late and apologized. "When you have a toddler, you never leave the house on time," she said smiling. Then she took my cats up, and returned back down.

Other than the street dogs sniffing around, all else was quiet. Dorri led us toward Patacancha river and down a short slope where we began hopping over the river rocks. On the other side, we quietly walked past two farms and eventually the space widened at the foot of the mountain where a stone-carved fountain marked the entrance to the ruins.

"This is the Ceremonial Fountain," Dorri whispered. "Now we'll enter the ancient city and climb those steps." She pointed to the narrow steps stretching straight up the steep mountain.

Once at the very top, the Sacred Valley appeared before us as a dark sea engulfed by the silhouette of the Andes. Every now and then a dog barked from the abyss.

Following the narrow ledge, deep terraces beneath us, we finally arrived at the heart of the ancient city surrounded by stone chambers.

"Follow me. I'll show you the Temple of the Sun," said Dorri.

The dance

One evening Arghavan was sleeping in his bed, cats curled by his side. Dorri's bed was unmade. I was sitting on a chair by her kitchen.

"I want to dance with you," Dorri said and pressed play on the music.

A soft guitar melody graced the air and was soon accompanied by the gentle voice of panpipes.

Dorri walked over to me and held my hand. "This music is beautiful," I whispered as we drew near. Our chests pressing, I kissed her neck. Her heartbeat drummed against mine. I felt loved. I didn't want to let go.

In the cold and silent room, the two tall gray beings simultaneously lifted their large eyelids and locked gazes. This time, their eyes were no longer vacant. Something heavy had passed between them. They had finally met each other's intent in a place of their choosing.

17
One Answer

“Six months, not a word,” James-Ali said to Riz, shaking his head furiously.

What the IT man wanted to say was, “That’s what you get for employing the cheapest service company available.” But what he did say instead was, “I know boss, luckily you have a new employee and the business is doing great.”

“I know,” James-Ali responded angrily. “But it’s a matter of principle. It’s about slamming a door shot.”

“I understand boss,” Riz said. “Also, your yearly newspaper just arrived. It’s on the desk.”

“Fantastic.” James-Ali walked to the table and opened the paper, grunting as he flipped through the pages. Then, suddenly, he slapped the paper down on the table and shouted, “Bastards.”

Riz jumped from his seat. He may have grown used to his boss’ fits but slamming tables was a new habit. “What is it boss?”

“Bastards at the County Business Committee didn’t pick us for the Best Business Award. They’re retaliating. I know it. I know it. I know everything.”

Riz was surprised. The awards were yearly and they’d never won it before. *Why does it matter now?* He thought. More than anything he was taken aback by his boss referring to the business as “us.”

“Fire up the email Riz. We are demanding a response,” James-Ali commanded. “This has got to stop.”

Three more months passed. James-Ali barged inside Riz’s office. “Nine months and no words yet from the service bastard. Three months and no words from the Business Committee bastards. What world is this?” he said furiously. “I’m sending the county a hand-written letter.” He held up his hand, showing a piece of paper with scribbles on it. “I’ve written here, why didn’t you respond to our email demanding answers?”

One month later, a written response from the County Business Council was delivered. James-Ali, who’d been checking the mail daily, was pleased to see it. But after reading it, he was so enraged that he threw the letter on the ground and walked away.

“We thought you were joking.” the one sentence response read.

18
Service

"It's a pretty day, isn't it?" I asked Fernando, my eyes fixed on the river. He didn't respond, so I turned to look at him. His gaze was on the ancient city ruins upon the mountain slope. "Dorri took me there. She told me the city was built in the shape of a mother llama feeding her baby. See?" I traced the shape in the air for him.

Fernando smiled. "I can see it now." He took a bite from his sandwich. "Please thank Dorri for me for lunch."

"I will," I responded. "Are you okay?"

"You know what I was thinking?"

"What?"

"That nine or so months ago I set out to find and serve you with a letter from your boss. Back then, if someone had asked me 'It's a nice day, isn't it?' I would have thrown a shoe at them. I live in a village now, under a blue sky, eating real food. And for the first time in many years I'm Happy."

I laughed. "I'm glad man."

Fernando continued, "I'll never forget. You took the letter and threw it in the fire without reading it. Then you took me out for a purple corn juice." He laughed. "I was actually angry because I was never good at my job and this was the one time I had successfully served someone. And you just threw it in the fire."

"Why did you start a service company in the first place?" I asked.

"Because," Fernando said. "I'd just returned from Korea broke and broken hearted. I didn't know what else to do." He laughed again and put his arm around my shoulders. "You and Dorri have been great friends to me. Thank you."

Once our sandwiches were finished, we went back to Señor Palta's shop at the market to finish our day's work.

"What do you think was in the letter?" Fernando asked.

"Probably something nasty to fire me with."

“He’s so petty. What was his name? James?”

“James-Ali.”

“So James-Ali spent money to send me four thousand miles away to find you just to let you know you’re fired.”

“I’d be shocked if he hadn’t. He probably said, ‘It’s about the principle,’ or something.”

19
Work to Do

“Gather.” The command could have only come from one person.

The Nicaraguan boy was so panicked, he dropped the mop and ran to the yard. Joe leaned his against the wall and dragged himself out. He was surprised to see Riz there too this time. But no James-Ali in sight yet.

The three employees were kept waiting under the scorching sun until the flies began buzzing around their sweaty eyelids. Then came signs of movement from their boss’ house. Joe was confident the delay was deliberate.

Finally, just as the flies were starting to feed on them, the shop owner, “Brains of the operation,” stepped out of his house. He looked different, but also the same. He had on his signature brown plastic sandals two sizes too big worn without socks. For this occasion however, he had on a brown buttoned up shirt and a pair of loose dress pants of the same color. Brown on brown on brown.

“Good,” James-Ali walked toward his employees with a sneer. “Today, I make this announcement to you all, that it’s time to rid the County of the cancer it suffers from. When left unchecked, the symptoms show themselves as the bastards at the Business Committee. Big changes are on the way.”

The Nicaraguan employee who had not understood a word waved a fly off his face but immediately stiffened up as his boss turned toward him and Joe. “The shop is closing and you’re both fired effective end of day, today. Wash your mops before leaving.” James-Ali announced. “I’m running for office and I know I can count on both of your votes.” Then he turned to Riz and said, “Fire up the email Riz. We have work to do.”

Bonus Chapter - Fernando In Korea In His Own Words

When you know you don't have anything and you're conscious of it, sometimes it's amusing. When I lived in Korea, it was very cold during the winter and I used to use my jackets as blankets. My room was on the very top of the building, on the roof. One night it was so cold in my room, I saw my own breath and I just couldn't stop laughing.

Then one night, the girl who managed the building - we hooked up later by the way... because the policy was you couldn't bring girls to the apartment, so mine was an inside job - she saw how I was living and told me, "you know you can rent blankets, right?" I didn't know. Later that night, I smoked a cigarette on the roof feeling like a king. I had blankets.

But before all that, the first day I arrived in Korea, I got lost. I was supposed to get to the building at six in the afternoon, but I got there at ten in the evening. And it was during the summer so it was very hot. I was sweating violently. I remember sitting in a park making peace with the possibility of spending my first night on a bench with all my shit and cigarettes. Then I saw this girl, she was just sitting and studying I guess. I tapped her on the shoulder. I literally saw her soul leave her body out of fear.

I showed her the address on my phone and she said, "Oh it's only two blocks away." She walked me to the apartment. The girl who managed the building asked me where I'd been and if I wanted to have dinner. I said yes but would it be okay if I have a shower first? She said of course.

I had thought it was going to be like a hotel kind of deal, so I hadn't brought a towel. But there wasn't a towel in my room, so I came down and asked for one. She looked at her boss who was there that night and he said something in Korean to her. Then she looked at me kind of annoyed and returned with a towel. The night we spent together, she told me she'd given me her own second towel.

Anyway, a few weeks later, the school I was attending sent me an email and said there's a Mexican guy who's just joined. And since you guys are both Mexican you should be best friends.

I met the guy and we went out drinking one night. We got so drunk but somehow made it home. I slept from five in the morning to eleven at night. At eleven, I heard a knock. I was in my shorts and a shirt. I opened the door and it was the young building manager. I closed the door embarrassed but quickly opened it again, hiding behind and said sorry I'm half naked in my shorts. She said, "It's okay. I'm going out with a friend. Would you and your friend like to join us?"

Of course I said yes. I called my new Mexican friend and said, "There's a new mission. By the way, thanks for getting me home last night."

My friend said he thought I had walked him to his house. Neither of us had any fucking idea how we'd gotten home and we were still hungover. But we went. It was a karaoke bar and the girl had come with a guy friend. We got tequilas and her friend got upset that we made him drink tequila. Whatever. That was that. The girl was nice though.

I guess I wasn't lusting over her then, it was just innocent. We were kind of lonely. She'd tell me "I'm going for a walk." I'd ask if it'd be okay for me to join and she'd say, "yes." And that was that, we would walk together in silence.

"One evening, we went out by the river. She put down a blanket and grabbed a drink for us. It was legal to drink outside. We listened to music and watched the river. Then at some point, I got up and started dancing. And I guess since everyone is formal there, it's weird when someone gets up and just dances. I took her hand. She said no at first, laughing, but then got up and danced with me. I kissed her. She didn't pull away right away, but then she did. She said, "It's not right. It's not professional of me since you're technically a tenant at the building I'm managing."

It got awkward. We got a ride back and didn't really talk. When we got to the building, I sat on the steps outside, smoking a cigarette. She kept insisting I go inside. I told her I wanted to be alone. She said, "Don't stay out, come in." I told her to do her own thing. I wanted to be alone. Then she said, "If I meet you inside, will you come in?" And, DING DING, I went inside.

I went to my room and sat on my bed. A few minutes later she knocked on my door. I led her in and we sat on the bed. We unfolded what had happened earlier and before long were kissing again. Then she fell asleep in my arms because I also didn't have a pillow then.

If someone asks me a moment of life I'd like to go back to, that'd be it.

The End

Harmonic Collapse

The Dance to Work

It was an ordinary orange morning for the thirty six year old male named Pancake. He showered, wore his new pants and tucked in his floral shirt.

On the drive to work, Pancake listened to his favorite song - Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto #2 in C Minor. He always only got as far as the end of the second movement by the time he arrived. For this reason, the third movement had remained largely unknown to him.

It irritated him that his work was not far enough or that all other routes to it were unavailable. With each listen, he felt more like he had split two brothers from a third. That somehow, the first two movements were mad at him for only listening to them and not the third. He'd thought of playing only the third movement one morning, but decided against it.

Pancake worked at a secret, underground military lab accessible by a hidden elevator that opened on the side of a large boulder. Long ago, the entrance was far and remote. However, with the eventual expansion of surrounding cities, the boulder now sat fenced in the middle of a golf course.

Though the lab and its entrance had remained a secret, it really didn't matter anymore. The underground operations were a mere shell of what they used to be back in the pre-war days. The building itself was crumbling and malfunctioning horribly, in obvious ways.

For instance, it was becoming harder to summon the hidden elevator because it was impossible to know how long until the vicinity was clear from amateur golfers. Sometimes while waiting, Pancake walked around, admiring the well-kept landscape around the golf course.

If conditions were favorable and the elevator was called for successfully, one of two things could happen. Either he went down, scanned his badge and walked through the long hallway to his room. Or, he'd have to dodge bullets while doing so.

Starting some months back, once the elevator reached level -1, the wall weapons would activate as if the lab was breached. The frequency of these events had recently increased to an 'everytime' status.

Pancake had the turning range of each weapon down by memory and had choreographed a dance that took him safely to his door. He began by walking four steps on the left side of the hallway, then did a sideway hop across and back. This would continue until he reached his door. It always worked.

2

The New Mission

Four steps forward, right hop, left hop, four steps forward. Pancake finally reached his office. He put down his empty bag on the floor and sat behind an empty desk with only an inkless pen at its center.

As nobody was allowed in anybody else's room, and due to having sworn confidentiality, the concept of having coworkers didn't exist to Pancake. He had never seen anyone else approach the elevator, or walk through the hallway of the lab. But sometimes he heard guns firing outside his office, which made him think there were others in the building.

In his routine, the only person Pancake held conversations with other than his neighbor, Strawberry Peach, was an elderly man who sometimes also walked around the golf course.

"My name is Pancake," he had introduced himself to the old man one morning.

"Hello Pancake. I'm Good Mustard," the other had responded with a tired smile.

And that had been it.

Pancake enjoyed working from behind his desk. He was able to think well in his office. However, his current mission had forced him to play with the pen between his fingers. He had been asked via a note on his desk to develop a method to make it possible to dig through to a parallel world.

3

Love You, Bye

How could the sky have ever only been blue once? Pancake thought, looking up from his kitchen window. It was orange and empty as always. *It's going to be a good day*, he tried to change his thought pattern. It was the weekend and he was going to bake for the first time.

The recipe was suggested by Intel - Portuguese custard tart or properly known as, Pastel De Nata.

"Intel," Pancake called.

"Pancake," the kitchen walls responded.

"How about we cover the house with Portuguese tiles while we bake?"

"Great idea," responded the soft voice and the walls changed from burgundy to white and blue, floral tiles. "Should we play some Fado?" suggested Intel.

Tying up his apron, Pancake said, "I don't know what that is, but sure. I trust your taste."

The music began and a woman began singing with intense and profound emotions. It was beautiful.

"Intel, what instrument is being played?" Pancake asked as he mixed factory flour and salt in a bowl.

"Portuguese guitar. It has twelve strings and a round body," the computer responded.

Slowly adding cold water, Pancake massaged the mixture until a sticky dough formed. He then put it in the fridge for half an hour and opened a bottle of synthetic red wine. He drank two generous cups.

Next, it was time to incorporate the butter into the dough, which he did with difficulty. It seemed to him that the picture on the recipe was not matching with the mixture under his hands. Nevertheless, Pancake continued to fold, roll and chill the dough on repeat.

"Intel," Pancake called.

"Pancake," answered the wall.

"Can you show me the photo of the sky when it was blue?" He just couldn't stop thinking about it, especially now that he was a little tipsy.

The same image he'd already seen many times before popped on the wall. It still looked as foreign as anything to him. A Palm tree under a bright, clear blue sky. He marveled at the hidden source of light cut from the picture. Pancake imagined whether, unlike the current, empty and orange alternative, there used to be some infinite blue source that painted the empty sky each morning. He poured himself another cup of wine. It was time to make the custard.

Just then, Intel announced. "Strawberry Peach is approaching."

"Open the door," Pancake commanded.

"Hi handsome," came the kind familiar call from the door. "Oh it smells like Like-Butter here."

Pancake laughed. They gave each other armless hugs and kisses on both cheeks.

"Mmm," Strawberry Peach took a deep breath with closed eyes, "Smells delicious." Then she got right to it, "Okay, so my neighbor has stolen my car again."

"Not again," responded Pancake, annoyed.

"Yes again. Cops are after her. Can I borrow your car for the day until they get mine back? I want to go to the zoo."

"Of course. I'm staying in. Are you going to the zoo by yourself?"

Looking at the projection of the Portuguese tiles on the walls, Strawberry responded, "Yes. Husband's out of town to be with his girlfriend indefinitely."

It hadn't escaped Pancake that today was his neighbor's birthday. That she had planned to go to the zoo with her husband. That her smile was a way of hiding numerous disappointments. "Do you have any plans this evening?" he asked.

"No, why?" Strawberry looked at him with bright eyes.

"I'm cooking lasagna. I have a bottle of young synthetic wine I've kept in the dark. Would you like to join me?" Pancake asked.

Strawberry's eyes widened with joy. "Yes. That'd be grand."

"Great." Pancake laughed. "Car key is in the bowl, have a blast."

"Can't wait. And please save me some of whatever you're baking. Love you, bye."

4
Top Drawer

Somebody with a lot of money must be holding on to a wine bottle from the past. From when they were made from grapes. Maybe all it takes is a sip of that to enter a parallel world. Maybe wine from real grapes would even make the sky blue again. Such a rare bottle of wine, collecting dust somewhere. Eh, Like they'd fund an experiment involving me drinking a bottle of real wine. Keep digging, keep dodging bullets. Pancake noticed that his scattered thoughts surrounding his work had been following him home. *What does wine have to do with anything?*

Sunday. Hangover. Strawberry Peach was deep asleep, naked, next to Pancake. His head throbbing, he got out of bed, walked to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of imitation juice. He took three pain tablets with it and got ready to leave the house.

"Intel."

"Pancake."

"Tell Strawberry Peach when she wakes up to make herself at home. Oh, and that I changed the drawer for the sex toys. They're in the top drawer now."

"I will. Should I let her know how long you'll be gone?"

"Sure, a few hours." Pancake left the house rubbing his temples, hungry and nauseous. He drove to the corner market first and bought two portions of carrot-potato boils. He put them on the passenger seat and drove west toward the sea.

Climbing down the steep steps to the beach the young man walked several minutes on the shallow sand until he reached his destination. He sat on a flat rock facing the water and began eating one of the carrot-potato boils, starting with the fried dandelion leaves as he always did.

Several birds gathered around the other plate but Pancake didn't pay them any attention. He was focused on the sky and chewing slowly.

When he returned home, Strawberry Peach had left. On the counter, there was a cup of coffee programmed to stay warm for several hours.

"Pancake," Intel called.

"Intel."

"Strawberry Peach left you a message."

“Oh? What is it?”

The walls turned a bright blue and a message in Strawberry’s voice began. “Happy birthday to my Pancake, my friend, my neighbor. Thank you for remembering and celebrating mine last night. I hope you enjoy your coffee. Your gift is in your room. Intel will record your reaction for me to watch later. Thank you for never stealing my car. Ugh, I honestly think she steals it in a twisted show of affection. Anyway, enjoy your day love.”

The walls returned to their neutral, burgundy color. Smiling, Pancake walked to his room.

His birthday gift was the sum of all his recent desires, a chair.

5

Something Different

For the next several months, all the news coverage was about a passenger plane crash and the possibility of war. Eventually, neither the news outlets nor the officials confirmed whether the plane was downed or had malfunctioned. The area of the crash was taped off but the carcass of the machine was never removed. It was soon forgotten about. No war.

The next few months after that were eventless, apart from two stabbing incidents at the local bar. But those were forgotten about too.

In July, Pancake took Strawberry Peach to the zoo for her birthday. Apart from two or three old people sitting on benches, they were the only ones in the park. Cardboard cutouts of creatures large and small looked out from their cages with blank stares.

"Thanks for bringing me here. And for remembering my birthday," said Strawberry wistfully.

"What's wrong?" Pancake asked.

Strawberry took a deep breath. "Well, husband used to bring me here for my birthday. He hasn't been back since he left to visit his girlfriend. I can't really remember when he left."

Pancake didn't say anything. He was looking down at their walking feet.

"I just wish," Strawberry said but stopped short. After a few seconds she continued, her voice trembling, "I just wish something would happen. Something more."

Pancake took a quick sideways look and saw that tears were rolling down Strawberry's cheeks.

"Like what?" Pancake asked.

"Like," Strawberry softly sobbed. "Anything other than eating and fucking. Like asking each other forbidden things. 'Hey, how was work?' for instance."

Pancake reached for his friend's hand and gripped it gently firm. She stopped talking and bursted out crying. He hugged her tightly. They were in front of a cutout of a cheetah staring at them with exposed fangs.

"Come," Pancake said. "Your birthday gift is in my car. Let's drive to the beach. I'll show you something different there."

Strawberry Peach wiped the tears off her cheeks and followed his instructions without delay.

A Sudden Left Turn

A long time ago, there were two friends. Caius was six and he played the flute. Vespera was eight and he played the charango. They called themselves “The Poor Ensemble” because they had no shoes and were always hungry. They played music for passing cars and every now and then received a coin.

When they turned thirteen and fifteen, people took to the streets against the government. Suddenly, the teenage friends were surrounded by a generous crowd that gave them new clothes, shoes and food.

The crackdown on the citizens was swift. Many of the people who had helped Caius and Vespera ended up with warning shots to their heads. One evening, as the crowd dispersed in a frenzy, the two best friends found themselves alone on the street with an army quadrant ready to shoot them down. They dropped their instruments, held hands and closed their eyes.

But just then, a commander stopped the soldiers and approached the teenagers. He ordered them to strip and had them driven away separately.

In his twenties, Caius worked as a music teacher in a small shop on the same street he’d been arrested years prior. He also wrote music with lyrics, secretly, as they were protest songs against the ruling military party. One day, drinking tea after a lesson, a young man with a grave look stepped in. It only took Caius half a glance to recognize his old friend Vespera.

The two embraced each other for a long time, laughing. Caius finally held the other by the shoulders and took one good look at his long-lost friend. When he noticed the military pins on Vespera’s chest, Caius said, “No longer poor.”

“Not anymore.”

“They did unspeakable things to me when they separated us,” Caius said.

“Similar,” responded Vespera.

Caius made more tea and as he was handing it to his guest, his elbow caught on a folder and the content spilled on the floor. Vespera collected the papers and glanced at them, then looked at his old friend’s frozen face. Shaking his head disapprovingly, he said, “Things are changing for the better, brother. Keep faith.”

As he was leaving, a young woman was joyfully approaching the door for her music lesson. Vespera opened the door for her and took one last glance back at Caius before leaving.

An Orange Parade

Betrayals are often violent but this one was bloody. Twenty years had passed since an unknown, young officer became the de facto dictator and people were still licking their chronically infected wounds.

In a small shop on a street formerly known as Magnolia, renamed after the coup to Insignificant, a middle-aged woman with one eye was teaching flute to a man with amputated legs.

After the lesson, once the student was gone, she adjusted her eye patch and ran the tips of her fingers on her deeply scarred face. Just then, the door opened and a young officer no older than nineteen years of age stepped in. He stomped around the tiny space, projecting raw authority.

"You jump at the sound of my boots," the officer snarled at the seated woman. "Is it because you missed me or is it because it's the anniversary of your teacher's death?" He picked up a few folders and emptied their contents on the floor, moving the papers with the tip of his right boot, looking at them intently. "Twenty years. Too bad I wasn't born yet. Or I would have liked to be the one shooting him in the head outside of this door."

A tear rolled down the woman's good eye. It didn't go unnoticed by the officer.

"That better be a tear of joy for the twentieth anniversary of leader Vespera's victory. He will join the parade today, you know," said the young officer. "Funny how different two friends can end up. One becomes a leader who literally changes the color of the sky, the other gets shot dead." He laughed with manic forcefulness.

The woman trapped her breath. *The tear was a mistake. Luckily I'm still granted one on each anniversary, or I'd be dead now. But it's getting close. Don't breathe. Don't give him anything else,* she thought.

When the officer was done laughing, he turned to leave. "I'll look for you at the parade. Actually, you better make sure I see you there."

When he was gone and well out of sight, the scarred woman first gasped for air, then held her face and burst into tears.

Good Mustard looked at himself in the mirror. He was wrinkled and tired. His lips were less red, his hair was frazzled. He recognized his gaze as his own but was unable to fully relate to it. It had been a while since he'd seen his own reflection. Everything looked worse.

9
Among Flowers

Pancake reached under the back seat of his car and handed Strawberry Peach a bottle wrapped in a cloth with paisley patterns.

As she unfolded the covering and looked at the bottle's label, her red, sad eyes widened with sudden joy. "How?" she asked, bewildered.

I found it among the flowers at the golf course. What he didn't mention was that the bottle had come with a note reading, "Thank you for appreciating these plants."

The drive to the beach was quiet. Except, on three occasions, Strawberry had looked at Pancake but not in a way she had done before. He had noticed one of the three.

Pancake parked the car. Strawberry Peach put the bottle back under the back seat and they descended the stairs down to the sandy beach toward the flat rock.

The two sat shoulder-to-shoulder facing the sea. Then Pancake raised his arm and pointed at a distant part of the sky. Strawberry followed the direction of his pointed finger. She squinted first then gasped, holding a hand to her mouth. Cold, silent tears began rolling down her cheeks.

She reached for Pancake's hand and squeezed it, not blinking or taking her gaze off that part of the sky. She was afraid to lose it - that thin slice in the orange sky that revealed a pale blue one behind it.

On the drive home, Pancake again caught Strawberry looking at him the way she had on their way to the beach. Only this time she'd also smiled.

When they arrived, Pancake said he was going to cook Lasagna if she wanted to join. "Mmm. Lasagna. My favorite," Strawberry responded with a soft expression.

Pancake laughed.

"I'd love that," Strawberry added. "Carry this inside please and I'll be right back. I just need to go home for a moment." She handed Pancake the bottle of wine.

"Strawberry Peach is approaching the door," Intel declared half-an-hour later.

"Let her in. Oh, and let's cover the walls with pictures of flowers," responded Pancake. His wish was granted instantly. Pink, yellow, blue, orange, violet flower, and every other color in between and beyond was represented on the walls.

Strawberry Peach stepped in and marveled at the beauty of the room. She had changed into an elegant turquoise dress. She had a decanter in one and two wine glasses in the other. She had also put on lipstick and powdered her cheeks.

How beautiful, Pancake thought. He'd only seen Strawberry Peach's face made up once before, in her wedding photo.

They greeted each other with broad smiles and a full embrace. She complimented Pancake on the aroma of the lasagna sauce. He said, "You look beautiful. I'm sorry I'm still in the same clothes. I wanted to get a headstart on cooking, but I'll change..."

Strawberry laughed, "Thank you. I like what you're still wearing. I hadn't seen this shirt before, I meant to tell you. Blue looks great on you."

"You hadn't? Are you sure?" Pancake felt stupid for the questions. He felt nervous. His heart was beating faster.

Strawberry Peach nodded and without taking her eyes off her host set the decanter and glasses on the counter. "I'm going to open the wine."

She opened the bottle and asked him to join her as she poured it down the decanter's long neck.

"Woah," they both exclaimed.

"Will you marry me?" Pancake asked after dinner.

"Without a single doubt," she responded with simple, youthful joy.

They touched their glasses and drank to their union.

10
Not Now

Two days later, while crossing the hallway to his office and dodging bullets, Pancake had a strong urge to be with Strawberry instead. This momentary distraction caused him to have a misstep. Instead of a leap across the hallway and back, he had continued walking.

Pancake froze in his tracks, afraid. He'd never made this mistake. He definitely didn't want to be shot dead, not now.

Just then, a door on the far end of the hallway opened and a figure walked out. Pancake's eyes tracked the silhouette until it stood at the center of his line of sight. The shadow gestured with his hand for him to step forward. Just as Pancake was reluctantly going to follow the order, the hallway suddenly turned silent. As if turned off by a switch, there were no more shooting weapons, no trace of shells or damage on the walls. Nothing but a long and smooth, rectangular, cement tube.

Pancake's breathing grew heavy. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the hallway that serene - it felt alien. Cautiously, he relaxed his shoulders and stepped forward, his eyes darting from door to door, unable to locate his own among the many. As he got closer, the mysterious figure's features became clearer. He was wrinkled and strangely familiar. Then, just a few paces away, he recognized the man to be Good Mustard.

Surprised, Pancake greeted the old man. The latter said nothing and turned toward the open door. Pancake followed. When he stepped in, he realized he was inside his office. But as his eyes moved to his desk, he saw someone else standing behind it. It took him a moment to believe what he was seeing - Strawberry Peach. She looked just as startled.

The old man walked out of the room and returned with two more chairs. In that brief period, Strawberry had whispered out what was also on Pancake's mind. "All this time, we worked here together? Arriving half-an-hour apart?"

"Please," the old man directed the young duo to sit on the three chairs assembled in the center of the room. Once they were all seated, Good Mustard commanded, "Intel."

"Good Mustard," the walls of the office lit up.

"Begin," said the old man.

Moving pictures appeared. The footage showed two barefoot boys playing instruments for money at an intersection and their eventual arrest. As the story unfolded, one of them became a

music teacher and the other a military man. Strawberry grew increasingly suspicious of the striking resemblance between the man in uniform and Pancake. Later, Pancake shot Strawberry a sharp glance when the man, who looked identical to him, opened the door to the music store for a young woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to her.

The video went on to show the young officer stage a violent coup and become the ruler of his country. In its aftermath, he ordered the arrest and execution of many, starting with his childhood friend. He then hired scientists to change the color of the sky in people's minds to a sunless, cloudless orange and executed them afterward.

The tyrant further tightened his grip by unleashing a war that reduced Earth to a wasteland of ash and radiation - a monument to his grotesque appetite for power. Years rolled on. People were getting sick and dying at higher numbers than anticipated.

New scientists were recruited in an underground basement that looked identical to the one Pancake and Strawberry Peach were now sitting in. Together, they managed to create a slight incision in the population's collective memory, exposing them to a tiny slice of blue sky, but only visible to ones who could truly focus every ounce of their attention and mind to it. The overall health of the country immediately improved, only slightly. The public never found out why and those scientists were put to death too.

On the twentieth anniversary of the coup, an older Pancake-looking dictator was giving a speech to a large crowd. Halfway through the event, from the corner of the screen came an aged and horribly scarred Strawberry Peach. She stepped on the stage behind the man and delivered a heavy slap on the back of his head.

She was arrested. The dictator was taken away to a safe place but he immediately sank into depression. He never recovered from the incident, which made it easy for him to be overthrown by a younger, hungrier autocrat. One who went to become the architect of living experiments.

The video fast-forwarded two hundred and ten years.

On the screen, Good Mustard was walking down a long hallway past doors to his left and right. Each door was topped with a plaque displaying a number and a brief description. The one the old man opened led to a room that looked identical to the three of them were now in. The camera angle showed how he had switched off the fake projection of malfunctioning guns in the hallway for Strawberry Peach and later for Pancake.

The final scene was of them sitting on their chairs and Good Mustard issuing a command to Intel, "Begin."

Pancake and Strawberry Peach looked at each other in disbelief and horror, hand in hand. The old man got up and slowly walked to the front of the room.

“Experiment Four hundred ninety thousand eight hundred ninety six, Dictator And Victim - partial eternal recurrence theory test - Completion: thirty seven consecutive non-violent outcomes,” Good Mustard declared. “Everything you watched was true history. Of seven hundred and thirty one tries, the final thirty seven ended favorably. As instructed by the scientists that created this living experiment, it must now end.” The old man cleared his throat.

The End

