He opened the safe and it was gone. The black box was empty. There were no pictures of her left. Justin breathed sharply. He bolted out of their house, dashing down a series of twisting hallways, feet stomping on the wooden floors. Outside, cars and trucks scrambled in disorganized commotion. A big red bus stopped next to Justin, but he kept sprinting down the street, scrambling between light posts and people alike.

Around his eyes, tears formed and fell away into the cold wind. She filled his mind, memories flashing in a relentless loop. He could still feel her, her presence wrapping around him like a fur coat. Her devilish smirk after hearing a joke. Her smile when they stared into each other’s eyes. Her little pout when Justin teased. Even her vulnerable cries. The memory of her shook his body, leaving him gasping between each step. Memories were thorns, and there wasn’t any good to keep touching them. He did anyway because it was her.

Justin kept running as if he could run off the pain in his heart, as if he could escape her. The sun was gone, hidden beneath the layers of a gray sky. He sprinted block after block, not even bearing to stop at crosswalks. He didn’t know where he was going. It was better that way.

His calves burned, and each breath drew cold, penetrating air, burning his throat and lungs. Over and over, he brought his legs up high and pushed into the ground with his feet, propelling him forward and past his limits. She tormented him still, like she always did, like the devil on his shoulder, yet she was the sun. She always had been. He let out a pained yell.

In what felt like no time, Justin found himself in a park by the river. He’d gone there with her before. He’d gone everywhere with her before. He fell on a bench, chest heaving, covering his face with his hands. The river, just a clear shot away from Justin, reflected the grey sheet above, and a thick fog had descended, occluding the view of the city across. The trees seemed lifeless with winter’s touch upon them, leaves barely holding on.

“You look like you’ve seen better days,” a high-pitched voice rasped. Justin started and turned towards the source. An old woman sat on the other end of the bench, a bag of bird feed in her lap. She threw some out, and in a few moments, after a single bird arrived, it seemed like a whole flock was there.

“I have,” Justin responded, watching the pigeons just beyond his feet, wiping his eyes clean of tears, though the remnants remained. He waited for her to ask more. She didn’t. “My stepfather took the only pictures I had left of my wife. He’s taken everything.”

“Do you remember her?” She asked, tossing more feed.

“Too well.”

“Can you picture her?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have all you need.” The old woman’s hair was short and round. She donned a puffy white vest.

“But I need her,” Justin whispered. “Her laugh and her smile. Her.”

The park was quiet for a while. Insects hummed in low whirrs. The pigeons continued to eat at their feet, climbing over each other to get just the tiniest crumb, but most waited expectantly for the woman to throw more. She didn’t.

“My stepfather blames me for the accident.” Justin watched the river wash onto the concrete shore. Over and over, the waves came and went. “I do too. If I had –“

“No use getting into *if’s*,” she interjected. “It’ll only do harm.”

Justin bit his lip. “I don’t want to live without her.”

More feed clattered onto the ground. “She’s here with you,” the old woman rasped. She went silent for a second. “Though you cannot see it, she’s with you.”

Justin stared at the pigeons, his eyes watering, vision blurring. His heart ached, clawing at him from a thousand different angles, pulling him apart. “But I want to meet her *now*. I want to hold her in my arms again. I can’t live without her. I think of her every second, and every second without her is a reminder that she’s gone. Forever untouchable. It’s like we never met. It’s like the memories that we made are pointless now that only I remember them. I *can’t* go on.” His throat choked and hands trembled. He grasped at his hair and pulled, ignoring the pain that came with it. He wept.

At last, she spoke again. “My husband died five years ago. I wanted to join him after he died, and I still do.” She paused. “He gifted me a wonderful family, and joy and memories that I’ll never forget. He taught me like a teacher to a student. Even now, I’m still trying to figure him and our love together out. Love is the greatest puzzle, after all.” She smiled, looking towards the grey sky – the first emotion Justin had seen of her. “I’ll tell him everything sometime. For now, I live with him beside me. Living with the memory of the dead, isn’t that what we do? They leave us with gifts, and we should treasure them in their absence instead of letting them gather dust. We treasure their gifts because they can’t anymore.”

Justin thought of the way she laughed and smirked as she made a joke. Justin thought of her kindness, how she always helped in ways that Justin could never predict.

*Treasure.* Justin grimaced and slowly began to sob. Tears splattered the pavement below, dripping down his face. Justin stood and took a few steps toward the river. He could barely make out the land on the other side. Thick and motionless, the fog occluded it, but if he looked close enough, he could see vague, tall shapes slightly darker than the rest. The skyscrapers reached out of the fog and touched a blue paradise that, though Justin couldn’t see it, he knew was there. Above, the sun had cracked through the grey clouds, a few bright splashes lighting the sky again little by little. The cold wind halted for a moment. Justin closed his eyes, and the world seemed clearer.