

Glitches

Short stories

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Foreword

These stories emerged from my dreams. Please read them in the order presented. The last story pays homage to David Lynch's work.

Retry

Day 1

I woke up late that Sunday morning, the Oregon sun slanting through the thin curtains and cutting through the room in cold, unfriendly lines. The clock on the nightstand read half past twelve, but the sight of the time felt again more like a trap than a measure. That summer everything in that town seemed adrift and leaden like the morning haze. Mark lay beside me, his breathing steady, the warmth of his body a tether didn't yet know I would need.

I turned to him, traced the edge of his jaw with my fingers, gently stroked his messy brown hair, felt the life clinging to him. His eyes languidly opened through the soundless space between our breaths as if the day outside meant nothing. Such moments vanish like twilight shadows fleeing with the last sun rays, never to return once the light faded—a truth I pretended didn't apply to me.

Our eyes met for a fleeting second and we sidled up to each other, like there was something beneath it all pulling us closer. When it was over he held me, almost distant, as if

even he could feel the edges of the day fraying, coming undone. My dreamy stare caught Plum gliding with feline grace across the bedroom floor, stealthy as always, slipping onto the bed like a weightless sprite. She curled up at our feet into a cozy ball of blue-grey fur, unmindful of the time, now on the hour.

The ringtone sliced through the stillness with a sound that felt sharper than it should have. I reached for my phone and saw the screen light up with my mother's name. Without thinking, I hung up. The phone rang again, insistent, and I answered.

"June, where are you? We're all waiting."

The family lunch, oops. I was supposed to be there sitting around the table and playing the part I was supposed to play. Instead I was naked in bed with Mark, the minutes dissolving like mist in the morning sun. Now something in the air, something I couldn't name, felt wrong.

"I'm sorry," I said, pushing the covers back, the warmth and safety of the bed falling apart. "I'll be there soon."

Mark mutedly watched as I scrambled to find clothes, his regard steady but shadowed. The silence between us grew thicker, fueling my agitation. Oblivious to the urgency, Plum stretched then stared at me and blinked, before seeking refuge in the kitchen.

I found fresh underwear and faded blue jeans, pulled on a demure burgundy sweater, my hands shaking as I tried to fix my long tangled dark hair marked by sleep and by him. The mirror caught the reflection of wild eyes and a face pretty in a way that felt like it didn't matter. I dabbed concealer and foundation to mask my weariness and rushed out the door, greeted by the crisp midday wind.

The soulless street glowered at me beneath an ashen sky as I started my car and pushed eastward toward my parents'

home, twelve miles inland from the seashore where my house stood. After a fifteen-minute drive punctuated by half-hearted breathing exercises, I parked beside my father's navy sedan while I steeled myself to don an apologetic mask, hastily sifting through stories in my mind, deciding which truths to tell and which ones to reshape, and how to steer the conversation away from Mark and from my so-called career.

The door burst open before my finger hit the bell.

"Well, look who finally decided to grace us with her presence. Come on in June, we're all waiting for you, we can't start without the whole family present," my mom said.

"Hi mom, sorry, traffic was a nightmare."

We gathered in my parents' wooded garden, surrounded by commanding Douglas firs, the air thick with the mingled fragrances of freshly mown grass and the smoke from the barbecue my father had manned. I exchanged polite, practiced greetings with Eric and Michael, my older brothers. Eric, the lawyer, all sharp angles and crisp shirt collars, barely offering more than a nod. Michael, the director of a PR agency, with his polished smile that never quite reached his eyes, gave me a quick, almost mechanical hug. I caught myself thinking "phony," just like every time we met.

We first talked about the weather. Eric remarked on the increasingly routine heatwave while Michael offered a few comments about the Pacific winds, their voices measured and calm, as if venturing too far from the script might reveal something none of us wanted to see. As my parents joined we shifted to gossip about the neighbors, the usual talk about who had sold their house, who had bought a new car, who was seen with someone they shouldn't have been.

The conversation inevitably turned to me, with the

familiar questions about my academic ambitions. My father asked how the search for a tenure-track position was going, his voice carrying that mix of concern and quiet disappointment. Michael chimed in with platitudes about how competitive the market is according to what he had read online. My mother added her usual reassurances as she failed to hide her skepticism.

I was somehow relieved that that discussion came sooner rather than later, and in the first pause I casually brought up the string of robberies I'd heard were happening in my parents' neighborhood—I knew they owned valuables worth as much as their mansion. They took the bait, and soon my father was speaking with a furrowed brow, his concern palpable as he discussed the need for better security, surveillance cameras, motion sensors and all. Michael, ever the salesman, suggested an AI-based system that a friend of his created, while Eric offered legal tidbits about trespassing laws and Oregon's castle doctrine.

As I silently congratulated myself for predicting their every response, I heard a sudden roar from above, that wrenched our gaze skyward. A large airliner loomed, angling downward as if seeking an airstrip that never was. Its size and twin engines made it likely a Boeing 777, but I couldn't be certain—and at that moment it was the least of my worries. Everybody stopped talking.

The plane grew nearer and louder and we saw a burst of flame from one engine, then from the other, spreading to the wings and fuselage until the entire vessel was ablaze. The sky seemed to tear apart as the airborne furnace met the earth in a deafening blast. Grey and black smoke billowed upward and we stood there, eyes wide and wordless, questioning what we had done or said to call forth such a reckoning.

“Jesus Fucking Christ!” uttered my father, with all of us now standing up.

We struggled to catch our breath, still gazing at the sky, as if some malevolent djinn compelled us to witness the rest of the performance. It didn’t disappoint. Less than twenty seconds after the crash, pale blue light rays emerged from far away, like an unseen spider weaving her web across the heavens toward us, each thread shimmering with a deadly intent. The tips of those silken strands ignited into sparks, honing in on us like laser-guided missiles. It lasted less than five seconds before I felt the overwhelming heat and blinding light of the hostile azure beams swallowing

Day 2

When I woke up the ceiling of my bedroom had taken the place of the menacing skies, the clock showed half past twelve, and Mark was fast asleep. Just a bad dream, I reassured myself, yet it clung to me unlike any bad dream; every detail, every scent, every emotion persisted and the brightness in my eyes that slowly faded felt like the afterimage of that last glimpse of the garden.

I nudged Mark awake with a perfunctory kiss, knowing I probably seemed more alert and troubled than usual as I recounted the dream. He asked if I was alright and pulled me into a gentle embrace. I thanked him for his kindness and reminded him that I had to rush off to the family lunch. He knew all too well how my family could be and nodded. I kissed him again, but this time I made sure it mattered.

As I swung open the door, Plum let out a sharp meow—I hoped he’d remember to feed her before heading to work, but didn’t feel like bothering him further.

I texted my mom as soon as I sat in my car, letting her

know I might be a couple minutes late. More than a déjà vu it felt like yesterday all over again. I told myself I'd been hallucinating and that perhaps the sushi from last night wasn't the freshest.

I reached my parents' almost on time and the welcome was definitely warmer. But they must have sensed something was off, as even Eric asked me if I was okay after I fell silent for a few seconds when their greetings mirrored exactly theirs of "yesterday." I brushed it off and politely told them not to worry, that I'd just been buried in work all week with little sleep.

Then came the talk about the weather, eerily similar to that I'd already heard, and dread settled as I questioned my sanity. It felt so unsettling that I chose to break the cycle myself, initiating the conversation about my job search. I mentioned applying to NYU, Austin, and even to some European universities, adding that yes, Mark would follow me.

Strangely, their judgment didn't rattle me as much as their words matching those from my dream, or whatever that was. No way one could have such foresight, least of all me. I tried to relax as my dad brought out a plate of brisket and pork ribs, and I asked Michael to grab me a beer while he was heading into the house to get one for himself.

"Sure June, you got it." He returned my smile in a way that for once didn't look fake. More than ten minutes passed and Michael hadn't returned. I offered to walk the fifty yards from our garden table to the house, more concerned about my beer than for him. I stepped through the open window door into the living room, the air inside unnervingly cool, then walked past the dining table and turned into the corridor leading to the kitchen. I froze when I saw him.

The scream tore from my lungs before I could register

what I was seeing. Michael's body lay crumpled on the desolate white kitchen tiles, his blood spreading in a dark, glistening pool around his neck. His throat was slashed, the flesh yawning open in a gruesome wound exposing the raw tissue beneath. I didn't think and couldn't move. My scream seemed endless, echoing off the walls as if the house itself were crying out in horror.

They must have heard me, my family and... them. My mom was the first to rush in.

"June, what happened?!" she shouted, her voice sharp with panic and not without accusation.

I turned away from Michael's mutilated body to face her, and that's when she screamed too. It wasn't for me though, rather for what was behind me, and her overdone face exploded in a spray of blood and bone, the blast from the shotgun filling the room. I spun around in shock, and there he was: a hulking figure, black gloves gripping the shotgun, the barrel still smoking, a cartridge belt strapped across his chest, a handgun in a shoulder holster. But it was his smile that truly chilled my blood; a small, almost gentle curve of the lips, so out of place on that frightening face. He looked at me, his shotgun still pointing in our direction, and with the disconcerting calm of a madman asked "who will open the safe?", as if asking for the time.

Eric and my dad stood frozen in the doorway maybe five feet behind me, their faces bloodless, eyes wide with terror. My dad's voice trembled as he stammered, "I can."

"I asked who will, not who can," he replied to my dad with a warm and measured voice, as he turned his attention to me. I barely noticed the double barrel shift before it was aimed at my eyes. The last thing I saw was the blinding flash of the muzzle, an unholy white light that consumed everything.

Day 3

I opened my eyes, the familiar ceiling coming into focus as I gasped for breath. Mark lay peacefully beside me, his soft breathing the only sound in the stillness. I reached out instinctively, touching his arm to ground myself in the reality of the moment, but it did nothing to quell the gnawing dread in my gut. I could still see that chilling smile, could still hear that voice.

It was all too real—the blood, the screams, the horror. The truth of my predicament started to form, and a cold sweat broke out across my skin. Could I be stuck in a loop, reliving the same day over and over like in that movie? A day repeating endlessly, beyond death's power to stop.

After the panic and tears, a strange calm eventually settled over me. Maybe I should stop trying to fight it, stop trying to make sense of it. If nothing I do will have consequences, then why not enjoy it? Why not do what I want for once, without worrying about what comes next? What's the point in holding back when tomorrow won't remember today? I felt a small, almost wicked smile tug at the corners of my mouth.

Collecting myself, I moved closer to him, my fingers delicately grazing his body and tracing a slow path from his forearm to his lips, until he softly stirred from sleep. Without a word, I began to kiss him, sliding my hand behind his head, letting my nails lightly scrape against his neck, then down to his hips. He didn't resist, and without breaking the kiss, he pulled me on top of him, face to face. Our gazes locked, and in that instant the world around us faded, his eyes darkened with raw hunger, and I knew mine mirrored the same. I reminded myself that whatever I did, he wouldn't remember it the next day, and that realiza-

tion sent a thrilling shiver through me. What I did next and the words I said ignited something in both of us, and I surrendered myself completely, more than I ever had before—so much so that I noticed a hint of worry in his eyes.

When I finally glanced at the clock, it was two in the afternoon. The phone lay discarded across the room, and reality seeped back in as I noticed faint traces of blood on our white sheets—my nails had marked him—reminding me of Michael's fate.

Mark had to head back home to work for his IT company, alerted by a sudden "security incident," leaving me alone with my thoughts about how bad today will end. I called my best friend, Alicia, who at twenty-seven was slightly younger than me but often proved far wiser.

"Hey, can we meet at the beach?" I asked right as she picked up.

"June? Everything okay?"

"What do you think?"

"Okay, usual spot? I need like thirty minutes to finish up here."

"Yeah that works, thanks. See you."

That meeting place was on our town's beach, a serene place often untouched bar for the occasional dog walker or lone runner. There was something about that spot, a sense of isolation, as if it were a world apart where the usual rules didn't quite apply.

After parking near the rocky outcrop that guarded the beach, I made my way down the narrow trail toward our favorite area, a secluded perch atop a patch of weathered stones worn smooth by time's hand. From this vantage we could behold the entire sweep of the shore, from the jagged northern cliffs to the south where reassuring hills lay bare,

save for the lone fishermen's cabins, the only signs of life amidst the ageless landscape.

I arrived first, pulled my towel from my bag and spread it over the sun-warmed stones. There I sat waiting for Alicia, letting my confusion evaporate as I absently contemplated the scene before me. The gentle waves lapped at the sandy shore with a quiet reverence, mindful not to disturb the stillness of the place. Rocks the size of a small house were scattered across stood like sentinels, offering havens for secretive encounters or just to escape the sun's gaze. No one else in sight.

After what felt like a minute, Alicia's silhouette emerged. She sat beside me, and opened a small box of chocolates as if nothing was amiss. A brief exchange of greetings followed before I admitted to feeling out of sorts, though I didn't dare elaborate about the preposterous past few days.

"Alicia, if this was all a dream, how would we even know?"

"What?"

"You know..." I grabbed a handful of sand and let it slip through my fingers. "Like, how do we know what's real?"

"June, you're freaking me out. What's going on?"

"What if you're in someone else's dream? How would you know?"

She chuckled, but there was an edge to it. "Girl, are you high? Dreams are dreams, they're all in your head. I'm sorry to break it to you, but this is all real." And she tossed another chocolate into her mouth, seemingly unfazed.

"Sorry, I'm so lost. Nothing makes sense anymore. If this isn't a dream then what's happening to me?" My voice cracked and tears started flowing. Alicia pulled me into her comforting arms.

But then her voice shifted, a cold undertone I'd never heard from her before. "Are you sure you did everything right?"

"What?"

"That day.. are you sure you did everything right?" she repeated. I could feel her arm pressing harder against my neck, cutting off my air. Panic surged through me as I realized she wasn't letting go. Oh well, guess this is how I die today, I thought. But her words echoed in my mind, and I screamed "Alicia, stop!" as I wrestled free from her restraint.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I gasped, backing away, while she just stared at me, her eyes wide with confusion, as if she had no memory of what had just happened.

I rushed back to my car and drove home in the deserted streets, speeding through with reckless abandon, disregarding red lights and traffic signs—if I died I'd just wake up again like some twisted resurrection.

I made it home safely, so to speak. Plum greeted me at the door with a satisfied look, but the familiar sight was of little comfort. An insatiable thirst and hunger hit me, as though that beach journey had drained all of my energy. My body propelled me to the kitchen, where I gulped water straight from the tap and tore into the stale bread left over from last night's dinner with Mark. Plum watched from the doorway as if she were observing a ritual she had witnessed countless times.

"You must be starving too," I murmured, fumbling for her food and bowl. The moment Plum's first bite hit her bowl, something shifted, and a blurry image started to flicker on my kitchen's white wall: the plane on fire just as I'd seen it from my parents' garden. I could feel the flames licking at my skin, fierce and overwhelming. But just as

suddenly the image dissolved, leaving behind an unbearable coldness that drained the last remnants of life inside me, leaving me hollow and weak. Plum squinted at me as she devoured her catfood.

I staggered toward the bedroom, each step a struggle, my hands grasping at walls and door handles for support. Finally, I collapsed onto the bed, surrendering to the exhaustion.

Day 4

My phone's alarm jolted me from sleep and I found myself sprawled in the middle of the bed, still fully dressed, alone. The early morning sun streamed through the unclosed blinds, its harsh light dragging me into consciousness. It felt as though I had slept for a year, yet when I checked the date, it was Monday—the start of another workweek. The time to head to the office had already come and gone, but I had something to do before I left.

Cupcake

Now

I love these workless weekday mornings where after a mere moment of guilt you feel like the world has forgotten you, and maybe that's just fine. Right now it's just me and a cup of tea and my drifting thoughts. It's 9am, the streets are waking, Mark just left—his first business trip since moving in. He was late, not entirely by accident, and I doubt he minded. Gone for three days in New York and I wonder if he's still thinking about me as he's racing down to the regional airport in North Bend. Either way, I hope he makes his flight.

I'm sitting here in our cramped kitchen that barely fits us both when we cook, facing the westward window watching the morning fog roll in. Plum is by the counter, her ritual of robot-dispensed catfood filling the room with the only sound besides the whisper of wind. The air is starting to feel colder in the mornings, winter steadily creeping in.

Life's good, I reckon, plus I've just been accepted as an

assistant professor at NYU. Three grueling rounds of interviews with the faculty members before they chose me, much to my surprise. I'm not gonna lie, it felt great and was a huge relief—the academic game being so tough and unfair—however there's a faint disappointment; Berkeley was my top choice, the pull of California, where I belong. But you can't be too picky.

Anyway these aren't the universities I want to talk about. I want to tell you about my alma mater, Stanford. About what happened two months ago. Amber. Paul. Professor Kagami. The cupcake. It sounds harmless enough, but there's something to that story I can't shake, and putting it into words might help deal with it.

Then

It was one of these alumni reunions where old faces gather to reminisce about the years that had supposedly shaped them and to pretend they all liked each other back then. Now scattered across the country, we'd partake in a day of forced camaraderie in one of Stanford's conference rooms. Some of us would give short talks about our lives and work and guest speakers would deliver keynotes to open and close the event. I'd been invited to speak after my acclaimed PhD thesis completed here. Fitting, I guess, that the reunion was in Pigott Hall, where I'd spent more time than anywhere else on campus.

The Uber pulled up to the Stanford campus and dropped me at the visitor center's parking lot. A familiar tug stirred my chest as I walked towards our meeting place, taking a short detour by the iconic Oval. I hadn't been back in three years and the place hadn't changed; the imposing sandstone buildings, not unlike classical Spanish religious

edifices, loomed over the landscape like monuments to a past I hadn't fully left behind—the warm tones and red-tiled roofs conjured memories of nights of reading, writing, endless lectures, and stolen glances across classrooms that once meant everything.

I arrived at Pigott Hall's front entrance, my modest heels clicking against the stone paths. I'd spent years here—first as a master's student then as a doctoral candidate. My PhD on Flannery O'Connor had consumed my time, my thoughts, my very identity. And here I was again, heading to Room 252, where so many of my ideas had taken root, where I'd argued over literary theories and scribbled down half-formed thoughts that seemed so important then.

The glass doors reflected my image as I approached. I looked perceptibly older, yes, but still familiar: untied dark hair, confident smile, minimal make-up, beige silk scarf, and a sleek cobalt blue dress I'd dug out of the closet for the occasion. I stopped for a moment stared at myself, the time contracting as if my last visit three years ago had been yesterday. With a deep breath I pushed open the doors and stepped inside. Time hadn't stopped here but it felt like it had. And I wasn't sure if I was ready for whatever was next.

The Reunion

Room 252 was just down the hallway where the reunion banners hung, large and formal. I stepped through its doors. Only about twenty people in the back of the room had clustered in small groups, chatting near buffet tables offering breakfast food and beverages. The murmur of conversation and the clinking of coffee cups felt distant for a moment. I walked towards the coffee machines without looking at anything or anyone in particular, getting ready to

mingle and casually hoping I wouldn't have forgotten their names.

And then I saw Amber. She hadn't changed. Mid-length red hair falling just past her shoulders, impeccably styled, a refined look that could be described as classically British, though she hailed from Boston. Amber had always been more than a friend to me. She was my confidante, the one I could trust with almost everything, personal struggles or academic pressures. Our conversations were richer than with anyone else. I had introduced her to Flannery O'Connor's Southern Gothic world while she had opened my eyes to Carson McCullers, weaving her complex emotional landscapes into our talks.

Without hesitation I crossed the room and we hugged like no time had passed at all.

"June! How have you been?" Her smile was as warm as I remembered.

"I'm good! So great to see you. How's Chicago treating you?"

We chatted for a few minutes to catch up on her new life and my academic applications. But as we spoke I felt a craving for sugar and caffeine. "I'm just gonna grab a coffee," I said, glancing at the table. "I'll be right back."

I made my way to the cappuccino machine and awaited it to finish its laborious and noisy work to return to Amber. But then I heard that voice.

"Hi, June."

Paul. The man who had been more than a lover, less than a partner, and too complicated to sum up in one word. Physically fit as ever, looking full of energy, and that smile I'd tried to forget. I turned to face him, trying to keep my cool.

Cupcake

“Oh, Paul,” my voice steadier than I felt. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Yeah, well, couldn’t miss it, could I?”

As we exchanged the obligatory where-are-you-nows I became suddenly aware of how close he was standing and how his presence made the air around me feel too thick. He hadn’t changed, not really. Same intensity. And he was flirting, or at least it felt like he was, the way he looked at me. I glanced around the room to locate Amber but the crowd had gotten denser and I couldn’t spot her.

In an effort to move away from Paul, I reached for a cupcake from the table, holding its soft base through the pleated crimson wrapper. I stared at it for a moment, intrigued by the Stanford logo piece placed atop the white frosting. I wondered if it was edible as it looked more like plastic than sugar.

And then as I turned to face Paul and before either of us could speak, the cupcake slipped from my fingers and landed sadly between us. Paul instinctively bent down to retrieve it. But as he straightened, his elbow swung wide, catching the man beside him. I saw a coffee cup sailing through the air. I saw its dark content splattering across a white shirt. And I heard a sharp “Shimata!”

The wearer of the shirt was an Asian-looking man with metal-rimmed glasses and thinning gray hair, black pants and shiny leather shoes, his serious demeanor at odds with the coffee dripping from his once immaculate shirt. His movements were controlled and methodical as he dabbed at the stain with a napkin, more concerned with maintaining his composure than the actual mess.

“This is... a problem, a big problem...” he said.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” said Paul as he helplessly stared at the stain, unsure what to do.

"I have a keynote to give," the man said, "I can't wear this. What a shame."

"When's your talk?"

"This afternoon, but not like this."

"I'm really sorry, we'll find a solution..." Paul looked at me, making it clear that I was part of the "we."

I actually had an idea. I might even be able to kill two birds with this plan. "Sir, how about I walk with you to the visitor center? I can buy you something to wear there."

He raised an eyebrow, assessing me through his rectangular glasses. "If they have anything more suitable than coffee-stained shirt, it's probably worth a try."

After more apologies from Paul, I insisted he stay, already feeling the heat of his presence. I walked out of Pigott Hall with the stranger, this professor type I had never met before. As we passed Room 252's door northern exit door, I told myself I'd use to walk to learn a bit more about him.

The Walk

We stepped outside, pausing for a few moments to breathe fresh air and let our eyes adjust to the crisp clarity of the cloudless autumn sky. The plane trees, still holding onto their yellow-brown leaves, blended with the warm sandstone walls. I found myself tempted to stay outside all day rather than be trapped in a conference room enduring tedious talks.

We started down the familiar northbound path through the central campus buildings, and I broke the silence first.

"I'm really sorry about that."

"About what?"

"You know, it was my fault, the cupcake and all."

“What do you mean?”

“I’m the one who dropped the cupcake that my... friend picked up before he bumped into you.”

“Ah...,” he nodded politely. “But it’s not your fault they had cupcakes on the table, should we blame the caterers? Cupcakes can be dangerous.”

“That’s true,” I replied, unsure if he was serious or joking. “Cupcakes aren’t exactly easy to handle.”

“Exactly. Who invented cupcakes anyway? They are responsible too.”

“Turtles all the way down, I guess,” I said, half-laughing.

“Turtles?” He glanced at me. As a foreigner he spoke pretty good English though with a marked Japanese accent, but perhaps he wasn’t familiar with the idiom.

“You know... infinite regress, every event can be described as the consequence of previous events, which in turn are the consequences of previous events, and so on and so forth.”

“Ah... yes, infinite regress, in-fi-nite regress...” He repeated the words slowly, almost thoughtfully, as if savoring a familiar concept.

We walked a little further, and I pointed out Rodin’s sculptures, the Burghers of Calais. I briefly recounted the story behind it—six men sacrificing themselves for their city.

“Sad, very sad,” he murmured, staring at the bronze figures, his eyes distant. Something about the way he said it kept floating in the air, like a half-formed thought.

After a pause, I realized I hadn’t introduced myself. “Oh, by the way, I’m June. June Glanton. I studied English literature here at Stanford.”

“Nice to meet you Ms. Glanton. My name is Kagami, I’m professor of physics at Tokyo University.”

“It’s a pleasure, Professor Kagami. So, I assume we’ll be hearing some physics in your talk?”

“Quantum physics, yes. My research focuses on quantum error correction. It’s crucial, you see, if we could solve that we could simulate every quantum phenomenon, everything that happens in Nature, without needing to solve Schrödinger equations.”

I could sense his excitement, but I knew that if I let him continue I’d be lost in the technical details. “Ah, quantum physics,” I interrupted, hoping to redirect the conversation. “You must get tired of all the pop culture references, multi-verse and whatnot.”

He shrugged slightly, a small smile at the corner of his mouth. “It’s fine. People know it’s fiction, fantasy, not real science.”

“You’d be surprised...” I replied, remembering the story of that teenager injecting mercury into his body to become an X-men.

Kagami looked thoughtful for a moment. “I think, the problem is not when people don’t know science, it’s when they think they do. They believe they understand when they do not.”

“Right? Some even perceive science as a belief system, like religion.”

“Precisely,” he said quietly, his voice taking on a reflective tone.

“And that’s the danger. The line between fantasy and reality becomes blurred, sometimes even for us scientists.”

“Do you see that often in your field?”

“Quite a bit yes, many scientists build careers in comfortable illusions. This is fine if you acknowledge that it’s an imaginary world. The risk is to develop a worldview disconnected from physical reality. We scientists use

fantasies all the times... what we call models, and we say all models are wrong, but some models are useful, because we know they don't fully reflect reality. I assume you've heard about string theory..."

He paused for a bit, thinking, and continued.

"The point of science is to test your ideas—your theories—against reality, and if it fails then you adapt your understanding. But to do that you must know what reality is... and how do you know that something or someone is real?"

I was about to respond when a wave of unease hit me—the memory of the plane, the blood, the beach with Alicia. My steps faltered as we neared the roundabout by the visitor center. I regained my composure and pointed Kagami toward the entrance. We walked inside and found ourselves surrounded by shelves of Stanford swag and a few wandering visitors.

As the professor was browsing through the t-shirts and polos, I checked my phone for messages from Mark. He had made the trip with me from Oregon, and we were staying at a friend's place in Palo Alto fifteen minutes from campus. I smiled at the thought of seeing him later today. I read his texts and tapped out a quick reply, added a few suitable emojis, and looked up to find Kagami-sensei.

I walked to the far end of the store, scanning the rows of clothes. He was nowhere to be found. I asked one of the staff but they hadn't seen any professor-looking Japanese man.

My first thought was that maybe he had left out of courtesy, out of some sense of Japanese politeness and honor. But that was still weird, and I felt something was off. I told myself he must have headed back to the reunion without me, and I quickened my pace as I left the store, taking the direct route back to Pigott Hall.

I walked half a mile south from the visitor center, the straight street stretching ahead. Just as I was about to turn right—Pigot Hall waiting just around the corner—I noticed a dog across the street. A yellow dog, probably a Labrador, or another kind of dog, a yellow medium-sized dog. His stance was friendly but held a mischievous edge, his tail wagging in an unusually slow and irregular rhythm. I stared at the dog and he stared at me and then he barked and trotted away.

The Return

Back in Room 252, the attendees were mingling during a break between talks. I scanned the room and searched for Kagami but he was nowhere in sight. The tables were cluttered with the remnants of coffee cups and pastries, the low murmur of academic banter floating in the air. I moved through the clusters of people, avoiding eye contact, my mind spinning with questions.

I finally spotted Amber. Relieved, I headed straight toward her. She was flipping through the program pamphlet, a smile breaking as she saw me approach.

“Hey June! You disappeared for a while. Everything okay?”

“I was with the keynote speaker,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “Professor Kagami. But then he just... vanished.”

Amber frowned. “Kagami? There’s no Kagami as a keynote speaker.”

She handed me the program, and my heart sank as I reached the section listing the keynote speakers: “Closing Keynote Speaker: Retired U.S. Army General Harold

Curtis.” Most likely a talk about leadership and crisis management. No quantum physics. No Kagami.

My heart raced as I stared at the name. “But I spoke with him. I walked with him to the visitor center. He was very clear about being the keynote speaker.”

Amber gave me a concerned look. “June, are you sure? Maybe you misunderstood what he said? If he’s Japanese maybe something got lost in translation, maybe he’s here for another reason.”

“No, I didn’t misunderstand,” I said, my voice trembling. “He was very clear, Amber. He said he was giving the keynote.”

“Well maybe he was trying to impress you...” she said with a smile.

“No it was totally not that.”

Amber’s expression softened, but there was concern in her eyes. “June, I believe you met him. But the keynote part... it doesn’t add up.”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I spotted Paul at the far end of the room, laughing with a group of alumnis. I excused myself and hurried over to him.

“Paul,” I said, grabbing his arm. “Have you seen Kagami?”

“Kag-a-who?”

“The Japanese professor of this morning, the one you bumped into.”

Paul looked at me, confusion clouding his face. “What are you talking about? You left abruptly after we started talking. I couldn’t find you later so I left a note to Amber. Are you okay?”

I stared at him, feeling the ground shift beneath me. He didn’t remember. I swallowed, a tremor working its way through my body. I asked if he was kidding but neither him

nor anyone around had any recollection of the coffee incident, let alone of Kagami.

"I... I don't feel okay, sorry," I whispered, my voice cracking, as I looked for the nearest exit. On my way I took a peek at the buffet tables: varied danishes, croissants, fruit, but no cupcakes.

Once outside, I pulled out my phone and quickly called Mark. The phone rang twice before he picked up.

"June? Everything okay?"

"Mark, can you pick me up? Please. I'm not feeling well. Something's wrong."

"Sure, coming right now."

Home

Mark had asked a few questions in the car but I could barely string together an answer. And I didn't want to strike him as going crazy again. All I wanted was rest. Once home I took off my scarf and my shoes and headed to the living room, Mark following me, his voice soft behind me.

"Honey do you need anything?"

"No, thank you, I just need to relax I guess," I said while sinking into the couch.

But before I could get lost in my thoughts, Mark came closer. I felt his breath warm against my neck as he leaned in. "It'll be alright," he whispered, his reassuring hands on my shoulders. The familiar touch sent a shiver through me, a comfort I hadn't realized I needed.

He embraced me gently, his chin resting on my shoulder, conjuring a smile to my face. I took his hand and placed it on my waist, feeling grounded by his touch. He pulled me closer, and I felt the tension in my shoulders begin to melt

away. For a moment, I let myself sink into the feeling of safety and warmth that his presence always brought.

Then Paul's face surfaced in my mind and I felt a flash of guilt—I imagined his hands on me instead, and the thought almost made me forget where I was. But just as quickly, Kagami's face crept in. His calm voice, his non-keynote, his sudden disappearance. A chill went through me.

I pulled away, feeling the warmth disappear. "I'm sorry," I whispered, my voice tight. "I need a glass of water." Mark's fingers lingered on my back for a moment before he stepped away, headed to the kitchen.

As the water flowed from the sink I heard "What's this?"

I turned and saw him an envelope in Mark's hands.

"Where did you find that?" I had not idea what that was about.

"It was sticking out of your purse."

I started to suspect that Paul had left me the envelope. Whatever it contained, I knew Mark wouldn't approve.

I stood up and reached for the envelope from Mark. I turned slightly so that he couldn't see what was inside, but not far enough to raise suspicion.

Inside the envelope I found a sheet of fine, high-quality paper, flawlessly folded. I unfolded it, half-expecting Paul's handwriting to appear. But it wasn't from him. Instead, staring back at me in delicate black ink calligraphy, each stroke meticulously crafted, was this:

カップケーキ.

Now

If you can read Japanese katakanas you'll have deciphered that line as "kappu kēki." Yes, it means what you think it means, cupcake.

Ever since the incident I've ruminated over what this Professor Kagami—or whatever he truly was—had said to me, and what he'd been trying to tell me, trying to make sense of it. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that some things simply resist explanation. There's just no sense to be made out of anything if your rules of logic are broken and your very definition of reality falls apart. If I can't explain it then I won't, and I won't let Kagami ruin any more of my days.

Now I need to get going. Mark's boarded his flight, and I should start packing for New York.

Tower

Part I

*The street – A duel – A rocket – The daggerist – Groceries –
A ladder*

The man woke in the street under a dark and starless sky, a cold drizzle falling onto his face. He lay unaware of what brought him there. His mind was blank save for two fleeting images at the edge of his consciousness—a woman's face, the giggle of a child—blurred like a watercolor left in the rain. He stirred, sat up, his back ached from the discomfort of the cobbled street. Rivulets of murky water flowed between the cobblestones and dark red stains stuck to the stones and into their interstices, a bloody tapestry whose crafters were nowhere to be seen.

He stood up, adjusted his worn brownish leather jacket and tightened his black chino pants. The street stretched before him, a river of stone flowing uphill, surrounded by contiguous buildings with closed shops below and unlit

windows above. Lampposts offered a timid, shaky glow that could be from fire or electricity. The dusky grey brick buildings rose two or three stories high, their facades darkened by coal smoke, their ground-level shops bearing names in foreign syllables. This was the old town of some Central European city in a time that appeared older than current—no familiar international brands, no fast-food chains.

He started walking. In the distance, plumes of smoke rose, backlit by the flickering glow of fires. He heard distant shouts. Now standing about two hundred meters from where he woke up, a sound cut through the patter of rain behind him—the harsh caw of a crow. The man turned and found a bird perched on a nearby lamppost. It was the shape and the size of a crow but its feathers were white as bone. For a moment the animal and the man regarded each other as in frozen in mutual incomprehension. The crow then took flight, soaring up the incline of the street towards the firelight.

The man slowly moved in the crow's direction, surrounded by rows of buildings uninterrupted by any street or alley across. Further up the street, barely visible through the rain and gloom, stood two men. He approached until he could discern their faces and comprehend their mirthless shouts. Their stained brown coats were hanging heavy with rain, their beards were wild and unkempt, and each held a long hunting gun whose barrels glinted in the light of an ignited trashcan.

They faced each other in a mockery of a duel. One man's shouts rose to a climax, and in that moment his companion raised his weapon and fired at him. The man, observing from afar, saw blood spilling out of the bullet-wound chest, which for a heartbeat remained upright and then crumpled onto the cobblestones. The shooter stood

over his fallen victim, maniacally guffawing. The detonation from the other's shotgun interrupted the soulless laughter as the slug obliterated his face, his headless shape grotesquely falling onto his lifeless comrade.

The man pressed on, still shaken when he passed the corpses lying in a pond of blood and rainwater—the sheer brutality of the scene and the sense of mutual annihilation resonated with a disturbing familiarity.

As he observed the heavier raindrops slicing through the air in perfect vertical lines, an agitated shape drew his attention up the street. It was the size of a dog and racing in his direction. He thought of grabbing one of the shotguns but the panicked beast tore past him, ignoring him, its matted fur leaving a trail of water in its wake. The man turned to watch it disappear into the gloom downhill, wondering what could drive an animal to such frenzy.

An answer came in the distinctive whoosh of a rocket-propelled grenade cutting through the night, then the thunder of the blast. The left side of the street erupted in yellow-white light, turning the small bookshop into debris of glass, wood, and torn pages. Dust and smoke billowed, thick and acrid, stinging his eyes and catching in his throat. He looked back down the street, then up at the buildings, but the shooter was nowhere to be seen.

The impact had ignited fires that quickly spread to the whole premises. The flames took quick to the wreckage, crackling and hissing as they spread. The air tasted of burning paper, hot metal, and something else—something chemical and unnatural that turned his stomach. He stood less than twenty meters from the ruin, the heat pressing on

his skin, a blistering wall that seemed to warp the air. He raised his hand to shield his eyes from the blaze.

As he lowered his arm, he saw her.

She emerged from the smoke like a vengeful spirit, shuffling towards him maybe thirty meters away. Her hair, black and straight as a razor's edge, framed a face of porcelain beauty. Her eyes, one weeping dark blood, the other wild with an inhuman gleam, locked onto the man with terrifying intensity. He found himself rooted to the spot, transfixed by her ravaged gaze.

In her hand, a curved dagger reflected the firelight. The curvature of the blade lead to a fine lethal tip and the silver guard featured wing-like curves menacingly extending outward, as deadly and stunning as the daggerholder.

She approached, her movements a fusion of jerky spasms and predatory grace. The curved dagger in her hand traced hypnotic arcs through the rain-soaked air—right to left, left to right—like a ritual dance of impending sacrifice.

He could have run, but a primal force within him demanded he confront her. As she closed the distance, now almost within arm's reach, he dodged her attacks in a calculated backstep, his mind racing to discern the pattern in the blade's swings. Mute until now, she let out a short piercing scream, her lips curling into a wicked smile, her eyes wide open. She raised her arm again, but he lunged forward, his right hand shot to her throat while the other hand clamped onto her forearm, crushing and twisting her wrist until the dagger clattered onto the wet cobblestones.

He drove her backwards, slamming her to the ground, and snatched up the fallen blade. In that moment, she sprang at him, but in one fluid motion he slashed in a wide arc, not unlike a samurai unsheathing. The dagger bit deep, cutting her throat in a spray of crimson that mingled with

the rain. The counterattack had been effortless, his body seeming to operate beyond conscious control, as if this world was protecting him and hiding unpleasant truths.

He studied her lifeless countenance, the thin carmine lips like a wound across alabaster, her black hair heavy with rainwater. Something broke in him then, and he wept without sound or shame. He took off his jacket, still warm with his living heat, and draped it over her like a final benediction. He trudged onward, clutching the purloined weapon like a talisman against the encroaching dark.

For three long minutes he walked undisturbed, while ahead tendrils of smoke writhed like harbingers of some nameless calamity to come. A gutted car stood nearby to his left, its chassis consumed by fire. To his right loomed a vandalized grocery, windows gaping like broken teeth, shelves spilled across the floor in a jumble of commercial detritus. Stepping inside, he saw the mutilated bodies of men and women lying sprawled in macabre tableaux in every aisle. This soundless installation, save for the metronomic patter of indifferent rain, arrested him—what malevolent ceremony had birthed such carnage?

Revulsion churned in his gut as he edged deeper into the ransacked store. Near the cashier's corpse, racks still stood stocked with sundries. He grabbed a bottle of water and chocolate bars, then hurriedly retreated, the dead's eyes observing his escape.

He caught sight of a towery edifice piercing the smoky sky. The renaissance-looking structure stood adjacent to an imposing building wider than tall, the kind that could have

been a concert hall, the man thought. The street was steeper and narrower, the lampposts sparser, the facades turning from darkened stone to pale ochre brick, punctuated by wrought-iron balconies and wide arched windows.

Seized by an urge to reach the tower, he secured the dagger in the side belt loops of his pants and started jogging uphill, being careful to the slippery stones and broken glass. He slowed down to look around when he heard the clicks of windows and doors opening around him. He could see shadows coming out of the buildings, maybe a dozen looking at him as to tell him something he could not hear. They all started running towards him, wearing ragged clothes, threadbare and torn, as if they had been hiding for years. Their voices rose in a chaotic roar, guttural shouts and cries in an unintelligible tongue.

His heart pounded as he broke into a sprint, the uneven ground shifting beneath his feet, the tower's dark silhouette straight ahead. Their footsteps echoed louder, growing closer. The stones underfoot were slick with rain or blood, he couldn't tell, and his boots slipped, nearly sending him sprawling. A woman's voice cut through the others, sharp and furious, but he didn't look back. The tower was all that mattered now, its base drawing nearer with every step, the only chance he had to escape the mob that hunted him.

He reached the tower's base, where a rusted ladder scaled the building's face. After speedily checking its steadiness, he grasped the corroded rungs, the metal bitter and cold against his palms, and began to climb. Halfway up, he chanced a glance earthward. His pursuers swarmed at the tower's foot and one by one latched onto the ladder, beginning their ascent like a legion of damned souls. A silent prayer formed in his mind—let there be no one waiting above, no ambush to render his climb futile.

The wind howled around him, threatening to tear him from his precarious perch, while the horde below grew ever closer. At last, lungs burning and fingers bloodied, he hauled himself onto the tower's summit, a narrow platform that dominated the city and a neighboring building. But he had no time to appreciate the panorama; he grabbed the dagger to cut the hemp rope strings that secured the ladder steady and before they could reach him he pushed the ladder away from the tower's facade and they pathetically fell in a cacophony of screams.

Part 2

The bell – Arpeggios – Rooftiles – Fireballs – The fall

At last, a moment of respite. A bell hung above him, unnoticed until now—a massive bronze sentinel decorated with scriptures and scenes of some arcane mythology. A human-sized bird, talons gripping a writhing serpent, stood surrounded by three genuflecting figures, their adoration etched in timeless metal. The rain had stopped, the sky had cleared up, revealing a scattering of stars and the moon's last quarter, a pale sickle hanging in the vast emptiness.

Below stretched the town's patchwork, dark roofs with unlit chimneys beneath a diaphanous veil of fog, the whole encircled by a river that gleamed like a silver thread in the moonlight, its course punctuated by the skeletal shapes of bridges and footpaths.

The adjacent building's roof was a flat expanse of pale stone and gravel that offered a route away from nightmare behind. It was too low to reach by jumping but a thin rope

hung from the platform's edge, like a trap baited with hope, but where else could he go anyway.

To secure his descent, he wrapped the rope around his forearm in a double loop, mindful not to constrict his circulation, and entwined it further around the dagger's handle and guard, creating a crude but effective brake. His descent began, alternating tension on the knife handle with the pressure of the rope around his arm. It wasn't the safest method but it proved serviceable. His feet touched down on the slick surface, the pooled rainwater a mirror to the indifferent crescent above.

Now on the roof, he moved with the wariness of prey, the dark and obsidian-hued gravel crunching softly under his steps, the flat and featureless roofscape stretching before him like the landing strip of some alien aircraft. Almost halfway across this otherworldly field, he halted, arrested by an unexpected sound.

A faint, pulsing rhythm emerged from the silence, crescendo with each iteration. He cast about, seeking its source, but the music seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere, leaving him to wonder if it resided solely within the confines of his mind or if it rose from the very surface beneath his feet. The composition was minimalist, hypnotic—a Philip Glass-esque tapestry of repeating arpeggios and subtle variations.

As the ethereal melody enveloped him, his eyes drifted shut. A wave of warmth blossomed in his chest and gradually spread through his limbs. The heat wasn't unpleasant, yet he wasn't sure whether to resist it or to embrace the surreal sensation.

Suddenly, a woman's laugh pierced the melodic veil,

hearty and joyful as if somehow part of the composition itself. His eyes snapped open as he turned, catching a glimpse of flowing châtain hair and of a mischievous smile—a memory that flooded him with euphoria, his forearm tingling with the phantom sensation of a warm touch. And then, like ashes in the wind, it vanished.

The echo of her voice was still vivid in his memory and he sought to associate it with a face, a name, or even a color. But each attempt failed frustratingly close, thwarted only by an elusive fragment of recollection. Despite the confusion of his ordeal, part of him acknowledged that this was preferable to the street he'd left behind.

He shook his head and arms as if to cast off the remnants of a nightmare, and gradually regained command of his senses. The music diminished as he progressed across the roof, now drawn towards the northern edge, diametrically opposed to the campanile.

The edge of the flat roof presented a new tableau—a street stretching out below, running perpendicular to the one he'd traversed. Three or four meters down stood the roof of a house, pressed tight against the parent building. One face of the pitched roof confronted him, its mild steepness belying the treachery of its surface; a red mosaic of terracotta tiles spread before him, some cracked, others displaced, too precarious a plane for a direct jump.

In what looked like a choreographed step, he deftly turned to face the wall, lowering himself from his current refuge, fingers holding the roof's edge as he dangled and he pushed the wall away with his feet, seeking a landing that would keep him from the ochre bricks yet close enough to grasp if needed. With a whispered prayer to

whatever gods might still listen, he launched himself down.

As anticipated, the slick surface proved a faithless ally. He toppled backwards but regained his footing with feline agility and made his way towards the roof's summit.

He surveyed his circumstances from this new perch. Another pitched roof loomed ahead, silvery-grey granite slabs instead of terracotta. This was the only path forward, as the flat roof behind was too high to climb his way back.

He ventured onto the new roof, gauging the reliability of the wet granite surface. As he neared the apex, a glint caught his eye—something nestled against the chimney's weathered bricks. Drawing closer, it revealed itself: a mirror, its copper frame tarnished but its glass unmarred, reflecting the star-strewn sky. His trembling fingers grasped the cold relic, its weight somehow significant in his hands as he raised it towards his face. But as he was about to look in the mirror, the chimney beside him shuddered and a thunderous noise from below shattered the night's silence.

The fireball arced through the air like a meteor in reverse and crashed onto the flat roof he had just vacated. The granite roof was still trembling and before he could process the eruption a second conflagration followed, finding its mark on the terracotta roof. The tiles exploded into shrapnel, the wooden structure igniting and soon collapsing along with most of the roof itself.

Transfixed by the spectacle, he almost forgot the continued tremors beneath his feet and didn't notice the first fissures across the granite. The whole house seemed to groan in protest against forces it wasn't meant to withstand. The campanile's bell began to ring as if awakened by the

chaos, a sorrowful knell that seemed to announce the start of sacrificial ritual.

As the roof gave way beneath him, he clutched the mirror to his chest, a fragment of reality in a universe gone astray. The second toll of the bell coincided with his plummet through the collapsing roof. The falling sensation seemed to stretch into eternity, and the wind blowing past him had lost the scent of smoke in favor of a warmer, almost fruity perfume. When he heard the bell's third ring, he felt enveloped by the darkness around and then sound and everything vanished.

Part 3

White and emerald – Infinity – Stairway – Red door

The room was a perfect half sphere, its walls seamless white panels radiating a soft, omnipresent light. It was as if he'd awakened inside a star drained of all color save the purest. The man's eyes adjusted to a brilliance and he found himself prone on a white leather sofa, its soft touch contrasting to the desolate world he'd left behind. Among the panels, a single anomaly caught his eye, a dark spot in the luminescent cocoon—a window, or perhaps a viewscreen.

As his senses sharpened, he became aware of her presence. Across the room, a young woman was seated with regal poise on the same sofa as his. Her resplendent emerald dress, a shock in this monochromatic realm, seemed to shimmer with each subtle movement. Dark hair cascaded in gentle curls around a face that bore an expression of neutral expectancy, as if his arrival was both anticipated and incon-

sequential. "You don't have much time left," she said with the weight of prophecy.

He struggled to sit up. "Where am I?" The words felt clumsy on his tongue, as if he'd forgotten how to speak.

"I expected you," her tone neither warm nor cold. "You are where you are supposed to be. You must continue your voyage." She spoke with the cadence of a newly discovered text, motionless save for her ebony-glossed lips.

"Who are you? Are you... human?" He approached closer to her, attempting to decipher her impassive gaze.

"You, can, see me. You, can, touch me." She said, emphasizing each word. She raised her right hand, allowing the barest contact with his fingertips before letting it fall, the ghost of a smile at the corners of her mouth. "Everything, is real. Now, go," she concluded, her voice a soft command that seemed to resonate through the entire room.

He walked to the darker panel, in reality a window, and couldn't believe what he saw. Beyond the transparent barrier lay the infinite expanse of deep space, a velvet darkness punctuated by thousands of stars. They seemed close enough to touch, yet impossibly distant. Was he in a capsule fleeting in space or was it a projection of his mind or something else?

Turning back, something on the floor caught his attention. A metal ring, incongruous against the pristine white. With trembling fingers, he lifted it to reveal a hidden trapdoor. Beneath, a stairway spiraled downwards, its destination obscured.

The woman rose in one sinuous motion and crossed the room with silent steps. From seemingly nowhere she produced a torch. "Take this," she said, "The way forward is through the depths." He accepted the offering, its weight

solid and reassuring in his hand. With one last glance at the spacescape, he stepped onto the first stair.

The wooden stairs bore the scars of time and countless passages. Knots in the wood like islands in a sea of grain, edges splintered, here and there a step had split, a jagged fissure running its length like a wound poorly healed.

Memories fragments resurfaced as he spiraled down. A vision of a wooden house materialized in his mind's eye, a feeling of home washing over him. Another level down, and he saw a child, face alight with joy, bouncing on a sun-dappled trampoline.

The third landing brought a flash of golden hair catching the light, a woman turning, her bright smile, her name J... danced on the tip of his tongue, tantalizing in familiarity.

With each level the darkness around seemed to recede, as if he was ascending towards light. By the sixth and final flight, the stairwell was bathed in a warm, diffuse glow.

At the bottom, a red door stood before him, its paint vibrant against the weathered wood surrounding it. He reached out, fingers brushing the smooth surface before grasping the cool metal of the handle. He pushed it open with a deep breath.

He stepped onto polished parquet flooring, the intricate patterns instantly familiar beneath his feet. The room opened up before him to a space he knew intimately yet was seeing anew. Another staircase, this one leading down to the ground level, beckoned him onward.

The house, his, revealed itself: a cozy living room, shelves full of books, a kitchen from where the scent of

freshly baked bread hung in the air, a cat drawn to the smell, weaving between her legs.

Through a large window, he glimpsed a sun-drenched garden, wherein he saw her. She was running towards him, her face alight with emotion. Expressive green eyes brimming with tears shone beneath delicately arched brows. Her small, straight nose and full lips, curved into a smile of pure joy, gave her features a classic beauty. Dark hair cut to shoulder length caught the light as she moved. Her slender frame seemed to float across the room, propelled by an urgency that matched his own racing heart.

When she threw her arms around him, he breathed in the scent of her, solid and real and impossible. "You're back," she whispered against his neck. She pulled away just enough to search his face, her eyes brimming. "We thought we could change things..."

Beyond her, through the window, he saw a child on a swing, legs pumping, reaching for the sky with each arc. The sight tugged at his heart, a piece of himself he hadn't known was missing slotting back into place.

The weight of all he'd experienced, in this moment, all made a strange sort of sense. Her hand was warm in his, an anchor in a world gone fluid at the edges. He squeezed it gently, feeling the press of her wedding ring against his palm. "I think," he said softly, "it worked."