

Before the Sun

The rain had stopped hours ago, but the streets still glistened like molten silver. Water pooled in the seams of cobblestones, trembling whenever a stray breeze swept through the alleyways. Somewhere overhead, a single streetlamp flickered — not quite out of life, but never fully committed to staying lit. It was the kind of hour the city forgot it had, a narrow stretch of time between night's exhaustion and dawn's impatient light.

A lone cyclist drifted through the quiet. Their coat was too thin for the damp air, but the rhythm of their pedaling kept the cold at bay. The hum of the tires was steady, a soft metronome against the hollow spaces between the brick walls. Shopfronts passed in a blur — shutters down, windows black, mannequins in winter scarves staring blankly into nothing.

From somewhere far ahead came the scent of baking bread. It curled through the air like smoke from an invisible fire, warm and insistent, drawing the cyclist onward with a pull stronger than hunger. The source was a bakery on the corner of Bridge and Lanesworth — a place the cyclist had never actually visited but had passed countless times during busier hours, when the glass counter was crowded with loaves, pastries, and the soft murmurs of customers. Now, the bakery stood in quiet defiance of the sleeping city, its oven light glowing faintly through the front window like a beacon.

The cyclist's breath fogged in the air, tiny clouds swallowed by the mist that clung to the riverbank. This route had become a ritual, a small rebellion against the inertia of the everyday. Each morning, before the world fully stirred, they escaped into these half-lit streets. The city, despite its size, could still feel intimate in these moments. Silent, waiting, pregnant with possibility.

A delivery truck was parked at the curb. Its engine was off, but the warmth still radiated from its hood. The driver, a man in a navy cap, leaned against the side door sipping from a paper cup. He gave the cyclist a nod, the kind of shared acknowledgment that belongs to those awake in forbidden hours. Neither spoke; neither needed to. The night still had a hold on their words.

Somewhere, a gull cried — sharp, distant, and strangely out of place. It was too early for the birds, but perhaps the sea didn't care for clocks any more than the wind did. The cyclist turned a corner and passed the waterfront, where the tide lapped gently against weathered wood pilings. The water's surface mirrored the sky: black, rippled, and holding a promise of color yet to come. Every so often, a faint streak of orange teased the horizon, as though the sun were testing the patience of the world before committing to the day.

The air smelled of salt and damp wood, mingling with the faint aroma of engine oil and old ropes. Fishing boats lay moored, their nets bundled and waiting for the day's work to begin. A lone fisherman untangled lines, his hands moving with practiced ease despite the chill. He glanced up briefly at the cyclist, offering a tired smile that spoke of years spent reading the sea's moods.

Beyond the docks lay the market district. Empty stalls stood with their canvas awnings rolled tight, but the air already carried hints of what was to come: citrus from crates of early-arriving oranges, the faint musk of burlap sacks filled with roasted coffee beans, the tang of sea salt from the fishmonger's early catch. The cyclist slowed here, coasting between the rows, letting the scents and the slow creak of the tide weave into a tapestry of beginnings.

A street artist had set up in the corner, her easel silhouetted against the pale sky. She worked quietly, brushstrokes capturing the tentative light with a fluid grace. The cyclist paused, watching as color bled across canvas, the city transformed under her hands. Her face was tired but serene, a kind of devotion that needed no audience to be meaningful.

It was in the market's farthest corner that they found the old clock tower. The building's bricks had weathered a century of storms, its iron hands frozen at 4:12 ever since the great power outage years ago. No one had bothered to fix it — time in this part of the city seemed to run on its own rules anyway. Beneath the tower's shadow, puddles reflected not the sky but the faint glow of lanterns. Someone had left them lit overnight, their flames swaying gently in the damp air.

The cyclist stopped here. Not because they needed rest, but because some part of them understood that this was the moment — the stillness before the turning of the page. The scent of bread still lingered in the air, and the gulls were beginning to gather somewhere unseen. A distant whistle — maybe a train, maybe the wind — carried over the rooftops.

Their mind drifted as the city began to rouse. They thought of the past, the years that had blurred into one another. The choices made in the glare of day, the regrets hidden in night's quiet corners. Time, they realized, was less a river and more a spiral — sometimes looping back, sometimes rushing forward, but always moving, unstoppable.

Memories came unbidden — a childhood spent on these very streets, the laughter of friends long gone, the smell of rain on pavement after summer storms. The cyclist wondered how much of the city was inside them, and how much of themselves was scattered through the city's bones.

The first full ribbon of sunlight broke the horizon without ceremony. It slid over the water, painted the bricks, caught in the glass windows of the closed shops. The cyclist closed their eyes for a heartbeat, and when they opened them again, the city was no longer asleep.

The bakery's doors opened with a soft creak, releasing warmth and light into the morning. A bell tinkled as the first customer stepped inside, their breath a visible puff in the cool air. The fisherman readied his boat for the day's catch, the artist packed her brushes away, and the city exhaled, stretching its limbs and preparing for another day.

The cyclist turned toward home, heart lighter with the promise of new beginnings. The rain had stopped, the night had passed, and somewhere beyond the waking city, life awaited.