

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Samy Oserapis

Edited by:
Khadidja Boulahbal

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams
Samy Oserapis
ISBN: 978-9931-754-17-6
legal deposit: First semester - 2019

Dromelin Publishing & Distribution
No. 01 Ibn Sina neighborhood, Beer Khadem, Algeria
Phone: (213) 0780002496 / (213) 0561391469
Email: dromelin.publishing@gmail.com
Website: www.dromelin.dz

Reproduction or storage of this book or any part of it in any system for the storage of information or any other means of publication is prohibited without the written permission of the publisher. Please do not participate in or encourage the theft of

Copyrighted material.

We appreciate your support for the rights of publishers.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This book may contain technical inaccuracies, typographical or other errors. Please excuse any errors that have escaped final proofreading.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First novels are always written in solitude, doubt, and secrecy. However, I would like to thank the unruly mentors I've learned from, both dead and alive. I would like to thank my parents, who didn't ridicule the hours wasted before the computer screen. And the Dromelin team who recognized my work and brought it to light, and, especially, Khadidja Boulahbal, my editor and friend, who believed in my scribbles and chiseled my words. And last and foremost, I express the deepest of gratitude to God.

Part 01

-1-

Memories in Blue

“‘Dreams are more real than reality itself,’ the Oracle once told me. She said, ‘reality is a stage, and we’re all but actors with no script, clumsily improvising our roles. Whereas, dreams are the murky backstage behind; and what do actors *do* in the backstage? They slip out of their costumes, take off their makeup, sit before a mirror and stare musingly at who they really are. You shouldn’t be afraid to go into that darkness and gape deep at your reflection,’ she said, but don’t dwell long on dreams and forget to live.’ The thing is, she meant it literally not figuratively,” I tell The Dutchess.

It is past midnight, and we’re on the balcony having a smoke. She’s wearing faded blue jeans and a pink hoodie. She’s sitting beside me on a plastic chair, legs crossed; her slipper hanging mid-air on her toes.

“Is that where you’ve been six months ago? In the realm of dreams? In some shady backstage gazing at your reflection?” She takes a drag of her cigarette, staring at me ambiguously.

I remain silent.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“For how long are you going to keep waiting for *her*?” she blurts out all of a sudden.

“She will be back.”

“How could you be so sure? It has been six months now, and she hasn’t given a sign.”

“It’s because I’ve made a deal. I know she will be back.”

“Made a deal with whom?” she asks, eyes brimming with a muffled curiosity.

“With the Rat-man, an ageless fellow. He’s a man of his word. Trust me.”

She eyes me dubiously but keeps her thoughts to herself. “You know,” she says, finally, “I just want to make sure you’ll be fine if she never returns. I don’t want to imagine you in a dark place, miserably gathering the scattered pieces of broken hope, because I’m leaving tonight.”

“Leaving where?”

“I am leaving this town. Forever. For reasons, I cannot fully elaborate at the time, maybe not ever. Besides, I feel like this place is consuming my soul, sucking it dry. I have to keep moving. I can’t stay in one place for too long. This may well be the last time we meet.”

“That’s a *bit* sudden.”

“I have told you before, already. You never listen.”

Memories in Blue

I fall silent, and I feel a little let down. She gently rests her hand on my shoulder and says, “We’ll meet again someday. I know it. Until then, don’t lose your mind.”

She crushes her cigarette in the ashtray on the floor, stands up and gives me a long, warm hug—the first time she ever gave me a hug. Her body is slender, fragile, almost hollow.

“Before I leave,” she says, handing me the two stones— *The Eyes of the Night Owl*. I thought I’d lost them forever. I take them back and say nothing.

And then, like a cat walking away in the mist, she leaves the room; gets swallowed by the darkness beyond, leaving nothing behind but the smell of her shampoo, the scent of tobacco wafting in the air.

I lean on the metal handrail of the balcony and light another cigarette. The breeze is mellow, cold and the night is deep, calm. A thin cloud trails, brushing across the sky like a swarm of cotton birds traveling westward, traveling somewhere far away. Everyone has left, everyone is leaving, and I feel like an ancient tree with roots deep in the soil, unable to go anywhere; and I am just twenty-three.

I feel uncomfortable talking about myself. And even if I wanted to say, like some types, I wouldn’t have anything special to say. I am too young to have any deep insights about life—or at least ones that are genuinely mine or haven’t been brought to light yet. And I haven’t been through any breath-taking, jaw-dropping, adventures to tell anybody. So, as far as anyone could tell, I am just your normal guy. I have no psychic powers or any tattoos on my chest and arms. My parents aren’t filthy rich, and I don’t play the Accordion. I’ve never been to jail for more than

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

one night, and I don't drive a 1970 red Dodge challenger. Just your regular twenty-three years old guy; a little confused, a little angry, and so clueless about the world around him.

But sometimes, for reasons unbeknownst even to fortune-tellers in distant shadowy tents, the strangest things happen to the most normal people. Nobody is exempt from those sudden fluctuations of fate. It's like lightning, when it strikes, it strikes just anybody in its path. Busy or free, interesting or boring, suicidal or full of life; it doesn't matter. It just hits you, and it never says why or 'sorry.'

So, yeah, I do have one story to tell. It's about the Rat-man and a girl named Sophia. Of course, there must be a girl in the story. However, let me tell you this upfront. This is not a love story, no one really dies in the end, and no one is really lost. So, don't hate me for it.

I tilt my head back and watch the stars as they blink and hide behind shreds of clouds. I try to remember it all from the beginning. I try to make sense of it, again for the umpteenth time—the Oracle, the neurologist, the violin-maker, Mandolin, the Dutchess, the Rat-man, the blue dreams... *and* Sophia.

When did it all start exactly? I guess I'll just have to choose a beginning, for convenience's sake. It all leads to the same destination anyway, which itself will lead to other destinations, and so on and so forth. Does anything end, really? Anyway, perhaps writing it down would help me understand it better. Shall we?

-2-

That Night: Two Years Ago

It was a clear October night. The streets outside were dry and no wind shook my windows. I watched a movie. ‘*Reservoir Dogs*’ if I remember correctly, then I slipped into my pajamas, ate a pickle from the fridge, brushed my teeth, and threw my tired limp body on the bed after a long, anemic day that had completely vanished from my memory. It was one of those days when I had a vacant mind and a feathery conscience. Life wasn’t that good, but it wasn’t bad either. I snuggled under the warm sheets, and I genuinely believed that I was going to have a good night’s sleep. However, I was wrong. *Terribly wrong.*

I am an easy sleeper. Rarely have I ever suffered any insomnias or had trouble dozing off, but I am not a dreamer. My nights are just a blank momentary interruption of consciousness where everything goes dark. Like a pebble, I sink easily into the ocean, but I sink deep where no beam of light and no sound could reach; and when morning comes, I surge up to the surface. So, after two or twenty minutes, I was already long gone.

That night; however, I had a dream. It was not one of those sequences of some vague scenes into which I’ll try to stitch a

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

certain meaning or psychoanalyze myself in a Jungian way. It was a rather clear dream, frighteningly clear. Actually, I am not very certain of the terminology, whether or not ‘dream’ is the right word to call that episode, and many to come. But ‘dream’ is a word we attach with all experiences that go beyond the realm of reality—a practical word. It went something like this, exactly like this; I am laying in my bed, I open my eyes and I see my room splashed by an unnatural bright moonlight spilling through the window. I stare absently at the scene, at the furniture of my room, glowing faintly with a blue-ish hue, but it doesn’t strike me as strange in the least. I guess we drop our reason and logic at the door before entering the world of dreams. That’s how it is.

Beside me, I notice a girl lying on the bed, face-up, eyes half-open, glaring dreamily at the ceiling. She’s wearing a white nightgown, hair streaming down the pillow in slithery rivers of tea. I dwell on the details of her face for a while, the curve of her cheek as it beautifully crosses her nose, the shape of her ear, the swelling of her breast. I don’t know the girl. I’ve never seen her before. But there she is, lying next to me, and it doesn’t feel so strange, rather natural, like something I have lived countless times before.

As if she becomes aware of my existence, she slowly turns her face to me and then follows her body. Without uttering a word, she stares deep into my eyes, and I in hers. The scenery around me starts to gradually vanish. The walls recede in the background and we’re left in the nakedness of the moonlight; a heavy silence falls upon us. All I see is the world beyond her eyes, and the more I peek, the more I feel like I am chasing a distant memory. I try to get a grip on it, but it slips away. Like a dandelion seed in a windy field, it just keeps flying by, further and further away.

That Night

That momentary bliss, however, doesn't last long. The air suddenly becomes dense and hard to breathe. And my heart rate increases, as I hear the distant footsteps of someone approaching. The sound bears a rhythmic ominous overtone. He walks slowly towards us, through the darkness beyond the entrance of my room. I sense threat but I am unable to do anything. I watch the door and wait, all stiff, like a cornered cat.

The pressure increases by the second, fear builds up, layer upon layer until he finally walks in the door of my room. That's when it happened. That's when I first experienced it.

My heart shrank into the size of a child's hand, prompting one violent beat that ran through my whole body; paralyzing every muscle in its way, like a total blackout spreading throughout the most forlorn corners of the city, turning it into the dark side of the moon. An intense wave of fear followed as if terror itself had personified into a demon and haunted me with a tight grip on my heart. And last but not least, the final guest came barging in without invitation or notice: a freezing cold burst into my chest and seeped in between every cell of my body, turning my limbs and blood into liquid ice. And there I was, paralyzed, terrified, and colder than frozen fish.

As the man walked closer, the room had gone shades darker. As if his sole presence chased light away. But I still could make out the outlines of his body. He was uncommonly tall, my bed looked like a cradle before him. He wore a long, dark, cashmere coat, which was buttoned up to the top and black trousers; his head; however, wasn't that of a man, but of a white rat, roughly proportionate to his body. And I could remember with great vividness its blue, globular eyes and its furry skin.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

The man—or the Rat—slowly trudged to the side of my bed. With each step he took, the fear and the cold grew denser. He stood still and high before me, then he unhurriedly lowered his head, until it was a few centimeters away from mine. His breath was cold and scentless; his bottomless eyeballs were crushing my soul flat under their weight. He remained in that position awhile, eyeing me attentively as though he was making sure he got the right person.

Unable to move a finger or to release a scream, I laid stiff on my bed, eyes glued to his, heart beating harder than a speeding steam train in a tight tunnel. Fear had grown wings and fangs and metamorphosed into its final form, and an *immeasurable* panic claimed my whole being.

The Rat-man, still bent over and gaping at me, moved his slender hand *carefully* up to my chest. He rested the tip of his fingers right below my sternum. Then, I felt it penetrating my very skin. *Slowly*. It pierced through my flesh and deep inside, until it clenched into something very profound in me. The muscles of my throat stiffened, preventing me from breathing; my heart shriveled and stopped beating, and life was slowly abandoning my arms and feet.

There was no blood oozing out. He didn't seem to have breached my real body, but something like the ectoplasmic concept of my body. And with his hand, he held a tight grip on the very core of me. That's how it felt. However, the pain was very real, and it was immeasurable. Cold and agony, fear and panic, four wild torrents pouring down, clashing simultaneously into one body. I could care less about the physical pain. What was new to me was *the fear*. I didn't know such terror existed. I realized that one cannot imagine fear, but only lives through it.

That Night

I would have fainted, but I was already asleep, and I'd hoped to wake up by then, but I didn't. I would have screamed, but I was paralyzed. I would have fought back, but I was nothing but a cadaver, a cadaver that could *feel* everything.

Suddenly, the scene started to shift back. He slowly pulled out his hand from my chest, stood erect and withdrew a few steps. The girl, who passively watched the whole scene, finally left the bed and stood beside him in the stream of the blue moonlight; the hem of her nightgown fluttered imperceptibly. They both glared at me for a while in complete silence. The girl's eyes; however, were flat, empty, and I couldn't understand what they conveyed or whether they meant anything at all. And his were as ambiguous. I stared back at them, confused, scared. Until, as if nothing had happened at all, she held the Rat-man's hand and they walked out of the room.

At that instant, I woke up.

Like a swarm of cockroaches scattering away from fire, the agony and the dread left my body as soon as I regained consciousness. My heart recovered its somewhat steady beat, but my mind was still swimming in thick confusion. To check I hadn't been paralyzed for good, I moved a finger, an arm, then my whole body. A speck of calmness reached my heart, but the dense shadow of fear was still hovering around the empty corners of my soul.

I slowly opened my eyes. The room was dark and painfully quiet. Should I get up, or should I just go back to sleep, and what the hell had just happened to me? Without too much exaggeration, I sincerely believed I was paid a visit by death, and I thought that's how death worked. It comes to you in your

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

sleep. It first sends you a beautiful girl, awaits for you till you lower your guard, and then it comes claiming your soul. But it wasn't death, and I was alive, shriveling in my bed.

I mustered enough courage to leave my blanket. I went to the kitchen and downed one glass of water after another. I wasn't especially thirsty, but I somehow believed the water would wash away whatever awful sensations clung to my body. Then off to the bathroom, where I splashed cold water on my face. Over and *over again*, trying to make sure I was in the real world and not dreaming still. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw a pathetic pale face, too pale, it was almost green, or gray, and I felt sorry for the person I was looking at.

I did my ablutions and went back to bed. I shrunk under the sheets like a fetus in a motherless womb, covered by an amniotic fluid of fear. Never had I felt so lonely, never had I sensed the darkness so heavy. I wanted someone to hold me, to tell me it was just a bad dream like they do in movies, but no one was there.

Eventually, sleep came and carried me into warm mud.

That night was, roughly speaking, the worst night of my life, at least up to that point. And no matter how long I ponder back upon it, I can't find another beginning. That night was the trigger, the first domino piece that collapsed and caused a series of intertwined events I can hardly make sense of. Or, perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps that was not the beginning, but just another meaningless incident. *Who knows, really?*

-3-

After the Dream: The Strangeness of Familiar Things

I woke up feeling uneasy. A dull mixture of dizziness, headache, and a sense of strangeness all over my body. My joints felt rusty and my mouth dry, as if it had been brushed by sandpaper. I opened my eyes and stared at the white, blank ceiling of my room. The roars of the passing cars down the street, the voice of some fellows talking outside, the chirps of sparrows perched on the tree next window, they all seeped into my ears and felt like noises coming from a distant world. For a few, long seconds, I had no idea I'd just woken up and was lying on my bed, or whether it was morning or evening. The notion of time itself seemed to have disappeared from my misty cognition. Alas, soon I began to recollect my fragmented consciousness, bit by bit, and started to remember everything.

Last night's dream came rushing back to me. *Every memory, every detail*, every feeling. It felt unreal and I was supposed to be glad that it was nothing but a nightmare and that it was over. But I clutched my heart. Something was terribly wrong and misplaced about that night.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Washing my face at the sink, I examined it thoroughly, but it was still the same face, the same body, the same, stained mirror that I was planning to clean for days. After brushing my teeth, I felt a burning itch on my back, behind my left shoulder, right below the scapula bone. I took off my shirt and twisted my body to uncover that part of my back in the mirror. I squinted my eyes at the area. What I saw was a dark, longitudinal mark, like a cut in a tissue, almost three centimeters long. It had no depth *nor any dimensions*. It looked more like a tattoo than a scar, but it wasn't a tattoo. It wasn't a scar either. I tried to touch it with the tips of my fingers, but it didn't ache, it just slightly burned. I never remembered having that mark in my back before. I had no idea where it came from or why it was there. After carefully inspecting it, I put my shirt back on and decided not to jump to any conclusions yet.

The clock showed 6:00 a.m. I did my morning prayer, fixed a simple breakfast— toast, cheese, and coffee. And sat in a plastic chair in the balcony and tried to enjoy the next hour of the day. I dwelt on the details of the night before as I ate and watched the October sunrise above gigantic autumn clouds in the distance. The sun spilled warm rays over the clouds, tinting their edges a glinting, golden hue, which charmingly contrasts with the background's soft morning blue. Oscar Wilde said that beauty is higher than genius, that it cannot be questioned, that it is the wonder of wonders and it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearance. The true mystery of the world is the visible, he said, not the invisible. *The bastard was right*, I thought, watching the sky. I felt like taking a picture and post on my Instagram account, but then I felt disgusted with myself for uncertain reasons. Now with hindsight, I think it was because I knew deep down that certain moments shouldn't be sullied;

After the Dream

some moments should be just elated for what they are and rest in our memories and nowhere else.

That morning was like any other morning, but because I knew the terrors of darkness, I found it bewitchingly mesmerizing.



I dressed and headed for college. The sun was gentle and the air fresh. And if it wasn't for the nightmarish night I'd gone through, I'd hope for a really good day. But something told me that I was far from having anything close to good anytime soon. I looked at myself in the mirror again before leaving. I was almost certain something had *changed*, but my face looked the same.

At college, everything looked normal—the unbearably long courses, the apathetic professors, the jaunty students full of ready-to-be-crushed hopes for the future, my friends. It was just another day, an accumulation of dull routines and humdrums.

I spoke scarce words that day. I made little talk. Just standard comments, nods and shakes and ‘*hmm, is that so?*’ (That one proved to be the most useful). No one seemed to have noticed anything unusual about me, about the way I looked or behaved. I guess I, too, tried to remain normal—or perhaps nobody paid enough attention. Because inside me, *nothing* felt normal.

I was drenched by an odd feeling that was never there before, an offbeat sensation that I couldn't quite get a grasp of. *Everything looked the same, but nothing felt the same.* I stared

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

at the scenery around me with a detached look— same paper college, same dreary classrooms, same clothed homo-sapiens, same date. But something was ticking off. There was a bizarre sense of peculiarity. It was as if a thief had broken into my room, searched every corner of it, messed it up completely, took something very important, and then tried to put it back together to look exactly the same, and left. And then I entered, I stepped in the middle and looked around. It looks the same, but something smells fishy. I just know something isn't right, but I can't tell what it is. That's how it felt, like my world had been messed up and put back together, only not exactly the way it was, and I sensed it.

I tried to forget about it, to chat more (even about things that bored me at an existential level, like politics, and football), to laugh it out, but it just wouldn't go away. It was like a fly that keeps buzzing around your ear on a hot summer morning. I tried to push it away but it kept coming back. I would find myself spacing out in the middle of a conversation, gazing at a faraway mountain or just into a random spot on the ground trying to get a grasp of that feeling, to have it in the palm of my hand and examine it thoroughly. Why does everything seem strange and different? It was like the opposite of a "Deja-vu," something like a "Jamais-vu".

I wanted to tell somebody about it, but I just couldn't find the right words. And even if I were able to, I doubt anybody would have grasped what I was trying to say. How could they when I couldn't understand it myself. Besides, let's face it. If it weren't for very rare cases where there's a true human connection, people usually can't empathize. We cannot feel what other people feel. We can only wear the right expression on our faces, and say the right words, to make the other think we

After the Dream

are empathizing. But we usually don't. Eventually, I realized I needed to be alone.

I missed the last lecture—not that I actually attend any lectures anyway—and left college as soon as I could. Driving home, the lines of traffic seemed unusually long and disturbing: angry bus drivers, angry cab drivers, angry mothers driving with angry babies. Everybody was angry, and everybody honked and cursed. Bone is a city with chronic constipation, only a snap of Thanos' fingers would cure it of its own misery—Did you already get the gist that I don't really love my city? Who does really? It's like a mother who doesn't really like her quarrelsome child, but deep down she loves him, something like that. I took an impromptu turn and drove off to the sea-coast. I needed a vast, empty, open space to clear my head and think straight.

It was three p.m. when I arrived. Except for a few couples making out inside their cars in the heat of the afternoon, the coastline was quiet and deserted. I knew a special spot I used to come to with friends in the past. It was a good place to chill and breathe a little fresh air far from the city we love and hate so much. I parked the car on the roadside, stepped out, and jumped off the metal handrail that separated the concrete road from the edge of the cliff.

Right after I set foot on the opposite side of the ground, I looked back at the rail. Something about it had struck as odd, as little minor detail. The handrail seemed higher than usual. Had I gone shorter? It could be, but it was most unlikely the case. Had it been changed into a new one? Perhaps. I hadn't come here in months, but it looked a little too old and rusty to be a new one. After a second hard look, it appeared that the color had also changed. It was a pale yellow, but in my remembrance, it had

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

always been a pale blue—not that I usually pay any attention to the colors of rails wherever I go. But it was definitely not the same rail.

I walked a few unsteady steps down the rocks of that cliff—a little risky and slippery, but I managed—until I reached an isolated little flat where it was comfortable enough to sit and face the sea. I sat on a rock, put on my earphones and played some music, ‘*Chopin Nocturnes*’. I wasn’t quite sure what I was hoping to find there exactly. A revelation, perhaps. Or just a little piece of soul the ocean might offer. Either way, that was the only place I could be.



I watched, breathing deeply. The wide Mediterranean stretched before me in shades of trembling blue, glistening under the setting sun like shattered glass, kissing the sky in a line of darker blue. The ocean was a sleeping giant, it breathed as I breathed, slowly; deep in slumber since ancient times. Every muscle beautifully relaxed. Beyond the horizon, a cumulonimbus floated peacefully above, like a castle in the sky, like Laputa, sailing away from Africa to dreamland. I watched it drift by, and I felt terribly little before it. But somehow it was appealing, deeply satisfying, even euphoric. I guess that’s what Edmund Burke meant by meeting the sublime, the great, the magnificent. *It induces a state of submission that is often combined with the possibility of getting lost.* I guess that’s what we all crave the most, to give in to something (or someone) great. We’re all masochistic, deep down, or else there would be no religion.

After the Dream

A sharp, crescent moon made its appearance early that day. It hung like a decoration on an invisible cosmic Christmas tree, and I felt like I was merely standing on another ball decorating that tree. Suddenly the acrid memories of last night seized my mind. The pain, the horror, the face of that entity. I closed my eyes, breathed in, and tried to conjure that girl's face before me.

The ambient sounds around me, the roars of slow waves splashing down the rocky shore and the cries of distant gulls enveloped me in a transparent cocoon of serenity. The sounds pierced my flesh and seeped into every corner of my body. They blended with the music in my ears and soothed my temper. My mind, like a mirror, became as calm as the sea unfolding before me. Soon the memories blended with the vast blue, diluted, subdued, tamed. And the disturbing feeling of unfamiliarity I felt I since morning was quelling.

On the way home, I thought about that girl. Was she real? Who was she? And why did I see her? Little did I know how tragic the answers to these questions were. I was like a blind old man sailing right towards a storm.

Existential Ingrown Nail

When Jung and Freud first met, they had a thirteen-hour conversation, uninterrupted, and Jung particularly called it “very interesting.” How vapid and shallow one must be to meet another and find nothing to talk about? And what would both of them say about my dreams?

I would go to sleep every night, expecting to live through the same ordeal again. Each night, when I turn the light off and rest my head on the pillow, the moment I close my eyes I see its animal face, its bottomless, blue eyes glaring densely at me. The shadow of fear would roam over me and my heart would race. I opened my eyes and through the darkness I stare at the open door of my room, a part of me expecting to see something there, another wondering if it was all just a bad dream. Fortunately, sleep would always rescue me into a dreamless world, where nothing happens until morning.

I carried out my daily routines absent-mindedly, I’d go to college, study in the library, hang out with friends, grab a bite or two, take aimless rides in the car, listen to music, watch a movie or read from a book until the day was over. I would say normal,

Existential Ingrwon Nail

calm days. They flowed monotonously, with nothing to distinguish one from the next. You could have changed the order and I wouldn't even have noticed.

The strangeness of the world I had experienced after that night began to fade away. Now that I came back to my senses, but I was just getting used to the new feeling. Give habit enough time and it will turn a roller-coaster into a sluggish train gliding through a desert. That's what happened. I just got used to it. In no time, I returned to my old life. I wouldn't call it, necessarily, boring, since there was some sense of a hollow purposefulness in it, but it wasn't that exciting either. Almost nothing worth mentioning was ever happening. Imagine life without booze or sex. That was how it was in a Muslim country. But it was probably the same for everyone else. That was what I always told myself. That was how I coped with it, my lack of adventure.

However, no matter how many days had passed, how many pages flipped in a book, how many movies watched—good or bad— how many people I hung out with—people I liked and some I was totally indifferent to— I couldn't get over that night. No matter how hard I tried rooting it out from my memory, I would often find myself thinking about it, dwelling on its details, reminiscing over that short moment when we stared silently at each other, that girl and I. I glimpsed the shadow of something I can't ignore. And I knew something had changed that night, something *irreversible*.

It disturbed me like an ingrown nail that throbbed nonstop, and it worked on deeper levels of some complex underground mechanisms.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I looked at myself in the mirror every morning and all I saw was a detached face and flat, glacial eyes, a figure of a person who is so worn out of life. But I was neither worn out nor was I depressed. Perhaps a little bored but who wasn't? I couldn't fathom why I was feeling that way. I was missing on a minor detail, a detail of essence, an imperial one. It was like the air molecules had suddenly changed conformation, or the seconds were slightly longer than usual. It was as if a note had disappeared from all the music in the world. I kept listening and frowning. I sensed that void, but I just couldn't tell what is lacking exactly.

I was feeling things for the first time in my life, a sort of alienation of my soul, or a serious issue with my brain. I mean, I surely wasn't thinking or feeling straight.

And then one morning, I dropped out of college. One, because I've had enough of it. Two, and most importantly, I no longer sensed the weight of the consequences my actions would bear in the future—something I never thought I would dare to do. And I decided to go check a doctor.

Did I truly decide to do that? Or was it inevitable that he and I would meet eventually? Those are the kind of questions most urging and most useless to ask.

Reticular Boredom: Mysterious girl

I've walked into this hospital any number of times by now, but each time I step in and look around, I couldn't get myself used to the feeling it exudes over me: an amalgam of disdain and sorrow. The sight is downright pitiful.

The hospital was built back in the days of the French colonization. They lived on Algerian soil for over a century, exactly 132 years. Doing what? Well, what could they possibly have been doing for all those years except spreading love and freedom? It's not like they murdered millions and sucked the oil dry. But who cares, right? The past is the past, so we shouldn't be so overdramatic about it. As far as I know, the two countries are back together like they used to. A sadomasochistic couple. My beautiful land, what have they done to you?

Anyway, most of the important facilities in this city were built during the French period. One could easily recognize the architecture, and the difference is striking. For some reasons—*obvious reasons*—the old french constructions are still holding up better than the ones built by Algerian architects, that's what you'd find in Bone, Papier-maché buildings and marble ones. I

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

guess corruptness is just a natural outcome of poverty, and poverty is a natural outcome of corruptness. Which came first? I believe stuffed stomachs, loaded vaults, and empty minds. And so the hospital remained upright from the old days, perhaps seventy or eighty years old, I'm not sure. Its original color was white, I presume. I can't assert because now all I saw were different shades of beige and brown; too old and dirty. One could see trails of black tints under every window, like a sobbing lady in a party bathroom, and her tears mingled with the eye makeup, running down her cheeks like rivers of ink, as if the building itself had wept till its tears had dried up and all that remained was the dark shadows of remorse and regret under the windows.

It looked less like a hospital than an asylum. An abandoned asylum, for that matter. But that hospital was the beating heart of Bone. It was the center of the city; that was the best we got. We also have oceans of oil beneath the ground. So it should make sense, but it doesn't.

The consulting room was very simple, bearing no unnecessary items except for those needed to fit the purpose: a desk, an examination table, chairs, and a little drawer. Pretty basic. I took my seat facing the doctor and waited for her to finish doing whatever important business she was doing on those papers on her desk. A young girl, a nurse, or an assistant, I presumed, was standing on the opposite side of the room, checking one of the patient's medical records. All I could see was her long black hair falling down a stark white coat.

"So, young man, what brings you here today?" said doctor J, without lifting her gaze, a reputable neurologist in this hospital. I had to go to the best. Presumably.

Reticular Boredom

“Well... about a week ago,” I cut straight to the topic. She looked so busy I felt I was the least important concern to her. Actually, I felt a little guilty wasting her time. Besides, I didn’t know how else to start. “While I was asleep at night, I had a terrible nightmare, not like any other nightmare. This one was... too real.”

“What do you mean, real? Could you be more precise?” she responded in a professional, monotonous tone, finally honoring me with a quick, shallow look through a pair of round glasses.

“You see, I was paralyzed and I was consumed by an extreme fear, an inexplicable fear. My heart was beating hard and fast, and my body ice-cold, and...”

“And?”

“There was visions.”

“What kind of visions? It’s a nightmare, a dream. I think it’s normal to see things, don’t you think.” I didn’t even know if it was a question or a statement.

“Yes, you’re right,” I suddenly decided not to tell the rest of the dream. I had a feeling it was pointless anyway, and I was already regretting coming here. “I guess, I’m more worried about the physical distress I’d gone through. I mean, could it all be just symptoms of something in my head? Is it normal to feel all that in a nightmare? Clinically speaking.”

“Have you experienced anything like that before? Or did It happen only once?”

“The first and the only time. That’s why I am a little concerned. I’ve never-”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Excuse me.” The phone rang, and she answered. Was she supposed to do that? Whoever or whatever it was, clearly it was more important than me. “Continue please.”

“I was saying.. I’ve never in my life experienced such a thing, nor have I heard about similar cases. That’s why I am a little concerned.”

“Have you done anything unusual that night before going to sleep?” She asked methodically, the expression on her face unchanged.

“Not that I remember, no.” That is if ‘Reservoir Dogs’ didn’t count as something unusual. It was pretty unusual *and* a great movie. ‘*You shoot me in a dream, you better wake up and apologize,*’ said Mr. White.

Doctor J checked my blood pressure, listened to my heart carefully, and ran a full quick examination on me.

“Look, I understand your concern,” she started, “but rest assured, it is just a simple sleep disorder. Sometimes, something goes off, but it doesn’t mean it’s broken. We’re learning more and more about sleep and its mechanism. I can’t tell you that we know everything there is to know about the physiology of sleep, or that I can put my finger precisely on the issue. That is if there is an issue in the first place. But this is nothing to worry about. You know a little biology?”

“Yeah, a little.” I was sure a ‘Little’ for a doctor meant a ‘Lot’ for a regular person, but I humored her.

“Well, it’s a complex process. Basically, all we know for sure is that your reticular substance, the one in your brain stem, is the one responsible for the sleep cycle. It is like a light switch

Reticular Boredom

for your consciousness. Switch it off and everything goes dark. On again and all is up and running. It operates during the day, and when it is tired enough at night, it makes you feel drowsy, and after you lay down and close your eyes, it switches off your neocortex. And since your neocortex, or your gray matter is the center of every conscious feeling you have, all feelings and sensations from the outside world can no longer reach you. If you are sound asleep, one could open your eyes, cast a beam of light right through your lens, yet you'd see nothing. Not that there is something wrong with your eye, but when the influx reaches your cortex, nothing happens, because it is turned off by the reticular matter. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, I do. Please continue." Fortunately, I'd watched a documentary about the brain once, so I was able to follow a little, though I have to say I'd lost her somewhere in the middle.

"So, that's basically what happens when we sleep, very simply put. But, why do we dream, how we dream, that's still a mysterious realm full of riddles for us. I understand you have had an unusual nightmare, with visions and neuro-vegetative symptoms, but it doesn't necessarily mean there is something wrong with you. Perhaps, your reticular substance misfired or over-fired. Or, perhaps the influx didn't run through the usual circuits of neurons. Things like that happen all the time. Their intensity and the way they manifest themselves differ from one person to another. So, don't let it bother you so much, okay? It is probably nothing to worry about." A quick smile was drawn on her face and it vanished as quickly.

"Okay. Thank you for your time. I think I feel a little better now."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Great! Have a good day.”

I lied. I didn’t really feel better, nor did I feel worse. I realized that what she said was scientific and somewhat convincing, but it simply wasn’t enough to shake off that unsettling feeling I had inside. It just didn’t add up. Why would a random dysfunction in the brain circuits create such vivid and detailed images?

Or did I just want to believe that I had gone through a paranormal experience? Exterior to this reality that bored me at a deep level. Perhaps, I hoped that I was finally escaping the rigid flow that consisted of every actuality in my life. Perhaps, I was, maybe deep down, glad that I have had that terrible nightmare. Even if I suffered. I would gladly accept pain if the pain was meaningful. Maybe I wanted to believe that a window to another world did, indeed, open for me. Even for a brief moment. A cab driver once told me: “life isn’t boring, nor is it exciting. It’s just neutral, perhaps a little cruel. So, if you find yours to be boring, don’t blame it on life, but on yourself. You’re probably the dull one, my friend. There’s plenty of excitement out there, you just have to be brave enough to go get it.”

So, yeah... that sunk deep in my mind. My life used to be somewhat boring, but I wasn’t blaming it on anyone, just myself and *only* myself.

If I faced my true intentions, I’d say that I came to see doctor J hoping she’d tell me there is nothing wrong with my brain. That those could not be symptoms of some disease, so I could confirm the spiritual origin of that night.

Reticular Boredom

I was walking out of the hospital, and right when I was about to let go of the whole story, I felt someone lightly tugging the hem of my coat. She was the other girl in the consulting room.

“I think I know who could truly help you,” she said.

Either Move, or Be Moved: Meeting the Neurologist

I followed her out of the neurology department. She walked before me with steady light steps. The sound of her high heels echoing through the halls was unusually soothing. I lost my gaze in her long, black hair, how it gently bobbed with each stride. It was almost hypnotizing, especially its deep, dark color, which made everything around it look pale and disappear slowly in a faraway background. She never once turned back to make sure I was still following and made no effort to talk whatsoever, until we reached a long dark corridor, that is. I don't remember exactly how we got there; just a vague recollection of taking many stairs up and many consecutive turns left and right, until we reached that destination. She walked straight to the last door in that hallway, on which a shiny, black sign with golden letters said: Professor Z.Ezra. She knocked twice, then opened the door.

The inside was dim lighted, feeble sun rays filtered through a barely open window and enveloped the interior with a soft glim. At the far end of the room, there was a large desk. On top of which laid very scarce objects: a pen holder, a stack of papers,

Either move, or be Moved

a thick book on the corner, and a laptop. Behind the laptop, sat a man, presumably doctor Ezra. Faint classical music played in the background.

“Good afternoon doctor, excuse me if I caught you in the middle of something, there’s someone I think you’d want to see”.

“Have a seat.” He gestured, his voice deep and low pitched, not too low though, just enough to send a certain unexplained reverence.

“I’ll have to excuse myself now. There are some matters I have to attend to. I’ll just leave him to you. He’ll tell you everything. Have a nice day!” With that, she left, closing the door behind her. She was certainly very fond of him, I could pick up on those things.

I took a seat and waited as he finished typing something on his laptop. He looked too old to be forty-nine and too young to be sixty, so I’d say he was swimming upstream in his fifties. Clean shaved; a medium, salt and pepper, well-trimmed hair fell on his forehead; piercing eyes glimmered behind rectangular, thick-framed glasses. After a few moments of silence, I concluded that he was waiting for me to start speaking, so I began.

“Well, I came to consult Dr. J-”

“One moment,” He interrupted. I concluded wrong. “Yes, go on.”

“I consulted Dr. J on a certain health matter that troubled me. I guess while I was explaining matters to her, the Miss that brought me here to you, couldn’t help but overhear our

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

conversation. She was in the same room. Soon after I finished with doctor J, she came after me and told me there was someone who could help you better, I guess she wasn't pleased with doctor J's answer."

The book on the corner of his desk was *'In search of lost time'* by Marcel Proust. Or at least a volume of it.

"I'm listening," he said, his eyes still glued to the computer screen. Up to that point he hadn't given me one stare and I began to sense a shade of haughtiness in his manners. I believe that no matter what, when talking to someone, you should keep eye contact. That, for me, is respect in its simplest forms. Jesus, what is it with doctors?—talking to someone with sunglasses on is also a bit rude, just saying. And wearing sunglasses when there's no sun in the sky is cringe-worthy—anyway. I went on.

"I've had..." I hesitated a little, "a very troubling and agonizing nightmare." I felt I was repeating those words and they were losing their meaning.

Suddenly, the moment I articulated those words, it seemed like I caught his attention. Now his eyes were fixed at me. His hands moved the laptop away and he turned towards me and said, "Would you say it was different from any other nightmare you've had before? From a scale of 1 to 13, how would you describe your pain?"

"Yes, and 12."

"I see. Describe to me the episode and don't omit the slightest detail."

And so I have narrated to him everything I thought happened that night. I described the intense fear, panic, and paralysis. The

Either move, or be Moved

Rat-man that messed with something in my soul, or what seemed like my soul, anyway. However, I withheld from telling him about the girl sleeping on my bed. For some reasons, I judged it would be best to keep that part for myself.

What I couldn't tell anybody else seemed to flow naturally when he was listening. Like water following osmotic pressure, the words sandpaper leaked out of my mouth. There was something about him that made it look like he'd understand. I've always distrusted the rigidity with which adults dealt with the world, though I was an adult myself. I was almost convinced that the majority would tell me with an unshakable certainty—a result of self-delusion many people experience when they get old and realize they actually know shit about life—that what I had was nothing but a bad dream and I should get over it. Well, perhaps it was, and perhaps it wasn't just a bad dream. That's what most people lack, a little room for the unusual to exist and thrive.

After I told Dr. Ezra everything I could remember from that night, he fell silent for a while staring at a random spot on his desk, seemingly submerged in deep thinking. And then he said, "Are you in a hurry?"

I looked at my watch to check if it was still early for my course, then I remembered I'd dropped college. "No," I answered.

"Why don't we take a walk. You drink coffee, right?"

"Sure."

We walked out of the room to a nearby vending machine. Standing up, Dr. Ezra appeared to be a tall, slender man. Under

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

his unbuttoned white coat, he wore a gray roll neck sweater that perfectly matched a pair of black trousers and dark brown oxfords. It wasn't so difficult to notice that he was a man who gave his appearance a great deal of care.

Hot coffee in plastic cups in our hands, we walked a few other corridors, until we reached a spacious paved terrace with empty benches on the periphery. The terrace overlooked the west bank of the city. The sky was innocent-blue and the air was fresh, orphan clouds wafted in the distance, and a flock of birds waded its way through. The terrace was calm and empty, and a mild serenity haunted the air. Seeing things from up above, one could almost believe there is nothing ever wrong with the world.

We walked to the balustrade, Dr. Ezra leaned on the metal rail, pulled out a pack of Winston reds from his pocket and put a cigarette between his lips. With a swift trained move, he struck a match and lit it. He savored a deep drag, letting the smoke seep into every corner of his lungs, and let out. Then, he said to me, eyes fixed into the horizon, "A doctor shouldn't smoke. Is that what you're thinking? I totally agree. As a matter of fact, nobody should smoke. This thing kills. I know that much. I used to hate the smell of tobacco, but, unfortunately, there had been a time in my life where I had to put one between my lips, when my health was the least of my concerns. You know, life could turn very acrid at times, like waking up every day with the taste of ash in your mouth. You try to wash it away, to eat something sweet, but it doesn't go away. I started smoking not because I thought it would solve my problems, but because I didn't care to see more than three days ahead into the future, and I said: *why the hell not!* And then—here's the trick— I started liking it. I could still tell you every reason there is on the book on why you must not smoke, and yet, knowing all too well how bad it is, I still do

Either move, or be Moved

it. It's weird when you think about it. Why do I do something I know will kill me?" He stared blankly at the cigarette between his fingers for a moment and then went on, "We always do the things we feel like doing, not the things we are convinced we should be doing. For me, that is the essence of being human; that's what it means to be free— to do exactly the opposite of what you are expected to do. You don't smoke, do you?"

"I guess not," I said.

"Good, good.. you shouldn't."

Again, he fell quiet awhile, puffing on his cigarette, gazing at a some nonexistent point on the horizon. I remained silent, too. I figured I had nothing more to say, and he had yet a lot more to say.

"I can give you an elaborate scientific answer to what had happened to you if that's what you want," he said finally. "But before I do, tell me first, would you take it and forget about it all If I gave you a convincing explanation?"

"To tell you the truth, doctor, something tells me it wasn't just a sleep disorder that could be cleared out by a scientific explanation. I mean, it felt a little more than that."

"I know, but still, if I give you a reasonable explanation, you should take it, right?"

"I'm afraid I have to. What choice do I have? I can't keep looking for what doesn't exist. I came here seeking an answer, so I'd take whatever I find. That is, of course, if I find it convincing."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Good. That’s the right way of thinking. Facts should be taken as facts, and hard facts break through the walls of superstitions. But the thing is, there is no exact scientific explanation for what you have gone through. There are only theories.”

“Yes, so Dr. J briefed me on that. Why did that young lady think you’d be able to help me, though?”

“Those kinds of sleep disorders, those vivid nightmares are, so to speak, my personal field of research. I am a neurosurgeon. I cut scalps, open skulls, and mess with the brain. I don’t research that on an official, academic level. It’s just a private interest of mine. Do you want to hear a little story?”

“Sure.” Time was all I had.

“When I was still training during my residency, back in the times when I was a few years older than you are, a friend came to me hopelessly seeking help. He was seeing those disturbing nightmares, and the way he talked about those dreams, about that entity you described yourself earlier. Well, not exactly the same one, but it was an entity nevertheless. About an out of body experience, how he was in his room, in his bed, yet at the same time witnessing a different kind of reality. It hooked me, and I thought that was something I should definitely look into.

“And so, I kept in touch with that friend, and each time he had one of those experiences, he’d come to narrate it to me, with the finest details. The guy, of course, was suffering, he was having those nightmares on a daily basis. Sometimes, he’d take caffeine pills just to stay awake and not fall into that hellish slumber. Sometimes, he’d go not sleeping for a whole week. The guy was experiencing a living hell, he’d even confronted me

Either move, or be Moved

with suicidal thoughts. I tried everything to help him, to make him feel better, but the nightmares won't stop.

“And so, somehow, over the past twenty years doing this job, I have encountered a multitude of people going through the same endeavor, and all with apparent similar experiences. And with each case, I felt an itch, as if it spoke to me personally, as if the answer at the end of the road had a message for me specifically. So, I tried to encompass all there is to know about that phenomenon, a personal quest, and to be able to offer a little help for those who truly suffered.”

“What happened to your friend?”

His slender body still bent on the balustrade, elbows planted on the metal handrail, he fell quiet once again. My question seemed to have faded like smoke rising from his cigarette, vanished in thin air. I never knew what became of his friend.

I sipped my coffee to swallow the silence. It was already lukewarm. I never liked vending machines' coffees, anyway. Actually, I seldom liked any other coffee except the one I made myself. I prepared my own brew since I was a teenager, perhaps a little younger. My mom suffered from insomnia, so she always needed a little more sleep in the morning, and she had to get up early every day for work. That's when I learned how to make coffee, I was in elementary school by then. I always woke up a little earlier to prepare breakfast for her so she'd get a little more sleep, instead of it being the other way around. A few years later, making coffee became more than a habit for me. It became a kind of meditation, an art if I dare to call it that. After performing one single act in numerous times, it becomes more than just an ordinary feat. It takes other dimensions inside you, and you

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

never do the same thing twice. Each time, it is different. It may look the same, it may taste the same, but for me, each time it was a little different, in ways only I could notice. I might have prepared more than a thousand coffee, but never have I made the same coffee twice. And every time, I think, it's better.

"You will have those nightmares again. I'm sorry to break it to you, but it never happens just once. You will most likely keep on experiencing them over and over again."

I tried acting calm, but it troubled me terribly. Just the thought of it made my heart flinch.

"So... am I hopeless? Is there anything that could be done to stop it from happening?" I asked.

He crushed his unfinished cigarette on the cold metal handrail and threw it onto a nearby wastebasket. He missed and the cigarette butt fell on the floor, but he didn't even notice. "The help I'll offer might sound a little unusual, but it's mainly the only help I've got. I'd take you to meet someone."

"Someone?"

"The Oracle, a person you'd find very intriguing. That is of course if she agreed to see you. So? Will you give it a try?"

I thought about it for a while, but I wasn't really thinking about anything specific, I just kept staring at the cigarette-butt on the floor, it disturbed me.

"Okay," I said finally.

"Good. Come see me again a week from today. And now, if you excuse me, I have to go, got work to do. Until then..."

Either move, or be Moved

“Until then.”

French Stones: Bards and Whales

Before we proceed, perhaps I should mention an episode that took place three months prior to that night. It was the summer when I spent a couple of days at my aunt's house in a little town south of France, and the summer when I first encountered the girl with the azure hair, when I got the cursed violin.

It was the first time I went to France, the first time I breached the borders of Africa, and it felt like I have unlocked a new territory in my mind. I remember the sight of the shores of Europe unfolding before me when the plane plunged in an ocean of white clouds approaching Marseille's airport. I bargained my way to take the seat near the window. Beside me sat a huge man, who was in the business of Dijon mustard and his wife, a calm, subtle, Asian woman; a total mismatch.

Although it was just blue seas and an outstretched land, it sure felt like a different world for me. So, this is Europe, I thought, it starts here and expands all the way till the far ends of the eastern shores of Russia. I was kind of amazed. As, the plane was lowering its altitude, getting ready to land, I had the chance

French Stones

to get a full view of the city from up above in much greater detail.

The first thing that strikes the eye is the white boats swarming the shores, all kinds: Yachts, runabouts, catamarans, deck boats, fishing boats, you name it. Some of them were cruising the sea leaving white trails behind like motionless shooting stars, and most were docked in the famous ‘Vieux Port’ of Marseille, where the Count of Monte Cristo once lived. I also caught a glance at the Chateau d’If.

Next, you see the villas with swimming pools, blue squares scattered everywhere like a pixel extension of the sea. There was not one villa without a pool, I assumed that’s where the rich people spend their holidays. Lucky bastards. Of course, I’d be an artist if I spent a couple of months in one of those miniature paradises. I’d paint random objects or write poetry or learn the cello. Or at least I’d aspire to become one.

The town where my aunt lived was a little piece of charm. Rivers ran like veins along boulevards, bridges adorned with lurid flowers on both sides. Old churches stood mighty amidst vividly colored bars. Outdoor coffee shops and restaurants, fishing sites and pebble beaches, and a central plaza around a glinting fountain. What can I say, compared to where I lived, that village was proof of how unfair life is.

I’d wake up a little after noon each day, have a satisfying breakfast and then leave the house. Music to my ears, I would wonder about all day long with no specific destination in mind. I would take random turns, walk random streets, discover different parts of the town, try different restaurants. Then I’d take breaks in cafés, read a few pages, and make small talk with

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

the locals. I had no plans from morning to dusk. There was no one waiting for me at home, and I had detached myself from all social media. I had barely talked to anyone for days, and I scarcely glanced at my watch. Seeing the sky reddens on the horizon was the only sign that time was actually flowing. I had a taste of what real liberty was.

Under an oak tree that stood alone, there was a special bench I'd go to each day to watch the sunset. I'd grab a sandwich and a soda and walk there. It was a little far from town, but it was a stride I enjoyed taking. On the way there, I'd come across a group of teenagers sitting on a wooden fence that paralleled a pebble beach. A pair of boys and a pair of girls were drinking beer and smoking weed. The place was remote and unfrequented and they barely paid any attention to pedestrians. Through the lenses of my sunglasses; I watched them curiously each day as I walked past them. I think no teenager should drink or get high, but the air around them was light and merry, and they looked so carefree. A part of me secretly envied them. Where I live, there was no scenario in which you could hang out with a bunch of girls and guys on a beautiful open space, smoke weed and things end up friendly. That was just out of the question.

While the others gave me a furtive glance then looked away and kept on chatting among themselves, one girl with stark blue hair stared at me dreamingly each time I walked by. Not that there was anything dream-provoking about me, she was just high. The girl; however, never addressed me. She would just smile. And neither had I.

During my daily strolls, I'd walk past a strange store alongside a river that ran on the edge of the town. A calm off the map area, and I liked ambling around there. The store was

French Stones

inconspicuous, just a wooden door and eight decks of Tarot cards placed on two shelves behind a display window, four on each. ‘Nosce Te Ipsum’ was the store’s name, written on small, black letters on a plank of wood on top of the door. I reckoned it was probably Latin. I couldn’t read Latin, though, nor Greek, so I didn’t know what it meant exactly, and never truly had the curiosity to look into it. The store had a queer aura around it, and it caught my attention each time I walked by. However, it was always closed. Each day I walked along that riverbank, be it noon or dark, the door was always shut. I once knocked twice, but no one was there. I was going to knock again that day, but I didn’t. I left.

My summer holidays in that remote French town lasted seventeen nerve-soothing days, the store didn’t open its doors until the night of the sixteenth day. I flew back to Algeria next thing in the morning.

It was my last day in the town. Each place I visited, I knew it was my last. The lunch I had, the coffee I sipped, the colorful streets, the soft sounds of church bells. I tried to absorb everything deep in me, carve it in the back of my head. Evening came and I headed to my special bench. Somehow, by then, it felt it belonged to me. I watched my last sunset under the same oak tree then I laid down, and looked up. Branches loomed over me, they swayed gently, leaves quivered, the wind rustled. Everything moved and everything was still. I lost my gaze in a humming kaleidoscope, and soon lost my line of thought. *I am far away yet I am so near. I am not in pain nor am I tired. I feel no thirst or hunger. I am consumed by no sorrow or stress. I don’t crave anything. I miss no one and nothing. I am myself and nobody else is me. I have myself. What else could I possibly need?* My feelings fluttered under the summer breeze, and it felt

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

almost blissful. May the time freeze here and never move a second. May the world end and I keep floating endlessly in limbo like this. I didn't care. I was good this way.

Then I came back to my senses.

The girl with the blue hair, as I headed home, smiled at me, and finally addressed me. "Au revoir, stranger," she said. I smiled back, waved, then continued walking.

I was supposed to go back home early to pack my things for the trip the next morning; however, I took a slight turn. I extended my walk home a little longer. I felt an urge to check the store one last time, something bugged me about it. Perhaps it was just a beseeching curiosity; perhaps it was something more. But I really wanted to see what could be lying behind its closed doors, what kind of place was it. Something called me in. So I went to check it one last time. One last shot.



The clock showed eleven p.m. The cobblestone path along the river was dark and quiet. There were no street lights, except for a meek glow coming from a few orphan windows here and there. However, that night, I was surprised to find that the lantern hung right above the wooden doors of the store was lit. The only one in the street of pale orange, just strong enough to see the doors and read the words on the wooden plank above, '*Nosce Te Ipsum*'. So I walked there, and with a speck of excitement in my heart, I knocked twice.

After a short while, the door was open, and behind it stood a little girl I would say eight or nine years old, wearing an indigo

French Stones

dress and crunching from a Maltesers. Her black hair fell in straight lines down to her elbows. She remained there, motionless, dark eyes gazing at me deeply. What her face lacked in innocence, it made up by an indecipherable mysteriousness.

“Salut!” I said, smiling to the little girl. “Are you... open? Could you please call mama or papa?” speaking French was not a big issue. Not after one hundred and thirty years of colonisation.

The girl grabbed my hand and walked me in. Her hand was small and cold; I followed like a little fishing boat pulled by a ship. Stepping inside, the store appeared to be more spacious than I had reckoned. It stretched far inside and was illuminated by the same pale, orange light coming from scattered candles all over the place. A low volume Opera by Maria Callas played in the background and a nice fragrant impregnated the interior, something woody and fruity, but I couldn’t quite figure out what it was.

In the middle, a lady was sitting in a round table on which there was nothing except a beautifully shaped jar of limpid water and an empty glass. The lady was reading a book and smoking what looked like a herbal joint.

As soon as I walked in, she turned the book face down, stood up and greeted me warmly, “Welcome, young man! Please, make yourself comfortable, look around, take as long as you wish.”

The lady appeared to be in her sixties. A black dress covered a tall, slender body; a plethora of amulets and bracelets dangled around her neck and wrists. She had frizzy hair, a conspicuous sharp nose, but a warm smile.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

After greeting me she sat back, resuming her reading. She was no bother, and I appreciated it. I started taking a look around the place after I thanked her. The store was clean and jammed with all sorts of objects. The items sold there were anything but ordinary. There was a whole closet of stones and minerals, I'm not sure I remember all the names, but there was green malachite, yellow topaz, polished amethyst, red Camelian and Opals, and black onyx. I examined each stone carefully in the palm of my hand. It was the first time I ever knew about the existence of such stones. It felt like I discovered a treasure.

Walking around that place, inspecting every corner of it, I came across dream-catchers, Talismans, potions I didn't know what on earth they were used for. There were feathers of all kinds and colors, little skulls, exotic plants, odd-looking rings with cryptic seals on them, books on spirituality, tarot decks, little statues of some ancient Hinduism deities, crucifixes, and many other things I didn't even bother asking what they were, or what they were used for. I also found an old, gold-colored telescope. I really wanted to have that telescope.

And then in one corner, I stumbled upon a violin, neatly resting, upright, inside a glass box.

I stood before it, contemplating it. The shape of that violin whispered to me, its almost perfect curves like a charming woman, its dark, brownish color like it was made of ancient wood that held millennium secrets. The swaying of the F holes on both sides, through which heavenly sounds are exhaled, produced somewhere in the darkness inside. I was hooked, all my attention absorbed in the little details of that piece of wood like a child glaring at his dream toy. I wanted to touch it, to hold it, and then at that moment, a revelation had fallen upon me from

French Stones

the roof like an avalanche. I wished for nothing more than to play it. That Exact violin.

I was no musician; never played one single instrument, never really had the intention to. When it came down to how music was made and played and what made a melody and a chord and a scale, I hardly knew anything. Not that I didn't like music. I could spend hours just laying down listening to a concerto or a jazz session. I guess it helped me get in touch with parts of me that are usually kept obscured. All reasons aside, I just like it. I need to be psychologically ill to not enjoy music. Listening to music was as much an activity for me as watching a movie or reading a book, but the itch to play an instrument, to make music, was never there inside me. I guess I never knew what kind of art I wanted to make, whether I was ever going to make any kind of art.

However, I could much appreciate watching a musician at work, and it amazed me at a profound level how could someone master an instrument to such an extent. As if the nerve endings reach the heart of the instrument and it becomes an extension of the musician's body. When producing a piece of music becomes as effortless as speaking or breathing, when merely conjuring a melody in one's mind becomes sufficient to make it audible and bring it to life. That's something to behold.

It should take years of hard work to reach there, but when I saw that violin inside that glass box, the regret that I hadn't learned to play the violin since the age of six came rushing at me. It was like you were on the exam table and suddenly you regret not having studied the whole year, while during the past months you never had any wish, nor the intention to even pass the exam. I had a strong absurd desire to become a master of the

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

violin the moment I saw it. It felt like it was something I could do, or I was meant to do.

A long moment passed standing there eyes glued on the violin, until I heard a voice speaking to me.

“Do you like it?” said the lady, looking at me from her seat.

“Yeah, I think... How much for it?”

“That’s 109 Euros. It isn’t new. It’s a used violin.”

“I will take it,” I said, without much thinking about it.

I had exactly 112 Euros left with me. It was emergency money, but I had to get that violin. For me, it was an emergency.

“So fast! Don’t you want to try it first, to hold it, examine it?” said the lady, looking a little bit surprised.

“I would’ve, but it would be pointless. I know nothing about violins.”

“I presume it isn’t for you then, a gift?”

“No, it is for me. I will just take it as it is.”

“Oh... I see. Perfect then. I will have it ready for you in a moment.” She didn’t ask any further questions. That, I also appreciated.

The lady stood from her seat and carefully removed the violin from the glass box. She, then, put it inside a leather case she had pulled out from a back room. The little girl was standing on the opposite side of the store observing me quietly.

“To whom did this violin belong to, if I may ask?”

French Stones

“I don’t know who the owner was exactly,” she said, wiping the dust out of the case with a wet tissue. “It was ten years ago if I remember correctly. On a summer night like this, actually, which makes it a funny coincidence. An uncanny-looking man dropped it by. I still remember him very clearly. He was unusually tall and he wore a dark, long coat, a red scarf, and a bowler hat. His skin was too white, not pale, but white, as if milk ran in his veins, not blood. He had blue eyes, but not the type you’d see every day. You couldn’t tell if they were flat or depthless. Didn’t even reflect light. His features were expressionless; he didn’t smile the whole time, not even once.”

“He made me feel uncomfortable. The air around him was heavy and hard to breathe. My granddaughter here was scared of him. She didn’t like him. She hid behind me the whole time. He brought the violin in this same case. He didn’t ask for a specific price, so I gave him a fair amount and he left right after, not a goodbye or a good evening. It seemed as if he just wanted to get rid of it, as if he threw a newborn baby in an orphanage. After he left, I checked the violin. There was no sign of the maker, no violin label. So, to be frank, I don’t know if it’s a cheap piece of wood or if it has any value in it. During the last ten years, no one wanted it. I’ve had some people who were interested in it, violinists mostly, but as soon as I bring it out of the glass box and they hold it in their hands, they immediately reject it and return it with a repulsed look on their faces and leave the store right away. So, I’m not sure if it’s junk or jinxed, in both cases, I’m glad to sell it, so again, are you sure you want it?”

Ten years ago, wasn’t her granddaughter supposed to be a toddler by then, if not even born yet?

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Apparently, it didn’t reject me, so, yes, I still want it.”

“Great then!” She said, and then as if remembering something, she continued, “Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention a little detail. It’s not important, but that man had a little white rat in his coat pocket. Funny, isn’t? That man remains a riddle for me to this day.”



The little girl walked toward me, and unexpectedly, she grabbed my hand, walked me to the round table in the middle of the store and showed me a seat. I didn’t resist or ask any questions. I just turned towards the lady, hoping for some kind of explanation.

“Ah, well... she actually wants me to do a reading on you. She doesn’t do that very often. She must like you. She could be a little whimsical sometimes, but I trust her instincts, and she feels I should read you,” The lady said, a pleasant smile on her face.

“Read me? What do you mean?”

“I’ll just have a peek on your fate, nothing fancy. If it’s okay with you, of course. It’s on the house, so don’t worry. You may later choose whether to believe in what I will tell you or not, it’s up to you. So, what do you say, up for a little experience?”

If I had to pay for it, I’d say it was all a scam, an act performed on every customer, but apparently it wasn’t.

“That’s a bit sudden. What if I don’t want to know my future?”

French Stones

“Everybody is both curious and afraid to know their future. It’s fine if you don’t feel like it, or if you don’t believe in those kinds of things. The decision must be yours. You must be the one to open the doors for me.”

“What doors?”

“Your future lays ahead of you, and if I am going to foresee it, I must first go through you, and I can’t if you don’t let me.”

I looked at the little girl and said jokingly, “Okay, I’ll let your grandma do what you want.” However, the girl’s expression remained unchanged. She just kept eyeing me intently, as if I was an unwanted stranger in the house.

I took a seat, and the lady walked to the closet of rocks and minerals, bringing back two stones to the table.

“That’s an amethyst,” she said, showing me the stones in the palms of her hands. “And that’s a Chrysocolla, they’re called *‘The Eyes of the Night Owl’* I want you to hold each in a hand and close a tight grip on them. Then shut your eyes, breathe slowly, relax, and think of something very personal, something deep, as deep as you could manage. A memory, an idea, a feeling. Something that makes the very core of who you are, can you do that?”

The two stones were the size of a mint candy, oval-shaped like a Quail’s egg. the Amethyst was of a dusky, deep purple. So deep if you stare long enough, you could almost see stars. and the Chrysocolla was a mixture of green and dark shades, as an abstract water painting. I held the two stones in the palms of my hands, stared at them for a short while, and then did what she asked me to.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I closed my eyes and tried to think of something personal and deep, as she had put it. It wasn't an easy task. I didn't know what she meant exactly by 'personal and deep', or what made my very core. I've led a normal life. I experienced no trauma or life-changing events, so it could've been anything. But, if I humored her, I figured that I needed to give the stones access to my inner self. That I was supposed to lead them inside, through the dark caves of my soul, show them the way to my essence, where everything of meaning is safely stored and guarded. Strangely enough, from all the memory I had, I started remembering the first time I had shrimp. I was alone with my father in a restaurant by the port and they were awfully delicious. We watched the sunset as we ate in silence. It was the first time my father told me he was unhappy. I was too young to understand what he meant. Perhaps I still don't.

I breathed deeply and slowly, and, after a while, my consciousness started to wane. I was losing sense of time and of my body. The dimness behind my eyelids grew stronger, like a second eyelid of absolute darkness has fallen upon my eyes. The store became empty, the lady and the girl had disappeared, and the walls had faded away. And I turned into nothing but a fleck floating into nothingness.

I gradually lost control over my thoughts and feelings, and It felt as if I was being dragged by something, by the stones, maybe. It dawned on me that I wasn't the one showing them the way, but they had a will of their own. They knew exactly where to go, they only needed my permission, and they had it. And then, I remembered a memory I didn't even know existed before.



French Stones

I am nine years old, and I am laying down in a hospital bed in a dark, quiet room, intravenous catheter in my arm. My body feels numb, my chest tight and my muscles tingle. My hands and feet are freezing and I am gasping for oxygen. I try to suck in some air, but only a scanty amount manages to get through. Anxiety and confusion claim my heart. I don't know what to do, and no one comes to my aid. I'm having an asthma attack, and I feel like I'm going to die.

Through the window facing my bed, a bright moon hangs still, spilling a silver glow over my body, I stare blankly at the gleaming planet while I slowly fade away. I let go.

From the bed next to me a hand reaches out and holds mine, it feels frail and cold, soft and immaculate. It takes my hand and gently presses tight. The hand laces into mine perfectly, like two pieces of a puzzle, a puzzle made only of two pieces. Suddenly, I sense something warm and vibrant growing inside my chest. And then, as if a flow had been established, every sensation of pain and dullness, of anxiety and fear, begin to leak out of me, through my arm to my hand, and from my hand, it dissipates into the nonexistent space between our palms. As if the hand holding mine is absorbing everything out of me, and within a few seconds, I started feeling light and good, as if I was in a state of bliss, of exaltation... I breathe a deep sigh.

I opened my eyes. The lady and the girl were still there across the table observing me mindfully. I found myself holding the two stones into tight fists, my head felt dizzy and my heart was beating fast. A layer of cold sweat covered my forehead.

"I think that will do. Will you hand me over the stones now please?" said the lady, her warm smile forever abiding.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“What just happened?” I said, pressing the top of my nose with my fingers.

“It’s nothing serious. It will pass. Just breathe. You were absent for thirteen minutes, which is good.”

When I handed her back the stones, she poured a glass of water from the limpid jar on the table and inside went the stones. For a moment of time, she stared at *the Eyes of the Night Owl* as they lay stagnant at the bottom of the glass, she held it midair at the level of her eyes, like a scientist observing a chemical reaction in a test tube, waiting for something to happen. And then, she gulped half of it in one swig.

I had a lot of questions, but I resigned from asking any, I supposed it was her way of doing things, and even if I demanded any explanations, I doubt she’d give me a simple answer. Water always had a mystical element about it. It is not unusual if she used it to practice her craft. I guess she used it as a medium for her psychic powers if she had any. So I just watched, waiting for her to proceed with whatever she was doing.

The little girl stretched her hand and reached for a glass of water, holding it with both hands, she drank the rest of it. I was worried she might swallow a stone and choke. I was about to snap the glass out of her hands when she already downed what remained of the water. Fortunately, the stones were still in the glass.

“It’s okay, she always does that. She likes to do what I do, and *in everything*, actually. Little kids, you know how they could be, don’t you worry,” the lady said, noticing the concerned look on my face. And then she continued, “Now if you excuse me, I will be back in no time.”

French Stones

She left the table and the little girl followed after her. They walked inside the back room and closed the door. I ambled through the store watching different items as I waited for them to come back. Then I noticed that I was enveloped by a sudden, complete silence. Even Maria Callas stopped singing. I heard nothing, not a sound coming from the room, not from outside either. It was as if they were standing behind the door holding their breaths, trying not to make any move. Just when I started getting suspicious, they both emerged back into the store.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said the lady, a different look on her face.

“Actually...” she continued, standing a few meters away from me, her smile turned into a hollow grimace, helplessly mimicking a smile, “I couldn’t get any read on you. It’s not unusual, it happens sometimes. Divination is a mysterious process, you give it your whole and you just wish it gives you a glimpse, but sometimes it just doesn’t. Sorry to waste your time. I guess you didn’t want to know anything in the first place, so I hope you are not so disappointed. I will have your violin ready. I’m sorry, monsieur, it’s time we close.”

I was a little surprised, a little disappointed, and a little relieved. I’d expected that at least she’d tell me something. Fortune tellers always tell you something vague, good, and with a twist. Something that could be interpreted a million ways. Because that’s what people pay for, that’s what they want to hear, a good life pervaded with adventures. Whereas in reality, life is usually miserable and devoid of any adventures. I didn’t pay for my little session there. I guess that gave her a little freedom to be honest with me.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

But still, something didn't add up. The memory I just had, it was soaked with strong sensations. I didn't want to specifically remember that, nor was I aware that such a memory had even existed. It came out of nowhere, or perhaps from somewhere deep and hidden inside my mind. Why did I completely forget about that night at the hospital? I had no idea. True, I used to have asthma attacks when I was little, but I had no recollection at all of that night, that memory disappeared into thin air, and came back again from thin air.

And the hand. I could almost ascertain that I remember to whom it belonged, but I just couldn't put my finger on it. I try to catch that fleeting image, to conjure the face of its owner, but everything is blurred. It is as if only the head of the memory had emerged from the darkness, its whole body remained concealed. I decided I will let go for the moment, and leave.

"I understand. Thank you anyway. Maybe next time the stones will divulge a little of what they saw. I hope it isn't frightening though," I said jokingly.

"Yes, sure. You are welcome anytime."

I paid the fare and she handed me the violin in its case. It was the first time I held a violin case. I felt its weight in my hand. It was light and kinda cool. It felt like I did the right choice buying it, although nothing about it seemed right. I don't even know how to hold it or the bow. As I mentioned before, I knew nothing about violins, or about music, for that matter. I acted solely out of gut.

As I was showing myself to the door, the little girl finally spoke.

French Stones

“*You’ll travel...*” she said, her voice soft yet penetrating; her dark eyes staring fixedly at me, piercing through me. She didn’t blink. She neither smiled, nor did she make any grimace, she continued,

“The Whale will swallow you, take you far away. The Raven will croak, but don’t glance behind. The bard of the night will visit you, don’t give away. Follow him, through the sands and to the edge of time. Only then you’d find your long lost wisdom. And not before you claim it, will you ever return.”

I stared at the girl, and she stared back, never averting her gaze. Then I glanced at the lady with a puzzled smile on my face, expecting she might say something like “Kids! they have a wild imagination, never mind her.” But she didn’t. The lady remained quiet as well, with a shadow of concern on her face. She didn’t look at me; instead, she was staring at the girl, giving her a look of what seemed to me like discrete regret.

Then, the girl went on; *“Things might not make sense in the future, and the sky might not look the same, but don’t be fooled, the soul is unchanged.”*

The lady looked to the ground for a while, then, without a word, she walked around the store, blowing out one candle at a time, and the inside went darker with every flame extinguished. While I was watching her move from one corner to another, I said nothing. The girl stood at the same spot, eyeing me with the same intensity until the place had gone totally dark. Pitch black. Even the lump above the store’s door was turned off. A complete silence, a heavy darkness, swallowed the store, and the lady and the girl had vanished into another world. Not a swish, not a

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

breath. But I knew they were there. I could still feel the weight of the girl's eyes on me.

I stood there at the heart of darkness. Somehow not a single word seemed to be the proper one to say. I just knew it was time to leave, so I turned towards the door and walked out.

As soon I stepped out, the door slowly closed behind me.

In my shorts' pocket, I found the two stones: the Amethyst and the Chrysocolla. The eyes of the night owl.

That's how I got the stones and the cursed anonymous violin.

-8-

Pas De Deux: What's Her Name?

My ignorance of the violin extended far more than I had imagined. First of all, I had no idea it was one of the hardest instruments to play. It required years of diligent practice, *and* a great amount of technique and precision: how to hold the violin, how to hold the bow, the right way to strike the bow, the exact amount of pressure you apply on the bow. And then there was the blank fingerboard on which many notes fit tight together within small spaces, where a one millimeter difference can make you hit the wrong note. And even if you get the note at the desired pitch, you are most likely to get a screech or a graunch, a sound that will make both your ear and others' bleed, at least not until you master a smoothmany delicate bow strike.

On the other hand, it totally slipped my mind that the violin was designed for right-handed people only. As a left-handed, I had to play it differently. I was aware that I had to reverse the strings—the low G would have to take the high E string's place, and the D string would switch places with A. But the issue, as it is usual when facing any conundrum, appeared to be deeper than I thought. Literally deep in the violin, in the sound post and the

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

bass bar, which are two pieces of wood that make up the inner component of the violin. Things that I couldn't simply reverse.

After learning the obstacles that faced me, I yielded and tried to play it with my right hand. But it was as useless as trying to eat soup with a fork or being attractive with a nice attitude. I can't even use a fork with my right hand, even for stabbing someone in the eye. It was just an extension of my body that I utilized only for primitive basic functions, like grabbing things and shaking hands; or punching someone in the face—I had a strong right, and as you've probably guessed, I masturbated with my left. I guess my left hand is the brain in the right one is the muscles, something like that. And so, eventually, I had to play that violin with my left hand. Although it was technically wrong, I had no choice.

I had managed to find a fair amount of tutors on the Internet giving free lessons. You can find anything on the internet. Want to learn how to play Shogi? You got it! Want to learn how to tie the perfect knot for a suicide rope? You got it! Just name it. I was motivated to learn, so I'd sit before my computer screen and practice for hours on end, but I'd get bored easily and jump from one thing to another. Nevertheless, I was pleased with what little I learned. Compared to a real musician, I wasn't doing much, but I wasn't one and I had no intention of going public with what little I wanted to play. Some things we only do for ourselves, and playing the violin was one of them.

I tried to assimilate as much as I could, as *fast* as I could. I started by grasping basic music theory concepts— What's an octave and what's a scale, what's a note and what's a half note, what's a rhythm, tempo right-handed and harmony. And I felt a little proud to learn words like '*Ritornello*' or '*Crescendo*.' If I

Pas De Deux

ever had a snail as a pet, I'd name him Crescendo, and I'd take good care of him, because I like his name.

After I covered a fair part of music theory, I moved to the instrument: how to maintain the right position, how to hold the bow, how to shift from one string to another. When a technique needed at least one week of training, I gave it one day. Of course, I was getting nowhere by this. I was impatient and I just wanted to play something, but all I made was chaotic, unchanneled progress. I remained in that state for four months, trying to play movie themes, famous songs. I didn't like the outcome, and I knew I was getting nowhere by this. Until one day, I decided to see a real tutor.



I still had a week in my hands until my next meeting with Dr. Ezra, so I decided I'd give it a try and pay a visit to the conservatoire in the Central Theater of Bone. Once there, I'll try to find a tutor and see if he could work with me privately. However, something told me it was a bad idea. Perhaps, deep down, I didn't want or *need* a tutor. I wanted to play whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. When doing something you love becomes an obligation, no matter how fun it is, it turns into a burden and you'll soon start to hate it. I didn't want the violin to become another obligation weighing on my chest. I dropped college precisely for that reason. Something else told me I couldn't keep up with the amount of practice, *even* if I got accepted, *that* I was better off self-tutoring. I was making progress. Slow, but still progress.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

In the end, no matter how much arguments I tried to feed myself, I was realistic enough to see the truth. And the truth was, I'd get nowhere close to good doing what I was doing, and I needed to master this violin, *especially* this violin. I decided I'd go next thing in the morning.

Morning came and I overslept. Not until 5 p.m. was I able to finally manage to push myself out of the apartment. I biked to the theater through the rush hour, the city was jammed, roads bursting with cars going in all directions, screaming buses and outraged drivers. Sometimes though, I'd pass across drivers who were completely Zen in their cars. They listened to their music as if they were sitting in an Opera house. Some people, I guess, were more sensitive to music than others—always be wary of those who can drive without listening to music someone once told me. And seeing them made me a little less outraged myself.

I had a cheap cruiser and I didn't hesitate to bump into potholes. I just wanted to get there as soon as I can. Driving in this city, you can't follow a straight line without barging into a hole or two, you just can't—though you are paying a fair amount of taxes that go into road reconstruction—you may watch people driving and think they're all drunk; they're not, they're just avoiding holes.

When I reached the theater, I tied my bike to a metal pole nearby and headed to the entrance. The theater was a grand edifice built by, and you guessed it right, the French! If you stand facing it, you'd see five, great, rectangular glass windows, a large main entrance, and majestic pillars. On top of the windows, there was a sculpture of a naked, winged man, wearing a roman war helmet; a nude lady wearing a veil over her hair holding a basket, and another dude holding a sword vertically. I had seen

Pas De Deux

this sculpture a number of times, but never before had I wondered what it meant or who sculpted it. That day, I did.

I asked the guard at the entrance to show me how to get to the conservatoire. I had the violin case with me and it was enough to make me appear like a fellow musician. He showed me a door, told me to keep walking down the corridor beyond till I reached the rehearsal hall. "But I guess you'd find no one. It's late and we're about to close," he said. But I did find someone.



The violin case in my hand, I walked down the corridor with hesitant steps. The sound of my shoes' low heels echo through the high ceiling, each step adds to my uncertainty. I felt like an impostor. I am no musician, and yet just the mere act of holding such an instrument in my hand publicly felt like I was lying to everyone. I tried to push away such ideas and walk ahead. What the hell. Someday, I wouldn't feel so ashamed, and if I wished for that day to come, then I'd better keep walking.

As I approached the end, the resonance of distant piano notes started to reverberate through the hallway. They reach my ears, so clear, so soothing, like the whispers of an angel leading me to heaven through the void. Someone was playing in the rehearsal hall at the end of the corridor.

The longer I listened, the more the melody became familiar to me. Each note casts a gleam over a hazy memory. Each bar added a piece to the puzzle. I listened intently, until the name of the piece finally comes to me. *Tchaikovsky's 'Pas De Deux.'*

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Strange thing was, I could almost assert that I had never heard the piece before in my life. Why did I recognize it, that I didn't know? The possibility that I'd heard it somewhere before still existed, but to recall the exact name of a piece just by listening to it once or twice was very remote. Besides, it was not an easy feat to recognize a classical tune. It was not like a rock or pop song, where you could remember the lyrics or distinguish the singer's voice, or even hear the name of the song in the words. Classical was different, and if one was not really a connoisseur or a true fan, it'd be unlikely to recognize any melody. Except a very few famous ones, like Beethoven's Symphony No.5 or Mozart's Lacrimosa. But somehow, I recognized Tchaikovsky's piece.

Now intrigued to see the person hitting the keys of the piano, I kept walking. My grip on the violin case was now looser than it was seconds before. The music transported me to a different mood and I gave my ears away to the melody, until I stepped into the large rehearsal hall.

The room was poorly lit and almost empty, except for three kids on one corner tuning their guitars, and one guy putting his clarinet in its case, ready to leave. And in the middle of the hall, there was a girl, playing the Tchaikovsky piece on a grand piano.

I saw her back and I stood still. Her hair kissed her shoulders, slightly quivering as she struck the keys, sometimes gently, sometimes with burning ferocity. Her back swayed back and forth, tenderly with the rhythm of the melody. She didn't notice me. She seems completely unaware of her surroundings, quite submerged in giving life to Tchaikovsky's music. *Why do I recognize the piece?* I closed my eyes, trying to conjure the memory, but nothing came to me.

Pas De Deux

I observed the girl as she played, and a speck of a strange feeling, so tiny at first, so imperceptible, grew inside my chest. A feeling I was not familiar with, and the longer I stared, the more it took form inside me, amplifying with unreserved chaos, shrinking, expanding, throbbing and seeping into every corner of my body. As if an ancient door inside my soul opened wide and something came streaming through, like Gog and Magog, and it was telling me something, something unreal but undeniable. *I know her, this girl.*

The music stopped suddenly and a heavy silence fell upon the hall. The kids with the guitars and the clarinet guy had disappeared somewhere. They probably left, but I was unaware. The place was deserted, there was no one, except the girl on the piano. I stood a few meters behind her. She stopped playing, not gradually, but abruptly. Her fingers still resting on the piano keys. She remained frozen in her seat as if the scene had been paused. I expected her to keep on playing soon, but she didn't. We stay motionless for a while in a moment of absolute silence during, in which neither of us moved a muscle. Until she slowly moved her face to the left, I saw her nose, she looked at her shoulder, and then, at me, as if she finally became aware of my existence, and her eyes met mine.

A shudder ran down my spine. A cold shiver spread to the far ends of my body. My head span lightly, my heart shrank, and a thin layer of tears welled up in my eyes.

How could I have forgotten her? Now I remember it all.

The feeling that was growing inside my chest had now become whole and clear. It was a feeling I had buried inside a long time ago, under shovels of snow and dirt. But for some

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

reason, it had been kept alive and breathing, somewhere deep in my memory, not fully excised. Now I remember! She was the girl from my dream, the girl who held my hand in the hospital room that night...



It all came back. I remembered that night twelve years ago, when I was nine years of age. For some reason, I ended up having an asthma attack. It wasn't very rare back then and it was often manageable with an inhaler. However, that night, it was too severe I had to be taken to the hospital. The details of the memory are blurred and hazy, but I recall having been taken to the emergency room where they stabilized my worsening condition, but the doctor, I guess, saw to it that I spend the night in the hospital to monitor my condition, that I was not ready to leave back home yet. So, I was taken to another room, jammed with beds like tombs in an underground temple room. On each bed, there was a child. Some of them were sleeping, and others glared at me watchfully as I joined them. My bed faced a large glass window, and she was there, right on the bed beside me.

When my parents left and the night deepened, when the lights were turned off and most of the kids had gone to sleep, the attack seized me once again, stronger and more violent. I remembered the feeling of distress and the imminent death that haunted me. How I struggled, but eventually gave up. And how this girl, reached out for me and held my hand, so pure and innocent, so natural and warm. I turned toward her, and I saw her face glowing in the moonlight. She looked at me with eyes full of compassion as she saw the strife I was going through. She blinked, and a tear ran down her cheek, moistening the white

hospital pillow. And without saying a word, I understood every meaning her eyes tried to convey. *She feels sorry for me, she fears for me, she's not shedding tears because she's in pain, but because I am in pain.* This girl, a stranger to me, and yet, she agonized with me as if I was a part of her. And right there and then, I needed no one, no doctor and no friend but her. She held my hand tight, and it took away all my pain, all my fear, and distress. Slowly, it all seeped away out of me. Somehow, by some power, her touch took in all that I felt.

However, the night was long and stifling, and I wouldn't have made it till morning if it wasn't for her.

My body was weak and I soon fell back to sleep, but my chest tightened up once again and I started sucking air with all my might, but only a scarce reached my lungs. I breathed heavily, rapidly, until my chest muscles gave away and I started to lose it. I tried to scream but there wasn't much air inside to give sound to one single weak shriek.

The tiny striving part in me that was still conscious, knowing that there was no soul out there to come to my aid. The hospital, for some reason, was dead quiet. Not a sound, not a swish, not a nurse. I struggled to keep breathing, a struggle paraded with hopelessness. And as the hopelessness began to triumph over my instinct of survival, and as I started to give in, slowly but surely, her hand reached out for me, from the world of the living, and took mine, with the same firm velvet grip. And suddenly all the anguish and agony started to vanish, leaving my body through my arm to my hand, dissolving into the nonexistent space between our palms.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I turned my head toward her, and I saw her, bathed under the silver moonlight spilling from the glass window. She seemed to be breathing heavily, too. Perhaps suffering the same endeavor I was. But she stared at me with the same concerned, fearful look. She didn't say a word, she only tightened her grip, as if to not let me drift into the other world as if fighting fate itself. And after seeing that I was feeling better, she smiled at me, and her eyes glistened in the moon glow like magic. I smile back, and after a short while her breathing stabilizes too, and somehow, was synchronized to the same rate as mine. I breathed the air in and I saw her chest elevating as if it was mine. I breathed out and it flattened softly. We held hands until drowsiness subdued me and I fell into a deep, comfortable sleep.

It was a long night. I don't know how many times I had to wake up under the feeling of suffocation, struggling to keep enough air flowing through my lungs to keep me alive. And I ignored how many times she had to save me. Time had stretched during that night, bent, distorted, and ramified. It didn't flow in a straight line. The events that took place weren't following a linear order. I don't know which one occurred first and which one second. Each memory is like a leaf in a tree rather than a bead in a thread. It felt as if I had lived them all simultaneously, each time I sleep and wake up under the asthma attack, each time she held my hand and saved me. The episodes were intertwined. They all felt *alike* and *different* still. Perhaps that's why my mind had kept the memory of that night hidden, buried deep down, because it failed to make sense out of it, because it didn't submit to the rules of common logic. But now, I saw that girl playing on the piano, Tchaikovsky's 'Pas De Deux' and I remembered it all. My mind couldn't keep hiding it forever. Every suppressed feeling, memory must resurface eventually.

Pas De Deux

That memory ended in the morning. I woke up in the same hospital bed, my mom was in the room, feeling glad, reassured that I had a good night's sleep. The first thing that I always did after I opened my eyes turned my face toward the bed beside me. But the bed was empty. She was gone; her bed was made and no trace of someone ever laying in there the night before. *I think to myself that she must have left early in the morning, and I feel sad about it.* I wished I could talk to her, ask for her name, hold her hand a little longer, but she was gone, vanished, and I hadn't seen her ever since. Not until now.



She stopped playing, and slowly, turned toward me. Our eyes met halfway. She stared at me long and deep. She looked surprised and puzzled, a shadow of a faint smile visited her face quickly, but soon disappeared... I must have had the same look on my face.

She stood up and faced me. We gazed at one another in complete silence, as if we were abstract paintings in a gallery. I wanted to say something, but the memories came back to me with an unprecedented intensity, leaving me speechless. Nothing but silence could do it fairly to this moment. She seemed torn apart between disbelief and a feeling she couldn't ignore. She looked deep into my eyes, not blinking. She didn't stare elsewhere. I could see the confusion on her face, as much as I was confused myself.

A while passed as we stood frosted before she finally seemed to have regained a sense of her surroundings. She glanced at her bag under the grand piano, grabbed it furtively,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

and with large, quick strides, she walked towards me, eyes on the ground. I stood still. I did nothing but watch her. And as she walked past me, her face a few centimeters from mine, she glanced at me and disappeared into the dark corridor beyond. Only the wet echo of her high heels and the scent of her perfume lingered in the air. I was alone in the conservatoire.

I stood there unable to move, my mind a sweet confusion. All I could think of was the color of her eyes. In that fleeting moment, in which she peered into my eyes, walking past me, the details of her face were engraved in my remembrance— her chestnut brown eyes like the wood of my violin, her arched eyebrows and her delicate nose, her wavy hair and her full lips. I can't be mistaken. It was her, the girl I saw in my dream that night sleeping in my bed, staring at the ceiling. The girl in the hospital room when I was a child. She looked nothing like the nine year's old girl I remember, but I recognized her. Her *eyes* are the same.

As I recovered from my instant flush of confusion, I looked behind me, searching for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. I went back the way I came through that long, dark corridor and out of the conservatoire. I swept my surroundings, looking for her. She couldn't have gotten far away. How could I lose her? I must talk to her. *She can't disappear again.* Not after twelve years. I roamed the streets, trying to spot her, I checked every passing pedestrian, every cab, every store, but I couldn't find her. She was gone.

I went back to the conservatoire, hoping that I would find someone who knew her, a friend, a comrade, a teacher. Anyone from whom I could get the slightest hint on how to find her. But the place was empty. I found no one. The guard at the entrance

Pas De Deux

followed me inside and asked me to leave, telling me it was closing time.

-9-

Letters and Paintings Musical Massacre Long Corridors

My uncle was a biologist and a painter. I didn't know he painted until he passed away and I inherited his apartment. He was my only uncle. Though he was rarely in town and kept a somewhat private life, we were close. There was certain tacit complicity between us, like we understood each other's queer convictions and deviant decisions. On various occasions when he tried to explain to everyone his peculiar point of view on certain matters, and when everybody called him a bizarro, I'd tap him on the shoulder and tell him that I understand. Strangely enough, I always did.

At the age of forty-six, he was diagnosed with leukemia. Fortunately, there was no wife or kids to weep for him. My uncle never married, for reasons he had kept for himself alone. But if I had to make a wild guess, I'd say he felt good on his own; he cherished his freedom and he was never sure whether or not he should trade it for something else. Or perhaps he hadn't met the

Letters and Paintings

right woman, or, perhaps, he did and it just didn't work out. It was a cosmic rule in this universe, to maintain a necessary level of drama amongst mortals. Most special relationships were condemned to end up in failure and heartbreak. And I have reasons to think it was the case for him. If a man was happily married, it usually meant he was with the love of his life, and perhaps my uncle didn't want to be unhappy.

Three years ago, he died in a car accident in Lisbon visiting friends. I inherited his apartment along with everything else in it, as he had written in his will; and a good amount of money that I haven't touched yet. Plus a red Aveo Chevrolet. The red Aveo had a dent on the left side of its rear bumper like a dimple. My uncle never fixed it, and I guess it was for a reason. I think it was an imperfection he liked. He'd always leave an unnoticeable imperfection in all of his paintings. He believed that it was a necessary part of perfection.

"Silence is a part of the music. Empty spaces are a part of the painting. Loss is a part of life. And imperfection is a part of beauty. Perfection is nothing but a fine balance between the opposites," he once told me. So, I never fixed the car myself. The red Aveo will have that dimple as long as it is owned by me.

My parents tried to talk me out of moving alone in the apartment, but I moved anyway. It was not like I was going to the moon. The apartment was just on the other side of the city. I had an existential need to live alone, to own my special place, where no one could bother me when I felt like I needed some time on my own (and I feel that way most of the time). Where I could create my own small world as I wished and to have the right atmosphere to think and feel right. Besides, who doesn't feel like walking naked in their own apartments sometimes?

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

My uncle left behind all kinds of things in his apartment, but mainly he left me lots of books and music records. And in the room he used as a workshop, I found numerous paintings, ones he made himself, and others by different artists. I was able to easily distinguish his paintings from others'. They had a unique touch and they all, more or less, shared one subject matter. They all depicted a room with a window or a balcony, the room was jammed with all kinds of items, and there was always a person looking out to the world, sometimes standing beside the window, sometimes sitting in a chair. Sometimes, it was a woman, sometimes it was a man. Sometimes, they were smoking, other times they were drinking a hot drink in a mug. However, he never showed their faces. They all seemed to be lonely people, looking out for something in the distance.

I also found lots of letters. He had a considerable number of correspondence from all over the world, people who still preferred written letters over Emails. And inside one specific wooden box, I found a pile of letters from one particular person, a woman named Petra. I knew nothing about her, but the address was from Montenegro, and the date of some letters goes back many years ago, to the age when my uncle was only twenty-four years old. I never dared to read a letter. I chose to grant him the privacy he always wanted, but It doesn't take a genius to guess what kind of relationship the two of them shared, and when you think about it, it all fits.



I biked home from the theater, took a shower, grabbed the stones I got from France and left the apartment as soon as I could. I needed to walk, alone, breathe some fresh air, and think

Letters and Paintings

things through. Tchaikovsky's *Pas De Deux* in my ears, I strode by the river (which was more of a quagmire than a river) under the night sky. All I had in mind was that girl playing the piano. There was no doubt that she and I were linked somehow. Though what was the nature of our connection, I had no idea.

I had so many unanswered questions. For instance, why had I seen her in my dream, sleeping in my bed right before I had that horrible experience, in which that entity barged in and messed up something in me? Something I could still feel deformed to this day. What was that entity? That strange man with the head of a white rat and unearthly blue eyes? What did it want from me? And was it linked to that girl.. or was it all some kind of malfunction in my psyche? Why did I remember that night at the hospital when the fortune teller in France gave me the two stones? What had truly happened that night, and why had I completely forgotten about that memory? Why did I meet her now a few weeks after having that nightmare, and why do I recognize the Tchaikovsky piece she was playing?

So many questions, but no answers. I sat on a bench by the riverside and hold the two stones in the palm of my hand— the Amethyst and the Chrysocolla. I stared deep and long at them, hoping that they might elude a hint, insinuate an innuendo, whisper an answer, but they were as mute as the still night.

I needed to figure out how could those random events be linked. What possible cause could they share, and for what possible reason are they happening to me? But the more I pondered about it, the more it didn't fit. I could think of nothing to bind them. There was no thread that goes through all the scattered beads. No, the beads didn't even have a hole through which a thread could pass. However, somehow, figuring it all

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

out didn't seem to press me. I cared less if I could make sense out of it any time soon, because I met her, and I had only one priority in mind: *I need to find her, talk to her, and know who she is.* My instinct told me that things would sort themselves out eventually, but for now, she was the answer.

That night, I went to sleep with a speck of something strange in my heart. That night I dreamed again.



I was standing at the heart of a stage. Beside me, a lady was striking the keys on a grand piano, and a whole orchestra was playing behind me. A murky theater stretched out before me; seats full of quiet, snobbish people. I realized it was the same central theater I visited today. But an old aura lingered about it. I looked around me, but nothing struck me as eye-catching, just normal people listening to a musical suite.

I realized that I was a violinist. Not only that, but I was also the concertmaster, and I was playing something with the agility and nimbleness of a true Virtuoso. Again, oddly enough, I recognized the piece. Tchaikovsky's *Pas De Deux*. A moment passed by for me to realize that this was not my body, but someone else's, someone older, taller and more built. This was not me, but it didn't feel so unusual. For some reason, I was familiar with this figure, and with this violin I was holding in my hands, and with the crowds eyeing me with admiration. I finished the piece, bowed down, and the whole theater burst into applause and appreciation.

Suddenly, I heard a scream of a lady echoing through the stale air, emanating from the crowds. And then another

Letters and Paintings

followed, and not before long, panic spread like water waves on the surface of a pond across the gatherings, and everyone starts to agitate, freak out. They left their seats and run around in all directions. Frenzy and havoc possessed the place, like ants going mad after someone had stepped on their colony.

Among the crowds, I distinguished a group of people, youngsters mostly, holding knives and weapons of all kind, stabbing and beating around everyone who stood in their way. They seemed to have planned to raid the theater the exact moment the piece ends. Their outfits and the looks on their eyes easily suggest they were from a different class. They were not wearing suits and fancy clothes like the audience, and they definitely did not come here to listen to music. I reckoned they were some *Anarchists*, and they attacked the concert to get some sort of revenge or send a specific message.

As they wade their way through the horrified crowds, spilling blood and giving soul reapers an extra job. And as they eventually reach the first ranks of seats through the central aisle, I finally got to take a look at their faces. And only then, I understood from the fire burning in their gaze that they *would* kill everyone and wouldn't spare a single soul. They did not come here to rob or to bargain certain conditions, but to perform a masterpiece of a massacre. At that moment, true fear claimed my heart.

Amongst them, I recognized the face of a young man. I didn't know how I know him, or who he might be. He had an appalled look on his face, and the knife in his hand was still shiny and clean. This young man harmed no one yet, and didn't wish to kill anyone, but, somehow, he ended up here. Our eyes meet, and as he seemed to have recognized me as well, he stood still

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

on his spot, his eyes yelling at me ‘Run!’. Behind him, I notice a tall man standing in the shadows, well dressed, hands in pockets, calm and demure, as if he was gazing at the sea. I couldn’t tell which group he belonged to, the attackers’ or the victims’, nor could I see his features, but he seemed to be watching both of us. And then he whispered something in the air. ‘*Remember our deal.*’

A vague color of solace claimed my heart, and with reassuring steps, I put my violin back in its case. I glanced at the young man again as he kept watching me, transfixed, and put the case on a chair where he could see it. This was the end, and I accepted it.

As I walked slowly to the exit of the stage, something sharp and cold pierces my back, cutting through my heart. I fell on my knees and collapsed on the floor. My cheek on the cold, wooden stage, I watched the furtive steps of people running for their lives, and corpses crumbling to the ground. I heard screams and cries, and slowly, every sound became distant, and every image blurred, and then, like a heavy lid, darkness enveloped everything to nil.



I opened my eyes and stared blankly at the ceiling of my room. I didn’t know what time it was, but it should be dark outside. And yet, the room was gleaming with an unusually bright light. *It must be the moon*, I thought. I turned my face languidly towards the half-open window to see the source, and as I looked the other way, I saw *Him*.

Letters and Paintings

He was standing at my bed, motionless in his usual long dark coat, and under the moonlight, I could see his rat-head, his white fur glistening, his blue eyes glaring. There he was again, paying me another visit. A violent wave of shivers ran over my whole body, paralyzing me, leaving me horrified and freezing. I tried to fight it but I realize with bitterness that I had to endure the whole thing once again. There was nothing I could do. I was nothing but an insect trapped in a spider's web.

To my surprise, I noticed a little girl in a white gown standing beside him, clinging to his hand and looking to the ground absently. I looked at her closely, and not before long I realize that this was *her*, the girl on the piano. However, this time she was the child I met at the hospital that night, and not a full-grown adult.

The two of them walked out of the room and disappeared from my sight. Agony left my body as the Rat-man walked away, and I unwillingly stood up from my bed, following them outside. Out of my room, I expected to find the hallway of my flat, but, instead, I found myself facing a long corridor that appeared to be endless. The radiant silver light illuminating my room was flowing out and immersing the hallway into a pale cold whiteness that gradually faded out the further it traveled.

The Rat-man and the little girl were slowly walking ahead, but they seemed to have already gotten so distant from me. Where was he taking her, I wondered. It suddenly dawned on me that I must not let them venture far away, that I must follow them and never lose sight of their trace. I tried to run faster but I couldn't. All I could manage was a steady pace. I felt that my will extended to very limited proportions.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

The more I tried to get closer the more they drift away, I felt helpless, all I could do was watch them walk further and further away.

The little girl suddenly came to a halt, still holding his hand, she turned towards me as if she had sensed my presence. Though the place was dim, I could see she was looking me in the eyes. I stared back, and an unfamiliar feeling struck me. Her eyes were flat, depthless as if there was no soul beating in them, or perhaps a soul was so worn out that it lost every sparkle. Her gaze sets a wave of doubt through me, weakening my will. Her eyes looked nothing like the girl from the hospital that night, or those of the one I met today in the theater, but I was certain this was the same girl. Which one was more real? The longer I gazed into her eyes, the more it became clearer to me. She wanted me to get her, to reach her. A call for help so distant and pale, but I could hear it, there was no mistaking it.

I moved forward. I moved as fast as I could. They were standing still and I was getting closer. And just when I reached, the Rat-man turned his face towards me in a brusque move, sending a sharp, ominous look over me. I shuddered, frozen in fear. I couldn't move forward or run away. His strain was far stronger than me. He would never let me take her from him.

He then opened a door that didn't exist before. He entered and dragged her inside with him, closing the door behind.

I woke up soaking wet, drenched in my sweat. The clock on my phone showed four a.m.

I stepped into the shower, and as the hot water ran down my body, I pondered about my dream. Where could they have gone? Who was that young man I recognized amongst the crowds? The

Letters and Paintings

mark on the back of my shoulder ached and slightly. I looked in the mirror and I saw that its color had turned darker, gaining in dimensions. It was the same spot in which I felt the sharp knife pierce my flesh, I realized.

I made coffee and sat in the balcony waiting for sunrise. I felt so tired and drained out, but I didn't want to go back to sleep. My bed felt the loneliest place on earth.

-10-

Paint That Boredom A Little Music
Disturbing White Teeth
Another Bench

At nine a.m. the next morning, I was already at the entrance of the conservatoire. I tied my bike to the same metal pole and I waited. The whole morning, I waited, hoping she'd make an appearance any time soon, but my patience was fruitless. She never came, not in the morning, not in the afternoon. Dusk fell and I had to go back home empty-handed. I had spent the whole day sitting on a nearby bench in the central square observing the entrance of the theater. I never took my eyes off the entrance, except for a couple minutes at noon, where I headed to a fast feeding restaurant to grab a bite.

I tried to wait for her inside the conservatoire, but the guard made it clear that if I wasn't a student there, then he couldn't let me stay. To my surprise, not only did she not come, but I spotted no other student setting foot in the conservatory that day. I figured that perhaps it was an off day for the institute, or perhaps it opened its doors only once or twice a week, but I didn't know

Paint that Boredom

which days. I still had a few days in my hands till my appointment with Dr. Ezra, so I made up my mind to come every morning for the rest of the week until I finally find her.

The next morning, at nine a.m., I was already sitting on the same bench, facing the theater. This time, I brought along a large thermos of coffee and snacks, so that I wouldn't have to move, lest I'd miss her appearance. I made sure not to forget my earphones. Waiting was less onerous with music on. I had a three hours collection of violin concertos of Farid Farjad on my phone, a Persian violinist, and it was the perfect track for such situations. Stalking, in other words.

Laying still, doing nothing but waiting and observing, time had stretched, a minute took *literally* sixty seconds to pass, and I felt each second and the spaces in between. One, two, three, four... sixty. Back to one again. I had nothing stirring in my mind, nothing to keep me busy thinking, nothing to hook my attention. I just watched the flow of time, running slowly like a flat slow stream in a spring forest.

As much as I tried to keep my eyes on the gate, I couldn't help but contemplate my surroundings. The last days of October were blue and sunny; the air carried northern chilly winds from the high shores of the Mediterranean. The theater was located in downtown Bone, facing the central square. A place surrounded by colonial French architecture, and many stores and restaurants and cafés and hotels. It was a crowded place, dozens of people walked in the stream of my vision each minute. I don't usually stare at pedestrians, but sitting there, with all the time I had, I surprisingly found the process of observing people quite amusing.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

With Farid's music on, every banal scene indulged itself in a very poetic tale, where everything suddenly became artful and brimming with meaning. I stared at an old man sitting on the other bench reading the newspaper, a flock of pigeons feeding by his feet. He wore an old, blue ensemble and a flat hat time had worn out and bleached its original colors. And I wished I was a painter to catch that exact moment and eternalize it in a painting. I don't know what about that scene, but it exuded a certain meaning that wasn't at all ordinary. An ex-girlfriend of mine used to ask me what music I was listening to whenever I made promises to her. That way she knew which ones were real, which ones were under the influence of music—I only made promises when I was soaking with music. Naturally, I never stuck to them. Smart girl.

I watched another man, just walking by, simple clothes, hands in his pockets. He wore a distant look on his face, and somehow, he told a story by himself. I could imagine his whole life unfolding before me. Every tragedy he had lived and every joy. I saw him as a little boy crying with dirty clothes, a teenager having his first smoke in the backyard of his high school, a young man marrying the woman he's not sure he loved, a father with a miserable face, and then this man. Of course, I didn't know the man, but the music enveloped every gesture he made and every detail he bore, he made it all tell a story. Talk about magic.

Then I walked a young lady. Her face muffled in thick, beige scarf; her eyes hidden behind large sunglasses, and she was wearing a long, dark-lavender coat. She walked in fast, long strides into my field of view, into my realm of music, where everything took on a different color, and she became this enthusiastic young girl overflowing with that unsullied

Paint that Boredom

optimism young girls usually carry. A girl who had her spirits broken and her heart shattered into pieces. And eyes that shed torrents of tears on long lonely nights and were possessed by a truthful sadness that she now has to hide behind thick sunglasses. And now she was standing up again, embracing life, promising herself she'd be stronger and solid, to never love again, but secretly wishing to meet someone who would pierce through the high walls she built around herself and make her melt again. Of course, I was probably very wrong. She could be normal, who led a very boring life, but I enjoyed making up stories about random people. I knew reality was much more disappointing.

Observing people from that bench, the waiting became less tedious and more bearable. I had found in the way people walked and dressed, in their features, in their manners, in the way they talked and laughed among themselves, in the way they mused as they ambled alone a certain amusement. I tried to imagine their whole life, what possibly had led them to become the people they are today, and what secrets tomorrow holds for them. While doing so for many hours on end, I had come to the realization that these are not just some people who exist in my world, but each of them is the center of *a* world. Each of them has had a past filled with joys and pains, dreams they aspire to, people they love and want to protect and make happy, people from whom they received deceptions and pangs. Each of them has his own thoughts and beliefs and convictions, each of them has a personal quest they believe they must fulfill, be it absurd or meaningful to me, it sure was important to them. I had come to the realization that I am just a guy sitting on a bench in their world, nothing more. I felt a strong curiosity to learn about all of their stories, and a little sad that I would probably die, missing on most of the stories this world would ever bear.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

A day, then two, then four days had passed without a trace of her. Each day I grew more and more hopeless. A distant voice in me started whispering thoughts like, ‘What the hell are you doing anyway?’ or, ‘What do you expect would happen when you finally meet her?’ but that voice was weak and I was persistent. She had to show herself, soon, someday, and I had to find her. I thought this wasn’t negotiable. I simply had no other choice. I would improvise what to do once we meet.

It was on the fifth day that the situation shifted. I was there at nine in the morning, as usual, coffee and snacks and music on and ready for another big day of surveillance. For some reason, the bench facing the theater was never taken. Or, perhaps that early in the morning people never sat on benches. They usually went to work and schools. I was the queer one, and I started feeling ownership for that bench, same as the bench I used to sit on in the French Town that summer under the oak tree. The sun was warm, the air fresh, and the bells of fate were eager to ring.

At almost ten, a cop showed up. “Show me your identification papers, please.”

A round face and cheap Rayban glasses and a belly that could eclipse the sun. He addressed me with all the severeness an Algerian cop usually carried. I was caught by surprise. My eyes were glued to the theater entrance and I didn’t pay much attention to my surroundings.

“I don’t have it on me. Sorry, sir, have I done something wrong?”

“You were sitting on this same bench doing nothing in particular for four days now. I’m assuming you’re observing the theater. Don’t you think that raises a bit of suspicion? Some

Paint that Boredom

people may think you're up to something, like bombing the theater, for example. Tell me, what are doing exactly?"

Well shit... I didn't consider such a situation. I had to think fast. I sure couldn't tell him the real reason why I was sitting here. *Think, think...*

"I am waiting for a certain girl to show up." Fuck. "All I know is that she's a musician in the conservatory here and I need to see her." I sometimes do a shit job improvising. It happens.

"A girl, huh? And there's no other way to reach her?" The cop exclaimed. I didn't like the tone of his voice. The same tone people with no friends always had.

"I'm afraid not. No, there isn't."

"I'm assuming an old sweetheart, huh? You are not stalking a random girl, are you?" he added sarcastically and smiled. He had white teeth, too white, but not such a great smile.

"Yeah, you could say that. An old sweetheart."

"Too bad, buddy, but you gotta find another way to find her. I have orders to make you leave the scene. As I told you, you have risen suspicion and you have to leave now. I don't wanna see you nearby, either. If I do, it's gonna be trouble for you, so you better just leave, okay?"

Not now, I can't leave. She could appear the moment I turn my back, I've seen it too many times in movies to know it could happen. *I can't just go now.*

"But I told you, officer, I'm just on the lookout for a girl. Am I breaking the law here?"

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I just told you to leave, so asking those questions isn’t gonna change anything for you.” His voice tone turned serious again. My question seemed to upset him, and he started to upset *me*.

“Okay, I’ll leave.” I realized going into further discussion with him wasn’t going to make him change his mind. I decided that I’d come back tomorrow, I’d disguise myself and choose a different, less conspicuous spot. I thought surely the police had better things to do than making sure a random guy doesn’t observe the theater on a public bench. Or maybe they didn’t. Who knows? Perhaps I was the pinnacle of excitement they get to have in their day. Might as well tease them a little more. I stood up and left.

-11-

SOPHIA

I was unlocking my bike from the metal pole near the entrance of the theater ready to leave home when I heard a voice behind me.

“Sorry, that cop had to speak to you.”

I turned to see who it was, and there she was, standing behind me. Same chestnut eyes staring at me warmly, same wavy hair resting on her shoulders. She appeared out of thin air, and I remember exactly how she looked in that moment. She wore a garnet sweater under a long, gray cardigan, black jeans and dark brown Chelsea boots. The wind blew and fluttered her hair against her face, and with her left hand, she pulled it around her ear. A flock of pigeons took off and rode the wind in the back scene. I stood facing her, speechless for a long while. All the noise had gone.

“Can we talk?” I said after mustering some courage.

“Yes,” she answered immediately. “I think we should talk,” Her voice soft and hushed.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Can we go someplace quiet, if you’re not busy, of course.”

“Sure, I know a place. It’s not very far from here. Follow me.”

And I followed her to a nearby café in a modest five-story hotel facing the central square, a two minutes walk from the theater. She walked a little fast, and I was one or two steps behind her. Every now and then, she’d turn around to make sure I was still following. I wasn’t certain of what I was doing exactly. What was I going to tell her? Was I going to talk about the dreams and the memories from that night in the hospital? Does she even remember me? We were complete strangers, leading lives so different from one another. What exactly was I hoping to get from all this? Were we going to be friends? What if she didn’t like the person I am? What if I was too boring for her? What if *I* didn’t find her that interesting? What if we didn’t have anything in common? Why did it even matter that we get along? And why hadn’t I thought about all that earlier when I had all the time I needed? *It doesn’t matter now*, I thought, *I’ll just let the conversation lead itself*.

Birdland was the name of the Café, and it was on the top floor of the hotel. It was a calm empty place, barely anyone inside except for an old man, a foreigner, I assumed, sitting alone reading the newspaper, an untouched slice of lemon cake and a cup of coffee were his only companions. In another table two men were chatting, middle-aged, probably talking business. It was classy and spacious, the walls were painted dark brown and the chairs were cozy and red. It was dimly lighted even at that hour of the day. In the background, classical music was playing, and a certain, unexplained mysteriousness lingered in the café.

SOPHIA

We sat at a table for two in the corner, paralleling a large glass window. She took a seat first. I sat facing her. She remained silent, sweeping the place with her eyes for a few seconds before laying them on me.

“It has been a while since I last came here. I like those photographs,” she said, giving them a second glance. They were photographs of famous places from all over the world in black and white, probably taken by a professional— The Arc De Triumph, The Alcazar palace of Seville, the Astronomical Clock of Prague, Ginza street of Tokyo, and a photograph of the Café de Flore. Two other sites I couldn’t recognize.

“They’re good,” I said after observing the photographs myself. “Makes you feel nostalgic about something.”

“About a life you never lived,” she said, now staring at me. “I’ve never been to Paris, might be a cliché, but there are so many places I’d like to visit there.”

“I’d like to have a coffee at the café De Flore, at least once,” I replied.

“Why there especially?”

“Many artists, writers, and philosophers were regulars at that café, like Pablo Picasso, for example. Can you imagine sitting at the same spot where Picasso himself used to sit, grab a bite or a drink and get inspired? It must be something. Actually, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone De Beauvoir, all were regulars at that café.”

I paused. She leaned on the table and watched me with dreamy eyes.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Go on,” she said.

“Yes. As I was saying, they used the café as their office.” Was I blowing the whole thing up right now? “Not only their favorite place to chill but where they did most of their writings. Sartre once got inspired at that place as he watched the waiter of the café, the way he was so devoted doing his job, the manner in which he walked and behaved himself, how he dressed and how he addressed the customers. He was so into his role as if he was born to be a waiter and nothing else. Sartre used the term *Bad Faith* to describe that concept, that we have a preconception of what we should be and what we should do, that it wasn’t necessarily what we *must* do, that we could be or do many other different things instead, but we stick to one thing. He wrote it all down in his book... I forgot the title.”

“*Being and Nothingness*,” she added.

The waiter came, greeted her warmly, and asked what we would like to have. We ordered a regular coffee and he left right away.

“Yes, that’s the book,” I said, a little amazed. “You should’ve stopped me if you already knew everything about Café De Flore. Now, I feel a little foolish.”

“No, no! I seriously had no idea Picasso used to go there, and I didn’t know the waiter was from that café.” She chuckled faintly. “I read the book so I recalled the waiter thing. Have you read it?”

That was the first time I saw her smile. There are smiles that betray the face and others that brightens it. There are girls who look more beautiful angry than smiling, and there are girls with

SOPHIA

the opposite effects. Her face, however, swung from mysterious to innocent when she smiled. I liked both of her faces, and what I liked more was the sudden shift. She had one dimple on her right cheek. *Just like my uncle's Aveo*, I thought, *strange but interesting*.

"No," I said, after catching my line of thoughts. "I watched a video about Sartre on YouTube. Never read a book of his."

"I read it, but I honestly understood very little. I begged myself not to stop each time I flipped a page. I kept telling myself that this is a deep book, that it can't possibly be that uninteresting, but it was to me. It was a pain finishing it."

I never went through the pain of forcing my way through a book. I had a rule I call the 'fifty-page' rule, which consisted mainly of giving a book a chance of fifty pages. If it didn't hook me by then, I'd close it and throw it away. But I kept the idea for myself.

"It might come in handy someday. A time on a book is never a wasted time," I said.

The waiter brought us coffee in large, red, nicely-shaped cups. She thanked him, added one and a half spoon of sugar, and I watched her as she slowly stirred her coffee. Her nails were perfectly trimmed and naturally colored.

"What's your *bad faith*?" she asked, still stirring and staring at her coffee.

"I'm not sure. I used to go to college. I majored in biology. Now I don't. In that sense, I honestly have no idea what to do with my life."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“At least now, you could whatever you want. When you figure it out. Eventually.”

“What’s yours?” I asked.

She sipped her coffee, glanced at me, then looked out of the window. She did not answer my question.

“So, you saw that policeman talking to me,” I said, changing the subject.

She nodded.

“I was waiting for you to show up. I was watching the entrance of the theater.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“For the past four days, you were doing the same thing.”

“How do you know?!”

“I watched you from the conservatory window every day.”

“From the conservatory window? But I was watching the entrance. You never came to the conservatory...”

“I’ve actually been there every day. It has a separate entrance. It’s on the opposite side of the building,” she lowered her voice as she said that last sentence, a subtle smile of embarrassment on her face.

“Seriously! How come no one told me.”

SOPHIA

“Cruel world, isn’t it? Everybody knew you got the wrong entrance and no one cared to tell you,” she said teasingly.

“But you knew. You’re the cruelest of them all.” And that somehow made her chuckle a little. Making jokes with a person you just met was one risky thing. You never know what kind of humor they developed.

“I’m sorry,” I went on. “You must be confused. You must’ve seen me every day and wondered what on earth does that dude I’ve never seen in my life want from me.”

She fell silent again, looking down at her cup, then she looked at me, and I could tell she wanted to tell me something, but the words faded at the verges of her lips.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked.

She nodded, sipping from her coffee.

“You said you knew I was waiting for you to show up. How did you know I was waiting for you? I mean, I could be just another random guy sitting on a bench.”

Her face wore a shade of an indecipherable seriousness. Her eyes widened as she peeked into mine, searching, as if she was looking for something in the fields beyond my eyes, making sure it was there before her mouth uttered any word. Not averting her eyes, she said, “You’re the boy from that night.”



Her words carried within a strange foreboding, a foreboding that cloaked us in a dreamlike silence, during which we stared at

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

one another, like two strangers, taking off their masks after a long night dancing together in a masked ball. Masks down, real identities revealed, we stared in silence.

She remembered me too. It was not a fabrication of the mind. That memory had truly taken place and she was not just a random girl my subconscious had hazardedly shown me in my dreams. Why had I forgotten about that night in the hospital during all those years, I don't know. But at least, I was finally standing on solid ground. I was no longer drifting in the voids of doubt and insanity. However, I ignored whether things were going to become clearer or more complicated. She was a stranger to me, and yet she felt familiar. Talking to her was like meeting an old companion.

“Do you remember, too?” she asked.

“That's why I'm here.” A shadow of a smile visited her face.

Lowering her gaze, staring at the half-finished cup of coffee between her hands, she went on, “I recognized you the moment I saw you. You know, at the rehearsal hall a few days ago. You look nothing like the kid from that night, but...” She trailed off, “I was able to tell it was you. The memory flashed back at me, and you were standing there, staring at me, and you had that something in your eyes. I didn't know what to do, so I ran away.”

I remained silent, offering her the time she needed to collect her thoughts.

“So, I ran, and I hid, and I watched how you looked for me. I wanted to talk to you but I was...” a short interval of silence interrupted her speech. “I came the next morning,” she went on. “I was nervous I'd find you again, but, at the same time, a part

SOPHIA

of me hoped that I'd see you again, and I was both relieved and disappointed when I found no trace of you anywhere in the conservatory. It was when I looked out from the window around noon that I noticed you, sitting out there on the bench. I wanted to come talk to you, but you can't really blame me if I didn't. I mean, you were a stranger, I remembered you, but I wasn't sure you remembered me as well. As far as anyone could tell, you could be just sitting there chilling or something."

"What about the next day?" asked I.

"Yes, the next day you were there again, and I was watching. It became clearer to me that the reason you were there on that bench had something to do with me. Half of me wanted to come down to you, the other half was just reluctant. I wasn't sure our encounter would be a thing not to regret. I couldn't make a decision. Not that day, nor any other day after." She heaved a sigh, then she went on. "Not until earlier, when I saw the policeman talking to you, that I realized you might go and never come back. And so I ran down, hoping I'd catch you before you leave... Sorry I kept you waiting all these days."

I could see from the look in her eyes that her apology was very sincere. It was not just a courtesy.

"I was coming back the next day anyway," I said.

"Why? Why did you take all that trouble just to meet me? So, what if we met one night at the hospital when we were kids. It isn't such a pleasant memory anyway."

Should I tell her about the dreams, about how I felt that night at the hospital, about the nightmare and the Rat-man walking her down a long corridor, I wasn't sure...

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I’m not sure,” I said. “There are things I have to figure out.”

Another moment passed in silence, in which all the meanings that our little talk carried were sinking deep like shapeless rocks in the dark oceans of my mind; probably in hers, too. We remained voiceless, waiting for the rocks to hit the bottom and stir the untouched cold sands below. Perhaps we could catch a meaning in the odd geometry the sands would make.

“I guess I understand,” she said finally.

The conversation seemed to have reached a point where verbal expressions could no longer convey the meanings we wished to convey. The mood plunged in the quiet hum of the two men talking in the other table and the background classical music. The silence between us was natural, like the silence after a wave kisses the shore, preluding the forthcoming of another. I didn’t feel a need to break it.

“You used to come here a lot?” finally, I asked.

“Yes, I used to come here almost every day with... friends.” A faint ghost of sorrow hovered over her face but soon returned to normal. She had expressive eye; they almost changed color for each emotion, turning their abstruse meanings into tangible material for the soul. From her eyes to my soul. It was clear for me I had stirred unwanted feelings. I was expecting her to explain the reason why she stopped coming to this place, but nothing came after.

“I like it. I never came here before.” I blurted out.

The waiter came and refilled our cups.

SOPHIA

“I enjoyed your playing by the way. I’m no expert in music, but my ear sure liked what it was listening to.”

“I’m flattered. It was Tchaikovsky’s *Pas De Deux*.”

“Yeah, I could tell.”

“That piece is very important to me.”

“For how long you were playing?”

“Since I was nine, but I never participated in any competition, never performed on stage. I just played in a small band a couple of years ago.”

“Is there a reason for that?”

“I guess I never felt the need to win any competition or be recognized. I just wanted to play for myself. I couldn’t wait to finish my curriculum and graduate from music school. I hated exams. I just wanted to play, that’s all. You are a violinist, right?”

“I wouldn’t say *I am* a violinist. I just started practicing months ago. Self-tutoring, if you are wondering why you’ve never seen me before in the conservatory.”

“Do you play it left-handedly?” she asked.

“How did you know?”

“You stirred your coffee and drank it using your left hand, so I figured you’re sinister.”

“I am, actually,” I answered, impressed. “I just can’t do it with my right hand.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I’ve never seen a sinister violinist before. Maybe we could play something together one day,” she suggested. Meaning she was already thinking this was not our last encounter.

“Sure, but I doubt it’s going to be any time soon. Still, have a long road ahead.”

Unlike all good promises, that day actually came to be, the day when we played together. And sometimes, I wish it remained an unfulfilled promise.

“Okay then. Tell me, when you’re not playing the piano, who are you?” I asked, as there was so much I wanted to know about her, and I didn’t know where to start. I also didn’t want to blow it off.

“This is too heavy a question. I don’t think I can answer it using words only,” she said, smiling faintly.

“Yeah, I guess I wouldn’t know how to answer it myself. Do you go to school? I guess that’s a little less heavy.”

“I used to study philosophy, but I dropped out of college, too, a year ago.”

“Do we share the same reasons for doing so?”

“I don’t know about you. Do you want to know about mine?”

“Because you wished the world would end?” I answered jokingly.

“Actually, precisely,” she said, staring at her hands.

“What do you mean?”

SOPHIA

“At a certain point, life was too much. To worry about the future, about money, about the people you love, about the people who love you. About yourself, about trying to become a better person, to become someone important, about never feeling that you are good enough.

“You have to worry about your health, your body, the way you look, the way you dress, you have to be fit, you have to be slim, you have to always feel beautiful... You have to carry on your daily activities, relentlessly. Wake up early in the morning while you still need sleep, eat in a hurry, get ready in a hurry, and then go to college in a hurry. *Every day*. Because you *can't* miss a day. You might tell yourself what the hell, I will take a day off, but you'd only feel you're a little left behind. Somehow 24 hours a day isn't enough. There's so much to do. I want to sleep as much as I want. I want to read as much as I want, I want to watch every great show and great movie there is, I want to have the luxury to do nothing when I feel like doing nothing. I want to take time preparing my meal, and I want to take time eating it. I want to spend more time with my family, with myself, with God. I want to invest more in myself. I want to discover my talents and grow them. I want to play more piano. I want to stop playing the piano when I don't feel like it... I want to be able to let go of everything if I feel like my heart is no longer in it, my studies, my hobbies, my relationships... I felt chained with a thousand chain, years are going by, chances are decreasing, regret is piling up. I'm getting older. Did I imagine I'd be like this at this age when I was fifteen or sixteen? No! I imagined I'd have a much different life, that I'd be freer and more independent, that I would feel better about myself and about my life, that I would no longer have the same fears and the same insecurities. But guess what? I haven't changed much. I'm still

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

the same sixteen years old girl I used to be. I still live with my father and I still wake up in the morning each day to do something I don't really want to do. Don't you wish that the world would end? That a comet would hit earth again and put us to extinction and we get over with it. I just wished that it would all stop, that I could hit the pause button, for a day, for a month, or for ten years."

"Or a zombie apocalypse," I intervened.

"Sometimes I wish I was born in those ancient times when all you had to worry about is food and a warm shelter to hide under when dusk falls. And in all that spare time you have, you would wonder about the world around you, discover new things, contemplate the night sky and wonder what stars really are. Now, I read about it in an elementary school textbook: *'a star is just a distant sun, and our sun is just another star. There are billions and billions in the universe.'* Put as bluntly as that, no magic in it. All the wonderful things about the world were robbed of their luster, and the consequence is a society or a *'humanity'* that doesn't appreciate anything about this universe and this life, that misses the whole point about it. I wish I didn't learn all those fascinating facts. I wish I still didn't know what stars are and where does the earth ends. Could you imagine the thrill those young sailors felt in circumnavigations trips around the world in the 14th century and before, sailing into an ocean and not knowing what's beyond and where it ends? Their imagination could be boundless, limitless. They could picture anything, fantasize about anything. How they must've felt when they reached a new land, a new continent, to put their feet where no one has laid foot before. It's a kind of thrill we're deprived of. Nowadays, we know that if you go all the way you'll just end up from where you started. Big thrill.

SOPHIA

“I’m not wishing for old times or blaming new time, I just hate the way things are now. And when I started to wish for the world to end, it was then when I realized I must do something about my life, because the world wasn’t about to end any time soon. Anger was growing inside me, it started so benign, but it grew out of proportions. Until one day, I woke up in the morning, and I was late again, and I didn’t have much sleep last night, I was so worn out, and as I was getting ready, I looked at myself in the mirror and I saw a miserable face. It saddened me deeply. At that moment, something snapped in me, and I said to myself that’s enough, and I knew that no matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise, nothing would change my mind. Enough. And so I didn’t go to college that day, nor the day after, and not a day ever since.”

She heaved a deep sigh. “Do you understand?”

Looking back, I think she felt a little guilty about saying all that, because that was only half-truth. It wasn’t her real reason for dropping out of college, at least not entirely. Only later on will I learn the full truth.

“I guess I do. I must do after you talked that much,” I kidded. “But I never really aspired to become somebody important, so I didn’t really feel that much pressure. You hated philosophy?”

“I was fond of it. That’s why I majored in it, but studying philosophy isn’t going to make you a philosopher. And soon after I entered college, I discovered that it wasn’t at all what I had in mind. The professors lacked passion, they didn’t love what they taught, and it showed. They lectured in a mechanical, academic way, and that bored me to death. It wasn’t what I signed up for. I also thought I was going to meet people of my

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

own kind, and have those kinds of deep interesting conversations, discussing god and the universe and life and so on, and finally expressing my own thoughts about certain subjects, but I was wrong. None of what I expected was true. I would have hated philosophy itself had I not dropped out.”

“In this case,” I said, raising my cup in the air, “to the dropouts!”

“To the Dropouts!” And we made a toast. What was I meeting this girl for again?

“Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance,” she mused.

“What’s that?”

“That was Sartre. I think this is his finest line.”

She suddenly looked at her watch, as if remembering that time was actually flowing, then she said, “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

She stood up and was ready to leave.

“Wait,” I said. “When can I... see you again? If I may of course, can I perhaps get your phone number, or your social media account, Facebook, or Instagram?”

“I’m sorry, I have neither. I’m free the day after tomorrow. The same spot at 3 p.m.?”

“Of course...”

“I hope this meeting helped you figure out whatever you were trying to figure.”

SOPHIA

“A little, yes,” I said.

She looked out the window absent-mindedly. She fell quiet for a while, then said, “You showed up at a very strange time of my life.” I just watched her. “Anyway, bye.”

As she strode off towards the door, I called out for her again.

“What’s your name?”

“Sophia. My name is Sophia,” she said, giving me a small smile, then left.

I went to pay the fare but the waiter told me, with the warmest smile a waiter could wear, “It’s on the house.”

-12-

Goat in the Desert: An Adagio for Mandolin

I wasn't especially brilliant in college. I actually didn't really dream to become a biologist. I'm aware that it's an interesting field and there's so much one can do and learn, but I wasn't dying to be that kind of person. Why did I do it? Well, I guess at some younger age, I was truly fascinated by how the human body functioned. For me, it was the most sophisticated, most complex piece ever created in the entire universe. The pinnacle of intelligent design. God's masterpiece. For me, it was somewhat a shortcut to understanding and admiring how God's mind worked. I thought that that's what I would be studying for the rest of my life— the wonders of God's craft.

I guess I dreamed to become a neuroscientist at a certain period of my life, to put on a white coat and dwell in my lab alone and plunge over a microscope and do all kinds of experiments, on all sorts of living creatures in complete quietness. Studying and examining life in its utmost primitive and detailed forms. Figuring out more about how it all worked and decrypting its complex mechanisms. And after ten years or

Goat in the Desert

so of dedicated work, I'd be making a major breakthrough, one of the discoveries of the century, and that will be the apogee of my life. Then, I would be truly satisfied with my existence in this comedy of existence.

When I was a high schooler, a teenager, all those ambitions seemed very achievable. The moment I stepped into college, I lost something important. I just didn't want to do it anymore, that sparkle was lost. it wasn't at all what I had expected, wearing that coat and doing research in a lab seemed so distant from where I was standing, at least ten years away, sometimes light-years away. And year after year, that dream was dissipating like sand in water, lost in the thick fog of reality.

It wasn't totally obliterated, as the vestige of that ambition still beats somewhere in the corner of my mind, but it was no longer a vivid dream that keeps me going day after day. I had just... lost it. And so, I studied just barely enough to make it through the next year, without any fire or motivation, waiting for something exceptional to happen and sweep me off the dullness I sunk in deeper each passing day.

I was always a good student during the years before college. Top of my class. Rarely second or third, and that somehow gave me a sense of uniqueness. At least, I was something different from everybody else, even if it was a useless title as 'top of the class'. And though it came with prejudices sometimes, like 'Geek', 'he probably doesn't have a life', and 'that's probably the only thing he's good at'. (Things people who are less good say to feel good about themselves, though sometimes they weren't really that far from the truth), but for me, that title was a heavy anchor for my self-esteem. I wasn't even the top of all the classes in my school, and there were countless classes in

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

countless other schools over the city, but nevertheless, I *was something* in my class.

I didn't consider myself the smartest. I knew many other smart people who could've easily done better than I did, but they were lazy, and I was just less lazy. I wasn't that hard-working either. I was simply conscientious. I just couldn't walk to the exam room without having gone over all the material the night or two before the exams, and that seemed to work all over the primary, middle and high school. But I guess it isn't how talented or how smart you are that made the difference. It's how hard you work for it. People with less fortune often times achieve much more than those blessed with a godly gift. I guess in that sense, the world is a fair place.

In the university entrance exam, I ranked first in my high school, that was the pinnacle of my life, and it was downhill ever since. In college, everybody was smart, many students were top of their classes, and not before long I lost every sense of individuality I once enjoyed. I was just one among many. I wasn't special in any other possible way. The only thing that had me distinguishable then, everyone had it now and in abundance. And sooner I felt like one bee in a nest of hundreds of other hard-working bees.

I lost some of my self-esteem. I lost my dream. I had no big ambition I looked forward to in the future. I had nothing special to wake up for in the morning. I didn't especially want to become a biologist. And so, my life consisted mainly of a long anticipation, like sitting in the waiting room without ever knowing if the doctor is going to show up. It could last an hour, a few days, or years.

Goat in the Desert

One day in the lab while the professor was explaining something about how cells commit suicide to protect the rest of the organism, something called ‘Autophagy’. While I was at the verge of giving it all up, asking myself what the hell was I doing there, my friend, who was standing at the back of the group with me told me, “You should move to the front, perhaps it will be in the exam.”

“I might not survive to see that day,” I answered.

“Stop being such a drama bitch.”

“I’m serious. The point of it all is that it has no point.”

“You should be a writer, some people will like the crap you’re saying,” he said.

A writer. Such a word seemed more distant to me than becoming a scientist. It wasn’t a bad one either. At least writers get to be cool in their unhappiness. I was just unhappy.

I was thinking about all that as I gazed vacantly at the green meadows elapsing before me from the side window of Ezra’s car: my life, my distant ambitions, my value as an individual. For the first time, I contemplated the possibility that I was not yet fit to know what was best for me. For so many years, I was just a dead leaf floating on a slow stream, not really minding where I was going; whether or not was it possible to go anywhere else. Study hard and go to a good college and have a good job and marry a good wife and start a warm family and appreciate the warmth until your days are over. Don’t get me wrong, this wasn’t such a bad plan. I mean, most of us didn’t go to good colleges, most of us don’t marry the right person, and rarely anyone was spending the rest of his days in the warmth of

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

his family. However, I wished I was a leaf swaying in the winds instead, played by the unpredictable breeze, and landing on lands I never thought I'd ever be. My life was foreseeable. I could almost see an overall picture of what would happen. That picture had often given me a sense of reassurance, of safety, but on that day in the car with Dr. Ezra. It troubled me that my life was that much expected. It troubled me that I knew what I wanted in life.



I met Dr. Ezra as planned, a week after our first meeting. He was expecting me and as soon as I arrived. He said that we would be going to *the Oracle's* house by car. And so, we hit the road.

He had a black Octavia. The interior was neat and clean and impregnated with the smell of a newly bought car. Leather seats and a wooden dashboard, high def. An LCD screen and tinted windows, as elegant as the way he dressed. One could easily notice how much attention he gave to his clothing and belongings.

Dr. Ezra was not very talkative on the road. He had rather a spaced-out look on his face. It was hard to guess what was going on inside that man's head. A lot could be going on, or nothing at all. So we just remained silent as we listened to some of Rachmaninoff's music, Satie, and Samuel barber's adagio for strings.

"I hope you don't mind classical music," he uttered before turning the player on.

"Not at all," I replied.

Goat in the Desert

It was almost two in the afternoon; we drove far from the city, until I lost track of our exact location. All I could see was repeating landscapes of green meadows, rows of cypress trees, and scattered houses on small villages along the road. A dome of gravel-gray covered the sky, thick clouds hovered low, until it started raining, gently and delicately. Tiny droplets pitter-pattered against the glass of my window. I lost track of the scenes outside as I contemplated the raindrops as they splashed against the glass. Following their tracks as they slid down, I noticed they never pursue a straight line— *a drop of rain was more unpredictable than my life*, I thought. Sometimes, two droplets joined together to become a bigger one, steadier, and glossier.

“How can she help me?” I asked

“Let’s just say she’s gifted,” he said after lowering the music’s volume a little.

“Is she like a conjurer?”

“Don’t worry. She’s no charlatan, and there’s no black magic involved if that’s what you’re worried about. At least, trust that I have a minimum amount of intelligence not to fall for anyone’s tricks.”

“Okay. If you say so. What’s her name?”

“She’s known by the name of the Oracle. Nobody actually knows her real name.”

“Mystery intensifies. Do you trust her?” I asked.

“I do.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Okay then. Let’s hope she likes me.”

After about forty minutes driving, at a junction, we took a ninety-degree turn. The road stretched far beyond and seemed to lead nowhere. He drove along for a considerable amount of time and then took another turn that led to the woods, an almost invisible, unpaved road inside a tunnel of thick trees that was almost dark under the daylight. He followed it until we reached a sign that said: ‘*Private property! Do not trespass please.*’ At the end of the road, we finally reached the destined place.

It was a one-story mansion, located in the middle of a deserted forest and completely surrounded by trees. There was no fence, no guard, no dog, and no car parked anywhere. There was no sign of human life. In the middle of the courtyard stood a dry marble fountain. On top of which, a sculpture of a naked, winged man wearing a Roman helmet was perched. He seemed to be pointing at something in the sky.

The front courtyard had enough space to receive four cars at maximum. Not very spacious or majestic, but it had a beauty of its own. We parked and stepped out of the vehicle. The soil was moist under the drizzling sky, and the air was colder than I had expected. No one came to greet us. I watched the curtains behind the windows, to see if someone was peeking at us from inside, but they remained still. The place was ghost-quiet. All I could hear was the wind whistling through the leaves, the distant creeks of some lonely birds.

“Come, let’s get in. It’s cold,” said Dr. Ezra, rubbing his hands together.

I followed him to the door. He knocked twice, and a man, as it appeared from his clothing to be the butler of the mansion

Goat in the Desert

opened the door shortly after the knock. The wrinkles on his face bespoke his old age; it was meticulously shaved and he behaved himself in a very erect manner. He bowed at us in respect and showed us to the living room. He said no word.

The house turned out to be way more spacious than I had anticipated. It seemed to stretch far into the forest. The inside of the mansion is centered around a vast hallway, a doorway was on either side of the hall that leads to other rooms, and the living room was just an extension of the main hallway, separated only by two huge pillars. The walls were of dark red ornamented with golden fractal-like shapes. However, I saw no grand vases, no august paintings, no ancient clocks, just blank empty walls.

The living room was enormous. They had very little furniture except for one loveseat and two sofas, which were placed in the center around a small, wooden table. There was a fireplace and one single painting hung on the wall just above it. It depicted a woman sitting on a high seat, and she appeared to be listening to a Greek man wearing red as he was talking to something over the body of a dead sheep. Very simple to interpret.

“That’s *‘Lycurgus consulting the Pythia’*, by Eugene Delacroix,” said Dr. Ezra as he noticed how absorbed I was in the painting. We took seats and waited.

“Who’s Lycurgus?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” he replied, “but that lady, Pythia, was the high priestess of the Temple of Apollo at the city of Delphi, you know, ancient Greece.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“So, people consulted her? Like that guy. What’s his name again?”

“Lycurgus. And, yes, they consulted her on all kinds of matters. Mostly wars, whether it was advisable or not to go into wars and whether they’ll win or lose and all that jazz.”

“Nice. I bet she made good money.”

“During those times, the highest priestess meant the most powerful woman in the entire world. Kings revered her and many have mentioned her in their writings. Aristotle, Plato, Sophocles, and Euripides said she made pretty accurate prophecies.”

“I gotta say, she has charisma.”

“That’s not how she really looks, actually. Eugene lived in the 19th century. She lived around the 8th century BC, so no one actually knows what she looked like.”

There was something about that painting. It stood there in the middle of the wall above the fireplace. It was the only painting I saw in the house. The dim light spilling from the tall window at the end of the living room gave it a bewitching charm. *Pythia...*

As we waited on the sofas, the butler served us tea in luxurious cups with cookies and lemon slices. Or what looked like tea. I didn’t know what kind of drink it was exactly. Probably some herbs I never tasted before, but it didn’t smell so pungent. I squeezed two slices of lemon into my cup and sipped it. It was strangely bitter.

Goat in the Desert

After a while, a little girl finally appeared and joined us. She was about ten or nine years old. A girl kissed by the flames, a redhead. Her hair was long and wavy; her eyes a bottomless dark pit. She wore a dark green sweater and blue jeans and was conventionally a real beauty for her age.

“That’s Mandolin, the Oracle’s granddaughter,” said Dr. Ezra. “She might look young, but she’s really mature.”

“Mandolin, like the musical instrument?” I asked.

“Yeah, well... that’s not her real name, but she likes to be called by that nickname.”

“I see. I like it anyway. Hello, Mandolin!” I greeted her with a smile, which she didn’t return.

“So, that’s him,” she said to Dr. Ezra as she examined me with her gaze.

“Yes. He’s suffering from those kinds of nightmares. He came for help.” And then he glanced towards me. “I have told the Oracle everything about you over the phone, and she practically tells Mandolin everything. She’s more like her assistant.”

“Finish your tea and let’s go to *the Room*, please,” she stated, this time addressing me, her gaze cold and piercing.

I gulped down my tea. It was a little hot and it hurt my throat, but I didn’t want to waste anyone’s time. Mandolin stood from her seat and naturally held my hand. It reminded me of the little girl in that spirit shop from last summer. She did the same, and they had the same, cold, slender hand. Mandolin walked me

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

through the dark hallways to another room, *The Room*. Ezra followed.

With nothing but one, long sofa, two wooden chairs and what looked like a psychoanalyst's therapy bed, the room was—like the rest of the mansion—darkened and smelled of loneliness. Inside the room, there was another door that appeared to be leading to an anti-chamber, and one long window that let a little daylight seep through. It was too obscure, I hardly saw anything inside.

I had expected to find the Oracle inside the room waiting for me, but it was empty. So far, I only saw the butler and Mandolin inside this big mansion, which was a bit unsettling.

“Lay here, please.” She pointed to the therapy bed. “Close your eyes and try to relax.” Her low voice tone mismatched her age. If I only heard her voice, I'd say she was sixteen or seventeen, but she was just a little girl. A strange one, she was. Dr. Ezra seated himself on the sofa and took a little book from his cashmere's pocket.

“Just do as she says and it'll be all over soon,” he told me before he indulged into his reading. Mandolin entered the second door and closed it behind her.

I took off my shoes, unfastened my belt, closed my eyes, and tried to relax as much as I could. I took a deep breath in and let it inside for a few seconds then I slowly exhaled, moving my consciousness over my whole body and relaxing every muscle on the way. I repeated the process a few times. Before long, my head became very light, my body was slowly turning into a volatile fog. I felt I was floating a few centimeters over the bed, and soon sleep enveloped me like a warm, thick membrane.

Goat in the Desert

With that, I slept.



I opened my eyes slowly. The room was brighter than I recall. A rich silver beam flooded the inside through the window; that light again, why did it feel familiar? I peeked outside the window and I saw that dusk had already fallen. *How much had I slept anyway*, I wonder.

I tried to glance at the watch but my phone was nowhere to be found. The room was vacant and the air around me was thin and heavy to breathe. Everyone had disappeared and I didn't feel so right. I stood up, looked around, and with leaden steps, I walked out of the room.

The moment I stepped out, I felt a presence behind me, so dense and ominous. I looked back and I saw the dark silhouette of a woman. She was tall and her hair was long and a bit messy, but I could only make out the outlines of her body standing upright beside the window. I couldn't see her face, but I knew she was watching me.

I walk down the corridor, expecting that I'd find Dr. Ezra, Mandolin, and the Oracle in the living room, but the corridor was long. So long, it seemed endless. The golden fractals on the red walls of the mansion seemed to vibrate imperceptibly as I walk by, giving me the sensation that the house was alive, *watching* me. My mind was a bit foggy.

After a few moments striding down the corridor, I looked back again and the shadow lady was still behind me, following me silently. My head was hazy and I couldn't think straight. I

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

knew that something was deeply twisted, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Was it the walls? Was it me? Or was it the lady behind me? Which was normal and which was not, I could not tell.

As I stared ahead, I glimpsed the walking silhouettes of two bodies, one of a tall man and one of a little girl holding his hand. I quickened my pace and approached them, but the more I got closer the more it became clear to me that this was the Rat-man from my dreams and little Sophia. A vague memory flashed in my head, giving me the sensation that I had already seen this, that I had already been here before. Where was this man taking her? Something didn't feel right. *I have to reach her*, I thought to myself. I kept walking in their direction as fast as I could, but as I got close enough, he opened a door and walked in with little Sophia. However, this time he didn't close it behind him. Did he close it before? I couldn't remember. I followed them inside.

A sea of white sands unraveled before me the moment I walked through that door. For as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but infinite dunes of white sands glinting under a bright night sky. The Rat-man and little Sophia were marching ahead, and I carried on my pursuit, trying not to lose sight of them. As I advanced forward, I noticed that I was barefoot, because the sand was cold and soft under the sole of my feet. Yet, the air wasn't crisp, but rather warm and humid, and no wind blew against my skin. The desert was as quiet and lonesome as a roaming asteroid drifting in space. I looked up at the sky and saw a brilliant moon, as radiant as a dying star. And on the other side of the night-dome, I saw four stars aligned diagonally, almost in a straight line. Another *deja-vu* sensation seized me as I got absorbed in the shape of those four stars. *Why does sand feel so cold; why is the moon so bright?* I still felt

Goat in the Desert

thick fog enveloping my head, but I had one thing in mind—follow them. That was the only thing I felt I must do. And so, I kept tailing them as they advance ahead towards an empty horizon. I would sometimes look back, glimpse at the shadow lady behind me. It still kept a constant distance between us.

Somehow, I felt no fatigue or thirst; my respiration was steady and so was my heart rate. The longer I walked, the more the emptiness of the desert turned me into an empty shell. I gradually lost all sensations. I felt no fear, no joy, no yearn, nor confusion. For a fleeting moment, it felt so good not to feel a thing, but no sooner did I dwell in that ephemeral bliss. Then, it disappeared into nothingness as well.

At my right horizon, I glimpsed blurred silhouettes of two giant men and a goat walking in the opposite direction. The goat had colossal horns and long slender legs. And the two men were built, dragging giant tombs across the desert. They were going somewhere it seems. I looked up at the sky again and I saw felt only *three* stars aligned instead of *four*. Something feels different, but I was numb; my sensations had abandoned me. The bizarreness of the whole reality around me didn't seem to strike me as odd. It swirled through me and around me; instead, I felt I was a part of it.

After I don't know how much time or how long of a distant did I walk, something appeared in the distance. A little, white house with a dome as big as a single room. The Rat-man and Little Sophia seemed to be heading its way, until they finally reached it. He pushed the door open and they disappeared inside. Now there was no one except me and the shadow lady behind

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

me in the insane vastness of this desert. Even the giant men and the goat had vanished somewhere.

Just before I reached the white dome house, an old man with a long white beard, wearing a four-piece, dark green suit and a purple tie appeared before me. A wooden stick in his left hand.

“What are thou doing here?” he asked, his voice ambient and mighty.

“I think I am lost,” a voice in me answered, but *not* me.

“Thou art a foreigner here. It is a dangerous place. Thou should not be here.”

I tried to look him in the eyes but I noticed he had no eyes.

“Here is the exit, but *never* come back,” he said, pointing with his stick to a door that had just appeared behind me. I opened it and walked through, but there was nothing behind but an endless vacuum I kept falling until I finally woke up.

Dr. Ezra was still reading his book laying on the sofa, and Mandolin was sitting beside him playing a video game on her smartphone.

Heavy rain splashed against the window.



“He’s awake,” stated, Dr. Ezra.

My head felt heavy, my eyes burning, and my feet cold. The sensation of the sands remained and reminded me of the whole dream I had just had.

Goat in the Desert

“Drink,” said Mandolin, handing me a glass of water. “You’ll feel better after a while.”

I realized how thirsty I was, so I gulped it down in one breath. I tried to sit.

“For how long was I asleep?” I asked.

“One hour and thirty-seven minutes,” answered Dr. Ezra without looking at his watch.

“You must have some questions. Gather your senses and let’s talk,” said Mandolin as she sat on the chair beside me.

“What happened?”

“The tea you drank earlier, it was an elixir called the Ayahuasca. It sort of dissociates your soul from your body and gives you a lucid dream. That’s what happened to you,” she answered with no hint of emotion.

“How do you feel?” asked Dr. Ezra.

“Kinda dizzy and strange all over.”

“That’s your first time. What you feel is normal,” he stated.

I fell silent for a while, catching my scattered senses and half expecting a full explanation. I looked around but the Oracle was nowhere to be seen.

Mandolin kept eyeing me strangely until she finally said, “Here’s what the Oracle wants you to know. The man you had followed is the one responsible for your nightmares, as you have probably guessed yourself by now. She says she shouldn’t have let you follow him that far, she shouldn’t have let you walk

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

through that door, out of this realm to the other realm. But she had to in order to better understand what is exactly wrong with you. You must understand that the world of dreams is a complicated one, full of symbols and metaphors. She says your case is a little bit different, even a little disturbing. Something she feels not quite right, but she can't put her finger on it yet. That's why she can't say anything for sure just yet."

Strangely, she mentioned nothing about Sophia.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Behind that door," she said, pointing to the second door. "I'm sorry, but you can't see her. Not yet."

I glanced at Dr. Ezra, hoping for an explanation, my head was throbbing, and I started to get mad. But he just glanced back and nodded.

"You must have seen a lady in your dreams, that was her. She was sitting here the whole time beside you while you slept," continued Mandolin.

"Why doesn't she want to see me?"

"Don't take it personally, she sees no one, except a very few. She communicates through someone else. This time it happens to be me. She explained everything you need to know before you woke up and went back to her room," Mandolin spoke in the same manner of a middle-aged wise lady. I assumed she spent too much time around the Oracle, and looked up to her and wanted to be like her.

"Is that all? Who is that man and what does he want from me?"

Goat in the Desert

“She doesn’t know. She cannot know, yet. That kind of knowledge exceeds her powers for the time being.”

“I am confused here. Am I in danger or something? And what are her ‘*powers*’ exactly if she can’t know anything?”

“Yes, you are,” she answered firmly, seeming a little upset. “If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have come here. There’s no telling what is going to happen to you next, she says.”

“That was a bit harsh and blunt. Not cool,” I said, as I eyed her daringly, totally omitting the fact that she was just a little girl.

Dr. Ezra stood up from his seat and looked at his watch. “I think it’s time we leave,” he said. “Let’s go to the living room and give them some privacy. I’m sure the Oracle needs to speak with Mandolin. Right?” He looked at Mandolin. “Or do you want me to speak to her myself? Because she definitely has a little more to say.”

They exchanged a riddled glance before she answered. “I’ll see if she has anything else to say.”

And so, we exited the Room, Dr. Ezra and I, and waited in the living room. We remained quiet. I had a lot of questions, but my head was mud and I needed silence. A few minutes later, Mandolin showed up again. “Would you come back next week, please? She says she needs some material she cannot get her hands on for the moment, but they should be available by next week.”

“Is that all?” asked Dr. Ezra, a little bit confused.

““Yes, come back next week, please,” she says.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Dr. Ezra looked upset. This was clearly not the kind of things he expected her to say, and neither did I. With sudden, long strides, he walked back to the Room; Mandolin followed him after she asked him to stop, but they both disappeared and I was left alone in the living room, sitting on the sofa facing the Pythia painting. I waited like a patient with an ambiguous diagnosis that the doctors were hesitant to announce. As I was immersed in the details of the painting, the butler came in and served me tea and lemon slices.

“I’m not drinking that. You drink it,” I exclaimed. Enough spiritual beverages for one day.

“Don’t worry. It’s normal tea.”

“Okay, if you say so.” I was still thirsty.

I squeezed the lemon and sipped my tea, eyes still fixed on the painting. It was the only object I could look at in the whole room.

“Do you realize you’re looking at an original?” said, the butler.

“You mean that’s the real painting that Eugene painted himself?”

“Yes. Fascinating, isn’t it?” I wasn’t an art dealer or an expert, so I didn’t know how really fascinating it was.

“Indeed. Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask all the questions in the world; however, I am not sure you’d be granted the answers you are seeking.”

Goat in the Desert

You could've just said yes or no, I wanted to tell him. "How long have you been with the Oracle?"

"*Oh*. As long as I can remember," he answered, a nostalgic smile on his face.

"And why is it that no one can see her?"

The butler fell quiet for a while looking to the ground, and then, he looked up, and under the faint sunlight filtering through the curtains, I glimpsed a film of tears welling up in his eyes. I didn't know if I should've regretted asking him that question or not, but I judged it would be better not to just say anything.

"Perhaps you won't be granted that answer. Now, if you'll excuse me." With that, he left.

"I'm sorry!" I shouted. I had clearly stirred unwanted feelings in him. I felt sorry for the old man. Whatever the reason she was not showing herself must be a serious one, I figured. How does one end up working a butler for an Oracle in the middle of the forest anyway?

Dr. Ezra came back to the living room after he followed Mandolin. I couldn't quite read the expression on his face, he looked a little less upset but even more confused. He took a seat beside me and crossed his legs.

"She says she needs some kind of stones that she can't have for the time being and that it'll take her a while to get them. I don't understand. She usually gives some herbs to drink or to burn, or some potions or to perform certain rituals. But this time she needs stones!" He seemed a little bit infuriated. "Is this some kind of payback? Because It's been a long time since I hadn't paid a visit? Tell me, Mandolin. You must know."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“No, I don’t think it’s payback, Doctor. The Oracle does not mix feelings with work. She really needs the stones. Although she would have appreciated it if you visited her more often,” she said, her voice monotonous, flat.

“I’m sorry. I feel I wasted your time, but I guess we need to wait a little longer.” Now addressing me.

“No, it’s fine, but, what kind of stones?” I asked, taken aback. Of course, The purple Amethyst and the dark green Chrysocolla the fortune-teller gave me in France last summer hit me.

“Some kind of spiritual stones she says. I don’t know,” He answered.

“They’re called *the Eyes of the Night Owl*, and she really needs them in order to help you,” added Mandolin. And... bingo.

“I don’t think we should wait for a whole week, because I think I have them...” I claimed.

Now both were staring at me in a strange way.

“It’s a dark purple stone and a green one if I’m not mistaken,” I said

“That’s right. Where did you get them?” asked Mandolin, looking genuinely curious. Finally, I saw some emotions on her face.

“A lady gave them to me last summer in France. The lady is a fortune teller, deals with spiritualities and stuff, much like your Oracle, I think.”

Goat in the Desert

“A fortune-teller...” she paused, contemplating. “How come she ended up giving you those two stones?” she asked again with the same intense interest.

“It’s a little complicated, but she made me hold each in the palms of my hands and think of something personal. After this, she put them in a glass of water and gulped it down. She didn’t drink the stones, of course, just the water.”

“Thanks for the clarification on that last detail. Really helpful,” she said.

Mandolin spaced out for a short while, seemingly submerged into deep thinking, and then she asked me, “Did, by any chance, that fortune teller have a little girl with her?”

“Actually, yes, she did. Is that a common thing or some thing?”

“*Lilith...*” Mandolin uttered, barely audible, “that’s good news. You must bring the two stones and come back as soon as you can. The Oracle has to confirm that the stones are the real deal herself.”

“I think that solves it then,” said Dr. Ezra.

“I think it’s time we leave now. Let’s go.” He was puzzled but relieved.

The butler walked us to the door and greeted us as we left. Mandolin, standing behind him, kept staring at me fixedly. I couldn’t read the look in her eyes or what it meant. It wasn’t expressionless, but it had an expression that was too intricate for me to unriddle.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Outside, the downpour had subsided and sun rays made their way through cracks in the thick layer of gray clouds. *They lived in a beautiful place*, I thought.

I looked back at the mansion, and I noticed I had missed something when I first entered. There was an inscription on top of the door engraved into the frame. I said ‘*Nosce Te Ipsum.*’ It was probably Latin or Greek, and I couldn’t read both. However, it rang a bell.

On the way home, Dr. Ezra didn’t say much. Listening to music on the player and looking out the window. That was all I did.

Until I asked him. “So how come you could see the Oracle from all people?”

“I told you, we go way back.”

“How old?”

“I used to bring her some of my patients, ones with the same nightmares as yours, some others with different symptoms. She can sometimes handle what science has yet to figure out.”

“You know, I have a theory on why she can’t see anyone.”

“Go ahead, amuse me,” he said, glancing at me with half an eye.

“I think a sort of disease or maybe an accident defiled her face. Now the poor lady looks horrible and she can’t let anyone see her.”

“Why do you think that?”

Goat in the Desert

“It’s the butler. When I asked him why can no one see the oracle, he almost shed a tear. Judging from his age, I assume he has been the butler of that mansion for ages, and he must really love the Oracle and so when she got the disease or the burn on her face, he felt really sorry for her. *I am* right, right?”

“Not bad. I don’t know. Maybe you are, maybe you’re not.”

“You mean I am and you can’t tell because she made you keep it a secret. It’s okay, I understand. You can just hint at it.”

“Okay, think as you like.” He winked at me. I didn’t know if it was a sarcastic wink or not. He winked in a very serious manner.

“So, you have seen a fortune teller before?” he asked.

“Yes, I have, last summer.”

“What for?”

“I wanted to know how rich I was going to be in the future,” I joked, and it was the first time I made a joke with Dr. Ezra. But I regretted it a second after. “Just kidding.”

He chuckled and then said, “I actually believed you. Good. Saves me the whole lecture ‘money isn’t everything’ thing.”

“I kinda get that at a certain level, but still, money doesn’t buy happiness but *it is* the matrix of happiness.”

“True, very true.”

“I actually didn’t go to a fortune-teller. She proposed to read me and I had no reason to refuse.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Isn’t accepting her considered a little bit of heresy in your religion?”

“Believing what she says kinda is. I just heard what she had to say.”

“So? How wealthy are you going to be?”

“Rich enough to buy all the cheese in the world.”

“That isn’t half bad,” he stated, impressed.

“Actually, she said ‘I have nothing to tell you.’ She said she couldn’t get a read on me. Pretty bizarre, I thought.”

“Yeah, that *is* weird. Fortune tellers always have something ambiguous and good to say.”

“That’s what I thought, too.”

“Give me your phone,” he requested. I unlocked it and handed it over. “Here’s my personal number. Call me when you have the two stones ready and we’ll pay her another visit, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. I wanted to ask him why he was helping me, but I decided not to.

I haven’t forgotten what the little girl said that night in France, I just decided I’d keep it for myself.

“The Whale will swallow you, take you far away. The Raven will croak, but don’t look behind. The bard of the night will visit you, don’t give away. Follow him, through the sands and to the edge of time. Only then you’d find your long-lost wisdom. And not before you claim it, will you ever return.”

Goat in the Desert

That was what she said. I couldn't shake it off my mind this whole time.

He dropped me home and we parted ways. I had a lot to think about, the vivid details of that dream still hovered in my memory, and I had to have time with myself alone to process all that.

-13-

Midnight Madness: One, Two, Three Four...

“Those who haughtily boast about their ideals are the ones to fail drastically when put into practice. And those who appear unrighteous to the crowds often prove to be the ones who unhesitatingly live by their ideals. Those are the ones most faithful and most honest. Don’t be fooled, those who talk don’t do, and those who do don’t need to talk,” my dead uncle once told me. We went diving into off seas and as we emerged to the surface and sat on a rock in the middle of the sea, facing the setting sun, he told me that. I was only fourteen or fifteen then. He told me many things and I forgot most of them, but for some reason, that stuck. I guess that’s why I was always drawn to silent people, to people who rarely use the word ‘I’. Though they sometimes turn out to be just empty or depressed or both, rather than mysterious and deep. But I was always drawn to selfless people, who seldom refer to themselves, at least not when it was followed by a self compliment.

With my shoes on, I threw my body on the sofa the moment I stepped into my apartment. I closed my eyes and heaved a deep

Midnight Madness

sigh and I stayed in that state for a while. I wanted to doze off for a few minutes, but the shoes and my pants started to tighten on the circulation around my legs, so I got up, washed my face and took off my clothes. It felt good walking around with only boxers. Then I did my five prayers at one go. During which, I felt hungry. I kept thinking about the food as I recited the verses, about what I have in the fridge and what possible dishes could I fix for myself. I hardly ever concentrate during prayers. If I were to be fair and honest with myself, I'd say I was merely doing a physical exercise, not a drop of spirit in it.

I pray from the heart only when I'm in trouble and want something from God, and I feel awful about it. I feel like an opportunist, and I feel even worse when I pray for him again after I have somewhat been an ingrate. And after he responds always and again with the same clarity and intensity as if it was my first ever request. I guess that's what makes him a God. Unlike people, he's above disappointments or paybacks.

Soon after I finished praying, I went to the kitchen and fixed a quick veal escalope Milanese with lettuce leaves, green olives, and mustard, listening to *My Favorite Things* by John Coltrane. Then I made a large cup of coffee and enjoyed it as I watched Woody Allen's movie, *Annie Hall*.

The movie ended a little after midnight. I grabbed my phone and my earphones and laid on bed. My favorite part of the day had just started; the roars of the cars down the road seized and stillness conquers the night, and the whole city went to sleep.

I turned off the lights and lit the lamp on the nightstand after I threw a black cloth over it to subdue its brightness. The room

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

plunged into a subtle darkness, and an almost invisible orange, like a thin layer of dust covered everything.

I played The *Disintegration Loops* by William Basinski on my phone and sunk my head in the pillow. I didn't want to feel emotional, melancholic, or nostalgic. I just wanted to feel different, to empty myself of all the emotions the mundane life had stuffed into me during the day and become a vacuum, a void into which all of what the night has to offer could be welcomed. Something like in the movie *Spirited Away*, when dusk falls and all the strange spirits emerge and enter the bathing house. I turned into that bathing house, and I welcomed every feeling inside; distinct, unfamiliar feelings, they carry within themselves no essence of goodness or wickedness, but something only privy to the night, and William Basinski's music fit the right purpose.

I stared absent-mindedly at the ceiling, at the furniture of my room, at the window, and everything took on a different hue. As if, walking out of their bashfulness, they suddenly became alive and spoke, sang and danced among themselves in a language of their own. After midnight, in the heart of silence, many strange things happen, and if you paid close attention, you could catch a glimpse of it.

In that dim orange light and the background music, it felt like an endless night at the end of time. I dwelt in a psychedelic-like state, and I wished that sleep wouldn't subdue me soon and that I would go on laying in that state, observing my room, sinking in my own thoughts forever. It reminded me of the feeling I had when I walked in that white desert, hollow, vacant, but good.

Midnight Madness

Then I suddenly remembered the stones that I must bring back to the Oracle. I jumped off my bed to fetch them, only to realize halfway that I had completely forgotten where I hid them. No matter how hard I tried to remember, their whereabouts just wouldn't come to me. I knew I hid them somewhere, and somewhere good. But it was like I shoved the map into a bottle and threw it into the ocean. I looked everywhere (not everywhere, naturally) but I just couldn't find them. I was good at hiding things, and it often backfired at me.

While I was searching, I found stuff I had long forgotten. In one drawer, I found my old round Rayban sunglasses. I first wore them in Tunisia one summer holiday, during which I had spent my whole days nested under a palm tree inside the hotel reading Emile Cioran's *The Trouble With Being Born* and sipping lemon juice. A Romanian girl approached me and was eager to talk about the book. She was beautiful and smart, unfortunately; however, she wasn't into men. I also found my chopsticks, the ones I received them as a gift from a girl with whom I've had an ambiguous relationship with. We were neither friends nor lovers. I guess we both were intellectually and sexually attracted to one another, but never emotionally. I struggled eating with chopsticks until I put them away in the drawer one day and handed them to oblivion. I also found my old inhaler, a ping-pong orange ball I took from a hotel once, a ticket to a play called '*Waiting for Godot*' and a lavender candle I lit only once. Finally, I found one of my uncle's old Camel packs of cigarettes. *Midnight Madness* was written on the cover, and a golden zippo lighter. It had two initials engraved in the lower corner '*P.M.*' After giving it a hard look, I figured it was perhaps the name of his Montenegro mistress Petra from the letters. I imagined them sitting in an outdoor café in Europe,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

chatting and smoking. They must've shared one of that Impossible-to-happen kind of love. Lucky them.

Finding all these forlorn things warmed my heart in the middle of the night. It was like I had stumbled on a treasure, a treasure in my own apartment. However, not the stones.

I heard thunder, followed by a sudden black-out. The pale orange light from the lamp vanished and left me engulfed in absolute darkness. I looked out the window and the whole neighborhood was submerged in the same murkiness. All I could see were the leaden purple clouds hovering low. Blackouts weren't so unusual, and unless I was doing something important on the Internet I don't really mind them. I sat on my bed, not really sure what I should do. I suddenly felt no desire to sleep. I wasn't even tired. I took the purple candle from the drawer, lit it with a Zippo lighter, and rested it on my desk. Under the feeble glow of the candle all I could see were my hands and a few books in the corner of my desk.

My mind was clear and I felt I could finally think deeply about the last events, but thirst took over me all of a sudden. Whenever I was set to do something important, something always came up to distract me, be it thirst, hunger, or a need to pee. Sometimes even a small detail on the wall. So, I darted off to the kitchen and opened a can of Selecto. I took a few swigs to drown the thirst then I put it beside the candle. I kept staring at the dancing flame, how it fluttered and quivered, and how the shadow of the can swayed, shrank and expanded under its light. The lavender smell filled the room as the purple candle slowly melted.

Midnight Madness

I have a penchant for that kind of imposed darkness. It triggered a primordial instinct in me. One of the old days when humans were mainly hunters and had recently discovered fire. When dusk meant the end of the day. And if you had a full stomach and a roof under which you could spend the night, nothing else mattered. That was how I felt in total blackouts. Everything ceased to matter for a while—the past, the future and whatever concerns I had. They all get swallowed up inside that darkness and vanish into another world. And all that was left was me, the pure, raw, self.

I watched the flame dance in the complete dimness and thought about Sophia. The features of her face, what she wore that day, how she beautifully played the Tchaikovsky piece, why I kept seeing her in my dreams walking away with the Rat-man across the desert. Where could he be taking her, and why was it important for me?

I rose from my seat still holding the candle, I absent-mindedly opened the drawer and cast some light inside. I grabbed the Camel pack in my hand. I stared at it for a moment. *Midnight Madness*, it said. *Midnight Madness*. Catchy. I opened it, and a strong tobacco scent filled my nose. It had three cigarettes left inside. I gazed at them bemusedly. What was that thing that people were so crazy about, that was incomprehensibly charming and bewitching? It couldn't be just the ads. There was something intrinsic about cigarettes. Was it a statement, to smoke? That '*I am brave enough to wield fire and suck its soul inside me, and the smoke that I exhale is a proof of that?*' Symbolically, of course, maybe. I stared at those three cigarettes, until something snapped in me, and I just decided to smoke one.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I was no smoker. Actually, I had never put a cigarette in my mouth. I didn't smoke because I thought it was bad for health or anything. I did many other things that were as bad or maybe even worse, like eating all that processed food, drinking too much coffee or soda. Perhaps I never smoked when I was a teenager because everyone started smoking around that age. And I, maybe unconsciously, didn't want to be so typical (Not saying that I am not). Actually, I was so convinced that I would never smoke in my life. I felt no attraction whatsoever to cigarettes or to the habit of smoking. But that night, at that exact moment, I decided that I will. Some convictions we think are unshakable could disintegrate in a matter of seconds, once we realize we never truly had any solid reasons for having them in the first place. Besides, there was something extremely liberating in breaking your own rules.

And so, I grabbed the pack of cigarettes, the golden lighter, and my earphones and left the apartment. I thought I could use some air. I liked how the neighborhood looked when submerged in total darkness. It became abstract, and walking in it, I became abstract myself. Besides, I wouldn't see its ugliness.



Gloom flooded the streets. Whole buildings sunk into obscurity, silence reigned like a sovereign deity. I put my earphones on and started walking. I played a somber German jazz piece called *Ganz Leise Kommt Die Nacht*, which meant quietly comes the night. It seemed fit for the atmosphere. After a while, I sat on a bench and faced the giant dark cubes. I pulled out the Camels pack, and then, slowly, I put a cigarette between my lips. For the first time in my miserable existence, my lips

Midnight Madness

finally kissed the damn filter. I stroke the lighter and sucked in, deep in, until smoke filled every alveoli of my virgin lungs. At first, I coughed, but then after two or three drags, smoking became as natural to me as breathing air. I guess I had it in me the whole time. So much to be proud of.

A few seconds later, the nicotine kicked in. My mind softened and my thoughts turned mellow. I lost a little of my balance, and my muscles felt like butter. That was my first encounter with the nicotine euphoria, and fortunately or unfortunately, it wouldn't be my last.

I gazed vacantly at the shaded buildings, and I knew that behind the dimness of many windows there are people looking outside. People like me who have a thing for blackouts, and others abandoned by sleep, searching for something in the darkness. You'd think for a moment that they were all glancing at you, but you realize that you were as invisible to them as they were to you. At least not until I lit that cigarette and the orange smoldering tip gave away my whereabouts.

Mighty pink clouds hovered low in the sky, concealing and revealing an almost full green moon. Stars twinkled timidly as if they've withdrawn a few steps back to let the moon to be the star of the night. A moment they shine, another they die behind the clouds. The smoke I exhale mingled with the white cold breath and blurred the scene before me, then it dissipated into the air. Another orange tip emerged from one of the windows. I didn't know who lived there, but I knew that he or she was staring back at me. Two orange dots in a sea of darkness. I felt a faint connection between us for a fleeting moment but vanished right away. I continued watching the sky, inhaling, exhaling.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

My eyes had suddenly caught a glimpse of a strange sight, very strange and befuddling. I saw *four stars* aligned in an almost straight line, like four diamonds in a string. However, they were soon veiled by a massive cloud. I frowned. I couldn't quite believe my eyes. Something must be off. If there was one constellation I knew, it was Orion. I learned it one time when I thought I'd be spending a night out staring at the sky with a girl I liked. I thought I'd impress her if I knew the stars. That meeting never happened, and I never showed her Orion. I don't know what became of her now. She could be a model or she could as well be dead. But thanks to her. I knew Orion and I was sure Orion's belt had only three stars aligned, not four. I also still remember their names, Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka. Arabic names are given by Arabic astronomers. Surrounded by the other four stars that made up the constellation, Saiph, Rigel, Bellatrix, and Betelgeuse. I think no one could have missed those three stars, had he contemplated the night sky even once in his life. However, they were always three, never four.

After the cold had finally subsided and was revealing the stars, I narrowed my eyes and glued my gaze up to the same spot. One star appeared at the edge of the cloud, then the second, a third, and... *a fourth?* It confused me, really. Had I mixed up Orion with another constellation? I swept the sky looking for a match, but I found no other stars aligned except the ones I was staring at. Besides, Betelgeuse, Saiph, and Rigel were right where they should be. After a while of hysterically sweeping the night dome, it became certain to me that this undoubtedly Orion's belt. But somehow, by some mysterious, strange, intricate circumstances that I totally ignored, the belt had four stars instead of three. One more star on top of the three, more radiant than the rest.

Midnight Madness

When you start to think about the chances of a star suddenly appearing out of nowhere in the night sky, while it was never there before, believe me, it doesn't look so promising. The more I kept thinking about it, the more I was doubting my own sanity. It was whether my mind was playing tricks on me and that star didn't exist; or that it was always there and I had my memories deformed. The only rational explanation was that that star was born thousands of years ago and its light had finally reached earth. In terms of probabilities, me going crazy was more likely to be the case.

For how long was that fourth star there? For how long hadn't I gazed at the night sky? Was it days, weeks, or months... I always looked up at the sky when I walked alone, and when I did, I always searched for Orion. After taking so many solitary nocturnal strolls, finding Orion in the sky became a habit, a mechanical act, a way to make sure I was still walking the same earth under the same stars. I always had a restless feeling that this whole reality was so fragile, unstable, and it could fluctuate or collapse on itself at any moment. I could be walking someday and I would look up and find no star, not a single one. Or night wouldn't be so dark anymore; it could turn green or purple. Or I could be walking and suddenly the whole physical world dissolves into nothingness, and I would be nothing but a mere thought floating forever in that limbo. If that ever happened, I wouldn't be so surprised. I mean, no one knew how this universe came into being and what truly rules its laws. Okay, maybe they do. But no one knows what's on God's mind. Anything could happen anytime.

But why now? Why does this star appear in my sky? What could it possibly mean? Or could it be the *Midnight Madness* I am smoking?

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I gazed like a madman. My mind shifted gears. Hypothesis and possibilities rushed all together simultaneously and clashed among themselves in the synapses of my gray matter. Leaving my mind swirling in a soup of utter confusion. Could it be something else, a satellite, a spaceship, an invisible, colossal creature playing with his wristwatch, reflecting some other star's light over my direction? But no. The more I stared, the more I became certain that this was indeed a star, and I had no choice but to accept it as a fact. I mean, I accepted that I exist without truly understanding the reason why, so this shouldn't be so different.

The embers of the smoldering tip had eaten away the cigarette. I had only smoked half of it, and I decided it was high time I quit smoking. The power was still off and the silence grew louder. Another gigantic cloud slowly drifted close and veiled the night dome, as if the city itself was snuggling under a pink blanket and was ready to fall asleep. *You should go to bed too*, it whispered, as it closed off on everything, no moon, and no stars. I reckoned it was time for me to head home.

What was the name of the fourth star? I mused.

-14-

The Tiger-striped Cat: Green Gates At The End Of Time

From the speakers of the stereo, Chet Baker's trumpet's sweet, rich sounds filled the kitchen room as I drank my morning coffee. I was sitting at the kitchen table by the window reading Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicles*. The sky hung low and gray, carrying the omen of raining any time soon. The watch pointed to Eleven past ten. I had overslept. I had barely had any sleep last night. The image of the fourth star stuck on the back of my eyelids and kept stirring my whole being, enabling my mind from turning off the lights and letting me drift in deep slumber. Eventually, exhaustion was more powerful than a surrealistic image of a star. Exhaustion beat it all eventually. What a bliss.

I was supposed to meet Sophia again at three o'clock this afternoon as agreed, so I still had some time until then. I did my laundry and practiced a little violin. I always practiced half an hour a day; never missed a day ever since I started a couple of months ago. Sometimes I'd do a little more practice than the scheduled half-hour, to test myself, whether I was making any

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

progress or not. I'd stand in front of the mirror and try to swing the bow, play a tune or two. I'd be surprised each time how wrong I was doing it, I'd correct my posture, my bow handle, my bow strike, and try to maintain it that way as I practice it over and over again. It was no major progress, but I was getting there. I could feel it, baby steps towards making that violin a part of my own body. I guess the idea of ever having a tutor is flung out the window; maybe I could have Sophia teach a bit about music.

As I practiced, that dream I had the other night flashed into my memory all of a sudden. In which I was a concertmaster, a virtuoso playing Tchaikovsky's *Pas De Deux*. When those anarchists barged in and murdered everyone, and I got stabbed in the back as a result. The little mark behind my shoulder itched a little as I recalled those events. Was that a dream, or a memory?

After, I did all the housework I could. Then, I played enough violin, but hunger knocked on my stomach's door. Chet baker still playing his trumpet, I fixed myself a quick lunch, a sautéed piece of steak with shallow fried Jalapeño peppers, onions, garlic, and mushrooms. Served with lettuce leaves, green olive, and mustard. When you live by yourself for a long time, and when you start noticing you've been eating too much junk food, you start learning how to cook. As with the violin and every other possible skill, you start getting good at it, up to a certain level at least—beyond that, talent and luck take the lead.

I finished eating, drank a soda, showered, shaved the stubble on my face, put on clean, ironed clothes— blue jeans, a jean jacket over a white shirt and black boots. Threw in a scarf over my neck, put some but not too much cologne, and I drove to the destined place.

The Tiger-striped Cat

Sophia was not there when I reached Birdland. The café maintained its unique atmosphere; the same classical music playing in the background, same quietness mingled with a few hushes here and there. The table in the corner where we sat last time was not taken, so I seated myself and asked for a grape juice as I waited for her.

I arrived fifteen minutes early, but I was expecting to wait anyway, so I opened my paperback and resumed my reading. I always carried a book with me for situations like these. Time flew by quicker in the company of a writer.

Somehow, it was always like this with dates. Guys show up early and girls show up late. Fifteen minutes early, fifteen minutes late. Perhaps it was a gene on the X chromosome that all women have, or perhaps it was a global-wide conspiracy among females, made in an underground meeting room, under a hair salon, or a public women's toilet. It wouldn't be so strange if it was the case. Rule number one taught in there: always arrive fifteen minutes late, never in time. But what the hell? I didn't mind waiting for a girl if she was coming all the way to see me.

As I was submerged in reading, a question arose in my mind and cut the smooth line of words flowing from the book through my eyes to my mind. A question that seemed fundamental. Was this a date? Why hadn't I thought about it before? Why does meeting her feel utterly natural? If I wanted to look at this from an objective perspective, I was seeing a girl whom I only met once. This made everything look like a date. But still, it didn't feel like a date. It felt more like the sun waning and the moon rising under one sky at the end of the day— not saying I was a sun or a moon. That would be cringe-worthy. What I meant to say was that it's the natural way of things. They met under the

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

same sky countless days before. They met again today, and they would keep meeting forever as long as the world didn't crumble and vanish. Do we call that a date? It didn't matter anyway.

Who was she to me, and who was I to her, that seemed to be the pressing question? There was certainly a connection between us, a link that I couldn't really describe. Did I like her? I couldn't really tell. Was I starting to fall in love with her? Was this what it is? That, I didn't think so. Falling in love wasn't what I was feeling exactly. It was something different, with a twist, with an edge, with a bit of shadow. Something more complex and mystified. It was like the fabric of fate itself had a knot, a tangle, and that tangle was where her fate and mine cross each other. It was something old and vague, deep, convoluted and branched out. And somewhere in those deep, dark branches she and I existed. We existed as two little kids, nine years old, holding hands and wondering what the hell was going on. That was the only thing linking us that I could think of, that night at the hospital.

After that night, we lead separate lives, each went a different way, each walked a different road, a different branch and we were lost. And now, for some unfathomable reason, we met again. I felt lost now. I didn't know what I should do next, but I knew one thing. I had to meet her, and I had to keep meeting her; she was the key to the confusion that clouded my life, the only key. For now, I had to see her, and pay attention to where it would lead me.

I examined each face entering the café, until she finally showed up. The clock showed 15:15.



The Tiger-striped Cat

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she apologized, almost catching her breath.

“Never mind,” I replied as I closed my book, forgetting to put the bookmark where I finished. She had on an army green, cashmere coat over a black rolled neck jumper, and a leather bag perfectly matching the coat. She hardly wore any make-up, which made me feel comfortable. She took off her coat and hung it on the chair and took the seat facing me. The faint soft scent of her perfume filled my nostrils, a Chanel coco no. 5, I reckoned. She looked tired.

“You look tired,” I said.

“Do I? I haven’t had much sleep yesterday.”

“Insomnia or nightmares?”

“A little of both.” She gasped.

What kind of nightmares was she having, I wondered? I wanted to ask her. I wanted to ask her a lot of things; I wanted to know all about her. But I didn’t want to extract answers out of her like a cup in a murky interrogation room. I preferred to let things flow the natural way.

“I have nightmares too,” I stated.

The waiter—same waiter—came to take our orders, and I ordered chamomile tea, she asked for hot cocoa and ‘the usual’. I wondered what it was until it was served shortly after along with our drinks: Macarons, nine pieces served in a white dish in the shape of a pyramid, all the same flavor. It started drizzling outside.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I hope you like macarons,” she said.

“I need to be a little psycho not to like them. I hope they still make them in heaven, you know if I make it there.” or if it even exists, I wanted to add. She giggled and grabbed the one on the top. They were all of a pale purple stuffed with white cream. She took a bite and gave me the rest.

“Taste it,” she said, her eyes glowing. You could tell how much she enjoyed them.

“I can’t really make up the flavor. What’s that?”

“It’s lavender and white chocolate. That one is my favorite. The waiter knows what I like.”

“So, you are a regular here or something? You said last time you used to come here with a friend of yours...”

Her face wore a different expression all of a sudden as if its brightness was dimmed a few shades. I figured there were trigger questions to her mood, some questions I should not ask. Like a minefield, you never know when you’re going to step on a bomb. But I wanted her to answer me anyway.

“Yeh, but I no longer come here. I just don’t like to come here alone. If I’m here all by myself, I’ll feel blue all of a sudden. I can’t help it,” she exclaimed.

“Your friend moved out or went to a distant college or something?” I add carefully.

She turned her face and looked out the window, watching the gray buildings and the darkening wet asphalt, but I could tell she was just avoiding eye contact. I could glimpse the glistening

The Tiger-striped Cat

film of tears in her eyes, and then she finally said. “She passed away. In a way that is uncommon.”

Yeah, damn it. Why did I have to ask the damn question?

“I’m sorry... God bless her soul,” I said. Not really knowing what she meant by that, a way that was uncommon. Here goes another bomb. But I had to walk through the field of mines she was standing at the other side and walking through it was the only way to reach her.

She looked down at her lap, still avoiding eye contact, and then after she got herself together and said, “Listen, I’m sorry. I know there are a lot of things you’d like to know about me, but there are certain things I’m not ready to tell yet. I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready. You have to understand that. *Can you?*”

“Of course.” Well, not really, but what choice did I have?

She took a sip of her cocoa, another bite of a macaron and gave me the rest.

“Talk to me,” she said as she looked at me and smiled, and it charmed me, for the first time, I felt something inside.

“I want to talk about you, because I want to know you, but I guess I’ll have to pass on that for now, so... what do you want to talk about?”

“You. Tell me about yourself. Start from where you think your story begins.”

Where did my story begin? After she asked me that question, I realized I didn’t really have a story. I was a normal guy who have lead a normal life. I’d met a couple of girls. I’ve had a

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

number of meaningless adventures. But if you sum it all up, they'd make a collection of short stories, not a novel. The only thing closest to a story was me meeting her now. And besides, I didn't believe you can really know someone by having them tell you their stories; it took much more than that to know a person. Actions spoke louder than words.

"Now that you put it this way, I don't really know where to start. You already know I am a dropout. I live alone in a flat my deceased uncle left me, and I spend most of my time reading, watching movies and listening to music alone in my room. I have no one really special in my life. None of my previous relationships were serious, and I am lucky enough to have been exempt from any tragedy. I reckon I am the same age as yours. You're twenty-one, right?" I cried a lot when my uncle died, but I didn't want to tell her that.

"I am. How did you know?"

"I'm bad when it comes to guessing a woman's age, but when it comes to a girl my age, I'm never mistaken. I can't explain how, but I know."

"Did you also know I was nine when we met that night at the hospital?"

"I did," I replied; it was true.

"I actually did, too. It was clear to me you were the same age as I was. I thought this boy is nine years old. He can't be any older or younger. In fact, I can almost guess what month you were born in"

"Go ahead! I'll treat you another dish of macarons if you guess it right."

The Tiger-striped Cat

She peeked deep into my eyes and twisted her lips in a delicate pensive way. Her chestnut eyes were ambiguous but candid. The more I stared, the more I detected a distant speck of sadness, like a flickering candle flame in a dark room. She tried to hide it, but it was there.

“You are a September guy,” she finally said

“Well, bravo!” I agreed, surprised.

“You owe me a dish.”

She stared at me for a short while, in an attempt to catch a fleeting meaning, then, she added, “Your face is reminiscent of a clouded autumn afternoon. That’s why.”

“However you meant that I am going to take it as a compliment,” I said. That was the most sentimental thing ever said to me in years, maybe my whole life. I stared hard at her. Was she an illusion?

“Yours is reminiscent of a lone chrysanthemum, on the summit of a rocky mountain, in a land where it’s always twilight and the sky is always orange,” I said in return. I had to return every compliment; a habit of mine.

She smiled imperceptibly. “You didn’t have to say that. Where did you read that?”

“Nowhere, but it felt the right thing to say, that’s all.”

She fell quiet for a while. I hoped that I didn’t stir any unwanted feelings. She had a repertoire of expressions on her face, and yet I couldn’t understand what each one meant. But I was learning. Then she smiled, a half genuine smile that broke

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

through every layer of my soul and left me totally defenseless, defenseless but safe.

“I want to give you something,” she finally uttered, and pulled out a large brown envelope out of her bag and handed it to me. I carefully took the envelope. It was a little heavy, and from the feeling of it, I reckoned it was a stack of papers.

“What’s that?”

“A manuscript. Kind of,” she said, “I’ve had a lot of time since I quit college, so I started writing, and ended up writing that thing in your hands. I never intended to publish it. I don’t even know if it’s worth publishing. Besides, it’s unfinished. I couldn’t write the last chapter, because I didn’t know how it is going to end. It was in my desk drawer for months and I didn’t know what to do with it, I thought I’d give it to you.”

“You want me to help you figure out how to finish it?”

“No, I’m not planning to. It will forever remain unfinished. I just don’t want to have it anymore.”

I opened the envelope. Inside was a thick volume of papers, typed and printed on the computer. The first page was blank.

“The title,” I said, a little confused.

“It’s untitled.”

And that’s how I ended up having Sophia’s untitled, unfinished book. I couldn’t help but think she left it that way on purpose. Untitled, and unfinished, much like all stories in this world.

“I’ll give it my full attention and care,” I said.

The Tiger-striped Cat

We sipped our drinks and ate the macarons, splitting each piece. She would have the first bite, and I would finish it. The rain kept drizzling, and Satie's melancholic *Gymnopedies* was playing in the background. A natural silence filled the space between us as we watched the rain from the window.



"You said you were having nightmares, too," she broke the silence.

"Yeah, I do." I was just about to tell her everything. "You know, like everyone else."

She gazed at me again as if she was giving me a chance to say more. I could tell she knew I was hiding something.

"They say we dream because we aren't at peace with ourselves, with our desires, with our demons. So, when we sleep, the tight security exerted by our conscious mind loosens up, and all the monsters and the suppressed feelings and thoughts emerge to the surface and manifest themselves in the form of dreams. Or so Freud said," she relayed.

"Do you believe that's all there is to dreams? A simple manifestation of suppressed feelings?" I asked.

"I know that's not all there is."

"How do you know?"

She looked down at her cup, and then at me.

"I dreamed of you, and the next day, you showed in the conservatory."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I remained silent, a strong urge prompted me to tell her about everything, the vision I had at the fortune teller in France, the dreams I've had about her. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't there simply because I remembered her one night at a hospital when we were nine. But I couldn't bring myself to do it, something held me. However, my gut told me she knew, and that reassured me.

"What kind of dream?" I asked.

She took another sip of her now lukewarm cocoa and brushed her hair back, then lightly gathered it around her ear. She turned to the window and watched the rain, seemingly submerged in deep thinking. Watching her side profile, I couldn't help but notice something behind her ear, a little dark mark, almost triangular, in the skin behind her earlobe. At first I thought it was a tattoo, but the more I stared, the more it was clear to me that it wasn't a tattoo but a birthmark.

"Maybe I'll tell you someday," she said after a while.

"Okay. We have a lot to tell each other someday."

"Actually, there is something I want to ask from you."

"Sure, anything."

"I want you to come somewhere with me."

"Where to?" I asked.

"It's a little complicated... I keep seeing this place in my dreams. In the dream, I'm standing right at the entrance of the conservatory. The whole city is deserted and the sky is gray and ominous, much like today's. And I feel the presence of this

The Tiger-striped Cat

place, like it's throbbing and beating, as if it was alive. And it is summoning me, imploring me, conjuring me. I start walking towards it. I don't know where this place is, but I know how to get there. It's connected to me in some way. So, I follow that feeling, like a thread, and with each step, I take closer, the feeling becomes more vibrant and intense, and my heart starts to beat faster. I don't know how to explain it, but it is as if something is waiting for me there, drawing me closer, like... *It's a huge lump of despair.* I don't know why it's calling me, but in the dream, I know I must go there. And so, I walk, I walk alone through the empty streets, until I feel it so close, just around the block, just another few steps and I'll get there, but my heart starts beating faster and harder, so hard, it almost breaks through my ribs. And so, I stop, then wake up."

I waited for her to continue but she didn't.

"But... This is all but a dream right?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't bother you with my concerns. You have no reason to come anywhere with me. Forget about it." She changed her mind all of a sudden.

"No, not all. Please continue. It's no bother."

"I mean it. If you're doing it just out of politeness, then don't do it, please. This is important to me."

"I'm not doing it out of politeness." I gave it some thought and then I ventured, "Actually... I think I feel its presence, too."

Her hands were resting on the table, and I wanted to hold them and reassure her, but I stopped my arm midway. The tips of our fingers touched slightly.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“What do you mean you feel it too?” She asked, taken aback

“I felt it the first time we came here, like a twitch in my chest. I could almost feel the presence of something far away, but not so far away. But I couldn’t quite understand what it was, so I ignored it. I feel it now, too, but it’s weak. Honestly, I don’t even know if we’re talking about the same thing. I never dreamed of it.”

“I can feel it right now, too. The dreams started about a month ago, always the same dream with me standing at the entrance of the conservatory and then I start walking towards it and always stopping at the same spot. Always so near. But I could never reach it.” Her voice was cracking. “What’s really bothering me is that, sometimes, while I’m playing the piano at the conservatory, I’d leave the place and find myself heading towards it, like I’m compelled to, like I am sleepwalking. And it’s always like the dream, the city becomes ghost quiet and the sky is always gray. I’d walk, walk, walk, and then stop at the same spot, heart beating oh-so fast. I freeze and I end up turning back and going home. I never make it there. When I wake up the next day, I could no longer be certain if I had truly lived it or if it was just another dream. I could no longer make the difference between what’s real and what’s not... and it makes me scared.” She looked away and bit her lip. The dreams started about a month ago, around the same time they started for me.

“Do you want to go now?” I asked.

“Aren’t you busy?”

“I’m an unemployed dropout. Let’s go.”

The Tiger-striped Cat

I went to pay the fare, but she stopped me. “This hotel belongs to my deceased friend’s father. I stopped coming after she passed away, but they’d never let me pay, so don’t worry about it.”



Outside, the central square looked forlorn and lonely. The smell of autumn and the wet soil impregnated the cold air, and rain gently poured down, like a gardener meticulously spraying his flower. Sophia opened her umbrella and covered me inside.

“Hold it,” she said, “You’re taller.” And she nested herself beside me, our shoulders slightly touched. “This way,” she said.

On the way, we barely exchanged words. I focused on the fading feeling of that mysterious place, and I could tell that she was too. She guided me towards it, and with each step, I felt it was becoming stronger, and its shape gradually taking form. I ignored what that place was. I didn’t even know if it was a place or something else. For me, it was just a feeling, so feeble and unreal, but it seems that we’re both linked to it somehow. Yet, her link to it was far stronger than mine.

“You’re feeling it?” she asked.

“I am. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. I’m not scared.”

“If you start feeling strange, tell me and we’d stop.”

“Okay.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

After about fifteen minutes of walking, her pace dropped its speed, until she suddenly stood still in her spot. A wave of terror ran through me as I looked at her. Her face turned pale, her lips blue, and a drop of blood slid down her nose. She had her eyes closed and her hand rested on her forehead. I held her arm and wiped the blood out of her face with my scarf, and she immediately dropped her weight against me, and tightly gripped my forearm. Had I been two seconds late, she would have collapsed on the ground. I swept the place looking for a place to sit until I spotted a bench from afar.

“Come. Let’s sit,” I said.

She didn’t move a muscle. Her eyes closed and her grip tight on my forearm, and remained quiet for a while. And then, ever so slowly, she opened them, loosened her grip and stood normally.

“I’m fine,” she said meekly, her voice weak and her eyes flat.

“You call that fine?! Come, let’s sit.”

“Believe me, I am.” Her voice was regaining its timber and her face its colors. “I’m sorry I scared you, but don’t worry. I’m fine now.”

“What’s the matter? Are we close to that spot?”

“No, it’s not that. It just happens sometimes. I guess I’m just tired.”

I was no doctor but I knew that wasn’t exhaustion. “Okay. I’ll get you a cab. You should go home and rest. We’ll go next time, okay?”

The Tiger-striped Cat

“No, I can walk. Let’s continue. *Please.*”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, let’s go.”

And so we carried on our stroll. Slowly, at first and then we maintained a steady pace. I would secretly gaze at her for a few seconds as she aimlessly stared at the wet streets. A part of me was just checking on her, making sure she was doing fine. The other part was meditating over this person who was walking so close to me, never before appearing in my life, and now there she was, the center of the unreal chaos that flooded my world. She looked calm and unruffled, as a northern sea, but I could feel the frost in her heart slowly melting, and the confusion and loneliness inside me gradually dissipating. I was getting somewhere I thought. I didn’t know where exactly, or whether it was a good or a bad place, but I was moving. I just needed to keep her walking beside me. I needed to be the mast of the ship, and she would be the compass that points to the south. And together, we’d sail towards unknown seas. Was the fourth star a metaphorical embodiment of her appearance in my life? She felt like a star, distant and beautiful.

I didn’t have a clear grasp of what I wanted exactly, nor did I know what feelings she carried inside her. And whether we were just a comma in a book, or the burning feelings behind the writer’s pen. But walking beside her, I felt the forces of fate moving towards an ambiguous equilibrium. As if earth swirled more smoothly, and clouds drifted more peacefully, when she was with me. It felt right.

She unhurriedly took her hand out of her coat pocket and placed it on my arm, pressing against me. I looked at her but the

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

expression on her face was unchanged, there was nothing slightly misplaced about the way she did it, and I felt no awkwardness whatsoever. Fate took a closer leap toward that equilibrium. I took another step in that field of mines, and the clouds above us took on meaningful shapes.

We walked different blocs and took turns to places I had never been before in this city. Uncharted streets, like a space-time continuum that existed in a different dimension, intricately intertwined with the real one. And we somehow leaped inside at a certain point without noticing it. A street within a street. A door behind a door. I just followed her, and she seemed to know exactly where to go. Like a blind person following the source of a distant humming, she never hesitated once.

“It’s around that corner,” she stated, as she came to a halt.

“I know, I can feel it. Shall we?”

But she froze, eyes fixed on the corner of the block, her breathing became heavier.

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t think I can do it...”

I faced her and gave her an earnest look, trying to convince her of something I don’t understand myself. “You’re not alone this time. Besides, I can feel it clearly now. It’s not evil. It won’t do us any harm.” It was true, whatever lies in there, maybe a Lump of despair as she said, but it was not evil.

She remained silent for a while staring down at the ground, then she looked at me and nodded. “Let’s go.”

The Tiger-striped Cat

Around the block, was just another street. Same old stores under the same old colonial buildings. We slowly made our way forward. We passed a watchmaker, and then a dress-maker before she finally stopped before a green rusty metal gate.

“It’s here,” she said, staring at the gate like a child gaping at a white tiger for the first time in his life, both in haze and hesitation.

I gently knocked on the gates. The sound was unnaturally sharp and dry, but no answer came whatsoever. I knocked again, the same dry sound echoed through the inside and reached my ears, carrying along a dismal melancholy of whatever lied beyond. But again, no answer.

“Are you sure this is it?” I asked.

“I am. It’s here.” her face showed no color of anxiety, which reassured me.

Then she knocked this time, harder, but no one opened the door.

“What do you think we should do?” She asked.

“Come.” And I went to the dressmaker, the shop just next to the green rusty gate.

“Hello,” I greeted.

“Hello, welcome! How can I help you, dearies?.”

“I just want to ask you about the shop just next to you. Will it open any time soon during the day?” I pretended I knew it was a shop, because I didn’t want to seem suspicious. This way I’d

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

avoid unwanted questions. Whether it was a shop or not, and whether it would open any time soon or not, I'd know.

The moment I asked him that question; however, the expression on his face suddenly changed, turned from pacific to hostile. "I know nothing about him! Don't ask me anything about him! Is there anything I can do for you? If not, then please have a good day," he said brutally.

Him. So, the owner was a him. There was that at least.

"Okay. Sorry. Have a nice day," I answered, as we walked out of the store.

"That was a bit strange. You still sure that whatever lies in there isn't evil?" asked Sophia.

"Right now, I am sure of nothing. Let's hope the next one doesn't hate him so much."

Thus, we visited the watchmaker, the shop next to the dressmaker.

"Let me handle this," she said.

"Salam Alaikum."

"Wa Alaikum Salam! Welcome," replied the old man with round glasses and a smile that highly contrasted with the gloomy overcast, who seemed to have been dwelling in the complex process of fixing a hand watch.

"Thank you," said Sophia, genuinely smiling.

"What can I do for you?"

The Tiger-striped Cat

“The store next to the dressmaker, with the green metal doors, what can you tell me about it and about the owner, please?”

“You seem too young for a couple who’d be interested to buy that store.”

“We’re not willing to buy it. We just want to know about it,” she uttered, not correcting him about us being a couple.

“Can I know why, please?”

“I’m afraid the answer to that is not *that* simple...” trailed off Sophia.

The watchmaker mulled over our answer for a moment while giving us a piercing look. Probably going through all the why’s and why not’s he should tell us anything about it.

“It’s the first time anyone inquired about Mr. Amati. Have a seat, please.” He ushered us in and asked his assistant to bring us tea.

“You seem like honest people, whatever your reason may be, I know it’s not bad. So, what do you want to know precisely?”

“Tell us everything you know, please. About this Mr. Amati,” I answered.

“I’m afraid I can’t be much of any help. When it comes to Mr. Amati, I have to admit that I know very little. When I opened my shop twenty years ago, he was already here, you may think that after twenty years you’d know everything there is to know about a person, but strangely enough, it wasn’t the case with Mr.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Amati. He shut himself inside an iron sphere long before I met him, a sphere no one can pierce through. He let anything leak out. I tried to make contact with him, get a little friendly and personal. He was kind and was never mean to anyone, always greets you with a bright smile, but after a while, I gave up. I decided I'd just respect his privacy, for whatever reasons he wished to close himself up, I had no choice but to respect his wish. We still greet each other, exchange small talk, sometimes long talks, but never a personal one. Strange thing is, he once told me I'm the closest person to him, which was odd, and... *Sad*. I don't know where he still lives, whether he has a family or not, whether he has anyone else besides me. So, as I said, I know nothing about him, except that he is a harmless old man named Amati."

"And what kind of shop does he own?" I asked.

"He fixes musical instruments, and makes violins, but I have never seen him play one."

I glanced at Sophia, and a thin thread of mutual understanding hung between us. Music seemed to link the three of us.

"Where is he now? How can we meet him?" asked Sophia.

"I have no idea dear. He sometimes disappears, sometimes for a week, a month, a day, but he always opens his doors again. You just have to wait for him."

We thanked him and we left.

"And that's how you extract information," teased Sophia.

"Hats off to your aptitudes. Also, he was his friend."

The Tiger-striped Cat

“You’re a bad loser.”

Rain fell in strings.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

“I will wait.”

“Come.” I spotted a little café where we could seek shelter from the rain and watch the store at the same time. A modest place, few people, and no music played in the background. We took a seat in the corner beside the window and ordered two black coffees, a heavy silence encompassed us.

“He’s not coming,” said Sophia after a moment, her voice almost inaudible.

“He will, eventually. The watchmaker said so.”

“I might never meet him.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Things have been slipping away from my life lately, like sand from a child’s hand, soon nothing will remain.” Her eyes turned into a depthless well of sadness.

“I won’t go anywhere,” I replied.

She glanced at me and her lips formed what looked like a smile.

“I know, but I will.” She looked away, tears streaming down her cheek.

“Have you heard the story of the cat that died a million times?” I asked, after I don’t know how much time had slipped

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

since she articulated her last words. I wiped the wet trace of the tear on her cheek.

“No,” she answered, her tone hushed and muffled.

“There was once a tiger-striped cat, the cat died a million deaths and was reborn a million times, and was owned by various people whom he didn’t care for. But the cat wasn’t afraid to die. One day, he was a free cat, a stray cat, and he met a white female cat, and the two of them spent their days happily together. Years passed, and the white cat died of old age. The tiger-striped cat cried a million times, and then died. It never came back to life.”

“You think I will die of old age next to the tiger-striped cat?”

“I do, and a million cries will hurt more than a million deaths.”

“That would be beautiful... But maybe not in this world. Maybe in another one.”

“It doesn’t matter in which world.” A world with *four* stars or *three* stars.

A candid half-smile beamed on her face. That smile left me defenseless and broke through every layer of my soul.

“You love cats, don’t you?” she asked.

“I do. I get along with them. It’s not the case with dogs, unfortunately. I don’t like dogs. It’s mutual. They bark at me for no reason. Perhaps they know I don’t like them; perhaps I don’t like them because they bark at me for no reason. Either way, I’m fine with it.”

The Tiger-striped Cat

The sky was painted blue on blue, dark shades over darker shades of blue, until the street lamps were lit. Mr. Amati didn't show up.

"It's time I leave," Sophia said, as she stood up.

I got her a cab, she jumped inside and from the side window she stated, "The watchmaker called us a couple."

"He's a watchmaker, maybe he's seen into the future."

We exchanged an accomplice smile, like secret partners in crime.

"When shall I see you again?"

"Two days from now, same spot, three p.m."

"Goodnight, Sophia."

"Hey, thank you for coming with me. I really appreciate it."

"Never mind. We'll go again next time."

"Good night, tiger-striped cat."

-15-

Blue Is the Color of Death and Late Summer Evenings: Zoe's Untold Story.

I rang the bell and a smooth '*ding dong*' reverberated through the hall. After a few seconds, Zoe Coppola opened the door.

"You're late," Zoe said, with her lofty, mysterious way of talking. Like she was constantly playing one of Meryl Streep personas. However, she was not making it up. It was her natural way of talking, which made her cool in so many ways despite her old age.

"I'm just six minutes late," I said after I looked at the clock on my phone. I was supposed to arrive at six p.m. "The elevator isn't working, so I had to climb the stairs fifteen-story up. At some point on the way up, it stops being so much fun, you know."

Blue is the color of Death

“The elevator works. You must have a key now or have someone give you access from inside. New laws in the building,” she said, not a single hint of regret in her voice.

“I’ve always liked that about you. You are never late telling me the things that matter.”

“I forgot.”

“You’re also forgetting a five-letter word.”

“Sorry, I forgot. Don’t be a crybaby now.”

“Give me a glass of water. I feel like a thirsty dog.”

“Oh come on, don’t say that. You can’t be that thirsty. It’s just fifteen floors up. Man up.”

“Says the lady who was chilling on her cozy couch and who has the key to the damn elevator. I’ve counted the stairs you know. Three hundred and seven stairs,” I said as I untied my shoelaces.

Zoe was seventy-one years old. She was my doctor since I was a minute old. She was also, one could say, my Godmother.

“You haven’t even prepared anything for me, no coffee, no crackers. It’s been months since I paid you a visit, you should at least try to look a little happy that I came,” I said after I took off my shoes and caught my breath.

“I am happy, but you made me wait six minutes, be that late on a train and it will take off without you. That’s life, you gotta learn how to keep up. And I know you like to prepare your own coffee, so go to the kitchen and make it, you know how I like mine. I’m on the terrace, join me when it’s ready.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Now who’s the crybaby. You’re not a train Zoe, you’re not going anywhere. And not too sweet, not too black; not too strong, not too mellow, right?”

“That’s right. You can somehow reach that almost perfect balance. I never could. That’s why I make you make coffee whenever you’re here. Sometimes I even invite you just to make coffee. I’m up.”

I’d known Zoe for as long as I could remember. My mom told me she was the one who saved my life when I was a newborn. She said that from the moment I was out in this world, I was already gasping for air, suffocating to death. I didn’t cry like other babies. Maybe I was aware of how miserable life was going to be and I attempted to finish mine before it even started. There was a Japanese cult that believed that babies from the age of zero to three were little gods, or *Oko-sama*, as they called them, meaning ‘lord child’. Perhaps I was a wise lord child and didn’t want to be born on the face of this damned earth. But Zoe saved me, and since I suffered from asthma for many years to come; she had been my doctor ever since; my mentor, my friend, my godmother. Though she never gave me her blessings on anything, she was more of a skeptic on those matters.

Yesterday, she called at one a.m. and said she wanted to see me. She lived alone in a duplex on top of one of Bone’s tallest buildings. Her only son went to study overseas long ago and settled there. And her one-legged husband passed away last year; a healthy man who went to sleep and never woke up. Some people died that way. I guess it was the most peaceful way to go. I never learned how he lost his leg.

Blue is the color of Death

Come to think of it, there was so much I didn't know about Zoe's life. I thought the two of them lead a full life together. Maybe she was clumsy when it came to making coffee, but she managed to reach a delicate balance in her life very few people could ever reach. She had a successful career, published many studies and papers, and was a worldwide renowned doctor. She maintained a somewhat warm and stable family, and she had her own workshop in her house; a room full of painting equipment and many artistic works of her own making. She discovered she had a knack for that kind of craft a long time ago and never stopped nurturing it ever since. I guess painting was the most common form through which art blooms in a person. Some hold a brush a start to paint, others hold a pen and start to write, and some hold an instrument and start to play. And talentless people grab a camera and start taking pictures (However, some photographers were pretty talented, to be fair.)

I've once watched her paint. She entered her workshop, put music on and started scrubbing and mixing colors like she was in a trance. She dove into her own world and everything around her disappeared into black waters. She hadn't even noticed I was standing there and when I called her she didn't hear me. So, I just kept watching. It was fascinating.

She also has an okay library, containing more than three hundred books minimum, and lots of records of all kinds of music. Just name it. Jazz, classical, folk, bolero, soul. Except rap, no one in the house listened to rap. She also maintained a good frame, a healthy body, not an inch of fat, even at the age of seventy-one she was a graceful, slender woman.

I once asked her how she could manage to keep up with everything. *"It is not on a mere whim that I do all that, it's a*

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

basic need. I have to keep my mental, spiritual, and physical health in check. If one side peters out and dies, I'll become an unbalanced soul. And if that happens, the other two will crumble as well. It's like a three-legged table, take one leg out and whatever is on the table will fall and shatter. And it's my emotions and thoughts that are on the table."

Maybe she didn't lead a life full of happiness, I don't believe such a life exists. But she led a life without regrets, and that's more important. I think.

After the coffee was ready, I put two cups on a tray with some dry biscuits and climbed up on to the terrace where Zoe was waiting for me. The terrace was a paved patio and was aligned with different kinds of plants and flowers that Zoe and her diseased one-legged husband collected and took a great deal of care of. White lilies, delicate daffodils, Lavenders, Magnolias, Chrysanthemum, Cactus, and many other types I couldn't really remember the name of. Each time we were on the terrace, I'd have Zoe name them all for me. She cared for them like her own little creations. I asked her because I liked how her eyes glow as she explained in minute detail everything there was to know about each plant and flower. She talked about them with a rare kind of delight one can only find in people burning with passion.

"The magnolia flower was named after the French botanist Pierre Magnol. It's a very old flower. It existed long before bees, can you imagine that? It dates to twenty million years ago and even more. It's a beautiful flower true, but unlike other flowers, the magnolia is a tough hard one. It survived every challenge nature had presented. Climate changes, geological shiftings. It had to adapt itself to every adversity and hardship in order to

Blue is the color of Death

survive. But it's not only a symbol of strength but also of beauty and purity. When I was a teen, my father gifted me with my first Magnolia on my thirteen's birthday and explained everything about it. Ever since that day, I decided that I'm going to be a Magnolia, in a figurative sense of course. And I still have that plant till this day," Zoe once said about the Magnolia.

I remembered that part of our conversation because I watched the movie 'Magnolia' and I liked it a lot. You couldn't go unchanged after watching it. Though when I saw it, I had no idea that Magnolia was a flower. I always wondered what it meant. I couldn't even imagine what it could possibly mean. It was this ambiguous word with a very ambiguous meaning, until, thanks to Zoe, I got it all clear now.



Zoe was sitting on a chaise longue under a pergola just near the edge of the terrace. I took a seat on a chair next to her and placed the tray on the small wooden table between us. From where we sat, high on top of a fifteen-story building, the landscape unfolded before us was one-third spoiled city, one third a naked sparkling sea, one-third red cloudless sky. From a wireless Bluetooth mini speaker on the table "Robin Guthrie-Bordeaux" was playing. A few pigeons landed on the edge of the building.

"What's the matter, Zoe? Your voice on the phone yesterday hinted that you did not call me just to see me."

"So, now you can tell what I feel from the tone of my voice on the phone?"

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Of course, I can. I always did.”

She took a sip and then gazed at the horizon. She had a different glimmer in her eyes. “It is the twilight of my life,” she finally said.

I remained quiet, giving her all the time she needed to collect her words.

“Don’t blabber comforting words, a woman knows when her sun is waning.”

“Are you scared?” I said, carefully weighing my words.

“I am. I’m a little scared of the part when it actually happens.”

“But not of what might come after?”

“No, I’m not scared of that part. I hope it’s not arrogant of me to say this, but I think God isn’t that mad at me for the way I lived.”

“I guess if you feel it then it means it’s true. I mean, he wouldn’t let you feel reassured if it wasn’t the case. He’d give you a warning or something.”

“That’s a naive thought, but it has a good ring to it. I want to believe it.”

Although Zoe wouldn’t strike you as the religious type. I mean, she rarely used religious figures or religious speech when she spoke. And she did not wear Hijab. But I had often seen her pray. She regarded religion as a personal matter, a matter between one’s self and one’s God only.

Blue is the color of Death

“Have you called me today to check on me before you leave?” My voice an amalgam of cynicism and a dry sadness. I didn’t have the slightest idea how to behave.

She glanced at me from the tip of her eyes and smiled, a smile so reassuring if she’d jumped out of the building I’d jump right after her without hesitation.

“Sort of,” she said

“Sort of is a word with a loose end.”

“You’ve known me since forever. What do you think of the way I lived my life?” she asked.

“I don’t think I’m able to fairly judge your life, but I believe you lived a full one.”

“I’d like to believe that I had led a just life. But no matter how hard I try to convince myself that I did, I just can’t. There is a kind of void one can never fill.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that life is an unfair game, a dangerous one. You have to play it carefully, because once you make a fatal mistake, you have to live with it for the rest of your days. You can’t rewind, you can’t go back in time and make it right, you can’t erase it from your memory. You just have to live with that pain forever.”

“I think one can always atone for his mistakes, no matter how terrible they were,” I said.

She sipped her coffee, then continued.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Let me put it this way. Imagine you’re cooking one big meal in a large cooking pot, and that meal would be your only source of food for the rest of your life. And so you’re too careful with the ingredients, and you spend a great deal of time and effort making it. And so far, you’re happy with the results, you start believing that you’ll enjoy delicious food for the rest of your days. But then, one day, you make a mistake, your hand slips and you spill too much salt, too much for any person can stand. Your hands start to shake as you look at what you did in disbelief. You can’t undo it, you can’t change the whole cooking pot, and you can’t take out the salt. By each second, you start to realize you’re ruined, you’re done for. If you don’t eat, you’ll die. If you eat, you’ll suffer each bite, you’ll frown, and your face will make out ugly expressions as you chew on the food, but you can’t do anything about it. You’ll keep eating that food forever, and you’ll never get used to the taste of it. You’ll hate the last bite as much as you hated the first bite. That’s what can one mistake do to your life. It ruins it forever.”

“What are you talking about, Zoe?”

She gasped, looked at the palms of her hand vacantly.

“I had another family once, but I lost them,” she stated.



“You did?” When I first met Zoe Coppola she was already in her late forties. Whatever happened before that, I was totally in the dark. I knew nothing about her previous life. And never dared to ask her anything so personal.

Blue is the color of Death

“Yes, at the age ofttwenty-six, I was married to a guy I was deeply in love with. I felt the happiest. You know, the kind of love stories that are too good to be true, and that are bound to end up in heartbreak. We met on a bus on a Thursday night, October 1970, on the way home from Algiers to Bone. And he happened to sit beside me. I didn’t mind because he seemed a decent guy. He was holding a paperback in his hands. What harm could come from a man holding a book, I thought. Besides, I thought I’d take my chances with him rather than have a total weird stranger sitting next to me for a ten hours trip. A lady is always confronted with that dilemma when traveling alone. There’s always the fear of having some pervert sitting next to you and having to deal with all the weird touches and the awkward conversations. So you can imagine the relief when having someone decent instead of a freak

“It was a nocturnal ride, and we were supposed to arrive first thing in the morning. Everyone was sound asleep on the way. All you could hear is the hum of the engine and the smooth sound of the tires sliding down the asphalt. But I couldn’t sleep that night. I was awake staring at the window, young, beautiful and empty-minded. And so was he, absorbed in his reading under a dimmed hand flashlight. We were silent for the first few hours, until he shared half a snack, and started making small talk. Before I knew it, a flow of a natural conversation soon ran between us. We spoke quietly, whispering in each other’s ears all night long lest we woke someone up, and by the time we arrived, we were already very close.”

“He was preparing his Ph.D. in astrophysics, and at the same time, he worked on a novel. He wanted to be a writer. It was all he could think of, and god was he talented. He was not someone without substance who tried to force words into phrases, and

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

phrases into inelegant paragraphs. What he wrote was beautiful. The words flew naturally as you moved from one line to another, like water sliding down a melting ice mountain. He was not from this world, his mind was always elsewhere in a realm of his fabrication. He didn't think like everyone else: he didn't believe in what everyone else believed in. He was a man who shaped his own standards and convictions and who stuck to them no matter what. But he was also a kind heart, the kind of persons to whom you'd want to tell all your secrets and pains and cry your heart out on his shoulder. At that age, meeting him was the best twist of fate that has ever happened to me.

“We dated for three years, after which he asked my hand for marriage. We fought a lot naturally, sometimes more than one can stand. We had our kind of unresolved issues. As I told you, he was stern when it came down to his convictions, and sometimes they strongly clashed with mine, and the outcome wasn't always beautiful. I was young. I was avid for freedom, and you could say I was somewhat a feminist. Although I never liked to be called that. I never liked to be called anything. But I was a ferocious fighter when it came down to a woman's rights. I believed that we should speak up our minds no matter what, that we had the right to wear whatever we liked and to lead whichever life we chose. I still strongly believe in women's rights, but back my ideas were somewhat immature, naive and idealistic. I wasn't aware that I was overdoing it, that I sometimes stepped on his virility and self-respect. I was blinded by some kind of anger, an anger that was nurtured by observing over the years how women were treated, especially how my own mother was treated by my father, and I loathed that. I loathed it deep down in my core. And whenever our convictions clashed

Blue is the color of Death

I'd become an enraged person, even sour, and argue with all my might, and he did the same.

“That turned our relationship bitter at times. But we were in love, and aside from those parts of us that we couldn't manage to reconcile, we enjoyed each other's company. We'd talk about everything and anything be it religion, literature, movies, music, traditions, our past, our future, our worst nightmares, our dreams, and ambitions, or just nonsense. He was a light soul and there were no limits to what we could tell one another. We couldn't get enough of each other, but we couldn't stop hurting one another either. It felt too good and bad at the same time, and we were clueless about our future. One day, three years later, as to make things even worse, he proposed. *‘You make me so miserable, and we probably should never be together. But you also make me feel alive like no one else did. And I'd always keep wondering what life would be like had I married you, so, wanna try?’* Of course, I wasn't ready for marriage, but I couldn't say no, I loved him too much.

“After marriage, I lived the happiest days of my life. He grew wiser. We stopped quarreling, and as time passed, I stopped being so stubborn and learned to give in. All that remained between us was a gentle understanding and a warm relationship. Peaceful days flew by, we had our share of laughter, of love, of travel, of sex, of creativity. He finished his book and published it, and my career was blossoming. It was like the golden age of a bygone civilization.

“After one year and a half, I got pregnant and had twins. A boy and a girl. Those two little creatures brought along a whole new taste to our lives. We shifted from husband and wife to mother and father. It was a new experience with its own kind of

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

excitement and challenges. Holding those two babies, he was the happiest man on earth. And I, beholding that sight, felt a burst of joy that I wasn't quite used to feel. A kind of joy that carried, for some reason, an intense sense of fear, fear of the possibility that all this might vanish someday. I believed that love was something rare and it will probably never happen to me. But it did, and I was happy. But again I felt that I didn't deserve that kind of happiness, that I didn't do anything special in my life to be bestowed that kinda bliss. I was married to a man with whom I shared intimate feelings, financially we were doing good, we had two healthy angels, and nothing seemed to be going wrong. It was the kind of calmness that worries you profoundly, and it did. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and cry so hard at times. I was scared, and I felt something sinister was approaching. I felt it close, too close. I would tell myself that I was just imagining things, but I couldn't shake off that feeling. It lingered there, and each day I felt it stronger."

Zoe paused for a while and cleared her throat, recollecting her thoughts and taming her feelings. Dusk had fallen, the sky and the sea merged into one, and the city from above looked lustrous and innocent. The coffee was cold. I was about to dash down and bring some juice when she carried on.

"It has been forty years since I told this story. I had buried it deep inside me. Put it in a thick black sack and threw it in the ocean. But sometimes it floats up and emerges on the surface, reminding me of the most painful time of my life. And all I did those years is to sink it again in the waters, again and again. It was the only way I could carry on living.

"One day, we had an argument that soon turned into an awful fight. I've had an unusual day at work, a strange man

Blue is the color of Death

appeared and somehow was able to make me outraged. I say strange because he said the perfect words to provoke my anger. Like hitting the right notes on a string. He was calm and unruffled, and said things that were like a spell over my mood and then he simply walked away. And so I went back home infuriated. He was tall, skin too white, eyes too baleful. Very enigmatic. The stubborn part of me manifested itself again under the pressure of work. Of being a mom and a wife. And turned me into a woman I always tried to bury. A woman I loathed, mean and out of control. But I couldn't help it that day, I fought ferociously and so did he, I even said things I should never have said. Thing is, I even forgot what we argued about. It must've been something silly.

“That day, I left the house to spend the night at a friend of mine. I just couldn't bare spend another minute there. I was angry at him and ashamed of myself at the same time. It was the first time I ever left him alone with the kids. They were one and a half year old at that time. God they were beautiful...” A torrent of tears ran down Zoe's red cheeks.

“I spent the night at my friend's apartment, expecting a call from him, an apology, something to calm my rage and melt my heart like he always used to when we fought. But I heard nothing from him the next day, or the day after. I thought he was being stubborn and that made me more unyielding. But I missed the kids badly, and couldn't stay mad at him forever. So after two days, I returned home.

“When I first opened the door...” Zoe paused for a while, cleared her throat, then continued. “A strong smell hit me. It was neither bad nor good, but it was a scent I never smelled before, and it lingered all over the apartment. My heart shrunk and then

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

started beating so loud. I knew something terrible had happened, and I immediately remembered the ominous feeling I have been sensing all those past months. Like a thick shadow looming over the house, waiting for the right moment to flood it in dreadful darkness. The house was too dark in spite of the broad daylight outside and disturbingly quiet. I called my husband's name, and my voice came out so dry, I couldn't recognize it, but no one answered. My legs were shaking as if they turned into paper, barely holding me standing. I started walking towards the chambers, one step at a time, hopelessly calling out his name, and each step felt as if it was my last and I'd just collapse there and then. I just knew a horrible sight was awaiting me. I wished I'd turn into a spotless worm and get crushed under someone's feet and not witness what I was about to witness. But I had to see. I had to keep walking. I had no choice but to face it.

"Inside our bedroom, I found him lying on the bed, his arms wide open. On each arm rested a baby. The girl was on the left, and the boy on the right, like two angels and crucified saint." Zoe's tears didn't dry out. They kept streaming down like rivers from an inexhaustible fountain. I've never seen her cry before. "They were dead... Their skin was... *Blue*. Their eyes wide open, and fixated on something on top of them, as if they all saw the same thing just before giving their last breath.

"I didn't scream or collapse on the ground. Instead, I stood there in a haze, staring at that scene in disbelief. I forgot who I was. I wasn't grasping what I was beholding, nor where I was or who were these people. Or if these figures before me meant dead humans. I forgot what people looked like. For a long moment, I lost track of every sense linking me to this world. I remained frozen, still, watching, like a dream inside a dream, like a hollow wooden sculpture staring at the void at the edge of the universe.

Blue is the color of Death

When my mind reclaimed its grip on reality, when the images I was seeing fully reached my brain and were correctly translated and understood, with a jolt of panic, I recognized these blue corpses lying on the bed. I became aware that was my husband, and those were my two little children, and I went hysterical. I screamed. I cried. I cried out their names. I cried out for help. I hit myself. I hit him. I caressed my babies. I kissed them. I kissed him. I begged them to say something, to breathe, to blink, *anything*. At that moment, I wished I never existed. I wished that the earth would split open right there and then and swallow me into its dark belly. I wanted to be stabbed with a thousand knives if it could make the pain I was feeling hurt less, even for a split second. But none of my wishes came true. I yelled. I yelled till I lost my voice, then I mounted him, and hit him so hard on the chest and kissed him and caressed his face and his hair, and then hit him again and again, begging him to come back from the dead, to not leave me alone. And then I stopped all of a sudden, as if I wasn't in great pain already. I looked at him and realized that his eyes were fixed at me, and so were those of the two babies. I was the thing they were all staring at, eyes wide open. The expression on their faces was empty. It said nothing, no joy, and no pain. There was nothing in their glances. Not even a hint of sorrow, not a shade of reproach. Just flat cold eyes which were heavily glaring at me, as if they said... *It's too late now! You left us, and now we're gone.* I wept until I collapsed on top of them.”



Zoe stopped talking, covered her face with her hands and sobbed quietly. I caressed her shoulder and then dashed down and brought a tissue and a glass of water. I wiped the tears off

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

her face and handed her the glass. She drank a mouthful, caught her breath and kept gazing at the night sky.

“Go on, I’d like to hear the rest of the story if it’s not too much for you,” I uttered.

“I missed the funeral,” she went on as she wiped her nose. “Because I was at the hospital. I was told that I went into a sub-coma. My mind couldn’t handle the strong surge of feelings, so it shut itself down. When I finally woke up three days later, I was oblivious to what had happened, but soon after I remembered everything. I wished it was all a dream, a bad dream that I had just awakened from. But it wasn’t, and I broke into tears again. I sobbed till my tears dried out. I became mentally incapable of doing anything. I had sunk into a deep depression. I ate almost nothing, and articulated no words for several weeks.

“When I sleep I dream of that scene. I see them, all blue and dead and staring at me. And when I’m awake, all I do is think of them. I think of how everything could’ve been different had I not left that day. What if I stayed I would have prevented it from happening. That my babies and my husband would still be around me. They were my world, every source of joy I had left. And when they left, they took everything away with them, and left a hole in my chest that constantly ached and that nothing could possibly fill.

“As to how they died or what killed them, no one was sure. The policeman said that it might have been a gas leak, but the doctors found no trace of gas poisoning, and nothing abnormal showed on the autopsy. They were perfectly healthy. Their lungs didn’t suffer, and neither did their hearts. There was no sign of physical abuse, and no evidence of any possible cause of death.

Blue is the color of Death

When I asked them what might have caused their skin to turn blue, they all looked at me in confusion. No one knew what I was insinuating. Later on, I had learned from a friend of mine that when they found the bodies a few hours after I collapsed, their skin color was perfectly normal. I tried to convince them of what I saw, but she showed me the autopsy report, and it mentioned nothing of an abnormal teguments coloring. I found it befuddling, but I had no energy to go into that at that moment. I was so worn out I had no force to do anything.

“After that incident, I spent six months in an institute specialized in those kinds of psychological breakdowns. The institute resided on top of a hill on the outskirts of Amsterdam. A place dispatched from the world, surrounded by mountains and flats of green lands. It was supposed to help patients go through their trauma and get better with time. It was a piece of heaven on earth, but for me back then, I was just living my hell in a different country. A psychiatrist friend of mine had sent me there. She knew the place because she was working with a research team from Amsterdam at the time, and thus was able to enroll me in that institute using her connections. She said I needed to get as far from home as possible. That staying here was toxic for me and will probably only make me worse. I had no will to object. I just nodded to anything that was said to me. I wasn’t even aware that I was heading to such a place. My friend took care of everything. She booked the plane, she paid for my stay, and she had people waiting for me on my arrival. And so, I spent six months at that institute in the middle of the mountains, with a horde of broken people from all around the world.

“I didn’t have a roommate since we had individual rooms, and I barely talked to anyone there. They had us do some morning activities, mainly sports, or gardening, or play some

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

games. In the afternoon they tried to indulge us in creative work: music, painting, poetry, reading, cinema, sculpting. And on each field, they had tutors and mentors oversee us. It was then that I discovered the world of painting, and through a small crack painting had created in me, I started, ever slowly, escaping the world of the undead. Seeing again, after a long time, the light of the world of the living. I painted every day, and my tutor patiently criticized each of my works and slowly walked me through the foggy world of art. He was like the ambient air around us, gentle and unnoticeable. But his words, his company, and his art is what kept me going through those six months. And those six months are what saved me from the brink of insanity.

“One day, he told me, *‘I ignore the reason why you don’t use it, but perhaps the first step towards your recovery is by starting to paint in blue.’* I never painted in blue up until that moment, and I wasn’t even aware of it. I must have unconsciously avoided it. My eyes would see all the colors on the palette except blue, and he had noticed it. And thus, I started using that color, and indeed, it was hard at first, but the more I painted in blue, the more I was reconciling with that hideous memory. No matter how much I tried, I could never like blue, and I still don’t.

“After the six months were over I headed home. I was more or less emotionally stable, still damaged, but I could go through the day without any tears. I was like a straw house, one little blow of winds and I would fall apart, one little flame and I would burn down to ashes. I was careful with myself, and so was everyone around me. I was able to resume my work. It was hard at first because I couldn’t even afford a reassuring smile to a patient, but I did my best not to show how hard it was for me, until everyone believed that I was finally doing okay. I had

Blue is the color of Death

learned the hard way to bury my feelings, and put on an act of a strong woman, and soon enough I believed that act myself. I believed I was doing okay... God, what time is it?"

"It's eight a.m.," I answered.

"I must have bored you with my story. Isn't it time for you to go home?"

"No, I'm fine. Can I spend the night here?"

"Are you sure? Don't you have lectures tomorrow?"

"I do, but I don't attend any of the lectures anyway. You can manage to find me a pajama right?" I didn't want to tell her I dropped college, because she would go berserk. I wanted her to finish her story first.

"I guess. Okay, it's nice to have you around for a little longer."

"Cool!" I said, and we remained silent for a while, staring at some random point in the sky. I swept the dome until I spotted the fourth star. It was still there, more radiant than the other three. I wanted to ask Zoe about it, but I preferred not to for the moment.

"Zoe... you didn't finish your story."

"Oh, well, since you are as curious as ever," she replied, pretending that I was just over-curious and not because I cared. But she knew I did, and so she went on.



The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Well, after coming back home from Amsterdam, I spent the darkest three years of my life. I mourned my family for three consecutive years. I lived alone in a flat I rented after I sold the old one we used to live in. I wasn’t ready to meet anyone. I felt that no one could possibly replace my family, no man could replace my husband, and I didn’t want to have any more kids. I was traumatized. I just wanted to be left alone, and live with their memory for the rest of my days. I was okay with that. besides, I was too damaged to be in another relationship, too drained to love again. I had nothing to offer. I was incapable of giving the minimum attention anyone needed. And soon I gave up the hope that someday I will ever be happy again. Life had given me a chance and I lost it, and there are no second chances. If spending the rest of my life alone would be the price I had to pay then I was okay with it.

“I had accepted it. I accepted loneliness as a part of me and as a part of my life. But accepting it didn’t mean it was going to hurt any less. I suffered alone for many nights. For so many nights, I wept myself to sleep, and there was no one to hold me, no one to tell me, *‘it’s fine, I’m here, it’ll all be okay’*. Each day, all day long, every moment I spent alone, I spent thinking of all the possible different scenarios: what If I didn’t leave that day, what if I didn’t go into that fight with him, what if I hadn’t met that strange man at work, what if I wasn’t so stubborn, what if I went back home a day earlier, a few hours earlier, would I have been able to save them? And what did he think of me seconds before passing away? Did he remember me with love, or with loathing? Did he hate me for leaving him alone with the kids, or did he feel sorry for me? Where did I go wrong? What deed was I paying for exactly? And why did all this had to happen to me? Why did God have to punish me this way?

Blue is the color of Death

“All day long, I kept going over and replaying all the scenarios in which I could have done something differently. I kept thinking of all the possible futures, in which I still had them, in which my babies grew older, articulated their first words, walked their first steps. I lived all the lives I will never get to live in my head over and over again, and that only made me more detached from reality. I no longer lived in the same world as everybody else. I had created a world of my own fantasies and dwelt there.

“I grew more and more depressed, and thus, in the midst of that weakness and self-loath, I indulged myself in all kinds of drugs. At first, I started smoking, drinking, but then all kinds of other drugs followed: Vicodin, Adderall, ecstasy, Benzodiazepine, amphetamines, tranquilizers, sedatives. Just name it. Each time a drug fails to numb my pain, I would take a stronger one. For three years, I secretly swallowed all kinds of pills. I distanced myself from everything and everyone. I would go to work, have the minimum interactions with people, go back to my dismal apartment and spend the rest of the day alone. I mainly ate trash. I didn’t take care of myself. I didn’t practice. I gained some weight. My face lost its color, my clothing its style, my soul its fire. I tried to paint, but the flow from my soul to the brush was blocked. I didn’t know how to connect with my feelings anymore, all turned into rust.

“Things kept building up inside, and when they reached a certain amount, they would blow inside me, making me weep myself to sleep. And then the cycle would start from the beginning, all over again. And I would spend another month or two feeling completely numb. All the things that used to bring me joy turned into hollow figures. I would see a beautiful sunset but feel no beauty. I would listen to my old music but nothing

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

reaches me. I forgot what it meant to have a good laughter, what it felt to be loved, or to love someone else. Even in my sleep, I stopped dreaming. The flow was irreversibly obstructed. For three years my life was a constant downhill into an abysmal pit. I didn't know back then that I was slowly killing myself, slowly walking towards the abyss, that once I fall there's no turning back. One day, everything changed. A hand reached out for me, saved me. It is the only way I can put it. I was saved."



"I went back home, as usual, ate whatever I found in the fridge, changed, gulped an antidepressant and threw myself on my unmade bed. I vacantly stared at the ceiling until sleep subdued me into its lawless world. That evening though, I dreamt. Although I am not so certain that 'dream' is the proper word to call it.

"I wore a long white gown that enveloped me like a white lily. The long hem of the gown was floating, gingerly wavering behind me, as if I was drowning in water. But I wasn't drowning. I was walking barefoot on the moon. The surface of the moon was smooth and made of glazed white linoleum. It was as if walking on a colossal marble ball. The sky was painted black on black. No star glinted, except for one radiant blue planet. It was Earth. But in my dream, I knew it wasn't the earth we lived in, but another earth. I knew that It was a place I will never reach.

"I kept walking forward, feet against the cold marble moon. Nothing to catch the eye on the horizon. Just a straight line separating deep black from cold white. My mind was clear, devoid of any thought or memory. For the first time in three

Blue is the color of Death

years, I felt a kind of relief. I was totally oblivious to my bleak past, and my body felt light and ethereal. I imagined I could keep walking forever in this place. I had nowhere to go, but at least I had no memories to go back to. I could talk to the moon, and the moon would listen, and we can be there for each other, forever. He wouldn't go anywhere, and neither would I. A shred of hope flickered in my heart, nurtured by a rare kind of excitement one gets only when one let go of everything. However, that didn't last for so long.

“Soon after, the peace of that heavenly sensation wavered, as I glimpsed from afar three silhouettes: the silhouettes of my husband, and holding each hand a child, the girl on the left and the boy on the right. They were older, taller, and standing on their feet. I was still amnesic of the incident at that moment, but I knew they were my family, and that I hadn't seen them in a very long time. And that I terribly missed them. Terribly, *terribly* missed them. So, I took off running towards them, running at my full speed lest they disappeared somewhere. But they weren't moving, they stood motionless, waiting for me.

“They were wearing long blue gowns, wafting and quivering behind them, just as I. A shudder of a familiar fear claimed my heart, but nonetheless I kept running toward them. I wanted to cling to them before they vanish—why did I think they would vanish? I didn't know—until I finally reached them. I wrapped my arms around my husband's neck, so tight, and he welcomed me in his arms, and held me strong and warm. It was him I thought. I'll never let go this time. I'll never leave. And then I held my two kids. I embraced them, squeezed them, and kissed them all the kisses I couldn't give in real life. At first, they were indifferent to me, but soon, they wrapped their slender arms around me.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I don’t know how long I remained in that state. In dreams, time does not flow as we know it. I never in my life experienced such emotions. So intense. So pure. As if all the feelings I have ever felt in my life were being filtered through an impermeable membrane, allowing only a meager fraction of which reach me. But in my dream, I was bathed in raw sensations. A hug worth a thousand hugs. And a kiss eons of euphoria. In an instant, all my pains were washed away. As if I was dipped in heaven. As if I never knew what agony meant before in my life. Holding my husband and my two little kids in my arms, it was the apex of what my soul yearned to feel. And somehow, through some force, I was offered that dream. I don’t know why, but it was what I needed the most.” Zoe took another mouthful of water and then carried on.

“That bliss; however, ended soon. A crack on the ground appeared just in the thin space between me and my family, and it kept expanding and getting bigger and larger, until the moon was split in half. I stood on one half, they stood on the other. And the two parts kept drifting away from each other in opposite directions. The one on which they stood was heading toward that blue planet, and the one on which I stood was falling down in the interminable darkness below. I wanted to yell, cry out their names, but I couldn’t. No sound came out of my throat. I just stood there, watching them leave, hopeless, and alone again. At that moment, I woke up.

“When I opened my eyes, my sunken sockets were little ponds of tears, my pillow was cold and wet. However, those tears were of a different kind, a kind I had never experienced before. They were not the droplets you shed when your pain becomes unbearable and transforms itself into a liquid form, and only worsens your agony. The tears I shed that night bore

Blue is the color of Death

something heavy and dark. A hand had made its way through my flesh and ribs and held my heart between its fingers and gently squeezed, gently but strongly, and drained my heart dry of all the grief it carried till the very last drop. Grief in the form of salty teardrops.

“I opened my eyes, and the room was bathed in a silver light streaming through the window. The light was unusually strong, bizarre, even. I glimpsed through the glass and the moon gleamed unnaturally bright, as if it had orbited closer to earth. I remembered my dream at that moment, and wondered if what I was seeing was the half that brought me back to the real world. I don’t know for how long have I slept. It was evening when I dozed off, but when I woke up it was definitely the heart of the night. I must have been very exhausted.

“As I slowly regained consciousness, I felt strangely relieved. I felt lighter, the dark beating cluster of despair I carried inside had suddenly disappeared. My chest felt hollow, filled with cool air. And I felt all that weight that piled up through those years leaking out of me. I still sensed the touch of that merciful hand tenderly squeezing my heart, purging the agony that I had dragged every single day since my family had passed away. And I had undoubtedly recognized that presence that came to my aid. I could say, without any pretentiousness, that that was my first real encounter with God.

“As if bewitched, totally out of control over my body, I slipped out of bed and went to the bathroom. I didn’t turn the light on. I felt that that divine-like feeling is lingering in the darkness, infinitely enshrouding the space around me, and that if I turned the light on, I might lose it. I reached a fine-tuned space. A hidden world between worlds. Like a mystic radio

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

wave between channel 19.7 and 19.8. It was fragile and I could lose it at any moment.

“I did my ablutions in the dark, and went back to my room which was still splattered with that unrealistic moonlight. I grabbed my blanket and laid it right where the light hit the floor. I faced east, and I started praying. For how many years didn’t I indulge myself in praying? Perhaps never before in my life. But that night, it seemed as if my whole existence had lead me exactly to that point. I just knew, by some unknown force, that my time has come. That I am expected in his realm. I felt pulled by something unknown to me, something bigger and absolute, like a grain of iron in the field of an infinite magnet at the heart of the universe; pulled through a cosmic net of intermingled space and time. To finally reach him, in a place that existed both inside and outside of me. So far away, yet nearest to me than my own arteries. So immense and boundless, yet it was the most affectionate place I have ever been. Perhaps for everyone God existed up above the seventh heaven. But for me, God was at the bottom of the ocean. And I had to sink so deep. I had to hit rock bottom to find him, and when I finally did... I found everything.

“I prayed that night, bathed under the moonlight. When my forehead touched the floor, I shed streams of tears, and the more I wept, the more tremendously blessed I felt. It makes all the difference to cry to God than to weep yourself to sleep... I just knew that it was *his* doing that I meet my family in that dream, hug them, tell them how sorry I was. And I just knew that they were my real family. I have no proof to back that up, and I don’t need to. I simply know that I had met them on the surface of that moon. He offered me that encounter, because it was the only way I could be saved.

Blue is the color of Death

“God, I wept a lot that night, cried to him for my weakness, for gratitude, for every bit of my existence I had spent in oblivion to his existence. I don’t know if it is even possible to describe it using common words, because it is something that transcends this world. It is as if trying to explain to someone what sugar tastes like when he has only tasted salt, or as if explaining what purple looks like to a colorblind. No matter how hard you try, some things can only be known when felt,” Zoe paused for a while, looking up to the sky and smiled faintly.

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour”

In a dreamlike tone and a pleasant smile, she recited.

“It’s a poem by William Blake. He was a British poet and painter, and that’s how he described it. Meeting the sublime. Countless great figures throughout history had mentioned having the same experience, from all cults and religions. The encounter with God, or with the truth as they had put it. And they have all talked about, more or less, the same experience. That’s what it felt like to be in the presence of God, to see a world in a grain of sand, and to hold infinity in the palm of your hand. A lovely way of putting it, don’t you think?”

“It is.”

“I remained in that state, forehead glued to the floor, and then something strange started happening to my body. I had an intense goosebumps, a shudder, a shiver, a tremor, deep down to

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

my very core. As if each atom in my body vibrated differently for a split second. As if inside each cell, New Year's fireworks were being sparkled. I was soaked in a state of utter bliss, a thousand orgasm, until I collapsed, and fell asleep on the blanket.

“When I woke up again, I felt the hard cold floor against my skin and bones. But my body didn’t ache. In a very long time, I woke up without a headache. I felt just great. A newborn butterfly from a human cocoon. My soul had grown its own wings. And my body, my heart, and my mind were cleansed under holy rains. I stood up, facing the window, and the sky was painted a dark blue dotted with gleaming stars, a faint graduation from pale to deep blue. I thought it was the time just before dawn, but only later I found out it was rather a late evening. In my confusion, I thought that I had slept the whole day on that blanket, but when I checked the calendar on my phone, it was the same day I dozed off on my bed. In my remembrance, I came back from work, changed and slept right away. Did I sleep for just a few hours? But I definitely woke up in the middle of the night. At first, I doubted that what I had lived was nothing but another dream, the bright moonlight, and the divine feeling. But again, I found myself right where I collapsed on the floor. It was real, and it was too vivid to be just a dream, but there I was like I just dozed off for an hour or two.

“I am still not certain as to what have had happened exactly that day, but it sure was the day that changed my life. I became a different person after that experience. I felt that I had made up with myself and with the world. All that anger and despair had vanished. I felt more connected to myself, more reconciled. I changed the apartment I lived in. It was a reminder of a dark time, a place to abandon. And I moved to another one, more

Blue is the color of Death

spacious and with a great view of the sea. It didn't matter what it cost; I needed it. A new home for body to dwell, and a new body for my soul to inhabit. I started taking care of myself, eating healthy, practicing sports, reading, painting, growing my magnolias again. In my job, everyone noticed the change. I radiated a kind of a mystic aura, and I could see everyone was happy for me. Every morning I'd wake up and remember with a shadow of disbelief that the old days are finally gone. And it took me a while to get used to it. I still remembered my family, but I remembered them with grace and warmth. Their memory transmuted from a source of pain to a steady anchor, an anchor that will enable me to remain firm in the face of any challenge life has to offer. And a reminder for me to appreciate what's left of it. And of course, ever since that day, I never lost touch with God."



"A year after, when I was thirty-three years of age, I attended a pneumology conference in the city of Valparaiso, Chile. It was my psychiatrist friend again who made me go, claiming that I needed a change of air, and I agreed. It was a long flight from Bone to Chile, but it was worth it. The conference lasted two weeks, so I had all the time to wander through the town. Valparaiso was a colorful city, and I enjoyed my stay very much. I tasted their food, talked to the locals, appreciated the architecture, made new friends. I was like a child who entered a toy store.

"In the last few days, I had dinner at a local diner, and then I aimlessly strode down the streets. Empty minded, I walked all night, future worries seemed to me like problems from a distant

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

world. Somehow, the experience that I had lived, all that pain and then the sudden salvation has given me a lucidity I could never conceptualize before. I saw life from a whole different perspective. Bygone days worries that I used to feel like chimeras mounting my back turned into trifle flies that I could cast away with a simple wave of the hand. And so I ambled along all night, light and carefree, and as dawn approached, I made a rest at a nearby terrace by the shore and ordered coffee and a locally made cake.

“At that instant, a man sat beside me at the table. The same tall man with the stark white skin that provoked and infuriated me that day years ago. Just before my family passed away. I didn’t remember him instantly, but it didn’t take me long to recognize him. I was flabbergasted, and he was calm, unruffled. He didn’t look at me. He crossed his legs and faced the ocean. ‘I must apologize,’ he said. ‘It must have been done.’ I was speechless, and I was unable to make any sense of what he was articulating, I just watched him, bewildered. ‘This is a small gift. Consider it a solatium.’ and he left.

“I wanted to stop him, ask him what he meant, but something in me resisted that. I knew that he was a mystery I was not meant to understand. I let go and stared at the endless Pacific ocean glistening under the uprising sun. The burst of godly colors reflected into my soul and made me ponder back upon my life. Of how fragile and miserable I was. Of how much I suffered alone, and of how beautiful that sunrise is. How many times had I missed it because I was too bleak to notice anything beautiful? A merciful tear of nostalgia fell down my cheek. Lost in my thoughts, I heard a voice of a man. ‘*Can I photograph you? I haven’t seen such beauty in a long time,*’ he said.

Blue is the color of Death

“I smiled at him. It has been years since someone complimented me, flattered me, and a lady needs that. I said yes, and that’s how I met my second husband. He was a fellow Algerian that I happened to meet in Chile. He worked at the ministry of external affairs, and he happened to be on a business trip to Valparaiso. A simple, elegant twist of fate. *‘Maybe you don’t remember me, but I was with you In Amsterdam.’* He had lost his wife and his sister along with his leg in a car accident, an accident he was responsible for. And amidst the guilt and the agony, he broke into pieces, and was sent the same facility I was in Amsterdam. He was already there when I arrived. *‘I remember you,’* I replied, and *I did.* I had a fuzzy memory of all the faces I saw in that place, but I remembered his. I recalled the way he sat alone staring at the green meadows, lost in thoughts. And I always wondered if he had green eyes or it was just the reflection of the green flats. It turned out he had blue eyes. He took a picture of me, and then asked if he could sit with me. A year later, we got married, because we understood each other’s pains.”

“But I don’t understand why you blame yourself all those years. It wasn’t your fault,” I protested after I let all of her story sink in.

“It was. Perhaps I don’t understand yet what was I paying for exactly. But strangely enough, when something bad happens to us, we know whether are responsible or not, one way or another.”

I mulled over what she said, but I couldn’t quite assimilate it.

“I’m not sure I get you, but if you say so, I guess it’s true.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I hope I didn’t bore you with my story.”

“Not at all. I needed to hear it, and you needed to tell it.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

We lost our gaze in the distance for a while, each lost in his own thoughts. Zoe had certainly achieved a level of understanding that not all people were lucky enough to obtain. She reached a deep form of wisdom through a tremendous amount of pain. But was it all worth it? Would she have traded it all for a different life? A life in which she still had her family beside her. Would it have been a better life for her? I wondered, but I realized I could never know. We only live once, and unless we lived another life and made different choices, and compared the outcomes, we can never tell if the ones we are making right now are the right ones. And besides, Zoe was lucky enough to be saved. I guess some people spent their whole lives in limbo, lost in despair, sinking in meaninglessness, until they die a meaningless death, never saved, their souls lost forever.



[...He pours himself a glowing drink and walks to the open balcony of the 21st century decorated bar, on the seventy-seventh floor of his palace. No hiss or mumble is heard from the bar. Everyone has left, even the bartender. They have left a very long time ago and never came back ever since. But this one is his favorite bar, because it reminds him of a certain time of his life. The 21st century is the era during which he met her. But she’s no longer here with him anymore. He’s all by himself.

Blue is the color of Death

He walks to the railing of the open balcony and loses his gaze to what has become of this place. What used to be a never-ending, well taken care of, the garden of every rare species of plants, flowers, and trees. Of every exotic animal and bewildering creature, had now turned a pale yellow, dead space. It lost its majestic architecture, it lost its glamor and thrill; nothing is left but ruins. He sees it all but he feels no sorrow or remorse in his heart. He looks up to the sky but his glare meets nothing but orange fog veiling the whole dome. It hasn't always been this way. Back in the days of glory, the sky was of a deep glinting purple shaded with red and sea green, a kaleidoscope of stupendous beauty. The stars shone near and planets swirled majestically low, and everybody rejoiced at the sight as they drank cocktails and laughed among themselves at the hanging terraces of the palace. But nobody comes here anymore, that was all in the past.

The Dreamkeeper finishes his drink and walks back inside. The bar is dark and lonesome, and suddenly it becomes painfully quiet. On the turntable of a record player, he places an LP of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker's suite, Pas De Deux, and gently connects the needle. The sound of the piano echoes through the whole palace, but there's no one to listen but him. He pours himself another drink and takes a stroll around the high hollow corridors, something he does every night.

In the past, this palace never rests from the jumble and noises of hordes of people coming here to party and have the best time of their existence. It was the mecca of the afterworld, the tower of babel at the end of time, created specifically to meet the wildest expectations and to amuse all kinds of people. Each floor is designed to match a specific era, with all its perfections and flaws, its art and culture, its tales and its legends, and

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

mostly, all its dreams. You name it: Mesopotamian ages, ancient Egyptian ages, roman ages, Greek ages, middle ages, ages of oil, world wars—all seven of them— virtual realities ages, intergalactic ages. There are even stone and bronze ages. People feel nostalgic to all sorts of things, and this palace delivers it all.

But the place had decayed, like a seven-star hotel that had lost all its splendor and grandeur after going bankrupt. No funds, no maintenance, no staff. And as time flew by, everything gradually faded into mediocrity. The divine gardens became dead jungles. The Venetian-like rivers had dried and vanished. The celestial choirs and horns went quite. The outside walls had lost their colors and artistry, and the inside had fallen apart. And what remained of it is full of cracks and dust. What once was a living giant full of mirth and laughter, had now turned into a dead shell, thrown in the middle of nowhere. Everyone has abandoned the place, the servants, the visitors, even friends don't come anymore. Only the king of the palace stayed, the Dreamkeeper, endlessly wandering the deserted spaces of his house. Perhaps because he is just a miniature of the lost kingdom, empty and lifeless. Or perhaps the palace is but a metaphoric magnified representation of his heart, forlorn and mournful. However, nobody truly knows what happened.

After a long time, a Visitor finally shows up in the distant...]

Excerpt from an Untitled Book.



Blue is the color of Death

“What do you think is the point of this whole existence?” asked Zoe, her gaze lost somewhere in between the stars. We were still sitting on the terrace facing the city.

“I don’t know, really. Whenever I think about it, I realize how clueless I am,” I answered after giving it some thought.

“I’m seventy-one years old, and I don’t know either, to be honest. But you need a purpose to go on living, you can’t lead a steady life without a meaningful purpose, don’t you think?”

“I am aware of that, but I can’t just make up my own purpose. It’s whether there is a point to this whole existence, or there isn’t. At least that’s how I think of it.”

“But people do it all the time. They create meaningful goals for themselves. You believe it’s pointless?”

“Not entirely. If it helps them move forward in life, then it is meaningful in a way I guess. But when I think real hard about it, I find myself in the face of two options only: Whether there is a God, and thus, there is one single purpose, the one that he intended before creating all this. Or there’s no God at all, and this whole existence is a mere fruit of chance, and no real transcendent meaning could ever emerge from chance. It’s neither heaven nor hell, it’s just an absurd existence.”

“Realizing this is already one step forward,” Zoe said.

“But it leads nowhere. It means nothing if I can’t fathom that one single purpose that I am created for, that one single idea that popped in God’s mind before deciding to make all this,” I continued.

“Have you tried looking for answers?”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“No, not really. I just lead a normal life, going through one day to another. To be honest, sometimes I feel so fragile, sometimes I think *what if I vanish right now*, and the idea doesn’t scare me or bother me that much.”

“But you’re young. You’d be missing on so much if you die now. There’s yet so much to experience,” she objected, resting her hand on mine.

“Like what?”

“Oh, well, there’s a collection of those for someone as young as you are. You must know the glory of success. What it feels like to be powerful and free. To make your own fortune. To see the world and to be a part of something much bigger. To meet different kinds of people, to help people. To fall in love and make love to the woman of your heart’s choosing. To father a child, to hold him in your hands and see him grow. And perhaps the most magnificent feeling of all is the one you get when you take one step closer to the truth. The truth about yourself and the truth about this whole existence. There’s no matching to that feeling. Do you really think it’s okay to die before realizing all that?” She said, looking me deep in the eyes.

“I don’t know, Zoe. I don’t want to sound like a defeatist, but sometimes life is a real struggle. Sometimes, it’s too much to handle, too much that I would trade it all for death. It takes a great effort to be successful. It takes luck to fall in love. It takes courage to be free. Not all those who choose to live get to experience the splendors of life. And I know I would suffer if I grow old knowing that I have wasted my life. You might think I’m a coward for saying all this, but death is better than growing old full of regret and self-loathing.”

Blue is the color of Death

Zoe uttered no word. I looked up and pondered on the vastness of the universe above me. All those stars and galaxies; infinite seas of possibilities. I thought of the God that created all this, and I imagined him creating me, putting together the features of my face, my eyes, my eyebrows, my nose, my lips, my chin, my height, my color. Writing it all down in his four-letter language, in my DNA. I think about the idea that he must have had before putting me together. For what reason could he have possibly created me? I wondered. A lustrous shooting star cut the sky in half, as if he swung his brush for me, reminding me that he was still there, watching.

“But... all that being said,” I went on. “I’m aware enough that dying before understanding the ultimate reason behind all this. The reason behind all the reasons would be my greatest loss. I would have really wasted my life for nothing then. But the truth is, I don’t really know where to start.”

“In Tolstoy’s Confession,” Zoe started. “There’s an analogy that goes like this: two people are taken from the road to an enclosed area in a magnificent sophisticated establishment. To work there, and in return, they would be given food and drink. Their main task is to work a kind of a lever that pumps water to the garden. The first worker is doing his job, working the lever as was told by the landlord, but the second one is not. Instead, he sits speculating on why he should do something so stupid as moving the lever. He complains about the fairness of this establishment, about its structure, about the reasons the landlord brought him here and gave him this kind of work in the first place. All the while eating and drinking from the establishment’s food.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“As time goes by, the landlord sees how the first worker is dedicated to his work, so he moves him from that enclosed area where he had to move the lever to work in the garden to gather fruit. And thus, the first dedicated worker now sees more of the establishment, and understand a little more of its structure. And as a result, he is now more grateful to the landlord. As the first worker keeps doing his job, the landlord moves him from one area to another, from the garden to the inside of the house, and from trivial tasks to higher responsibilities. Until he becomes the personal servant of the landlord. The first worker now understands everything there is to know about the establishment, and he knows and trusts the landlord. He no longer asks questions as to why he is there or why he should do a certain kind of work, because he knows enough, and understand enough. The second worker, on the other hand, still refusing to do his job before he gets the answers he needs, spends the rest of his life in that enclosed area, asking the same questions. And then, after a certain period of time, he figures it all out; that whether the master is stupid or he does not exist. And that he alone is wise and everything is meaningless and he should just take out his own life... That was Tolstoy’s analogy. Do you get it?”

“Does it mean that I should forge my way through life and the answers I am seeking will present themselves along the way? Rather than putting my life on hold, waiting to find those answers before even starting to live it?”

“Precisely. If you believe there’s a God, then you should live the life he offered you to the fullest. You must seek the truth, whatever may that be, and trust that he will guide you along the way. He’ll give you little signs, little revelations. He’ll put you through the necessary pain and ordeals. And as you move on,

Blue is the color of Death

you'll get wiser, and you'll start to see what you couldn't before. You have to wade your way through life, that's the only way. Whining about how meaningless life may seem isn't going to get you anywhere. You're going to suffer anyway, better make your suffering meaningful."

"But I don't know what it means to *live*. Most of the time I feel like life happens to me, that I have very little control over it, and that most of the time I just have to accept things as they are. I don't know what it means to *wade* your way through life."

"I know that it is a little bit tricky," she said, "living life to the fullest. It doesn't mean to drop all that you have and to gather a few things on a backpack and to start traveling the world. Though this too is a way of living. But what it means to live, at least in my humble opinion, is to break free from all that which you think you are. Break free from your whims, from your fears, from your convictions, from your reputation, from what you believe you should be and shouldn't be. When you break through all those layers that stand between you and your true self, only then you can truly understand what it means to be free. And once you are free, then you can start living your life to the fullest. You just have to wait for your cue."

"My cue?"

"Yes, your cue. It's like you are a sailor and you are waiting for the right moment for the winds to blow the hardest. You stay alert, you observe, your nerves sharp, and right when the moment presents itself, you unfurl the sails, and the winds will carry your ship wherever you want it to go, as far as it can go. That's your cue. You have to wait for it. And when it does present itself, you take it by hand, and you break free from

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

everything, and you let the winds of life carry you to places you never dreamed you'd be. Am I making a little sense?"

"I guess," I replied, it never occurred to me before, but I didn't find what she said to be that odd, for some reason, I understood it.

"Be careful though, if you miss it, it might never come again."

My cue. I closed my eyes and tried to listen to the silent echoes around me. I sensed it near, but I couldn't quite figure out what it was. Like a small bell ringing around the neck of a distant black cat. The cat was watching me, observing my every move, but he was invisible to me. The only link between us is the inaudible echoes from his bell. I had to listen carefully. He would approach me any time soon. I sensed it. And I had to catch that cat. If he slipped away. If I scared him. Or if I was too scared, I may lose it forever.

"You have lived seventy-one years, Zoe. What truth did your life lead you to?"

"Oh, I have my own truth," she said after she mulled over my question. "I could tell you what it is with great details and glory, how I found it, step by step. I could tell you what life means, or at least what I believe it means. But it will not strike you in any way. You may ponder about it for a couple of days but eventually you'll forget about it, eventually, every person must find his own truth."

Zoe turned towards me and held my hand. She looked deep into my eyes and smiled warmly. She looked so sublime and graceful under the moonlight.

Blue is the color of Death

She began, “You are young, and I can’t begin to describe all the marvelous things you will experience. Not all those who choose to live are miserable, some get to live heaven on earth. And I have a feeling you could be one of them. Needless to say, you will go through real pain, and you must experience real pain. Agony deepens you, sharpens you, it chisels you from a shapeless rock to a beautiful sculpture. But with pain, real happiness comes along. There is real happiness in this life. It comes in all forms and in different packages. And with the right eyes, you’ll distinguish it from the rest of the things the mundane life offers.

“Read. There are people who are geniuses and eloquent beyond comprehension. People that come along once in a lifetime, and leave behind them a legacy of gold. Read them, learn from them, understand what they had to say. Make sure you get your share out of this life, make sure you miss nothing. Listen to music. Let it reach it you and change you. Play music, or paint or write or sculpt. Drink from every source of beauty, and let the beauty inside you manifest itself. Fall in love. Love someone unconditionally. Give them all the love you can give. It doesn’t matter if you end up hurt; you will most likely end up hurt. But you can never become a real man unless you learn how to keep on loving after getting badly injured, and gush both real and metaphorical blood. And you can never become a real human, unless you learn how to be kind to both yourself and your enemy. Challenge yourself. Know yourself. Transcend yourself, and your soul will grow. Your mind will deepen. Your eyes will see colors you never knew existed before. And only then, the outlines of the truth you have been seeking will slowly manifest. It will reveal itself, like a distant island in the midst of misty oceans. Then, you’ll know your way, and perhaps, then,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

you, too, will have something to offer to the world, a piece of your own truth.”

A moment of silence passed as I peered deep into her eyes. I nodded, and I held her hand tighte.

GLITCH IN TIME

Music still playing from the mini speakers, a light breeze gently blew in our direction. It seeped through the opening in my neck and made its way under my clothes, caressing my skin all over. But instead of making me shiver, it warmed my heart. I looked up, a pink cloud was slowly crossing the sky, like a world war one Zeppelin. As it moved further, it revealed Orion in the far distant, with its four stars belt.

“Zoe, do you see Orion?”

“I do. Son of Poseidon the sea god and Euryale.”

“Since when did it have Four stars in its belt?”

“What do you mean since when?”

“I know it’s strange, but, somehow I remember it having only three stars instead of four. Or was I wrong all along?”

“Orion’s belt always had four stars, since the dawn of times, and yes, it is strange,” She said, eyeing me in confusion. “Are you not telling me something?”

“I don’t know. In my memory, there has always been three stars.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“That can’t be possible, unless someone messed with your memories.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Anyway, let’s go down to make dinner. I’m hungry.”

Down in the kitchen, Zoe put on Edith Piaf’s *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* in the music player. We poured two goblets of grape juice and started cooking. It would have been better if it was red wine, but since we’re Muslims, no alcohol for us. Grape juice fitted the bill. I boiled water to prepare spaghetti, and Zoe fried garlic and onion in a large saucepan. I then added the tomatoes, salt, pepper, paprika. While waiting for the spaghetti to boil and for the sauce to thicken, Zoe broke the silence.

“You asked me earlier about my truth. I’m still not telling, but I’m going to tell you about someone’s else’s truth, son of your city, Saint Augustin of Hippo Regius. He said...” and then, as if reciting the sweetest poem she had ever heard,

To fall in love with God is the greatest romance.

To seek him, the greatest adventure.

To find him, the greatest human achievement.

“Beautiful, don’t you think?” She asked, sipping from her goblet.

At that instant, I remembered what another man had said, probably because it contrasted greatly with Augustin’s poem, he said,

I tried so hard, and got so far.

But in the end, it doesn’t even matter.

GLITCH IN TIME

I had to fall, to lose it all.

But in the end, it doesn't even matter.

That man took his own life, and this was probably his truth about life. I wondered how could two men have opposite views on the world. One had found heaven on earth, another had found hell. What disturbed me was, which one was right? And can we ever tell?

“It is,” I agreed after poring over the verses. “Can we really fall in love with a being we cannot see or touch?”

Zoe smiled a faint smile, riddled, but pleasant, and remained silent all the while staring at her goblet, as if looking for my answer in the dark velvet liquids in her hands. After a short while, as if my question had petered out before reaching her ears, completely ignoring it, she said, “The spaghetti is ready. Let’s eat already. I’m starving.”

Zoe lit a candle and placed it in the middle of the kitchen table. All lights out, we were engulfed by peaceful darkness that penetrated our nerves and soothed us. As we ate under the faint flickering light, my heart gave a feeble twitch. I looked up at the electronic clock hung on the wall but the digits had disappeared. An uncanny feeling had seized me. For a fleeting moment, I felt that time had turned into waters. Present, past, and future all joined paths together and merged into one pool, a pool hidden deep between the folds of reality. Something that shouldn’t have happened.

In complete silence, I watched Zoe from across the table. She looked down at her lap and her dark hair covered her face. She slowly twirled the fork inside her plate; she twirled for a

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

long time, but didn't put any spaghetti in her mouth. As she lifted her head, what I saw before me was a young girl in her twenties. She was beautiful and surreal. I stared at her in haze and admiration, but soon after, I realized that this girl *was* Zoe herself. Somehow, she turned young, to age before she even met her first husband. A girl who had never known pain in her life, radiant and innocent.

"That's how you treat a lady to a nice meal," she said, in the most natural way. "Always under the light of one candle, all things swallowed up in darkness except for her, across the table from you. You only see her, and she only sees you."

I nodded and watched her.

"You know what I think about that fourth star?" she said as she put a mouthful of spaghetti in her mouth. I listened. She chewed unhurriedly, swallowed, sipped from her glass of juice, and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "I think you leaped into another world, to a world where Orion has four stars in his belt instead of three. You know, just saying. Maybe I'm wrong."

Perplexed, I was unable to utter any word. All meanings seemed to have abandoned their seats and left the theater. I nodded again. Eyes wide open, I watched this girl in front of me. This was what Zoe looked like when she was young, but does she realize that she had just turned young? Does she still recognize me? Or was it me that traveled back to her... My mind was totally in the dark. Little made sense.

"But remember what the little girl had told you in France. *Things might not make sense in the future, and the sky might not look the same. But don't be fooled, the soul is unchanged.* You remember that right?"

GLITCH IN TIME

I did remember it, and I did remember every word that little girl had uttered that night in that village. That prophecy stuck in the back of my head, carved in the inner layer of my brain. I just had to think about it, and it would come right away. *“The Whale will swallow you, take you far away. The Raven will croak, but don’t look behind. The bard of the night will visit you, don’t give away. Follow him, through the sands and to the edge of time. Only then you’d find your long lost wisdom. And not before you claim it, will you ever return.”*

But how does she know about it? I never told anyone what happened there.

“What do you mean the soul is unchanged?”

“Who knows, really? That’s totally beyond me. I guess it means that your soul is the same, no matter what time or space you’re in. I am the same person, whether I am seventy-one years old or now, and you’re the same person whether you’re in a world with three stars or four stars. I am merely speculating. Again, that’s totally beyond me.”

Delicately spinning her fork, elegantly chewing her food, I remained a mere figure observing her. This was the world I live in I thought, where time sometimes lapsed on itself. Where people just know things. I realized what a pointless endeavor it was to look for an explanation. I just had to accept it. Zoe finished her dish, sipped from her goblet, then folded her hands on the table and kept staring at me from across the quivering the flame, a hint of a smile on her face.

“Relax. You’ll do just fine. You just have to keep forging your way through. Always remember, the only way is through. And delicious spaghetti by the way.” A breeze streamed from

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

the open window— which I remember was closed minutes before— and blew out the candle. Left in total darkness, I stood up and fetched a lighter from the drawer, and kindled the candle again. Zoe was herself again, a seventy-one years old, fragile lady. Her eyes full of wisdom, her face full of wrinkles.

“I’m tired,” She said. “I’ll head to my room to get some sleep. Can you wash the dishes, please? And there in the closet, you can find my husband’s pajamas, so serve yourself.” With that, she left to her room. The electronic clock showed 23:37.



After I washed the dishes, I went to the closet and fetched one of Zoe’s deceased husband’s pajamas. I found an old, blue-striped one but the first time, it was worn by a two-legged person. In a sense, one leg was wearing a used pajama and the other one was wearing a brand new one. I felt I was filling a void that was created years ago in a car accident, a void in the shape of a leg. I hope he wouldn’t mind. It was only for one night.

I opened a can of a non-alcoholic beer and climbed up to the roof. It was still early for me to sleep, and the night was still long and muse-inciting. I put on my earphones and leaned against the wall beside the Magnolia flower, sipping my drink and watching the mountains far in the landscape; their outlines barely visible as they blended with the murkiness of the sky above. Eventually, I laid down on the cold floor on top of that fifteen-story building, surrounded by Zoe’s flowers and the darkness of autumn nights.

Face up, I lost my gaze in the blank spaces between the stars, and then in the ones between Orion’s stars. What if young Zoe was right? What If I leaped into another world, a world with four

GLITCH IN TIME

stars instead of three? But everything looks the same. I was the same, this city was the same, and people looked the same—which was somewhat disappointing. I eventually decided not to think about it. I closed my eyes and let my mind drift somewhere at the edge of consciousness. I tried to let the abstruse meanings of music guide my thoughts, and my thoughts guide my emotions, until they all merged and formed one stream of being; a stream that swirled endlessly towards the core of the world within. Gradually, my outlines receded, my proprioception faded, and I became a sheer speck of consciousness, drifting in a place that existed somewhere between the distant roars of the city and the borderlines of dreams. I remained in that state, shifting between turbulent emotions and golden memories. Zoe's family lying on the bed dead and blue; Mandolin's ember hair; the scent of Ezra's cigarettes on the rooftop of the hospital; the feel of the white sands under my feet; the feel of Sophia's body pressing against mine; her slender arms, and the black triangular mark behind her earlobe. Meanings and memories made ambiguous patterns for brief moments and soon rushed again in volatile chaos. I opened my eyes, checked the time on my phone, which indicated it was two in the morning.

I climbed down the stairs on tiptoe, trying not to make a sound lest I woke up Zoe from her sleep. I threw the unfinished can of beer in the trash, gulped a glass of water, brushed my teeth with my index finger since I had no toothbrush, fetched a blanket from the closet and walked to the living room to crush on the sofa. On my way I noticed a faint light coming out of Zoe's room. I figured she was still awake, so I went to check on her and bid her goodnight. I knocked and entered, but it turned out she was sound asleep on her bed. The desk lamp was on, under which there was a well-folded piece of paper and a brown

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

envelope. I stood there watching her for a brief moment. Face up, she looked like she was having the best dream of her life. However, not long after, I realized Zoe wasn't sleeping.

That night, Zoe *died*.

She wasn't breathing. I brought my face closer to her chest. I tried to listen, to glimpse the smallest elevation in her thorax, but she was motionless. I brought my finger closer to her nose to feel the flow of air, then I put a mirror near her mouth, but it didn't cloud up. I checked the pulse on her wrist, on her neck, but nothing. All was muted. I gently shook her shoulder and called her name, again and again, but Zoe *was* dead.

She was gone in her sleep. Her face revealed no signs of suffering or agony. But rather, if you paid close attention, you'd notice an almost imperceptible smile on her face. She knew all along she was going to sleep and never wake up. '*It's the twilight of my life,*' hours ago, she said.

Left alone with her corpse, the silence started to drown me. Layers upon layers of silence, until all sounds disappeared, not a heartbeat, not a breath, not a thought. It was as if death did not only take her life but the life in the space around her too. And I was sitting at the heart of that space, feeling the unbearable stillness of absolute silence, of absolute absence, a hollowness that soon made its way inside me. I was lost. I had no idea what to feel.

I sat there, face muffled in my hands, trying to figure out what it meant to die. Should I feel sad? Should I call someone? I hadn't the slightest idea. My mind froze. Never before was I alone with a corpse at two in the morning. Not that it was scary. There was nothing scary about it. It was just strange. I was alive,

GLITCH IN TIME

and she was next to me, dead. The contrast was too great, but it didn't feel that way. Was it because I had already accepted death as a part of life? Or was it because I had already renounced life itself... Why didn't I feel so different from the corpse beside me? The idea hovered in my mind for a while, but soon was absorbed like everything else by the silence engulfing me.

The well-folded paper that Zoe left on her desk turned out to be a *letter*, for me. I figured she wrote it just before she went to sleep, or perhaps she wrote it long before. I carefully opened it, and immediately recognized her handwriting.

Zoe, always telling me things on time.



"There is something I've kept secret from you for so many years. I beg your pardon. I know it's not my right to withhold it from you, since it concerns you. And I should have told you about it as soon as the chance presented itself. But I've made a promise to a man once to never tell, and I never did. However, I can't take this secret with me to the grave. I must apologize to you. I am sincerely sorry for what had happened that night. Twelve years ago.

I have already told you my story, and I thank you from the depth of my heart for listening. It means the heaven and earth to me, because now I know it will not be lost to oblivion after my death. You will carry it inside you, and thus, you will carry me inside you. Perhaps you don't understand the true value of that, but when you're about to leave this life, it means a great deal not to be forgotten, even by one single person.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

In the dream that I have told you about. That vivid vision in which I met my family on the surface of the moon that split in half. In which I received my salvation and was granted the chance to hold them and ask for their pardon. Where my heart was cleansed from all the agony and regret that piled up during the years that followed their deaths. I have never again dreamed of them ever since. I yearned to have that kind of experience one more time. I longed for their faces. I craved their touch. But it never happened. Except for one single time. Once, twelve years ago, when you were nine, on the night you were hospitalized for having an asthma attack.

It was my shift that night, and it was my responsibility to keep an eye on each patient and to make sure they are well cared for. I was monitoring a little girl, about your age, who was also suffering an asthma attack when they brought you in, gasping for air, struggling for your life. You've had many asthma attacks before, but that one was really severe. We did our best to stabilize you, and it wasn't an easy task. For a moment we thought we were really going to lose you. But you fought, and I refused to give up, and eventually, the medication finally took effect and you started to get better. I insisted on your parents to go home and get some rest. I told them that I wouldn't blink an eye during the whole night. That I will be right above his head, protecting you like a second mom. After all, you were like a son to me.

However, I don't know if you remember, because we never talked about this, but that wasn't entirely the case.

Everything was calm. You were sound asleep. You breathed easily. You had no respiratory signs and your blood oxygen levels were in the limits of normal. However, around two in the

GLITCH IN TIME

morning, I felt a heavy somnolence all of a sudden. Drowsiness penetrated every nerve, every muscle in my body, my eyelids turned into heavy steel; too heavy for me to keep open. It was as if somebody had sedated me, I just couldn't resist. Slumber, like a huge black snake, slithered around my body and neck and knocked me out. It was very strange because it never happened to me before. I had hardly managed to walk to the changing room, and within seconds, I was long gone.

That night, I dreamed of my family again. We were on a rowboat all four of us in the middle of the sea. It was dark. The waters were flat, and there was nothing on the horizon as far as the eye could see. Up above us the moon, as before, shone unusually bright. My husband was sitting next to me, and facing us were my two children. The girl was wearing a green gown, and the boy was wearing a purple one, each holding an oar and slowly rowing, and the boat silently glided on the silvery waters.

For some personal reasons, I'm going to omit narrating the details of the rest of the dream, but it was a unique one, too vivid, too real. I was aware that I was dreaming, and I was also aware that I was seeing my deceased family, which made it all the more distinctive.

When I finally woke up, it was three a.m. I dozed off for about an hour, and I woke up feeling remarkably better. All the tiredness of the whole day had disappeared and I had the same feeling in my chest as the first time: a hollow space filled with cool air. I could fairly say that it was the same experience I had before when I first met them. However, slightly less intense.

For a few seconds, I remained seated on the bed, my consciousness alternating between the world of dreams and

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

reality, until I was finally totally awake. The first thing that hit me was that I left you alone.

I hurried to your room, hoping that nothing bad had happened to you and the girl, but I was wrong. That's the part I have never told anyone about, except one person. when I entered your room, I found you both dead.

I still remember that scene with great details. The sight was nothing but flabbergasting. The moon was still as bright, as if the realm of dreams had not entirely withdrawn and was colliding with reality. And right under its light, you and that girl were both motionless, holding hands in the empty space between the two beds. as I slowly approached you, something in my heart flickered, and I knew I was about to behold a horrid sight. I prayed with all my heart that I am wrong, but with each step I took, it became more and more clear. You were both dead, blue.

You can imagine the fear I must have felt then. It was the same, unmatched terror I sensed when I first saw my family dead on the bed that day. You had the same blue skin, like a cold evening shade right after sunset. My whole body trembled, my hands shook, my legs barely kept me standing. I stood there petrified in the aisle between the two beds. You had no pulse, no heartbeat. You weren't breathing, both of you. You were dead, and I realized there was nothing I could do to bring you back. You were already long gone.

I fell on my knees, silently weeping my tears out. But the longer I stared at your faces, the more you looked just like two kids peacefully sleeping. For split seconds the hope that you would wake up like nothing happened would pop inside my heart and disappears right after. It was strange, and I must apologize

GLITCH IN TIME

for using this word, but the sight of you two was almost beautiful. The way the moonlight reflected on your blue skin in the dead calm of the night. Despite its dreadfulness, it was very enchanting.

I remained on my knees sobbing. I'd close my eyes and wish with all my being that I didn't doze off, that I was there doing my job, that I didn't let you die. The aching regret I felt years ago after my family's death was flooding me again. I was staring at the abyss, one step from falling back into that thick depression I dwelt in for three years. Then I opened my eyes again and see your tiny hands holding one another, and it would send an odd warm feeling inside my heart, 'this can't be a sad sight,' the feeling said. 'this is not a sight to cry for. This is how things should be. These two kids were meant to die this way, this night, and there's nothing you could've ever done about it.' And so I stayed in a state of utter confusion, remorse, and of utter loss. How am I supposed to face your mother and that girl's parents? How am I going to justify myself? how am I going to live with that?

However, somehow, by some force, for some reason, you came back to life.

The girl's hand twitched ever so slightly. I thought I was imagining things, but then it twitched again, and again, and with each twitch, I swung like a pendulum from hope to despair, until she heaved a sudden, deep breath in, and you followed right after.

It was as if you held hands and took a deep dive into the ocean. You stayed under the waters, and after a while, you swam up. Your heads emerged first, and you took a deep breath in. It

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

was as simple as that. You just came back to life. And like water drying out, the blue tint was slowly disappearing, until your color returned to normal. Your breathing became steady, hearts beating again. One moment you were dead, the second you were just two sleeping kids.

The relief and happiness I felt then were immeasurable, and so was the befuddlement. Life came back to me as it came back to you. At that moment, I felt I was also resurrected from the dead.

After I gathered my senses and made sure you truly were on the side of the living, I decided to leave you sleeping for the moment. I'm not sure, but somehow I felt I shouldn't disturb anything.

It seemed to me that each time I disappear, I come back to find the people dearest to me azure dead. The reason why I feel guilty about that night is because I feel that both of you, you and that girl, had lost something in those moments you leaped into the world of the dead. Of course, you had no symptoms after that incident whatsoever, and I kept a close eye to check on both of you for several months after. But no matter how much I try to reassure myself, I can't shake off the feeling that you two had lost something during that night. Or perhaps you had traded one thing for another, but certainly, you emerged not unchanged. No normal child dies and comes back to life just like that. The natural order of life was disturbed, and I ignore the reason behind it.

I also ignore the reason behind the simultaneous occurrence of my dream and your deaths, because there is definitely a link between the two no matter how strange that my appear. Why did

GLITCH IN TIME

I feel that irresistible drowsiness and dozed off to meet my family at the same time your unfathomable deaths occurred? I don't know, I've thought about it a lot, and I have come up with a theory. I think that your death had opened a gateway linking two worlds, through which I passed in my dreams and met my family. Or through which my family had passed to reach me in my dreams. However, I ignore the reason why did it have to happen the moment you and that girl came into contact with one another. Why did it have to happen through you? I also ignore the meaning and the connection between the blue color you and my family had shared on your first moments leaving this life. It's a conundrum I had to ponder upon for years. And it is one of the reasons I kept you close to me, because I was ready to take full responsibility if anything happened to you after that night. I had to keep a close eye on you,.I wished to keep the girl as close to me, but due to some circumstances, that was not possible.

I know that sooner or later you'll have to deal with the consequences of that night. As you can see, unfortunately, I have no answer to offer. And I can't say for sure what is the nature of those consequences. But if you ever start to sense that your life isn't as normal as it once was, or if you start to feel that the reality you perceive isn't as natural as it should be, know that you are not normal yourself. You crossed the great divide and came back. You came back while you shouldn't have, and that can't be without price. The first thing you should do if that ever happens, I believe, is to look for that girl. Her name is Sophia. She's the same age as yours. I don't know much about her life, but I will leave her address at the end of the letter in case you ever wished to find her.

Again, I am deeply sorry. As much as it may seem that there was nothing I could have done, I still feel responsible for what

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

happened to both of you. I am very grateful that you suffered no consequences all these years. I'm glad that you had no memory of that night. I am glad that you lead a normal life. And mostly, I'm grateful that I had the chance to keep you close during all these years.

I leave you the Magnolias, please take them, take care of them, and remember me each time you water them or contemplate their beauty. This is my gift for you, along with a humble sum of money that I beg you to accept. It's in the envelope I'll leave you on the desk, it's the least I can offer.

You're on your own now. Be strong.

Love, Zoe Coppola.



I read the letter a second time, then I folded it and placed it on the desk. My temples throbbed. My earlobes were on fire. My heart gave dry, arrhythmic beats. My hands became sweaty and my feet cold. I barely managed to stand up. I walked to the bathroom and washed my face several times, washed my arms and my neck, then my face all over again. All the while, a cyclone of distorted ideas and colorless emotions whirled inside me, shaking my whole being. I kept splashing my face with the cold waters, hoping that it would dissipate the confusion, but it was of no avail. I looked at myself in the mirror and stared deep into my eyes, trying to glimpse the shadow of death that once paid me a visit. I tried to catch the mark that it left inside me. Was I normal or was I deformed, scarred? So many questions arose in my head all at once, clashed, collided and annihilated each other; then arose again. Only questions, but no answers.

GLITCH IN TIME

I returned to the room and sat beside Zoe on the bed. I contemplated the features of her face, and the realization that this person was never going to speak, smile or move ever again started to clarify inside me. That this person beside me was never going to call my name again, never converse with me again, never ask about me, never worry about me, never hold me or reassure me, never be happy for me, never be sad because of me. That this person was going to leave a void in me, a void in the shape of her presence, and was never going to be filled.

I felt sadness welling up inside me, rising up, like boiling groundwater making its way up to the surface. I felt it in my throat, then behind the lids, ready to burst. I tried to suppress it. I tried not to cry. But then I asked myself why am I trying so hard, and I found no answer. I let go and cried my heart out, face buried in Zoe's shoulder, along with her corpse in the dead quiet apartment, until I fell asleep beside her.

That night, I realized that we do not weep for the dead, but we weep for ourselves. We cry because we become a little more lonelier than we used to be.

At five a.m., I woke up. Not knowing what to do exactly, I called her son, several times until he picked up. I informed him of the bitter news, and he said he would come as soon as possible, and that he would send relatives to take care of everything. I waited for them until they came, changed, took the Magnolias and the envelope and left right away.

I didn't attend the funeral.

PART 02

Lead Into Gold, World Into Words

In the month that followed, November, I regularly met Sophia twice a week. We'd just hang out at Birdland most of the time. The place was oftentimes hushed and charming. And we'd always sit at our usual table in the corner by the window, drinking coffee one cup after another and eating free white chocolate macarons. We'd mainly just talk, yet the conversation would take its flow and glide like a train on a whimsical railroad. And it would race time until two hours pass and we bid each other goodbye.

Not that the conversation didn't come to a halt at times. It did, and silence would reign over us. But it was not due to a lack of topics that this happens. It was more as if she disappears momentarily without notice, and completely forgot that she was just talking to me, or that I even existed across the table from her. She would look out the window and lose her gaze somewhere off, and her thoughts in the confines of her imagination and memory. I learned to accept those blank spaces in our conversation, and to just let her return to me whenever she felt like it. And when she does, she seems totally unaware of her

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

transient absence, as she would just smile at me with dreamy eyes, and we'd carry on our talk.

There was one thing I also found odd and befuddling at first. I came to understand that Sophia's discourse didn't necessarily had to always make sense. At times, she would narrate an episode of her life with great details and enthusiasm; at others, she would give very little of such; a simple dry account of events. Sometimes, she would start the story from the middle, totally leaving me in the dark on how it started. Other times she simply wouldn't end it. On occasions, her story may seem very incoherent, as she would tell it in fragmented bits that were not chronologically consecutive, and even when they were, there were always missing ones like torn out pages in a book. Sometimes, she would narrate a part of one story, then jumped to another part of another story, like bouncing from point A to point C, then back to B, then to point G. When I asked her for an explanation, she would look me in the eyes for a brief moment, a look that I was never able to decipher, then totally ignored my question and resumed her speech.

That inconsistency in her speech didn't make sense to me for a long time, not until I finally learned the reason behind it. She was constantly avoiding the mention of two people: Her deceased friend and another person, her previous lover.

Some days we'd just take aimless rides in my uncle's red Aveo, quietly listening to old rock music and sometimes singing along when we happen to know the lyrics by heart. Sometimes we'd head for the far coast and take calm barefoot ambles along the shore side. Other times, we'd ride up in the mountains and park the car on the roadside, we'd watch the city as it reddens under the sunset and stay there until it was dark.

Lead Into Gold, World Into Words

A tacit compliance had developed between us. A secret accord implying that we both understood in a way that couldn't be put into words the bond between us. An unshakable, inner bond, a deep intimacy of memories long forgotten through time. We did not once ask what we are to each other or what future lies ahead for us. We never discussed what we felt for one another nor demanded clarification about what each thought of the other. Sometimes when I let her drive, I contemplated her from the passenger seat, and the more I stared at her, the more I realized that I was not willing to ever lose her. I ignored the meaning of our encounter. What did it mean to die with one person holding hands and then to come back from the dead together? What did it mean to dream of her lying beside me right before having the worst nightmare of my life, a nightmare after which nothing was the same?

But it didn't matter, because being with her felt right and it felt good. During the past twenty-one years of my life, I had always felt that there was an oddity in my world. As if there was a missing gear in a very complex machine, the machine does its job but there was always this disturbing noise coming out of it. I'd heard that noise for so long, not knowing where it came from nor what was missing exactly. Until she came, and it turned out she was the missing gear, and she fits perfectly in its empty place and everything turned into its right order, and the noise had finally disappeared.

Beside her, I heard the world without any noise. I ignored what was going on inside her, how did she feel, what she thought. But something told me that it was not so different.

We'd pass by the green metal gates to see if Mr. Amati is ever back each time we meet. The tingling feeling of the

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

presence that lay beyond those gates never disappeared. Every time we drove or walked closer to that store, it grew more and more vibrant. As for Sophia, she remained quiet, uttering no words the whole time we were near the store. Not until we left it far behind that she could finally relax. However, the gates were always closed. Mr. Amati never came back.

That would be the end of our rendez-vous, after which we bid each other goodbye. Though I had her address (but kept it a secret), she never let me drive her home, and she never explained why.

I didn't hear a word from Dr. Ezra the whole month. He gave me his number and asked me to call him whenever I found the stones. Unfortunately; however, I couldn't find them. I looked everywhere, but it seemed that I had lost them. They just disappeared into thin air. And even when I tried to call him to inform him of my fruitless search, I couldn't reach him. After trying a couple of times, I left him a message and gave up.

The Oracle must've been waiting for me to bring the stones in her mansion in the woods. She said that she couldn't quite understand what was going on with me, that I was in danger. I considered paying her a visit alone a couple of times. I still vaguely remembered the way to her mansion, and I could find it with a bit of a struggle. But during the last month except for Zoe's death, nothing bad happened to me. I had no nightmares during my sleep, no Rat-man, no fear. It seemed that my life was regaining its once lost equilibrium.

Aside from that, when I didn't meet Sophia, I spent my days shifting between practicing the violin, cooking, taking nocturnal strolls in the gloomy streets of Bone, watching movies, jogging,

Lead Into Gold, World Into Words

and reading Sophia's unfinished, untitled book. Which I found, in contrast with her way of talking, very coherent and easy to read. The style was eloquent, the story was provoking and compelling. But, something did not always feel right about it. The more I read, the more I dove into uncharted depths that didn't always feel safe. At times, it felt ominous and twisted. At others totally unrelated to this reality. I could tell that the story was written not for the purpose to be shown to anybody, or to be easily understood. It was as if she wrote it solely to herself.

Nevertheless, I was hooked, and I sort of knew my way through the lines. I did not feel so alienated. Reading her story was like contemplating an abstract painting. Your common sense did not seize much, but you discerned a meaning emerging from all those intermingled shapeless colors, and it reached your core. You don't know what you are staring at and you can't pinpoint the exact element in the painting that was transmitting that meaning, but you feel it anyway.

The novel was thick in volume and she must have spent months writing it. It was taking me longer than I expected to finish it, but I was in no hurry. I wanted to appreciate the structure of each sentence of each paragraph. I wanted to pay attention to how they're linked together, what specific words did she choose instead of others, and behind what feelings those words were given birth. A book revealed much more to a person than his spoken words.

It was not until the end of the month that someone knocked on my door. It was Mandolin.

-17-

After Dark Escapade
Somethings Are Understood Only
When Experienced
In Deeper, You Must Go

The clock showed 00:37, and I was lying on the bed reading Sophia's untitled book when someone knocked on my door. Surprised as to who could possibly pay me a visit at such an hour, I hopped from my bed to open the door. I asked who it was but no one answered. All I received was just another, gentle knock, a knock that carried within nothing wicked or suspicious. I peeked from the door hole, but I only saw a small black silhouette. I asked again, but I got the same silent treatment. After which I just opened the door.

We stared at each other for a short while. Me, in surprise, and her, probably waiting for me to grasp the situation.

"Hey! Would you like to come in?" I said finally.

"I thought you'd never ask."

After Dark Escapade

Mandolin stepped inside, unhurriedly took off her white sneakers, and walked straight to my room, the only room beaming with a feeble orange glow.

“Come, we need to talk,” she said.

I peeked outside the door into the hall, expecting someone else to show up but no one did. I closed the door and followed her to my room. Inside, she took a seat on the desk chair, she wore a red sweater with casual blue jeans; her orange hair pulled back. She looked like the typical, innocent little girl; however, innocent little girls didn’t show up in the middle of the night alone without notice.

“Would you like something to drink? Milk or juice maybe, or maybe you’re hungry. I could fix you a quick sandwich,” I offered.

“Just coffee please.” I was going to say something, but then I remembered that I started drinking coffee around her age. Besides, I felt like having some too.

“Okay. Be right back.”

Then just before leaving the room, I turned and asked her.

“Did you come here all by yourself?”

She nodded.

I stared at her once again in confusion and realized that there were so many questions that needed to be answered. I decided I’d make the coffee first then I could ask her whatever I wanted.

Waiting for the water to boil, I looked outside of the window to see if there was anyone or any car waiting around, somebody

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

who might've dropped Mandolin to my place, but there was no one. The neighborhood was as deserted as it usually is this hour of the night.

After the coffee was ready I poured two cups and walked back to my room. Mandolin was reading Sophia's book. Totally ignoring my presence, she kept reading until she finished about a page. I took a seat and waited for her.

"Who wrote this?"

"Here's your coffee."

"Thanks."

"A friend of mine."

"Interesting..." She folded the book and returned it on top of my bed, took a seat beside me and sipped her coffee.

"That's some seriously delicious coffee," she said, looking a little impressed.

"Thanks. I buy the expensive stuff, because when I drink it I wanna taste it. But you know what's in my mind right now? It's not the coffee in your cup."

Mandolin remained unruffled. She looked at me and said nothing.

"How did you know where I live?" I asked.

"The Oracle told me."

"That answers everything. Thank you."

"She's the Oracle. She knows stuff."

After Dark Escapade

“And how did you get here all by yourself at this hour?”

“Aren’t you more interested in why I came here in the first place?”

“I’ll get to that.”

“You were supposed to bring the stones to the Oracle,” she said as she placed the cup on top of my desk and sunk in her chair.

“Yeh I know, but I have lost them.”

“Did you look everywhere?”

“I did, but they just disappeared.”

She looked around my room. Her gaze swept every little thing until it rested on the violin case.

“You play the violin...” she stated in a monotonous way, and I couldn’t tell if it was a question or a statement.

“Sort of.”

“Would you bring me the case, please?”

After I handed it to her, she opened it and carefully held the violin between her slender hands and contemplated it. Then she moved it to stare at it from various angles.

“That’s a strange piece of violin. Where did you get it?”

“Same place I got the two stones actually.”

“You mean from that fortune teller and her granddaughter?”

“Yeah.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Mandolin gave the violin another close look, then stood up. She held the violin in her right hand, the bow with her left, and as soon as she stroked the bow, a beautiful sound came out of the instrument, a sound I was never able to produce so far. She closed her eyes, and started to play. The notes of a sad lullaby filled the room, a melody that left me enchanted, almost bewitched, but it soon was over after a few seconds. She sat in her chair, then handed the violin back.

“It is a strange piece of violin, even the sound it produced was not like any other violin I have ever played,” Mandolin claimed.

“That was actually beautiful. I am amazed that you could play this level at your age.”

“Yeah. I stopped playing long ago though,” she said as she shrugged.

“Long ago? What are you, ninety?”

“I’m flattered that you think I am that young,” she uttered with a mischievous smile.

“So, now I can ask you for what reason do I owe you this honored, nocturnal visit?”

“Check the little compartment inside the case, where you keep your rosin.”

I did as she said, and to my surprise, I found the two stones in there.

“You haven’t looked there I suppose.”

After Dark Escapade

“I guess I haven’t, but I don’t remember ever hiding them in here,” I said, trying to hide my embarrassment. I totally forgot about the existence of that compartment. I might’ve hidden them there, but I didn’t remember doing so. I guess I was not yet used to having a violin, and besides, that was not where I kept my rosin. I practically never used that compartment.

Mandolin took the two stones from my hand and examined them. Each at a time. She first held the Amethyst between her thumb and index finger mid-air toward the light from the bedside lamp. Then, she did the same with the Chrysocola, giving them both a hard serious inspection, like a gem master examining a chunk of blood diamond, making sure it is the right deal. Then without saying anything, she handed them back to me.

“It doesn’t matter. Now that you have found the stones, we need to go somewhere.”

“Wait, did the Oracle send you to find the stones for me?”

“You have a sharp mind.”

“Why did she have to send you at this late hour of the night?”

“Because we need to get going, grab your keys, you’re driving us.”

“Where are we going?”

“You ask a lot of questions!”

Then, without giving me any further explanation, she took another sip from her coffee, stood up and walked to the door. As she was tying her shoelaces she added “The keys of the car are

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

on top of the microwave, and bring the two stones, a towel, and a flashlight.” With that, she left.

Indeed, I found the keys on top of the microwave, and it would’ve taken me some time looking for them hadn’t she told me their whereabouts. I shoved the two stones in my pocket, grabbed a towel and a small flashlight as she said, then went back to the kitchen and made two quick pickle and cheese sandwiches. Something told me it was going to be a long night trip. I Stuffed everything inside a small shoulder bag, put on a jean jacket and left the house.

Outside, Mandolin was waiting for me leaning on my uncle’s Red Aveo. I assumed the Oracle also told her what car I owned. The neighborhood was dark and gloomy a few stray dogs barked in the distance, and the air was crisp. I unlocked the car with the key remote and she slid into the passenger seat. I stepped in after her and started the engine.

“Off to where?” I asked.

“Drive seaward.”

I shifted gears, pressed on the gas pedal and the engine gave a smooth rumble that soon got swallowed by the silence of the night. After a few minutes, we were already on the freeway.



Mandolin turned on the stereo and silently kept shifting through the playlist I had in a plugged-in USB key, one song after another. She would listen to one track for a few seconds, then, displeased probably, though the expression on her face remained unchanged, she shifted to another. The playlist

After Dark Escapade

contained mainly some jazz, classical and some old rock music. Some of it, I collected myself, and some were suggested by Sophia. Chet Baker, Guns N' Roses, Schubert, Wes Montgomery, Debussy, Brahms, Sinatra, Coltrane, Pink Floyd, Queen, Muse, Ravel, Dire Straits, Chopin, Liszt, Puccini, Miles Davis, Janacek, Radiohead, and so on.

“So, why doesn’t the Oracle show herself?” I asked, trying to break the silence.

“Because she doesn’t want to. She has her own reasons.”

“Tell me, did she have an accident or is she sick or something?”

“What makes you think that?”

“I just thought she got disfigured, and became... you know, grotesque.”

“Grotesque?” She asked, glancing at me from the tip of her eyes, smiling sarcastically. “You mean ugly?”

“Yeah... sort of,” I said.

“And you think because she became appalling to look at, she doesn’t want to see people anymore?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“Nice imagination.”

“Did I get it right?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“C’mon, tell me! I can keep a secret.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

She gave it a thought, then after a moment of hesitation, she said, eyes on the road. “She is disfigured in a certain sense, but it’s not what you think.”

“In what sense might that be?”

“Drop it already!”

“Okay! Jesus!”

Another moment of silence had passed, me focused on the road, Mandolin still going through the playlist, not yet finding her ears’ yearning.

“She’s your grandmother right?”

She nodded.

“Where are your parents?”

She eyed me with a trace of disbelief mingled with hesitation. She took off her finger from the stereo and fell back to her seat, Debussy’s *Reverie* survived her merciless shift. She remained quiet for a long while staring out of the window, and my question faded away like a long call into the void.

“They gave me away and left a long time ago,” finally, she stated.

I realized I stepped where I shouldn’t have, like I always did

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Let’s not,” she said, still staring off the window.

“As you wish.”

After Dark Escapade

The city was desolate, scarcely a car in the scene, rarely a soul to be seen. All noises traveled to the world of dreams. Unlike big cities, Bone slept at night, but a Rem kind of sleep, where everything may seem peacefully calm, but all sorts of things were happening under the surface. Horrible nightmares for some, good dreams for others.

Driving through the streets you might feel as if you were a miniature in a checkerboard. One block was fully lit with broad boulevards and shiny signs of some fancy stores and restaurants. Another was pitch black with narrow streets and damaged asphalt. And sometimes, if you were lucky, you may stumble upon a small horde of people holed up in the shadows, smoking weed and drinking alcohol, who get momentarily revealed by the headlights of the car. I don't know which would seem more suspicious, the stoned, wasted horde or a guy driving with a child in the middle of the night. I shifted to the fourth gear and speed up through the empty roads, through the strangeness I was living but helplessly not questioning. Something I could never do during the day.

"The music is not half bad, but still not impressed," Mandolin half complimented.

"How may you be impressed, Madame? I have no Hannah Montana if that's what you are looking for."

"Impressing me would be ambitious of you. Will I find Bohemian Rhapsody among this tasteless playlist?"

"What's so special about that track anyway?"

"It's a masterpiece. What do you know."

"Go track thirty-seven."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

After she found the song, she fell back into her seat again, not saying a word of praise or impressment. The first famous verses of the song begun,

*“Is this real life?
Is this just fantasy?
Caught in a landslide
No escape from reality
Open your eyes
Look up to the skies and see”*

But not before long, we were pulled into the mystic atmosphere of the song, and started singing along, something you simply can not resist.

*“Mama just killed a man
Put a gun against his head
Pulled my trigger, now he’s dead
Mama, life has just begun
But now I’ve gone and thrown it all away*

....

I see a little silhouette of a man.”

We reached the seaside by the time the song reached its end. The air became impregnated with the smell of salt, and the ocean songs blended with the music and formed a soothing background hiss. In the far off horizon, the lights of distant ships and stars blended into a single sea of darkness.

“Where to now?” I asked.

“To the Sultan’s Eye.”

“What!? I’m not taking you there.”

After Dark Escapade

Mandolin didn't say a word. I assumed she anticipated my reaction, knowing how dangerous that place was. The Sultan's Eye was an isolated, distant beach at the far end of the sea coast, and there was no paved road to go there by car. We'd have to park somewhere far and walk down a hill through some bushes and hard rocks. It was a dangerous walk for a kid, especially at this hour of the night.

"Why are we going to that beach anyway?"

"The Oracle's orders."

"What if I say no?"

"Then we'll go home, but never again ask for her help," she ruthlessly answered.

"Do I need help anyway?"

"If you want to live to find out that's your choice."

"Why doesn't she explain anything god damn it."

"You think she'd send me at this hour to your house if it wasn't important? She's trying to help you. Now stop whining."

"How could she send her granddaughter alone to that beach in the middle of the night? I'm starting to question her sanity."

"Well, I'm with you, right? Am I not safe with you?"

"No, no, don't reverse psychology me. This is a responsibility I don't want to take."

"At least trust the Oracle. If she sent me there, it means that she knows nothing bad would happen to us."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I gave it some thought. I was aware of the danger, but there was something in me that wanted to see where all of this was going. Call it curiosity, call naivety, call it a sense of adventure, it didn't matter. I wanted to know.

"I guess I don't have much of a choice do I. Okay, screw it! Let's go."

"Finally some guts."

After a thirty minutes drive, we reached the closest spot by car to the Sultan's Eye. We parked and stepped out. The place was pitch-dark, and if it weren't for the moon's light we couldn't have seen three meters from our feet. I took out the flashlight from the shoulder bag and cast the beam forward. Down ahead, thickets of bushes spread out before us.

"Take my hand. I don't want you to ever let go, okay?"

"Okay."

Mandolin gripped my hand and we carefully trudged down a path that looked less of a path than small passageways through a maze of bushes. I'd gone to the Sultan's Eye a couple of times when I was younger, so I knew my way through. Pouring light down into the ground, we slowly made our way down the hill. Every now and then I'd hear something moving nearby, or an undefinable sound resembling that of a nocturnal animal, but I kept my ideas to myself. I was supposed to be the one protecting her if anything happens, not the one who shows fear. But in fact, I felt a little reassured whenever I felt her hand gripping mine, sometimes just realizing we were not alone could chase all the fear away.

After Dark Escapade

It was a long and tiring way down, and after a few minutes lumbering along, we finally made it to the shore. Safe but not too clean. With a few scratches on our forearms and ankles from all the thorns that caressed our skin along the way.

The beach was just about a hundred meters wide. During summer, you might stumble upon some campers, but in autumn, the beach was graveyard empty. I looked around but nothing caught my eye, just glowing sands, and a small rowboat ducked in the far end. It was an uncharted piece of Elysium, a golden crescent amidst rocky hills. However, in the heart of night, the view was breathtaking. The sea was a blanket of quivering silver stretching forever before us, crimson puffs of clouds floated peacefully above, shrouding and unveiling an almost full moon. And the waves gently crawled to the shore, filling the air with an undisturbed wet humming. Standing alone in the middle of that seascape, surrounded by murky mountains, glittering seas and an open sky, I felt elated, and glad I didn't refuse this after dark escapade.

"Think of all the people sleeping in their beds who are missing this sight, and feel all the exaltation they would have felt had they been in standing where you are right now, because you alone are witnessing this, and nobody else," I said to Mandolin who was still holding my hand, silently absorbing all the beauty of the scene.

"Says the guy who didn't want to come," she replied.

"You're a mean person."

"You're a pussy."

"Your name is ridiculous."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“But you said you liked it!”

“I did, but now I find it ridiculous. Seriously, from all the names in the world that’s what you chose to call yourself?”

She punched me in the stomach. She did not punch like a little girl.

“Okay, now what? I said, groaning.

“Follow me.”



Mandolin strode ahead to the far end of the beach, shuffling her little feet in the cold sand, until we reached where the boat was docked.

“Jump in,” she said.

Without asking any further questions, I did as she said. At that point, it was already too late to seek any explanations, so I just gave in to the flow of things. The boat gently swayed below my feet as I bounced in, after which I helped her get on board. The oars were inside, I took my seat and set them each aside. Mandolin untied the rope, cast off the boat and took the seat facing me. After all was ready, I started rowing.

“Where to now?”

“Just keep rowing far from the shore.”

The sea was calm and dark, the boat glided swiftly, as if it was floating a few centimeters above the surface, and the wet sounds of the oars kissing the waters were all we heard. Glancing

After Dark Escapade

at the depthless darkness below gave me chills, I couldn't help but feel something watching us from down there, something sinister and alive. What ideas was I supposed to get? Sailing in the middle of the night in a coal-black sea. The deep ocean always frightened me more than anything, what lied deep below the surface but monsters? I remembered a story I once read, a myth.

The myth says that before God created man, he first created Djinn. Creatures made out of the fire. The first Djinn was named Soumya, and Soumya and his breed lived on earth for thousands of years before men. However, they became less pious, more sinful and greedy as the ages passed. They killed and waged wars among each other, spilled blood and cast depravity and degeneration into the earth, thus diverging from the will of God. Displeased, God sent his angels on earth to terminate them, and so, a war began between the creatures of fire and the creatures of light.

The Djinn lost the war and the majority of them were killed, and what remained of them were chased away, scattered on the edges of the earth. God then created men out of dust, the first being Adam. And so Adam and his breed lived peacefully on earth for quite some time, until they inevitably collided with the remaining scattered Djinn. Two breeds fighting over one home, Men were gathered under the prophet Enosh, ancestor of Noah and grandson of Adam, and went into a great war against the remaining Djinn. The Djinn once again were defeated, poor creatures, and ever since they hid away in faraway places where men couldn't reach. The Highest of mountains, the deep deserts, hidden caves, and uncharted shores. And they lived there, till this day.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

The Sultan's eye was one of those uncharted beaches, the legend says. Actually, the name itself was said to be that of the Djinn ruling this cast-off seashore, a one-eyed king. And now we were trespassing his kingdom in the middle of the night, sailing off into his seas.

Of course, it was all but a legend. Actually, it was very absurd if you thought about it, unless it had a symbolic meaning deeper than my own understanding. However, the possibility that it was real still exists. I look down at the waters and can't help myself but imagine hordes of Djinn following us, keeping an eye on us. I try to chase away these thoughts, and look above to the sky.

"It feels like a dream," Mandolin said, her gaze lost somewhere far off.

"It does."

"The oracle says that life is just a long dream, and that you have to die before you can truly live."

"That talk is too ambiguous for me," I said. *It has always have been.*

"It can't be fathomed by reason. Somethings are understood only when experienced," she answered matter-of-factly.

"How about you, what is life to you? Putting aside what the oracle says about it," I asked, trying to provoke some answers from her.

Mandolin gave it a deep thought, and I patiently waited, curious to see what could this queer nine years old say about life.

After Dark Escapade

“To be honest,” she finally said. “I don’t really get it. I think life is too complicated for anyone to understand. And I believe that anyone who says that life is simple is simple-minded himself. Everything is intricately intertwined in a very mysterious way, and unless you untie all the knots and grasp how they were fastened, life will forever remain an infinite ocean of secrets we can never fathom.”

“Okay, damn... What do you do in your spare time? Read Nietzsche?” I said, a bit surprised.

“In my spare time, I go with strange guys sailing in the middle of the night. That’s what I do.”

We exchanged a quick smile and I kept rowing forward.

“Do you see that star over there?” she asked, pointing out to the sky.

I stared at where she pointed, Orion was clear and shiny.

“You mean Orion?”

“Yeah. The fourth star in its belt, the most radiant one, do you see it?”

“Yeah, I see it. What about it?” I questioned, now curious as hell.

“The Oracle said that that’s where souls travel when we dream. They go there and into other realms. It is a nexus that connects worlds and dimensions, a node in the fabric of time and space. Some would stay there and never return, some would drift to other worlds, and most of them just return back to where they came from in the morning.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

A distant but hazy image started to form in my mind.

“What is it called, that fourth star?” I asked.

“It has many names,” she continued. “each civilization gave it a special one. In some it is called Axis Mundi; in others, it is called Kolob, but mainly they all mean the same thing.”

“Which is?”

“The Pavilion of Dreams.”

“The other three stars,” she continued. “Alnitak, Alnilam, Mintaka. Or the three sisters, or the three kings, are the protectors of the Pavilion. The four great pyramids were built in alignment with these four stars. You can imagine the impact this constellation had over the course of history. The Egyptians built the pyramids in order to make a safe root for kings to travel to the Pavilion after they die, and to make contact with them after they arrive.”

Four great pyramids... The image in my head is getting more clear.

“Is it possible that in other worlds that the fourth star does not exist?” I asked.

She gave it some thought then she said, “The Pavilion may not always exist as a star, and is not always visible, but the entry may differ through the worlds. Why do you ask?”

My heart started pounding unnaturally, my muscles felt funny, my mind became foggy. I did not know what to make of it all. Was it panic or was it excitement, or was it a mixture of

After Dark Escapade

both? I closed my eyes and tried to calm myself. I just focused on rowing.

“I think I shifted worlds, Mandolin, and I got stuck in this one.”

Although it was dark, I felt Mandolin heavily eyeing me in silence.

“Don’t always believe what your mind tells you. Perhaps it is an exciting possibility and you want to believe it, but it is extremely rare, almost impossible.”

“Why is it so?”

“There are rules in this universe that could not be trespassed, and that’s one of them. Each stays in his world, and each world is impermeable. No one can enter or leave. Chase away that idea. Whatever is wrong with you, the oracle will fix it and you’ll carry on with your life like the normal guy you used to be.”

“But you said some would travel to the Pavilion of dreams and drift to other worlds.”

“Yes, but those are very rare. It could happen to prophets, to Buddhist monks who reach Nirvana, to some special artists, to very unique individuals. You think you are that unique?”

“I don’t think so...”

“Occam’s Razor states that the simplest explanation is usually the right one, so let’s cut you with that. The possibility that you shifted worlds is on the far opposite side of the ‘Simplest explanation’.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I didn't know if her words reassured me or made my confusion even worse.



"Perhaps it's time you tell me where we are going," I said.

Mandolin looked back to the shore. The beach was absorbed in the darkness of the hills and became invisible. Just how far have we drifted. She then looked around in all directions and said, "I think this is a good spot."

"A good spot for what?"

"You are going to dive in."

I stopped rowing, my arm muscles ached and I was going out of breath, but the physical pain was drained out of its meaning. I felt it but I didn't quite understand what it tried to convey, because all I was thinking about at that moment was the fact that I was about to dive in. Had it been any other scenario I could swear it was the last thing I would ever do. Plunging in the murky waters in the middle of the sea. I could imagine every possible scenario in which I don't come out of it unharmed. Just looking deep down into the waters gave me chills, because I could see nothing but dark rippling matter. What creatures could be lurking below, calmly anticipating my every move, waiting for me to enter their turf?

And then, my mind, in an attempt to comfort me, flung at me a memory of a documentary I watched years ago when I was eleven or twelve. A documentary about the deadliest sea creatures, and I came to recall with minute details the name and shape of the deadliest sea creatures on earth: Chironex Fleckeri,

After Dark Escapade

a box jellyfish with three meters long as tentacles, which releases a lethal venom the moment it comes in contact with its prey. My mind was funny, almost cynical. It refused to conjure a simple detail that I had memorized just the night before during the exam day, but it reminded me of the name of a jellyfish that I had learned many years ago in a very casual evening while watching TV, the moment I was about to dive in the middle of the sea.

However, I knew I had to do it. I had to dive in. I could have refused, Mandolin wouldn't insist and we'd go back home and it'd be all for naught. And I would forever forget about asking the Oracle's help. But again, I felt something in me that was urging me to do it. The unknown was both terrifying and bewitching, and the same thing that had been giving me the creeps when I looked down into the waters was pulling me towards it. Whatever might that be, I reckoned the Oracle understood it, and she knew I must go down.

"I guess it all comes down to this point right? Your visit, our nocturnal trip."

"You guessed right."

"Okay. I'll do it."

"Aren't you going to nag or ask why?"

"Somethings are understood only when experienced right?"

"Right..." she trailed off, a ray of moonlight uncovered a faint smile on her face.

"You just take off your jacket and your shoes. You'll go down with the rest of your clothes on. Hold each stone in a hand and close a tight fist on them. I want you to dive the deepest you

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

can, take a deep breath in and just let yourself sink in. Let go of your body, it is no longer your body, you are just an observer. And more importantly, close your eyes. Don't you open them, no matter what."

"That's all?" I said.

"One more thing," she added. "When you feel so scared, and you're about to swim up to the surface, don't. When that happens, I want you to go even deeper."

"When am I supposed to go up then?"

"When you're out of breath, obviously."

"Okay..."

I took my shoes, my socks, and my jean jacket off. I placed one foot onto the edge of the boat and leaned my weight over to peer down at the depthless waters. So dark they hardly reflected any of the moon's light. Was that what Nietzsche meant when he said, *'If you stare long into the abyss, the abyss will stare back at you.'* Maybe. Before, I glimpsed anything staring back at me, and I mustered specks of courage and threw my body into the waters, hoping I wouldn't stumble on any Chironex; not tonight, please.



The sea graciously swallowed him, leaving behind nothing but feeble ripples and an indistinct, wet sound that soon faded away from Mandolin's ears. The cold waters seeped through his clothes and enveloped his skin, like slender arms creeping around his body, gently pulling him down to the uncharted

After Dark Escapade

depths of the ocean. His hair nimbly swayed like old flames in a calm night, his arms wide open like a descending messiah. He irresistibly sank down, totally giving himself up to the sea, eyes wide shut, fists hermetically locked on the stones. Weight leaked out of his body like mud dissolving into water, leaving behind a dead space that was soon occupied by a growing fear. His heart rate increased, his lungs started to suffer, and his eardrums were on the verge of bursting. But nonetheless, he tried to turn a deaf ear to the silent cries of pain and terror, to the ceaseless pleas of his brain to get out of the waters and breathe a mouthful of pure air. *Deeper, he thought, whatever I need awaits me down there. I must go deeper.*

The further he descended, the faster his senses left him. One after another, like seamen abandoning a sinking ship, they all forsook him. Eventually, even pain gave up on him. He no longer felt the tight fist, neither the gelid waters. All he became was a shapeless fleck of sinking consciousness, immersed in utter silence. *I am alone, he thought, I've reached my most natural form. Beyond the inane stimulations of normal life, that is how I really am, that is how I always have been, alone sinking in darkness. It felt neither good nor bad, just natural.*

How deep have I reached? Will I be able to get back to the surface if I keep going down? My body must be at its limits. I know it's time I swim upward, but what if I keep going a little further below. I want to go further below... What If I die there? It wouldn't be so bad, would it? What do I really have to lose? Sure, I will miss many great things, but I'll avoid many great pains too. It's not such a bad deal, life is just a continuous drag intersected by momentary ephemeral pleasures after all.

Deeper he sank.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Since when have I become such a pushover? Am I saying such things because I am weak? Am I afraid that I'm not brave enough to take the necessary risks, to endure enough pain and live my life at its fullest? I have always avoided pain whenever I glimpsed its silhouette looming from afar. I have always thought it was the smartest approach to life, to take the path with the least amount of suffering and risk, and I have been blindly proud that I wasn't hurting like everybody else. But was it just a hard shell I built around myself, keeping me out of harm but also out of ecstasy? Keeping me safe but also enabling me from seeing life as it is. Sheltering me from the cold but also from the sun's warm rays? And just how thick did this shell grow over the years? I need to break it...

He needed to break it, he realized. He must shatter it to pieces, and let whatever outside reach him, envelop him, seeped into his veins and mold his heart. Be it pain or joy, be it disappointment or hope, be it life or death. He needed to break through and step right into the storm he always avoided.

He sank.

"I abhor a monotonous life," thus spoke his Shadow, a voice he buried deep into oblivion long ago. It spoke for the first time in his life. "I abhor your life," it said. "I can't survive in such conditions. A life where nothing happens, where the bleak routine is the color of what had been and what would be. I become pale and weak, my petals and thorns fall down an endless abyss. I become a carapace, a walking corpse, my face drained, my flame dies, my flesh decomposes, and I suffer. And I make *you* suffer.

After Dark Escapade

“I only feel alive in the lawless, tumultuous space at the heart of the storm. In which I’m being torn out between many forces at once. And in a fraction of time, I glimpse the sun, and I absorb tremendous amounts of meaning and beauty I used to overlook every day. In that fraction of time, I live, I live more than a thousand days I spent in sullen safety, and it fills me with the will to fight and beat the storm. And when I finally do, I am stronger and wiser.

“You see, It’s not that I like storms. Storms are scary and deadly, but the thing is, I need storms. We need storms. We need them to live, and we need them to go on living. They change us, they chisel us, they sharpen us, and make us see what we need to see, and feel what we need to feel. Without storms, our wings will never unfold”

“I’m not your enemy,” His shadow went on. “People don’t like me, but I’m your strength. I’m your fangs and claws. I can hurt when you can’t. I can make firm decisions and speak the truth when you can’t. I can be fair to you when you are not to yourself. I am dangerous, but I’m a danger you need. You need to be feared, not just idly respected. You need to send reverence into the hearts of people, not just a fickle warmth that has no substance or weight

“Do you think you are living your life righteously? Do you think you are virtuous? *You fool.* You’re only harmless and pathetic, you’re not virtuous. Only a monster who does not act monstrously is virtuous, and you are no monster. That’s why you need to embrace me.

“I am the monster in you. I can harm and I can take the pain. I step into the darkness without complaint or compromise, and I

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

seek no one's validation or praise. You may want to avoid me now, bury me deep inside, ignore my presence. But I am just growing denser and stronger, and know this, and remember this very well. When the opportunity presents itself, I will take it, and I will take over you. When you are too damaged to stand up, when you are too scared to look up, when you are too miserable to live up, I will rise and take matters into my hand. When your false morals and frail convictions fail you, and they *will* fail you, you'll *need me*. Wiser for you to take me now, while I am still tamable."

"Now... how far will you go?"

How far will I go, he thought.

For how long have I stayed in the waters? My body must be suffering. Should I swim upward now? Maybe not just yet...

A presence, unfamiliar and solemn, he sensed approaching him. Something lurking deep down in the concealed chasms of the sea. A creature all men revere. *Is it expecting me? Or have I just trespassed its territory?* He realized that fear did not truly abandon him. Fear was the first and last instinct. So ancient, so raw, so real. And he felt it inhabiting him once again. Stronger, more vibrant, more alarming.

However, fear was no longer a supreme king over him. Within himself, he realized he had something more powerful, superior than the strongest survival instinct of all. Something in him that could subdue fear in its utmost raw forms.

"*Don't waver*," His shadow whispered.

"When you feel so scared, and you're about to swim up to the surface, don't. When that happens, I want you to go even

After Dark Escapade

deeper. And no matter what, don't open your eyes," Mandolin's voice echoed.

He opened his eyes, and it wasn't so dark. Radiant, lunar beams speared through the water like celestial blades, illuminating the vast deep, and revealing a one eyed Whale with its jaws wide open heading his way. Totally giving himself up, the whale swallowed him.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Sophia asked, giving him the half-smile that always left him vulnerable. Sitting across from him at their usual table at Birdland. She was wearing a red scarf and a dark gray sweater; her usual perfume lingered in the air.

"Nothing," I said.

"You spaced out again. Did you even hear what I was saying?"

"Sorry, what?"

"I said that we cannot be together."

The café was empty. No waiter, no bartender, all the chairs, and the photographs had disappeared. There were just empty tables and blank walls, except for just one table at the far opposite end, where a man and a woman were quietly sitting. The man was wearing a purple gown and the woman a dark green one.

"Can I know why?" I ask, my head a little clouded, my perceptions blurred. Something felt strange.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Because I must go with him. Sooner or later I will leave. I don’t know how long I will be able to delay it, but it is inevitable. I’m going to have to leave you,” she said as she reaches out for my hand and holds it. It felt so real, more real than my wildest dreams.

“Who is he?”

She turned her face leftward, and stared out the window at something, at *someone*. I followed her gaze, and I saw a sea of white sands under a starry night sky stretching endlessly before me. Just white sand as far as the eye could see. No building, no mountains, not a soul, except an unusual, radiant full moon. And just down below, a tall man wearing a mask of a white rat and a long dark coat was standing straight up and staring at us.

“He is waiting for me. We have a long walk ahead of us. The place he’s taking me is still far away.”

“Why do you have to go? Why can’t you stay?” I protest.

“Because of you,” she solemnly said, holding my hand tighter, trying to reassure me.

“Because of me?”

“I don’t understand it myself, but I know this much.”

“Why am I here?” I ask.

“You came here. You wanted to see me, and I’m glad you did.”

“Don’t go! Come back with me. He can’t take you unwillingly,” I protest after gathering my thoughts. I was not

After Dark Escapade

sure what she meant by leaving, but I didn't want her to leave; it would devastate me.

She shook her head ever so slightly, a shade of sorrow haunts her face. "He won't let me leave. He won't let you take me. He's stronger than both of us."

"I am sorry," she said, standing up, looking down to the ground, falling completely silent. I held her hand tighter, trying helplessly not to let her disappear, but she slowly took it away. Without looking me in the eyes, she walked away.

I tried to stand up, to stop her, but I was paralyzed. My body just didn't respond. I watched her leave the café. Out the window, I saw her stand beside him. Her head still to the ground, never lifting her gaze, she waited, still. But he didn't budge, he didn't move, he just kept staring at me, fixating me. But I couldn't unriddle the look in his eyes. They were abstract yet evocative, like a roman statue staring at another statue. His gaze felt heavy on me, making me restless and confused. Nevertheless, I felt nothing ominous, nothing sinister. Where was he taking her? What was he trying to tell me? I could not tell.



I heard my heart unnaturally pounding. I felt my lungs and my limbs aching and my skin cold and wet. The scene grew darker one shade over another, until it turned pitch black.

I opened my eyes, and I saw nothing. I was deep in the waters, and all I knew was that I must swim upward, and so I paddled as hard as I could with whatever strength I had left,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

striking the water with both my feet and arms, trying to glimpse a sight of the surface. My eardrums hurt and I could not keep my eyes open for long. I closed them and kept swimming upward. The distance felt longer than I had anticipated, no matter how hard I stroke the waters the surface was still out of reach. Each second came with great hope and left with greater despair. One breath of fresh air seemed more precious to me than all the gold in the world. *A little more*, I thought, *a little more*.

The first gasp was the sweetest drag I have ever inhaled. Fresh air filled every alveolus in my lungs, and my blood merrily rushed the molecules of oxygen to every cell in my body, setting life into them, filling them with fuel to resume their labor. After several consecutive deep inhales, I started to calm down and pay attention to my surroundings.

The sea was as undisturbed as I left it. Yet, it was too murky, I could barely make out the outlines of my own hand. I looked around in all directions, trying to glimpse the boat, but it was nowhere to be seen.

“Mandolin!” I shouted. She could not have drifted far away. She must be able to hear me.

“Over here!” she replied, blinking the flashlight in my direction.

The stones in my hand, I swam over to the boat. She gave me a hand and after I managed to climb up, I threw myself on board. Face up, I watched the clouds unhurriedly drift by. Finally, I was able to rest.

“Are you alright!?” asked Mandolin, anguish resonating in her voice.

After Dark Escapade

“Now I am,” I answered, still heavily breathing.

She poured light all over my body, making sure that I was unharmed. “Your fingers and lips are blue, and you are shaking.” She helped me take off my shirt and wrapped me with the towel she asked me to bring. “Here, get warmer. You’ll feel better.”

She then pulled a small flask out from her bag and filled it with the seawater she squeezed out of my wet shirt. Afterward, she took the stones from my hand and tossed them inside the flask. Finally, she sealed the whole thing with a cork and shoved it back into her bag. She explained nothing of which, but I had a vague idea what it was all about.

“How long have I stayed under the water?” I asked.

“Five minutes and thirty-seven seconds, to be precise.”

“That’s too long...”

“I know. I started to worry you were never coming out of the waters, at least not breathing.”

“That was close, but I’m fine.”

“Thank god, you are.”

A gentle gust of sea wind blew in our direction, my flesh shivered in response and I tightly wrapped my arms around my knees and muffled my face inside the towel. I felt my body gradually getting warmer. Mandolin remained silent all the while sitting across from me, curiously watching me. The boat leisurely swayed at the arrhythmic movement of the water below, dimness and quietness enveloped us, and cold breeze caressed our skin.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“How are you feeling now?” Mandolin asked after a while.

“I’m feeling much better.”

“Gather your forces, you’ll row us back. I would have rowed myself, but I’m too weak for that, as you can see,” she stated, squeezing the two fibers of muscle in her arm between her thumb and index fingers.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“It’s almost four in the morning.”

I looked over to the horizon, and I couldn’t tell where the sea ends and where the sky begins. But I knew the sun was near, the spectrum was about to burst.

“Let’s wait till sunrise. It shouldn’t be too long,” I proposed.

Mechanically, Mandolin also looked east, but she saw what I just saw, infinite darkness.

“Okay. Why not?”

I reached over my bag and pulled out the pickle and cheese sandwiches. I felt a void in my stomach that needed to be filled. Whatever happened down in the water had consumed a lot of my energy. I craved something to munch.

“Here, I made these at home before we left,” I said, handing her a sandwich.

“Thank you. Smart move.”

We chewed our food in silence, both absorbed in his own thoughts. My mind felt a languid whirlpool that reached far deep

After Dark Escapade

inside, in which everything I believed defined who I was melted away and slowly spun towards a new core. It felt both strange and good. I felt undefined, mellow and shapeless. I lost the ground on which I stood, I lost the walls that sheltered me. I became a nobody. But I understood it was necessary, because now I could become anything I wanted.

“Care to listen to some music?” Mandolin asked.

“It’s your turn to impress me this time. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

She selected a soundtrack from her playlist, then she placed her smartphone in the space between us. Trumpet notes echoed through air and water.

“That’s Miles Davis, the piece is called ‘*It Never Entered My Mind.*’ You’ll like it.”

“I gotta say, I’m impressed a little girl like you is familiar with Queen and Miles Davis.”

“I only listen to music that survived the trials of time. Good music is eternal.”

“You look like you’d grow to become someone who’ll also survive the trials of time yourself.”

“I already am...” she said in a hushed tone. I found it a little arrogant, but there was no tone of sarcasm in the way she said. What an interesting, little brat.

A string of glowing orange appeared in the far distance, parading the arrival of the heavenly colors.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“You can think of the stones as exploring probes,” she started. “They look into the deepest corners of your souls. It is not an easy nor a safe territory for them to inquire into. That’s why they need you to open the gates for them, to lead them as far as they can go. Even if it is also an unknown and dangerous territory for you, but you are the owner. Only you can do it.”

“Yeah, I figured that much. That’s why the Oracle needed me to go to the depths of the ocean. It was in order to push me out of the borders of my understandings, right?”

“Close enough.”

“The fortune-teller in France last summer did approximately the same thing, though she didn’t push it that far. Just a glass of water did the thing, not an entire sea.”

“Each has her ways, and each circumstance demands certain measures. You had to dive in, but I guess you understand that much already.”

“I think I do.”

“You should thank doctor Ezra though. He has never done that much for someone.”

“But he always brings people to the Oracle for help, right?”

“That’s not quite true. He’s probably helping you because he suffered the same fate, around your same age if I’m not mistaken. The Oracle told me his story.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. He had quite a rough time.”

After Dark Escapade

“He did not tell me that much about himself, actually. I know very little about him.”

“But you trusted him anyway?” she asked as she finished the last bite of her sandwich.

“I’m trusting the Oracle, too. Sometimes matters escape your hands and outgrow you. They leap beyond you, and you have no choice but to trust strange people to help you get through it.”

A burst of amber, sapphire, and wine pervaded the obscure faraway sky. Stars receded, light succeeded, and the sea came out of its darkness to the glitter of the glory of dawn. Mighty clouds hovered high and bright, and the whole scene reflected inside me and polished my musty soul. It was both sad and exultant to realize that this divine celebration of a new day happens every night; that we miss it every night. It was nothing but a proof of God’s justice, for the poor and the rich, the weak and the strong, the old and the young, to equally revel one of God’s most beautiful artworks on earth. Mandolin and I fell silent witnessing the sunrise. The taste of pickles and cheese stuck at the back of my mouth. I wished I had brought hot coffee to wash it down, but the seascape was too beautiful to regret anything.

“Let’s go back now,” I broke the silence.

“Okay, let’s.”

Mandolin sitting across from me, I rowed back. After the star had risen high enough, its rays turned Mandolin into a still silhouette. Her hair fluttered under the morning breeze, and I

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

could only discern her eyes gazing at me from the warm shadows.

“You’re looking at me strangely,” I said.

“I know.”

“Perhaps you would be generous enough and tell me why.”

“There’s something different about you after you came out of the waters.”

“Like what?”

“Your eyes had gained a new depth. What happened down there?”

“I got swallowed by a whale.”

She eyed me for a little while longer, as if inspecting a crime scene.

“Whatever,” she said, averting her gaze. “I don’t need to know.”

We made it back to the shore safe and clean. We ducked the boat at the place we found it and climbed back to the maze of bushes. The red Aveo patiently waited for us at the side of the road.

“You are going to drive me home,” said Mandolin.

“Gladly. The Oracle must be worried you stayed till morning.”

“She isn’t.”

After Dark Escapade

And thus, we hit the road. Janacek's Idyll for strings on the stereo, the perfect piece for a morning ride home. We exchanged very little words on the way back, we were both tired and consumed. Listening to music was all we needed. The roads were empty and the air fresh, so I shifted to fifth gear and speed up, and within an hour we were already at the open nonexistent gates of Mandolin's mansion at the heart of the forest. Like the time before, no one came to greet us, all we found was the naked winged man perched on the dry fountain looking down on us.

"Thanks for the ride."

"Never mind."

"Okay. Bye."

"Wait," I said as she opened the door. "You don't go to school, do you?"

"No."

"You have no friends?"

"Are they something I should have?"

"That question is a bit hard to answer. Nevertheless, friends are kinda cool to have. Why don't you drop by my place some other time, we could just hang out, take nocturnal drives, go to distant beaches, eat burgers, whatever. Besides, there is someone I want you to meet, or you could just call me and I'd come to pick you if you want. Cool?"

She gave it some thought, she looked up at the winged man as if to ask for permission, then back at me with a smile.

"Okay, why not?" Then, she left.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

However, she never called or paid me a visit afterward.

I got home, took a shower to wash away the salt, then I made myself a hot mug of coffee that I drank leisurely in my bed. Bittersweet hot liquid slid down my throat, warming me from the inside, and relaxing my every nerve. Sleep slowly but steadily slithered around me. What could Sophia have meant by ‘*We can’t be together?*’, that question rose at the back of my head but soon faded away, I closed my eyes and fell into a dreamless sleep.

At five in the evening, my phone rang, waking me up. *Let it ring*, I thought, *let it ring as long as it needed, I just want to sleep*. But the phone never stopped ringing. It was a persistent, ceaseless ringing that eventually leads me to leave my bed and reach over my phone.

Ezra was on the phone.

-18-

Secrets Unfolding
Only Unrequited Love Is True Love
The Song of God

“Hello?”

“In the shower or asleep?” asked Ezra, insinuating that It took me longer to answer the phone.

“Asleep...” half of my voice and my consciousness still in the world of dreams, though which dreams, I couldn’t remember.

“Sorry, I woke you up.”

“It’s fine... who is this?”

“It’s me, Ezra.”

“Oh, hey. What’s the matter?” I sat up on the bed and switched the phone from my right to my left hand.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I think I asked you to call me whenever you found the stones...” A hollow silence followed. I kept waiting for him to finish but he added nothing. It was at that moment that all the memories from the night before rushed all at once into my head.

“Ah, yeah... I just found them last night, actually. I’m not the one who did, it’s a long story, Mandolin did—”

“I know. The Oracle woke me up at five in the morning and told me everything. I kept waiting for you to call ever since.”

“I just woke up.”

“It’s okay. Come dine at my house. I think we need to talk,” He proposed.

“You mean tonight?”

“Yeah, here’s my address,” he narrated his address to me. “Be there by seven, okay?” I wrote down the address in the back of a monopoly ten dollars bill I found laying over my desk, a vestige of my bygone days.

“Okay,” I said, and he hung up.

I wondered what Ezra possibly had to tell me. What was so important that he couldn’t say over the phone? I basically knew nothing about the guy. We were complete strangers. I had stumbled on him by chance in the hospital that day, and he decided he’d offer me some help and that was all. Mandolin said that he suffered the same glitches around my age, that was why he was helping me. It could be his real motif, to go through all that trouble for me. But now that he was inviting me to dinner at his house, I found it a bit odd. But whatever, I had no reason not to accept his invitation anyway.

Secrets Unfolding

There was a rhythm, a pattern, an invisible flow taking place and it was engulfing me and carrying me somewhere, and I figured I just had to go with it. That's what I had been doing since the beginning after all, whether it's working out or not, and where was it taking me, I had no idea.

What was the self, the *I*, *me*, *myself*? I mused for the first time as I took a shower. Was it a bundle of perceptions, thoughts, convictions, and patterns of behavior? Or was it the lens through which we perceive and filter those perceptions, thoughts, and convictions. Was it a mere activity of the brain, or was it the immortal soul that transcends the physical. Was it the source of imagination and dreams, or were those realms separated from it? And where did it reside exactly? Was it a core inside my body or did it include my body? Was it a map of neurons engraved in my brain, or was it a metaphysical entity that dwelled in a place different than my own flesh and bones, but controlled it like a marionette through the medium of the brain? Was it oneself or was it many inside one person, and if it was the case which one rules and which one didn't? And why did it feel like there was a judge among them all? And more importantly, why did it always feel so self-evident while it was far from being a simple matter?

As I stood up from my bed and was walking to the kitchen to get a glass of water, I sensed a different self emanating from me. For the first time, I seriously pondered about what constitutes myself as the hot water poured down over my body. I felt different, as if *myself* had gained more dimensions, expanded and taken different shades and contrasts. Like a painter who had left a canvas half-finished, lacking outlines and colors, but then, inspiration befell him and he decided to finish it, and it gained life and depth, colors and lucidity. That was how I felt, though I am both the painter and the painting. It was a

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

strange feeling to grasp, and stranger was the fact that I could grasp it. The shower was a place of utter vanity and utter wisdom. But there was one thing I discovered about the self: The more it grew, the lighter it became, which was also strange.

I shaved, ironed a clean denim blue shirt, and dressed in respectable neat clothes. I didn't want to seem too dressed up nor too little. I looked inconspicuous and clean, perfect for a dinner in a strange neurosurgeon's house.

I took another look at the address he gave me, something about it seemed familiar. The alignment of words and numbers in that order triggered a feeling of *deja-vu*. I stared hard but I could sort no memory. I tossed the monopoly bill in my pocket and by six-thirty I was already on the road in my uncle's red Aveo, listening to *Muse-Butterflies and Hurricanes*, not quite the song for the gentle autumn weather outside, but the lyrics kept echoing in the back of my head for some reason, so I had to play it and sing along.



Ezra's house was located midway up a hill amid other homes and pine trees on the eastern side of the city. A modest, colonial villa in one of bone's chic neighborhoods near the seaside. He must've inherited, I assumed. A doctor cannot afford this luxury in this country. A doctor was a mere servant of the state with a pitiful salary. A doctor was someone who was beaten till blood gushed out by the police when he protested his rights.

I rang the doorbell and Ezra himself came and greeted me, wearing casual outfits and a welcoming smile. He asked me to follow him. We went upstairs to his study. I did not peek long

Secrets Unfolding

into the house. I felt ashamed whenever I did that upon entering someone's house for the first time. Households were shrines full of pointless secrets and were not meant to be breached by anyone. It was dimly lit anyway inside and utterly quiet, and I must say, very deluxe from the little I managed to see. I ignored if he lived alone or if he had a family. I just followed him silently to his study.

Inside was a spacious room in which a library covering the whole wall stood on one side, a large desk in the middle, and a huge black painting hung behind the desk. On the opposite side of the room, the doors of a balcony were wide open, curtains danced with the sea breeze and the cold evening light poured inside. We sat in a round table for two right in the flow of the open balcony where everything was already served. Shrimp broth for an entry, grilled salmon with roasted potato and a touch of green sauce for the main dish, French fries, salad, toasted slices of bread, and a glass bottle of juice. For dessert, two slices of Tarte Tatin. And for the last touch, Brian Eno Album, '*Thursday Afternoon*' played in the background.

"Enjoy yourself. I cooked it myself. Hope you like it," he ushered after we took our seats.

"Thank you. Much obliged."

"You must be wondering why did I invite you here for."

"Certainly."

"Well..." he trailed off as he sank back in his chair and crossed his legs. "The reason is not as simple as it may seem. But I hope it'll become clear as we talk. If you follow back the '*why*' behind anyone's act, you'd eventually find yourself

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

wandering in the metaphysical. If you want a metaphysical answer, I don't have one."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Let me elaborate. If you ask me for example why I became a doctor, I'd tell you it's because it makes good money, because there's something humane about it. Relieving people from pain is somehow noble. But why do I find it noble? Is it because it gives me a sense of fulfillment when I actually help someone else? If yes, then why do I get that sensation upon aiding a total stranger? In other words, why do we feel good when helping one another, why do we feel good upon seeing someone else feeling better because of something we did? Is it because it makes us feel we're not such bad people, or perhaps because it makes us feel superior? Here we entered the metaphysical, because the answer to that question isn't at all clear. What's in it for me that a stranger feels good? Yet, it makes me feel fulfilled, a fulfillment greater than any other sensation one could have. Is it wired in us? What evolutionary purpose does it serve? Is it bestowed upon us by God? Is it one of the many images of God's mercy on earth? To make one of the greater feelings, if not the greatest, one could ever obtain derived only from helping one another? You see, the exact reason why I became a doctor is unknown, it lays blurred in the realm of the metaphysical, so is the reason why I invited you today."

"I see..." I said, sipping the rich hot broth. "But before we venture into the metaphysical, we have to cross the physical first. I mean, there must be rational reasons first."

Secrets Unfolding

“Sure, the reason why I invited you today is partly because I took a self-interest in your case, and I’m not saying you need help, but I want to offer whatever I can.”

“Because you went through the same thing around my age?”

“More or less, yes,” he answered, not a bit surprised that I was aware of such a fact.

“How did you make them stop, The nightmares?” I asked.

“They lasted about three years, and then they seized to happen, just like that,” he said after giving it some thought. Though he lied.

“With the help of the Oracle?”

“Yeah, it was during that time that I have come to meet the Oracle. She found me, actually. She said that she knew exactly what I was going through, that she could help me. I was a bit skeptical at first, but soon subsided to her wisdom, and ever since I stuck around with her. I brought her people she could help, people whom modern medicine has failed, and we kept a good friendship ever since. For over thirty years.”

“You two go back old!”

“We do...”

“Did she tell you anything about me when you spoke to her on the phone this morning? She got a flask full of seawater out of my wet shirt and the two stones.”

“She told me she’d reach you when the time comes.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“You seriously believe it’s something supernatural? Couldn’t it be a mere medical condition?”

“It could be both,” he said as he dipped a piece of bread into the broth. “The first recorded medical cases such as these date back to 400 b.c in a Chinese book on dreaming. Everywhere around the world and throughout history people experienced these nightmares. Actually, the word nightmare itself takes its origins from the symptoms of these incidents. The “Mare” is derived from the noun “Mara”, a demon in some mythologies. The same demon that tempted prince Siddhartha, the Buddha, by trying to seduce him with beautiful women and hindering him from reaching enlightenment. It may be a symbolic tale, it may be real, who knows? The mythology goes on forever about this phenomenon. Each civilization gave it a name, each period attached it with a different explanation.”

“I’m no Buddha and I’m not planning to reach enlightenment any time soon. I wonder what it wants from me.”

“No one said it is fair or rational”

“Yeah, I’m learning that.”

“You remember the friend I told you about when we first met? The one who suffered a great deal of nightmares up to the point where he did everything he could to avoid falling asleep.”

“Yeah, I do. Was that *actually* you?”

“No, he is a real person. He came to me because he knew I had already gone through the same thing. Naturally, I presented him to the Oracle, but there was nothing she could do. It turned out he had a form of Epilepsy. What happens in Epilepsy is a group of neurons, or many groups or all the neurons in the brain

Secrets Unfolding

fire simultaneously all at once, causing a seizure. And depending on which group of neurons in the cortex is firing, the symptoms vary from muscles stiffening to hearing noises to seeing things.”

“Could you break it down a little. Medicine is not really my forte.”

“It’s very simple. Imagine your cortex, the outer layer of your brain, as a map in which your body is drawn. Each area is responsible for a body part. When the group of neurons responsible for your arm muscles, for example, fires up asynchronously, your arm would cramp and stiffen. If the group of neurons responsible for taste or smell misfires, you’d taste nonexistent flavors and smell different scents.”

“Same goes for sight. In the occipital lobe of your brain, the area in the back of your head, exist Brodmann’s areas 17, 18, 19. You can think of them as three concentric circles, each one more specialized than the other. Area 17 being the one in the center. These areas are the ones responsible for sight, if the neurons in area 17 misfire, you’d see flashlights and colors. If 18 misfires, you’d see random shapes and forms. If 19, you’d see real images and scenes. If more than one area misfires, for example, area 19 alongside the area responsible for muscle movements and sensations, you’d be paralyzed, feel strange, and see an entity trying to harm you.”

“That’s what happened to my friend. He simply had epilepsy seizures, and after I gave him the medication those nightmares stopped, as simple as that.”

Ezra barely touched his food. He just took small bites from the dishes on the table, like a seagull snatching fish from the sea. It was common that those who cook lose appetite in the process.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I finished the rich flavored broth and was starting on the grilled salmons. The evening deepened, the first smell of winter nights wafted in the air, and the music mythicized dinner talk.

“Did you try the meds on yourself?” I asked.

“Of course. To no avail.”

“You think they’ll work on me?”

“Perhaps they might. I honestly don’t know which is worse, Epilepsy or a supernatural creature trying to smother you in your sleep. So, don’t just wish it was epilepsy.”

I wanted to tell him that I’d rather wished it was the supernatural creature instead, but refrained from doing so.

“But if it was epilepsy the Oracle would know right?”

“Her decision is still inconclusive. She’s still not sure about you.”

“What does she need, more tests? I wonder what’s coming next. She had me dive into the ocean in the middle of the night. Did you know that?”

“Yeah, she told me. She had me go through some crazy stuff, too, back in the days. Just be patient. She’s serious about you. Rarely seen her that interested as a matter of fact.” Ezra delved into an icebox with a pair of tongs, dropped three cubes in each glass, then he unscrewed the cap of the sweating juice bottle and poured some into each glass.

“Why don’t you tell me what bizarre things started happening to you ever since those nightmares started?” He asked, swirling the juice in his glass.

Secrets Unfolding

I found it useless to lie to him or keep anything from him at that point. It was not a matter of trust that I decided that I'd tell him everything at that moment. Some people just feel like talking to without really knowing why. They lure us into spilling everything out without even trying. Perhaps deep down, we wish to know as much about them, so we open up in an attempt to make them trade back what we offered. Some other people; however, no matter how much they insisted or tried to prove that they cared, we just feel uninterested in telling them anything personal. Again, perhaps because we wish to know nothing about them. Nothing about them really interested us. Every human interaction was a trade, a metaphysical trade.

"When it first happened, in the dream, I saw a girl laying beside me," I said, "after which I met her in real life, and kept seeing her ever since. Both in my dreams and in reality. I think she has a lot to do with me, or I with her. Or perhaps it was just a coincidence, I'm not really sure. A new star appeared in my night sky, however, and I felt that the world has implicitly changed around me, though I'm not sure in which way. I met you, and you made me meet the Oracle, and thus Mandolin. Oh, and a linear mark appeared in the back of my shoulder, right in the spot where I once dreamt that I was stabbed in a theater where everybody was murdered by some anarchists. I was the virtuoso playing the violin by the way, which was cool. I guess that pretty much summarizes it."

"It's funny how you included me in your collection of *Bizarre Things*. I thought I was pretty normal," he said sarcastically. I reckoned he was once a light spirit with a fine sense of humor, but it was buried under God knows what miseries he had to endure. He seemed to be a man who knew both great joy and great pain.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I see,” he went on. “Tell me more about the girl. Seems like she’s the most important element in your story.”

His question was a little ambiguous and hard to answer. How do I talk about something I don’t fully understand myself?

“What exactly do you want to know?”

“I mean, are the two of you...” He cleared his throat. For the first time, he seemed a bit uncomfortable, perhaps a little embarrassed. “Kind of lovers? I mean... What kind of relationship do you two have?”

“That’s a bit straightforward, doc,” I said, trying to make his embarrassment a little worse. Just innocent teasing. I had no issue answering his question.

“Yes, I’m already aware. Don’t emphasize it, please. Eat your fish and drop the ‘*doc*’ thing.”

“We’re not really lovers. I am not sure what she feels for me. I never dared to ask. Never felt the need to either. But we enjoy each other’s company. I wouldn’t say we’re friends though, it’s something a little more. I guess you can’t be friends with the girl of your dreams... Literally in my case.”

“I see...” He nodded.

“Do you, really?”

“No, not really. You seem to not understand it yourself, so you can’t expect me to.”

“Very true.”

Secrets Unfolding

“But, what about you? Do you care about her? How would you feel if she left you?” He asked, giving me a stare loaded with genuine curiosity.

“To be honest, man to man, I’m a goner, deep in the pit already. If she leaves, I think I’m gonna grow my hair long, start smoking and write bad poetry. I’d probably do both at the same time, smoking and writing bad poetry.”

A quick smile visited his lips but faded as quickly. He remained quiet for a while staring at the glass in his hand, absorbed in god knows what.

“In love,” he started. “though your body is high on hormones and your mind is convinced that it wants you to grow old with your beloved, but reality always, it always betrays expectations, save a little sanity in a small box and toss it somewhere you can find when things go wrong, trust me, you’ll need it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”



“When we’re young,” he went on, as if musing to himself, legs crossed, eyes still fixated on the glass between his fingers. “We try to think about the world, about life and existence in general. Everything that exceeds our own experience is conceptualized only in an ideal way. For some reason, that’s how our minds work. Future, for example, we imagine it to be exactly the way we want it to be, and we sincerely believe we are going to live it the way we imagined. We believe that we’re smart enough not to make wrong decisions and that we are good

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

enough to do what it takes. Not until reality smacks us that we realize it is not at all going to be what we hoped it would be.

“When we think about love, we expect it to be ideal, perfect, magical. Not until we fall in love and live through a real relationship that we realize how foolish we were. That’s why it takes one real relationship, good or bad, to shatter anyone’s belief in love. Someone once said ‘*Only unrequited love is true love*’ and it’s true in some sense. Unrequited love will forever remain in the shadow of imagination. Glorified in its ideal palace inside our minds. It never steps out in the light of reality, never disfigured. The same applies to everything that goes beyond our own experiences—marriage, friendships, family, religion, ourselves... It takes one marriage to lose faith in that sacred bond one always cherished. It takes one betrayal to dismiss friendship. It takes a bit of real thinking to question all religions, one small test to realize how superficial your faith really is. One real failure to realize you’re not that special. One life to realize life is nothing you thought it would be.”

He paused for a few minutes.

“When we experience the true nature of those concepts,” he finally continued. “Of the things that existed beyond our narrow circle of experience, their idealistic edifices we built inside our minds over the years will all crumble down, leaving us in the nakedness of reality, unprepared. Nothing, absolutely *nothing*, is like we imagine it to be. The ideal does not exist, not anywhere in this world. Why does our mind works this way? Beats me. I don’t know.” He moved his eyes up to me and heavily glared at me. “But it helps a great deal to know this truth. I’m not saying you should be pessimistic. Even being realistic is overrated, just... Be a little wise. Learn to unveil the true nature of things,

Secrets Unfolding

or else the price would be too high it will bankrupt you. Life will bankrupt you of itself.”

I rested the knife and fork on the table and pondered about what he said, I found it deeply depressing.

“Isn’t the disappointment we encounter when reality fails to match the ideal the root of all misery?” I reflected.

“You hit a jackpot. It is indeed. But make no mistake. Don’t blame it on love or life. Humans just expect much more than what these conceptions could actually offer. You just cannot apply a perfect concept such as love for imperfect beings. It is doomed to fail, to *always* fail.”

“It is odd how humans, so flawed and imperfect, can only conceptualize and imagine the perfect, the Ideal. It’s almost cynical,” out loud, I mused.

“Perhaps because we’re made out of two different entities. One is divine and dreams about the Ideal; the part in us that is from God. The other is an earthly, flawed entity and doomed to decay and disappear. We’re dualistic beings, and the strife between the two will never cease. It’s whether one wins and we rise above angels, or the other triumphs and we descend the darkest of pits.” he added.

From outside the room, I heard the unlocking and slamming of the front door, then the clicking of high heels. Someone entered the house.

“And what antidote do you offer? After introducing me to the inevitable misery I’m bound to encounter, you can’t just leave me like this.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“An antidote?” he repeated, surprised by my question. He cut a juicy piece of salmon and stared at it midair before he put it in his mouth, slowly munched it, then swallowed. “There *is* no antidote. But I can tell you this. Embrace hell, seek the heavens, and give it your all, and perhaps life will offer you what you’ve never dreamed of.”

He reminded me in a way of Zoe, God bless her soul. Her last talk on the terrace of her flat. It totally differed from that of Ezra’s. Hers was full of hope. I clearly remembered how she told me of all the great things I could live, and it warmed my heart. She gave me something to look up to. And now Ezra was telling me that life would inevitably disappoint me. Strange thing was, they both make sense. They both make a clear point. They were both saying the truth. I just didn’t know at that time how to reconcile the two, and I still don’t.

“Isn’t faith our only haven in all this mess?” I asked.

“Faith? You mean in God?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“Are you even sure that God exists?” he asked, clearly provoking me.

“I guess that’s self-evident. There must be a reason behind all the reasons that everything exists. If we trace back the *Hows* and *Whys* all the way back, we’d end up in the Metaphysical, right? And the ultimate metaphysical is God, I guess.”

“Fair enough,” he said, sounding a little impressed. “Though there’s a lot more to debate in your argument, that’s actually fine one. However, how do you know that this God is Just? Or Good?”

Secrets Unfolding

Or that he created this universe for a purpose and not just on a whim? How do you know there's meaning in this life?"

"I guess no one can know what's on God's mind," I said after giving it some thought.

"Yeh, damn right no one can!" he said. Ate a mouthful, then continued. "Jacques Derrida, your fellow Algerian philosopher, had come up with a whole new method in terms of literary criticism on the way we interpret a text. Take for example a Shakespearean work. The way one can interpret the work depends on a huge number of factors: On one's cultural and religious background, on how much one knows and doesn't know, on the way one had lived and the way one sees life, etc. And so, depending on those factors, a single artwork can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways. One person could attribute a great meaning to it, another could doom it to be empty and meaningless. And if all explanations are subjective, how can you prove one to be right and the other to be wrong? You can't. And if you can't be sure of any explanation, how do you know the work has any meaning at all?"

"Now, here's the plot twist," he went on as he adjusted his seat. "If we try to apply the same method not on one single artwork, but on life itself, what you'd be faced with is a real dilemma. Because of all the existing definitions of life, its purpose, its meaning, religious ones, philosophical ones, political ones. If you can't be absolutely sure which one is right and which one isn't, how can you be sure that there's meaning in the first place? You simply can't. You may choose to believe there's meaning, but it remains only an ungrounded belief."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“And in a world where an ultimate meaning may not exist, nothing we could ever do has any meaning at all, right?” I commented.

“Exactly. I like how you are following easily. The implications of this are many and dreadful. Life is a drag, life is hard, and if not for a really noble purpose, why go through it at all? If there’s no ultimate meaning at the end. So, why do anything instead of nothing? You may as well enjoy your life while you could, dwell on momentary ephemeral pleasures, live each day as if it was your last, until one day you are right. Why sacrifice the present for the future if whatever you might do in the future is hollow and devoid of meaning anyway? In this sense the Nihilists got it right.”

“However,” he pursued, “Giving yourself up to momentary pleasures will eventually lead you to great pain. It can’t go on forever, because you’d just be slowly killing yourself. There are responsibilities in this life whether it has meaning or not, and bailing on them will inevitably lead you to your own self-destruction. It is when the pain becomes unbearable that people usually tend to commit suicide. Why suffer if it is meaningless? Your other fellow Algerian philosopher, Albert Camus said, *‘Perhaps the most important question is whether to commit suicide or not’* and he hit a jackpot. Perhaps it is the most important question. If you can’t be sure that life has any meaning at all, and if life will inescapably bring upon great pain, then why go through it at all? Why not take or own life, to begin with? Does it make sense to you so far?”

“Now that you put that way, it does. Kind of.”

Secrets Unfolding

Ezra stood up from his seat and pulled out a pack of Winston reds and a lighter from his desk drawer, then leaned on his shoulder on the balcony door frames and lit a cigarette. He suavely inhaled and exhaled smoke.

“A fragile flickering existence we are, don’t you think?” he began, sounding bitter and pensive. “A few decades we get to live in a universe that has been shaped over fourteen billion years. On a round piece of dust floating in void. On which we learned that ‘*human beings*’ evolved from single-celled life forms and became aware of themselves and their surroundings a few millions years ago, and that we are their descendants. We don’t remember any of that, and if it wasn’t for ‘Curiosity’, we wouldn’t have known anything. We wouldn’t have recorded anything and time will flow unseen like the ambient air around us. History would simply not exist. We would be no different than nightingales or elm trees. Creatures without history. Yesterday, today, or tomorrow would all feel the same until we age and die.”

He continued after taking a drag of his cigarette, “But we’re not like any other creature. Something happened to us as a race and we became supreme beings on this floating kingdom. Something major, of essence. Almost as if the universe was still a fetus in the womb and at a certain moment it woke up, opened its eyes and started observing itself. becoming aware of itself. We were... We *are* its eyes. The universe’s eyes... Or perhaps, the great architect had chosen us over many other living creatures and bestowed us with something still unbeknownst to us. That thing that made us think, wonder and dream instead of just surviving and passing on our genes, like kindling scattered flames in an infinite dark field. Our souls, consciousness, or whatever you may call it, is that flame in this insanely vast dark

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

universe. The only fire as far as we know. With its light, we began to see, and with it begun our endless existential crisis. Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we heading? Is there any ultimate purpose? And what are we supposed to do exactly?

“Just a few decades in an endless existence, like flitting sparkles of a luminescent sea in which God had waved his hand. We come and go and fade into eternal oblivion. And in those few years, we get to live we are supposed to figure out all the answers to our questions. We are supposed to find the ultimate truth... Among four thousand religion, thirty million books, and countless things to achieve and to experience. No matter how you look at it, no matter how long you ponder upon it, you’ll come to realize you can never go through it all. And you cannot reach a ‘*certain*’ conclusion at the end. Sounds a bit unfair, don’t you think? So... We just live through it. Some of us decide to believe in something and to pursue it. Some of us create their own goals and come to convince themselves it is what they must do. Some of us choose to believe in nothing and live the absolute freedom of an empty existence. And... some of us keep on looking, they keep looking until they give their last breath.

“We’re but specks of existence in the heart of the eternal, a speck of dust in the dead cold infinite. But nonetheless, we still are the most marvelous thing about this universe. And that in itself is a great rejoice.”



I remained quiet all the while he was talking and smoking. I had finished the fish by that time and was leisurely enjoying my

Secrets Unfolding

iced juice. Though I didn't quite distinguish the flavor, it was something I had never tasted before. I had lost track of his line of thought somewhere in the middle, too much heavy talk for me for one day. Not used to it. Besides, I was sure he was talking more to himself than to me. He turned his gaze towards me and caught me staring at the black painting hanging behind his desk.

"You've been throwing glances at that painting ever since you came here. Does it trigger you in some way?"

"It does. It's too black."

"It's because it's made of Vantablack. Darkest material on earth. It absorbs all light, reflects none. It was hard getting my hands on that material, also hot on the price, but it was worth it."

"It's disturbing to stare at, yet it is almost beckoning."

"I like contemplating it. If you stare at it long enough, you'd come to believe that it is a doorway to another reality. It makes this world fade away and I imagine zillions of other possible realities existing out there. If I were a novelist, I would have written dozens of books just by staring at it."

"It definitely is worth its money," I said in amazement.

"Hey, how about some coffee now with the Tarte Tatin?"

"I'd like some, yes. Thank you."

He opened the door of his study, and still holding the knob, he shouted in the hall. "Lya! I have a guest here, sweetie. Could you please make us some coffee?"

Lya.. his wife? His daughter? I waited and anticipated.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Lya!” He shouted again.

“I heard you! I’ll bring it up to you when it’s ready,” a voice of a girl replied from downstairs.

“Thank you!”

He closed the door and turned towards me. “When the coffee is ready, I’ll tell you about the real reason I invited you here today, but first let me show you something cool. Come.” And he walked to the library looking for some books. I left the table and stood beside him.

“You read a bit?” He asked.

“A bit, yeah.”

“What do you read?”

“Mainly novels. American, English, French, Russian, Japanese, Turkish. When I like the author, I usually read all of his works.”

“That’s good. I used to devour novels, too, when I was your age. When you grow old, however, your inclinations change,” he said, still sweeping the rows of books looking for his prey. “Perhaps because novels give us something to look up to in the future, makes us dream that our lives might turn out as exciting as a novel. But as one grows old, his chances recede, his hopes peter away, and he realizes it is perhaps too late for him. So, he turns into philosophical books and history books, trying to encompass whatever he can of the human legacy before he... Aha! Here it is.”

Secrets Unfolding

He pulled out an old, musty book, like those they used to print in the 19th century, with a thick leather brown cover, and no illustrations whatsoever, just the title of the book.

“It is called ‘*The Song of God.*’ It is actually the only copy that exists in the world so far. Worth a fortune!”

“Really? How did you get your hands on it!?” I asked, as he carefully handed me the thick volume.

“The story behind it is a little bit odd. I got it during the time when I was having those nightmares, actually. I had my share of strangeness, too. I was visiting Lisbon during summer vacation, and one night as I was ambling about, wandering through the old town, I happened to come across this nostalgia shop. You know, where they sell all kinds of old stuff. Most of it is junk, but people like those kinds of things anyway, make them yearn for un-lived old times. Anyway, I went inside, and since it was late at night, the shop was empty and dim lighted and I was the only customer. The shop owner was this old lady who had the worst greeting smile ever. You’d almost think she’s cringing at you, but that was actually her smile. I doubt you’d ever get used to it, though. So, after I took a quick look around, my eyes caught this book in the corner of a shelf, blending with the fading colors of the walls and the other items surrounding it. It was almost invisible. When I held it between my hands, the layer of dust that covered it was too thick. Perhaps two or three years worth of dust. But, how can I put it? I liked the touch of it. Its weight, its brown old papers, its title inscribed in tiny golden letters ‘*the Song of God.*’ Though the name of the author is nowhere to be found. So, I decided I’d take it as a souvenir with me.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“The lady owner almost gave it to me for nothing. All she asked were some pennies and it was mine. She said that a strange man had visited her shop two years ago, dropped in the book. No one touched it ever since. She said it was cursed. I thought it was just a story she tried to stitch into every item so it would sell. But since she didn’t really try to sell it, it was almost as if she got rid of the book, I believed her. A few years later, a friend of mine suggested that I take it to an expert perhaps it was worth something, and it turned out it was the real deal. Only copy still existed in the world. It dates back to the thirteenth century, they said. Many museums contacted me and tried to buy it from me, but I decided I’d keep it for myself. Whether it was a coincidence or not, I was lucky, and that book is my lucky charm.”

“It will be like the family heirloom. Perhaps you’ll have a spoiled grandson and he’d sell it right after he inherits it,” I added.

“I’m afraid it’ll end up in a museum instead. Unfortunately, my lineage ends with me,” he stated, turning his face the other way, trying to smother the weight of his words with the cloak of sarcasm. A smell of regret in his tone.

I opened the book and leafed carefully through its fragile baked pages, feigning that I didn’t pay attention to what he had just said. The book was a mixture of different languages and illustrations. Some paragraphs were in German, others in Latin, I presumed, and some I couldn’t recognize. I leafed until my eyes rested on an English written paragraph.

“I am the bard of the holy night.

The whale in the murky sea.

I am the meek fog in the pending dawns.

Secrets Unfolding

*The endless silence within ye.
In which your demons crawl and your fears lay still.
I am the shadow that lurks in the ashen desert.
The skeleton tree atop the frozen hill.
I follow, I watch, I make no sound, I have no will."*

As my mind rushed to make all the possible connections between what I had just read and the prophecy the little girl in France had told me, Sophia entered the room, holding a tray of coffee.



[...The visitor in the distance appears to be a man in his forties. He's wearing a slightly oversized black suit and a red tie, a white shirt, and shiny leather shoes. Narrow eyes glare through thick-framed square glasses. A large forehead and a slightly messy hair. He comes from somewhere far away, walks through the abandoned gardens and knocks on the gates of the Palace. As he waits for someone to open the doors, he looks up and contemplates the lost glory of the place. He purses his lips and shakes his head sideways in regret. Someone finally opens the gates, it is the Dreamkeeper.

"Why did you have to knock, you could've let yourself in," says the Dreamkeeper in a haughty, sarcastic tone.

"Out of courtesy, I wanted you to know I am here. I don't wanna be impolite or anything," replies the visitor.

"You didn't knock when you used to come here. When this place was functional, you just barged in. You didn't even say hi."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“C’mon, Chico! Don’t be like that. I missed you. I came to see you,” says the visitor as he opened his arms wide open.

“Well, come inside. Let’s have a drink,” replied the Dreamkeeper, and they shared a manly hug, the one during which they quickly tap each other on the back instead of just wrapping their arms around each other like a man woman hug. Clearly, as it appears to be, the Dreamkeeper and the visitor are old friends.

The inside is dark and gloomy and ridiculously spacious. A faint jazzy tune plays in the background and echoes in the furthest corners of the palace. The visitor walks behind the Dreamkeeper to the elevator and says nothing, probably in shame, after seeing what has become of the place. After imagining the Dreamkeeper living here all by himself, he felt sorry. Inside the elevator, the Dreamkeeper presses the button seventy-seven, and inside, surrounded by four mirrors, they remain quiet, until the visitor broke the silence.

“I’m sorry, Chico...”

“Yeah, I know. I know you’re very sorry.”

The elevator opens its doors to the 21st-century bar. Same hollowness, same stale air impregnated with the smell of melancholy and dust. They walk to the bar top. The visitor takes a seat and the Dreamkeeper stands on the opposite side. He serves a small dish of lavender macarons, fills two glasses with ice cubes then pours drinks on top, and offers one to the visitor.

“Thanks,” says the visitor.

“You’re my first guest in a long time. Enjoy.”

Secrets Unfolding

“So... This is a 20th-century bar? I like the decor.”

“21st” replies the Dreamkeeper.

“Oh, yeah. Crazy times, crazy times. I remember it was an era of great confusion. We were sure of nothing, everything was hazy and undefined, love, God, reality, good and evil. It was a real mess, a true mess. The Internet did all that. It was the time when the Internet was born.” He pulls out a cigarette and put it between his lips.

“You mind?” he asks before he lights it.

“Yes.”

“Do you want one?”

“Yes.”

He offers him one, lights it, and they smoke leisurely as they drink.

“I remember I was a filmmaker around that time,” says the visitor. “I gotta say, I was pretty successful and famous. I don’t know what was so great about my movies, but I guess they were funny, in a way. And in another, they reflected the absurdity of the times we live in. I guess people connected with that absurdity. Things didn’t necessarily have to follow a specific order; people didn’t necessarily have to react in a stereotypical way to the daily events of life. My greatest work was a movie with no storyline at all, can you imagine that? Just two guys in black suits following their boss’ orders. Or that other movie about the samurai lady wearing a yellow motorcycle jacket with yellow pants and yellow sneakers and a katana. Those were good times for me, the 21st century.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

"Yeah, I remember you. I was one of your biggest fans," says the Dreamkeeper.

"Appreciate it, man. If you ask me, the greatest times were 7th century, the 21st, and the 37th and you know why!"

"Oh, yeah, I do."

A moment of silence passed as they drink and smoke. The clinking of ice reverberates through the place.

"So, nobody comes here anymore huh?" asks the visitor.

"Not a single soul."

"Sorry, Chico. It must've been hard for you."

"Yeah, well... What stings a little is that I thought I had friends," says the Dreamkeeper.

"You have friends, but... you know, everybody's busy doing what they're doing."

"They weren't so busy when they came to almost every party I threw. I thought I was giving everybody the best time of their lives, and I really enjoyed their company. I am talking about you included. I both blame you and enjoy your company."

"Thanks, Chico, really appreciate it. I'm really sorry, but I'm just gonna come right out and say it, me not included. Everybody liked you, but they didn't come for you. They came for what you offered. And let me tell you, what you created here is something very exceptional, I really give you that. But when the whole thing fell apart, well, you can't really blame them for not coming here anymore. Sure, you can blame your close friends, but not everybody," says the visitor.

Secrets Unfolding

"I'm not blaming everybody, and I didn't create this place all by myself. We created it together, me and her."

"Yeah, yeah, right. Sorry, I know. But, Chico, what really happened? Nobody really knows. One night everything was great; the other it all went upside down, we were shocked and confused, nobody knows anything... So, if I may ask you, what happened?"

"You really wanna know?"

"Of course."

"Okay," ...]

Excerpt from an Untitled Book.



The carpet was almost stained with hot brown smudges. Perhaps, in another reality, it didn't escape that unfortunate fate. And perhaps in another one, the wool carpet below our feet didn't exist at all. Perhaps then, if Sophia had dropped the whole tray and coffee was spilled everywhere, it would have caused less damage. But in the reality in which I happened to exist, she *almost* dropped the tray, and thank god she didn't. The scarlet wool carpet looked really expensive and felt nice to the feet. Besides, I badly craved hot coffee after that delicious stuffy meal.

Oddly enough, that was what came to my concern at that puzzling moment. In which Sophia made an epic entrance to the room—epic in its banality and complexity—and almost dropped the whole try at my sight. Then, with a cocktail of disbelief,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

rejoice, and panic, I realized that Sophia was actually in the room. That she was, without doubt, Ezra's daughter.

We stood there still like a paused scene from a Woody Allen movie for like five or six seconds. She stared at me, then stared at Ezra, then at me again. I, still holding *the Song of God* in my hands, exchanged the same befuddled stares, and noticed she was starting to blush all over. Then without saying a word, she walked with clumsy steps to the round table, placed the tray on top and left the room, immediately closing the door after her. Then yelled 'Papa!'. Ezra gave me the 'gotta go' look, and followed her outside.

Bewildered, I waited alone in the room. A cloak of quietness swathed the space around me. I heard nothing coming from outside the walls, though I assumed she was surprised as much as I was, and was now seeking an explanation from Ezra, her father.

Jesus... I was telling the man that I was in love with his daughter in his own house. He must've felt very awkward about it. How could I possibly face him now? But then I wondered, was he aware that his daughter and I knew each other? Perhaps he thought I was talking about someone else. I had hoped so until I realized that there was no shade of surprise on his face when she entered the room, it was almost as if he was anticipating our reaction. But then I thought about it. I had met him before her, and that happened purely by chance. It wasn't like he sought to meet me after learning that I was seeing his daughter. My head was a languid mess.

As I was closing the book and carefully returning it to its empty space, like a missing tooth, on the bookshelf, I

Secrets Unfolding

remembered the last paragraph I was reading and how absurdly intriguing it was. I stole another glance at it and then took a snapshot with my smartphone of the text before closing the book and putting it back where it belonged. That was a matter for another time I decided. For now, I had to think about handling the situation at hand. I returned to my seat and sipped my coffee whilst staring at the bottomless Vanta black painting.

The address! It suddenly dawned on me. Now I remember where I've seen it. I pulled out the monopoly bill from my pocket and stared hard at it. It was the same address on Zoe's Last letter. I respected Sophia's wish of never letting me drive her home. I believed it was a privacy she liked to maintain, and for whatever reason that was, it didn't matter. I didn't want to pry. But now I was in her house, sitting in her dad's study.

Loose ends joined together inside my head for brief moments. I glimpsed some sense beaming from afar, but soon everything faded away into nothingness. I needed an explanation. Did Zoe know Dr. Ezra?

Ezra entered the room, alone, and sat next to me. For a while, we remained quiet. He added one spoon of sugar into a cup of coffee and leisurely stirred.

"I knew you are seeing my daughter," he began. "That's the other half of the reason I asked you to come here today, to make sure you are not gonna hurt her."

"I'm sorry," I said. Though I didn't know what I was apologizing for exactly, I felt it was necessary. "I didn't know she was your daughter."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“What’s that for? She must be somebody’s daughter. Would it make a difference whether it was me or not?”

“I guess not. That’s not what I meant—”

“Relax,” he interrupted. “There’s nothing to explain.”

“So... Did you get your answer?” I said after I ruled out many things I was about to say that would have been wrong or awkward.

“You are in love with my daughter. You wouldn’t hurt her, at least not on purpose. You seem like a decent guy. I hope you don’t get hurt as well.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, sounding meek as hell. I looked at the clock on my phone. It was 8:30. I wondered if it was time to leave, Or if the night had just begun. It turned out it was the latter.

“I guess it was inevitable that you two would eventually meet,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked, a bit surprised, but still intrigued.

“I must give you my condolences about Zoe. I know she was close to you,” he, solemnly, uttered.

“You knew each other?”

“Sure. We are both doctors. I noticed you didn’t attend her funeral. You weren’t there.”

“I was at her house the night she died, God bless her soul.”

Secrets Unfolding

“You were?”

“Yeah, and she told me about the night Sophia and I had briefly... visited the afterlife,” I ventured.

He sipped from his cup and then said, “I assumed she would tell you about that eventually.” Again, not a bit surprised that I knew about that fact. “It really burdened her. She felt guilty about it all those years.”

“And I assume you were the man who made her promise not to tell anyone about it, especially me, right?”

He nodded.

“You tried to protect your daughter from me, and from that truth. I guess you just wanted her to have a normal life. I understand.”

“Glad you do.”

“You still want to protect her from that? You want me to stop seeing her? I haven’t told her about that dying together thing, by the way.”

“I guess I’m wise enough to understand that it would be pointless by now.”

“Your daughter is in good hands, Dr. Ezra,” I said with a bit of hesitation.

He gave a slow nod and a riddled smile. Silence reigned over the room. Each in his seat. Each in his own thoughts. Dusk had fallen, the sea merged with the sky and disappeared behind one shade of black, and Orion glittered somewhere above, but I couldn’t glance it from the balcony.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“She’s not actually my daughter,” he broke the silence. I remained quiet, waiting for him to elaborate. “I am the one who raised her, but I’m not her biological father.”

“You don’t need to tell me anything. I don’t have to know about your private lives.”

“It’s okay. You’re already involved.”

“Okay... So, she’s like, adopted?”

“Sort of... How about I tell you a story?”

“Okay.”

He poured me another cup of coffee, and something told me it was going to be a long story.

Ezra's Story

He met her at a cemetery on a rainy day. They sat together under her umbrella beside a *Fig* tree, the only Fig tree in the cemetery. They ate sandwiches and drank coffee, waiting for the downpour to subside. Near them was a grave, so old, the letters of the deceased's name engraved on the stone had long vanished. Only the *Epitaph* was spared the bleaching of time. Moss grew in the space between the letters.

"What happens but once might as well not have happened at all. If we only have one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all"

That was engraved on the Epitaph.

Ezra's parents died in a car accident when he was seven years old, and ever since he lived with his uncle, his five cousins, and his uncle's wife in a small flat. Ever since, he never felt home again. Always an intruder among other kids who weren't his brothers and sisters, a man and a woman who weren't his parents. Not only did they take away most of the heritage his parents left him, but they were also unkind to him. Perhaps because he did better at school than all of his cousins, or perhaps because his father was more successful than his uncle. Whatever the reason might've been, his boyhood years were a living hell.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

His only solace was in the kindness his uncle's wife showed sometimes, reminding him of his mother's warmth. She was his only ally and protector against the malice the rest of the family showed, and the one who managed to spare him his deceased parent's house against her husband's will. She knew he'd want to leave this place as soon as he got the chance, and she knew he needed a place to go.

During all those years, Ezra sought haven in the cemetery that faced the sea. For one reason, it was a quiet place exempt from the nuisance his uncle's family caused him. *At least, the dead won't interrupt my reading*, he thought, *they wouldn't steal my books and burn them behind my back*. For another, he felt closer to his family in the cemetery, though their bodies were never found and no tombstones rose in their names, but being close to the dead made him feel more at home. Each day after school, he would go there, read or listen to music until sunset and then head back home. No one asked him where he was or why he was late, nobody really cared, which was convenient for him.

After making it to med school, he moved to his parent's house. A Villa on the seaside of the town. Finally, he breathed freedom and believed that his real-life was now beginning, away from the oppression of his uncle and the limitations of his previous life. However, though he wasn't short on space nor on quietness in his new home, he kept going to the cemetery anyway, which was now closer to where he stayed.

He grew fond of the place. He made roots as deep as the Fig tree's roots that reached down to the bones and skulls of those beneath. He knew most of the dead people by their first names. Sometimes he would talk to them, read to them, play them some

Ezra's Story

music. They grew on him and he considered them friends and family. He imagined them to be good people, decent people, unlike the ones alive who raised him. He knew that the dead will never come back to life to become a reality and disappoint his expectations. He liked them the way they were, dead and quiet.

One day, he glimpsed a girl wandering through the cemetery, skimming the rows of graves. A girl he had never seen before. She seemed lost but beautiful, and was looking for a certain tombstone but was unable to find it. He watched her intently as she walked slowly, scrutinizing the names on the graves. The cemetery was vast and the dead were many, and after a while, she gave up and left the place.

The day after, he spotted her at the university, during the radiology lecture which he precisely remembered, because he recalled nothing of which. All the time, he kept watching her. His heart, for the first time, spoke to him in a language he did not understand. *She must be a transfer*, he thought; however, he couldn't muster enough courage to approach her. He had one chance and he didn't want to blow it, so he waited, and waited until fate ran out of patience.

It was an October day. The sky was leaden with sombre clouds, the sharp autumn wind moaned through the trees, and only the chirps of blackbirds echoed in the hollow of the cemetery. Ezra was sitting by one of the graves reading when the girl made a second appearance, he closed his book and contemplated her.

After she made another skimming through the graves, she rested under the Fig tree nearby a nameless tombstone.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

The conductor raised his baton and the symphony reached its climax. Rain came down from the sky heavy, overwhelmingly. Ezra tried to seek shelter somewhere but he found himself in nakedness, his only choice, and chance, was the girl under her umbrella. He walked to her, excitement eating away his knees. "Hi. I have sandwiches and coffee in the thermos, so how about you cover me from the rain and I share these with you?" He offered, wet and shaky.

"What's in the sandwiches?"

"Salad and mayonnaise."

"Fines," She said.

He was no stranger offering her some food. She recognized him from the masses of students and knew he was a fellow comrade. And so they sat there under the rain beside the nameless corpse and the fig tree, eating sandwiches and sipping steaming coffee. And thus, began their story.

'I came to Bone looking for my father,' she spoke. Her name was Leonie, and she came looking for her father whom she never knew. Her mother had absconded him while still pregnant with her, leaving Bone for another city away from her husband. 'He's a bad person and you should forget about him,' her mother would often tell her whenever the little girl asked about her father, not until she grew up that her mother finally confessed the truth. 'He killed a person,' she told her. 'He had murdered a very kind person who would never hurt anyone.' Leonie was shocked, spending many days in solitude digesting the idea and the implications of having a murderer for a father after the confession. But she always felt that there was yet a hidden truth, as the story didn't fit, or perhaps she had hoped that there was

Ezra's Story

more to the story. She knew her mother, and was almost certain that she wouldn't marry a murderer. But no matter how many times she implored her mother for the whole truth, it was to no avail.

So she came to Bone, and after finding no trace of him among the living, she decided to search in graveyards, one after another, but her search was yet fruitless. "Perhaps he is the nameless one under the fig tree, though I hope he is alive," Ezra said.

"I hope so, too."

However, Leonie never found her father. Not among the living or the dead. He remained forever a ghost in her imagination. Nevertheless, she found Ezra instead.

Leonie beamed with a mysterious charm. She was a light dreamy soul. Her eyes an amber hue of peace and puzzles. Her actions delicate and mesmerizing. Her words an elusive sweet spell. She rarely wore any makeup, keeping her looks and dressing simple and classy. The colors never mismatched, and perfume never left her aura. And without notice, like honey melting into tea, her fate melted into Ezra's.

The Red Spot on Jupiter referred to a giant hurricane the size of earth, eternally spinning with ravaging speed, never abiding. The feelings Ezra grew for Leonie were of that kind, a ceaseless fierce hurricane that flattened everything in its path, jungles, cities, people. Turning everything into a Martian desert in which only Leonie stood glamorously at the center. They dated for five years. Their love was the kind people made movies and wrote novels about. The kind that usually happened only once a

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

lifetime. It burned, it electrified, and it made reality merge with fantasy like Andromeda would meld into the milky way.

In their naivety, they planned to travel to Germany once they graduated and became licensed doctors. In Germany, they would do their residency program and from there they would set off to visit the whole of Europe and eventually the world. ‘Once we get a European diploma, nothing would stop us.’ They believed. They could work as doctors in any country, on any continent they wished. They could go wherever they wanted, bound by nothing. The excitement nurtured by that future grew every day inside of them, eager to escape the chains and the mentality of the society they were entrapped in. They craved freedom, thirsty for culture, for love, for poetry. Their dreams aligned, their hopes joined together and formed a bigger lump. However, a timed bomb, the bigger it got, the deadlier was the explosion.

One day, Leonie disappeared.

Just like that. No prodromes indicating an upcoming change. No sign that she was struggling inside. One afternoon she was herself, laughing, conversing, the next day she was gone. Ezra looked for her everywhere, and since she came to the city alone, there was no one he could reach for. No family, no relatives, and all her friends were as clueless as him. She was just gone. Shortly after, the *Nightmares* began.

Several months later, he received a letter from her, just a blank envelope with no postmark, no address, *nothing*. It was as if somebody had dropped it personally at the door of his house. It said the following, as Ezra showed me the letter,

I am sorry for disappearing on you like that. I had no courage in me to tell you the truth while looking you in the eyes.

Ezra's Story

You may think I am a coward, but it would have ripped my heart into pieces had you been standing before me, flesh and bones. Though I am certain it is impossible for me to convey my true feelings through ink on paper, I am going to do my best. If you owed me anything, it would be the truth.

I am incapable of being happy. I never experienced true happiness before in my life, and I don't think I ever will. I was raised by a single mother who was depressed as long as I can remember, and I have always believed that someday I am going to meet the right person, and finally experience what it truly means to be happy. It was a hope I always clung to. It was the only thread linking me to the real world, that whatever normal people feel, I would also feel someday.

Then I met you, and I believe with all my heart that you are that one person who is destined to make me feel all the emotions I have yearned for. That I am going to be truly loved and cared for. That I can finally know what it is like to feel safe and to dream. However, I didn't feel a thing.

It is not your fault. My feelings for you are real, though the nature of their reality may differ from those you carry. I know you loved me, too. But it isn't that simple, not with me.

Terror haunted me for several days when I first realized I was unable to feel happiness. I spent nights sobbing, and days pretending nothing was wrong. Days became weeks, weeks turned into months, and months into years. I put great effort pretending everything was alright, that I am a normal person feeling what I was supposed to feel. The make up I put gave me up sometimes and you would see through it, you'd insist that there was something wrong, but somehow I always managed to

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

convince you that it was all good. I put up an act because I didn't want to believe that I was different, and hoped it was just a matter of time, that eventually I too will experience all the happiness you tried to offer.

I also didn't want to hurt you. It warmed my heart that you carried all that love for me, but something in me resisted all that happiness, like it was a foreign body that my system rejected over and over again.

I don't know what is wrong with me. For a long time, I tried to trace back the reasons why I am this way. I looked into every corner of my soul, every nook and cranny of my being, trying to find a clue, trying to fix whatever was wrong. But, eventually, I gave up, and accepted the fact that I am simply like this. Something is missing, something essential, and there's no way to change that. I find peace in sadness, my heart is in harmony with misery, and my soul becomes restless in joy. Perhaps I was born without it, perhaps it was stolen from me long ago.

I am incapable of being happy. Of making someone happy. I can't commit to a real relationship. I know it took me so long to realize that and act upon it, and I know it is not fair to you, but I am not fit for long term unions, and I will never engage myself in one. I'll never have a family of my own. Perhaps I will see other men have casual shallow affairs, that's all. I believe there's a beautiful soul somewhere inside, but I don't think it will ever appear and shine through me. I'll remain just a walking corpse, and thus I will walk the earth and spend the rest of my days. You are the only real man in my life, and you'll forever remain the only one.

Ezra's Story

Don't try to look for me, don't try to find me; forget about me, forget about everything we have lived, everything we have dreamed and planned. Live your life as if you have never met me in the cemetery that rainy day.

Goodbye.

It blew him off the center of his existence, but Ezra didn't give up on finding her after reading her letter. Accepting her disappearance as if it was just a mundane event was out of the question. It was as if all the warm rushing blood in his life had suddenly dried out, leaving behind empty veins and a heart-pumping stifling air. Five years of his life they had spent together, through bitterness and ease, through the darkest of days and the merriest ones. They stripped their souls naked for each other, they knew the hidden spots of every scar and every bruise. Where it hurt most and where it pleases, where it was mostly dark and evil, and where it was warm and safe. Her disappearance made him question the past, the present, and the future. Everything was on the verge of breaking down around him. He needed to find her, look her in the eyes and tell her that it was okay. That he accepts her the way she was, missing some parts or whole, normal or queer, happy or miserable. That they could keep on trying to find a way to be whoever they wished to be, that it does not have to end like this, that there must be a way. Ezra read the letter any number of times, trying to find a hint, a hidden message, a glimpse of hope. And no matter how many times he read it, he couldn't mistake a silent call for help, a voice so distant and weak, from a place so dark and isolated. Although he was aware that what she wrote in her letter was true, and real, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was a part of her begging not to be given up upon. And it made him all the more persistent to find her, no matter what it cost.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Two years had passed and Ezra couldn't find a trace of her. He used up all his resources, he did everything he could think of to find her. But his search was fruitless. She disappeared like smoke, leaving behind no trace, as if she intentionally made sure not to be found by anyone. Which lead Ezra to finally give up the lookout. However, he never stopped waiting for her to show up someday, to re-enter his life without notice like she first did when he met her, and to stand by his side as if she had never left a day.

It was during that time that the first cigarette made its way between Ezra's lips, followed by pot at somber times. His life became a bleak continuation of indistinguishable days. Whatever used to bring him joy grew into meaningless figures. Whatever dreams he had were devoid of their luster. Whatever passion used to burn inside his heart became arid ashes. He barely put the minimum effort to make it to the next day. His job didn't excite him as it was supposed to. His future plans dissolved into languid waters. When she left, she took away with her every color from his life, and replaced them with metaphysical nightmares.

Time passed and worked its witchery, and Ezra finally accepted the fact that she was never coming back. He decided he was only harming himself mourning her, and his patients sometimes, and at last made up his mind to straighten up his life. He came out of it a different person, hard on the outside, deeper on the inside. He gave himself the chance to meet new people, and though he unintentionally seeked her shadow in every woman he met, he eventually met someone special. He grew fond of her, developed feelings for her and after enough time, he married her.

Ezra's Story

“My feelings for Leonie were deep and intense, whereas my feelings for my late wife were outspread and warm. You can't decide which was stronger, but you can guess which one leaves a mark,” he told me.

One year after their marriage, Ezra received a letter. This time the envelope had an address and a postmark. It was from Leonie, four years after her first letter. The message didn't say much, all it said was that Leonie was at a hospital in an eastern German city. She gave him the exact address of her apartment and the name of the hospital, and she implored him to come.

Please, I know you have no reason to answer my call, but it is crucial that you come. There is something very important I need to give you. No matter what reason you may give yourself into refusing my invitation, know that what I have is more important. Please hurry, I don't have much time left.

What Ezra felt upon reading her letter was not very clear. Surprise, excitement, worry, wonder, befuddlement, it didn't matter. He realized he had to go see her. He explained to his wife that it was an urgent matter, and she was the kind of woman to understand without further explanation, to trust strongly without looking foolish. And three days later, he was already on a plane heading to Germany.

From Munich, he reached the city in the address by train, booked an open reservation at a modest hotel, showered, changed into new clothes, and on the same night, he went straight to the hospital.

On the bed, he found her. Her face pale and her eyes sunken and flat. A venous catheter attached to her arm, the monitoring machine beeping at the rhythm of her heart. She looked painfully

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

weak, and it didn't take him long to realize that life was leaking out of her, that the flame inside her was shrinking in size and glow. He knocked and entered her room, and in utter quietness, he stood by her bed.

They stared at each other without saying a word, tears welling up between the lids, and old feelings surging up to the surface with a magnificent spark. Meanings formed indistinguishable shapes, and like dry sand, the strong winds of their encounter blew them away. Only silence conveyed all the unspoken words. She smiled at him, and gestured with her hand for him to sit by her side. He approached hesitantly, not knowing what to feel or what to say, and gently seated himself on her bed and held her hand with a firm grip. All the anger, all the resentment and frustration, all the unanswered questions and the burden of unconsummated love that piled up inside him over the years had faded away in an instant. All he wished for was to see her get better.

“Take me out of here,” she said, barely audible.

Her car was parked down in the parking lot, and he managed to get her out of the hospital for a night. Together, they roamed the streets of the town. She asked him to just drive, with no destination in mind. They both understood that this nocturnal ride symbolized all their unfulfilled dreams, a potential future lived in one single night. They rode through the European streets, listening to their once favorite music that he found in the car stereo, tacitly telling him that she never forgot that she clung to those days like a ship to an anchor. He didn't know whether to feel sorrow or joy. There she was beside him after looking for her for so long, all the things he wanted to tell her, all the questions he wanted to ask, they seemed all pointless and vain.

Ezra's Story

After driving for several hours, she asked him to take her to her apartment. She knocked and an old lady opened the door, "Sie schläft," she murmured into Leonie's ear. Leonie took Ezra's hand and led him to a room, inside of which a little three-year-old girl was sound asleep. "She's my daughter. Her name is Sophia, and I want you to have her," she stated.

He knew that there was no chance the little girl was his. Ezra, though in five years of relationship, never once slept with Leonie. She mentioned nothing about the father, or whether she was married or not. All legal matters were already taken care of, all he had to do was to take her home with him.

Ezra felt a mysterious affection towards the little girl. He held her delicately in his arms and caressed her hair. For the first time, he felt an altogether different kind of love, an immeasurable love for this little creature, and he realized at that moment that it was his fate to raise this girl. He put her back in her cradle and they left the room.

She felt tired, and they lay on her bed. Her head rested on his shoulder, she breathed heavily, face muffled in his chest, she quietly sobbed as dawn approached and the sky grew lighter.

"I don't know what's the point of my existence," she said. "I regret a lot of things."

At a loss for words, he pressed her against him. The only solace he could offer.

"Make sure she finds a father and a mother, and a warm home. Make sure she knows what true happiness is." He pressed her harder against him.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

That dawn Leonie passed away in his arms. She stopped breathing, and he knew she was gone. Nonetheless, He held her for a long time after. Acid tears streaming down his cheeks, for all the nights he craved her, for all the years he missed her, for all the moments he spent with her in his mind that never came true. He wished he could have done something to change that bitter fate, and yet he knew it was inevitable that it would end up this way.

Leonie was buried in Germany. Shortly after her funeral, he traveled back to Algeria, knocked on the door of his house. When his wife opened the door, she found a man holding a three-year-old girl. His barren wife loved Sophia as if she were her own.

Since that day, all the nightmares had left him for good.



“Does Sophia know?” I asked.

“She does. I told her when she was seven, and she took it like the most natural thing in the world,” He answered.

By the time Ezra finished his story, it was already eleven. I stood up, and thanked him for the supper. It was my time to leave. As he was showing me to the front door, Ezra said, “Understanding one another is perhaps the hardest task a person could accomplish, but nonetheless, you mustn’t stop trying.”

I nodded. I understood without further explanation of what he implied. I must try my best to understand Sophia. I bid him goodnight and left.

Ezra's Story

Something in Ezra's story didn't add up, a little *detail* I noticed that I was going to point out, but hesitated and decided to let go. It was none of my business anyway.

I started the engine and was about to kick out when Sophia gently knocked on the side window, wearing a black nightgown and slippers.

"Hey," she said in an intimate, lukewarm way.

"Hey, you."

"What a surprise."

"What a pleasant one. Sorry for intruding," I replied.

"Apology accepted." An accomplice smile on her face.

"Curious to know what your father told me? Pretty embarrassing stuff, if you ask me," I teased.

"Of course! Not a single detail omitted!"

"Hey, how about we play the Tchaikovsky piece, *Pas De Deux*?" I suggested.

"You think you're ready?"

"I'll be ready by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Someone's in a hurry."

"You have a keyboard?" I asked.

"Sure, but I don't play it anymore. I decided I'd only play an acoustic piano."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“An exception could be made. How about you bring it to my place tomorrow evening?”

She gave it some thought, then she looked back at her house, probably taking into account the recent fact that her father now knew about me and it would be okay if she came.

“Sounds like a pleasant idea,” she agreed.

-19-

The Dance of The Blue Lotus
The Morgan's Bane
Sometimes To Become More, It Is
Necessary To Betray

Though I always keep my flat clean and neat, I did extra work that day. I opened the windows, mopped the floor, washed the dishes, did the laundry, and put everything in order. I prepared a little spot in one corner with a good echo effect for us to rehearse in, tuned my violin and placed it in its valise. And finally, I sprayed a dash of lavender air freshener. I had to make it look perfect. After all, it was the first time I had a girl over to my place, not taking into account the recent impromptu visit by Mandolin. I took a step back and threw a wholesome glance at the place. All good.

At six o'clock, Sophia rang the bell of my door. She had on a white cream roll-sleeves shirt, turquoise jeans, and caramel Chelsea boots. On her shoulder she carried a KORG Keyboard in its bag, and in her hand two pizza boxes. Her casual outfit and

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

the mysterious warm smile she wore on her face put me at ease instantly.

“You have a microwave?” She asked.

“I think.”

“Good then. Pizza for dinner.”

“I was gonna cook for you.”

“Perfect then. Pizza and whatever you were going to cook for dinner.”

“Please, make yourself at home.”

She took off her shoes, rested the keyboard against the wall, and put the pizza in the kitchen. Meanwhile, I prepared coffee in the Moka pot.

“Everything seems too organized for a guy living alone,” she said as she glanced around.

“I like to take care of my place.”

“Nice. I can see that you didn’t put any extra effort just because I was coming,” she teased with a mischievous smile.

“I might’ve added a spray or two of air fresheners,” I confessed

“It does smell nice, and to be honest, I expected to see some walls inside.”

“I got rid of them since I live alone. I made the whole apartment one big room. I’m more comfortable in spacious places.” Since I always wake up in the middle of the night after

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

a horrible nightmare, and stared deep at the looming dark hallway of the apartment, I decided I'd get rid of all the walls. And thus, no dark creepy hallways when I woke up—those were replaced by dark, creepy corners, I miscalculated.

“So, if I were to spend the night, no matter where I slept, we'd be sharing the same room? Is that how you trick girls into sleeping with you? You got rid of the walls. Smart,” she said, walking around the place.

“Well, milady, I don't think that having walls would have changed that eventual outcome, anyway.” She got the joke, and we shared a good laugh.

“Well, I like it. Feels like a loft.”

“That was the point.”

I poured us two mugs of coffee, and after setting the music equipment, we started our session. We rehearsed every few bars apart. We first listened carefully to the segment of the piece on my laptop, then she transcribed the notes from the sheet music I managed to download from a website, since I couldn't read music myself. Then, we'd try to play it. Given that she was more experienced than I was, it took me a little longer to get it right. But strangely enough, I found the tune rather easy to play compared to all the other pieces I learned before. Somehow, my fingers knew their way through the fingerboard, my arm knew when to strike the bow hard and when to go smoothly, when to use a *detaché* and when to strike a *legato*. It was as if I had the movement stored in my muscle memory long ago, which made it all the easier and fun to practice.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

After two hours of rehearsal, we got it all down. Every part of the piece well mastered. All we had to do was to play them consecutively all at once in one single performance. We decided to take a break first.

“Do you know the story behind the nutcracker ‘Pas De Deux’?” she asked as we sat on the floor munching some cheese crackers.

“Enlighten me.”

“*The Nutcracker* is a piece of music for a ballet Tchaikovsky wrote. The ballet itself was an adaptation of Hoffman’s story ‘*The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*.’ You know it?”

“I never watch ballet, and no, I never heard of the story.”

“It’s a children’s story about a girl named Marie and a nutcracker doll, who is originally a charming young man—”

“Wait, what’s a nutcracker doll?” I interrupted.

“It’s a doll used to crack nuts open. You put the nut in between the doll’s teeth and it cracks it open. The mystery unraveled?”

“No, well... Yeah, plenty, actually. Never mind. Go on.” She smiled, then went on.

“So, the girl and the doll travel together to the realm of dreams and fight the seven-headed mouse king—”

“Wait, what?”

“A seven-headed mouse king. Every story has a villain, and in this one, it happens to be a mouse king with seven heads. The

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

queen of the land stepped on his mother accidentally and killed her, so he seeks vengeance. Any more questions, mister?"

"No, that one makes perfect sense. Is it a mouse king or a rat king?"

"I don't quite remember exactly, but I think it's a mouse. Why?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"So, eventually they defeat the seven-headed mouse king, and Marie breaks off the curse of the nutcracker, turning him into a real man. A journey through which Marie discovers love, and the Nutcracker metamorphose from a doll to a real human being."

"It's loaded with symbols."

"Indeed. That's why it was turned into a ballet, and probably into a movie someday."

"Do they stay in love afterward?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so," she said after giving it some thought.

"Why not?"

"I believe love is meant to end, it holds its meaning in both the unreal joy it produces and the unmatched pain it inflicts. Take one element out of the equation and love becomes incomplete, meaningless in a sense."

"I agree.."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“You do ?”

“Yeah, I think. Is that why you were playing the piece that day at the theater? I mean *Pas De Deux*.”

“I read the story when I was ten, and it hooked me. At the age of fifteen, if I remember correctly, I once dreamt that I was holding the nutcracker’s hands, and we were walking through a long pavilion of dreams. We were heading somewhere together, and I kept having that dream, over and over again. So in response, I started learning the Tchaikovsky piece ‘*Pas De Deux*’, and once in a while, I play it. It was a coincidence that you heard me performing it that day.”

“I see.” I thought about it for a little while, then I let go. “Back on stage now.”

An immersing moment of silence reigned over the apartment. She stood before the keyboard, closed her eyes and rested her fingers on the keys, like a surgeon about to cut open a patient. A sudden seriousness lingered in the air. I pressed the violin between my shoulder and jaw and waited for her to begin.

Ever so delicately, ever so bewitchingly, she stroke the first notes. They reverberated through the place like ethereal dragonflies out in the world for the first time. I remember the day when I first listened to her play this same tune in the theater that day. That strange girl from my dreams, playing a piece I never before heard in my life but yet recognized so well. And now she was in my apartment, playing the same tune with me, with a violin I acquired impulsively in some ambiguous circumstances in a France spirit shop. Just how little control did I have over my fate?

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

I heard my cue and I stroke the bow. The sound of the violin came out unusually clean and rich. Surprisingly, I hit the right notes like I'd been playing this piece for ages. The bow slid down the string with perfect pressure, caressing each string with minute precision and sweetness. The screech and the squeal I used to make suddenly disappeared. I glanced at Sophia but her eyes were still shut, stroking the keys with a hypnotizing accuracy and depth.

Her music aligned with mine and fused in a single flow of harmony, like two dancers endlessly drifting in space, their moves never a mismatch. Like two streams gliding down a mountain, same speed, same glitter, occasionally crossing and twisting around each other, blending in one larger stream and then separating again. I closed my eyes as well, and let my hands do the job on their own, and irresistibly sailed in the mood surrounding us.

I listened, blurred memories surged up to the surface, yelled something incomprehensible in the void of my soul, then sank again in the murky pond of my remembrance. In between the notes, I heard their calls. I tried to listen closely to what they had to say, but the sound was too faint and obscure. I felt an itch in my chest, something was forming in the distance, a familiar feeling yet unbeknownst to me. I tried to discern its source, decipher its meanings, but I failed.

I played harder. My body became fully in sync with the music. The violin became an extension of my arm, and my nerves ended inside the wood frame, in between the F holes and the bridge. *Why am I able to play with such virtuosity? It feels as if another person replaced me. This is my body yet it is not. I am myself yet I am not.*

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

When I opened my eyes, a theater full of people stretched before me. I was wearing a tuxedo and playing The Nutcracker-Pas De Deux with a violin in my right hand. Behind me, a full orchestra and someone playing in the grand piano. Was it Sophia? The image was blurred but the performance was the same. My body moved on its own. I watched the hordes of people before me in admiration and awe of the music I was making, but I didn't recognize any face. I noticed that I was more corpulent and taller. This was not my body, yet it didn't feel so strange.

Was I inside a dream? I heard a fuss outside, a scream. I closed my eyes and play vigorously. I shut them hard and firm, trying to unfold the overlap of reality. Back to my apartment, I kept thinking, *back to my apartment!*

A shudder ran down my spine. A torrent of images flashed in the back of my eyelids. Just colors and random shapes at first, then meaningful images and scenes followed. I saw a pregnant woman sobbing while furtively packing her clothes in a suitcase. A young couple sitting in a cemetery under the rain. Zoe on her knees at my bedside in a hospital room while I was holding Sophia's hand. The fourth star in Orion's belt. The green iron gates of Mr. Amati. The Rat-man eyeing me heavily in the middle of a white desert.

When I opened my eyes, I was instantly relieved. I recognized my ceiling and my non-existent walls. I turned around and Sophia was still there, eyes shut, playing as fervently as ever. The mark in the back of my shoulder itched slightly.

A sudden silence descended on the place as the piece reached its closure. With a halt, I noticed that Sophia had turned

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

pale. She slowly opened her eyes and gazed right at me, the expression on her face was ambiguous, provoking, foretelling, and yet it wasn't too strange for me to realize that she, too, had gone through an odd experience.

She leaned against the wall and threw herself on the ground. Still holding the violin, I settled next to her on the cold linoleum floor.

"I think we're worth some praise after that performance," she uttered as she rested her head on my shoulder, her hair tickling my neck.

"You deserve some, yes, but it wasn't me playing."

She tilted her head backward and looked me in the eyes, never before was she that close to me.

"You saw it too, right?" She asked, her eyes glinting with a sparkle I couldn't quite unriddle.

"Let's not talk about it," I said as I gathered a bundle of hair around her ear, and gently caressed the triangular black mark behind her ear. "Some things, if articulated, could lose all their meaning. And, yes, I saw it too. I always did."

She smiled and stared musingly at some point in the distance. "We did well. We should celebrate. How about you make me that dinner now?"

"You read my mind."



The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

On the Tunes of ‘*Moanin*’ by Bobby Timmons, I cooked Sophia one of my favorite dishes. Chicken liver with caramelized onions and mushrooms. She chopped mushrooms, and I did the hard work, weeping over the onions and cutting the liver into smaller bites. We chatted, we sipped grape juice, and when all was ready we served the dish with the heated Quattro Formaggi pizza Sophia had brought.

“How come you only have one plant?” she asked as she caressed the Magnolia flowers by the kitchen window.

“Those belonged to an old friend of mine. She was my doctor, actually. She passed away.”

“You mean that doctor. What’s her name?”

“Zoe.”

“Ah, yes. My father attended her funeral. I vaguely remember her. I didn’t know she was that close to you.”

“Yeah, she was. She was the one who looked after us that night in the hospital when we were kids.” I was about to tell her the truth, that we both passed away that night, but I refrained from doing so.

Sophia leaned on the wall, still caressing the flowers, she closed her eyes and pressed her temple.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a little dizziness. Where do you keep your candles?”

“You wanna have a diner at la chandelle?”

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

“Why not? Who knows, this might as well be our last dinner together.”

“Are you secretly going to the moon to never come back? They’re in the drawer behind you.”

“Busted!”

And thus, we had dinner under the faint amber glow of two candles. Though with ‘Moanin’ playing in the background, the atmosphere did not transform into a romantic one. The lightness of air remained the same. The music chopped the heads of any awkwardness trying to emerge to the surface, and I was glad. I was happy just talking.

“Tell me something cool, a useless but interesting piece of information that you thought it’ll probably never come in handy. You know, something that you’ll never use unless you tried to write a book or impress someone,” she asked, fork and knife in her hands

“Ah, one of those. Wait, I have plenty.”

“I knew you were the kind of guys to have plenty of those. Take your time.”

“Did you know that a day on Venus takes longer than a year? If you lived there, you’d be 21 years old while having lived only 18 days or so,” I said after sorting out from my memory.

“Oh, really? I bet a calendar on Venus would be a pretty mixed up thing.”

“Oh, it would! Imagine that telling you ‘see you next year’ is more promising than see you tomorrow.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Venus is a messed-up planet.”

“Explains why we think women came from Venus.”

“Hey!”

“Messed up is interesting. Occasionally.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. That’s a good one. Tell me more,” she said, sounding sincerely interested.

“Okay, I’ve got a good one. So, there’s this guy who noticed that Dragons are portrayed in every civilization throughout history, and so he wondered how come they all share the same image of this mythical creature. Did it truly exist or is it something else?”

“And what did he find out?”

“He found out the origins of this mythical creature, which is very cool. So, a dragon basically is a snake with four legs and wings, right? Before we became fully-fledged human beings, we first lived in trees as apes. And as apes, we had three main enemies, snakes crawling in the bushes, wild cats climbing up the trees, and preying birds snatching us from above. And so, we conjured up this mythical creature representing all our fears and enemies, our archetype enemy in some sense. A huge snake with four legs and wings.”

“Wow! So, that’s where dragons come from. Actually, that makes a lot more sense now. I would never look at dragons the same way again. Cheers to our ancient enemy.”

“Cheers!” The clink of our toast filled the apartment.

“You tell me one now,” I demanded.

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

“Okay, I have one, but it’s a bit embarrassing.”

“It’s fine. I’m not your father.”

“Okay, did you know that what is called a ‘French kiss’ in the English-speaking world, is called an ‘English kiss’ in France?”

“Hey. No need to blush.”

“I am not blushing, and you can’t see me, it’s too dark.”

“So, they’re throwing the blame on each other. Each one claims it’s the other who came up with the idea. I wouldn’t be so ashamed of it if it was me,” I said.

“I bet they came up with it at the same time,” she countered, chewing a piece of liver.

“Or perhaps a tribe in Angola outran both of them to the idea long before.”

“Perhaps. Who knows! Cheers to the kissing tribe in Angola.” She raised her cup.

“Cheers!” I watched her through the candle flame, and the more I stared, the more mesmerizing she became. Just when did I fall for her exactly?

“If this was real alcohol, I’d be pretty tipsy by now,” she commented. “The liver was pretty delicious, by the way, thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Sophia stood up, gathered the empty dishes and put them in the sink, then she threw a glance at her watch.

“It’s pretty dark. Perhaps I should drive you home,” I proposed.

She looked around, and then to the ground. Hesitantly, she said, “Do you mind if I spend the night here?”

“But does Ezra know?”

“Yes, I already informed him.”

“Of course,” I said, a bit surprised. “Mi casa es su casa”



The night came deep and heavy the ghost of winter haunted the sky and summoned forth an ominous thunderstorm. The parading winds rustled, the mighty thunder rumbled, and the sound of impatient raindrops drumming the windows filled the apartment with a warm sense of shelter and intimacy.

I gave her one of my shorts and a turtleneck sweater as a pair of change of clothes. The sweater swallowed her and the shorts turned into trousers on her slender legs. She looks funny and cute. I turned all the lights off and lit only a handful of night lamps on the far corners of the apartment. Our backs against the wall, we rested on a mattress on the floor, bodies half-covered with a drape. A dim glow enveloped us on the inside, rain, and thunder from the outside.

“We’re gonna tell ghost stories now?” she said.

“Better. Let me show you something.”

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

I rummaged inside my uncle's old stuff and pulled out a small wooden box I had saved for a special occasion, in which a little plastic bag, a lighter, and rolling material were kept safe.

"Is this pot!?" she asked, surprised as if I showed her a gun.

"It's not pot. It's called Blue Lotus. This is what ancient Egyptians used to get high on and indulge in their spiritual experiences. My uncle used to smoke it. Don't worry it's legal."

"And safe?"

"And safe."

"Your uncle left you a lot of weird interesting stuff, didn't he?"

"He was a bit on the queer side, a very interesting man. My father is his only brother, and I am my father's only son, so, I can most humbly and proudly say I was his favorite nephew. When he passed away, he left me all this, along with the apartment."

"God bless his soul."

"Amen."

"So, we're gonna get high on the same stuff Seth and Osiris did?"

"Exactamente."

"Cool..." She stared hard at the dry herbs on my palm, then looked at me and said, "But I never smoked before."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I’m not gonna oblige you, but if it’ll make you feel better, I’m not a smoker either.”

“Well, you do it first.”

I clumsily rolled a cigarette, tight on the lip side, wider as it stretches forward. I lit it with the lighter and inhaled deeply. Held the smoke in my lungs for a while, then slowly exhaled through my nose. The taste was different from that of a cigarette, the smokeless dense, and smelled better and stronger. The floating Blue lotus molecules reached my alveoli, dissolved into my pulmonary blood circulation, then to my heart, then pumped up to my brain. And after about thirty seconds the sweet strange feeling of lightness seeped into every corner of my body. Suddenly, the sound of rain pelting the window pane turned into a very intriguing and mystic melody, like each drop was playing a note of a Martian scale.

“I think it’s starting to kick in,” I said, looking at her with a stupid smile on my face.

“What do you feel?” she asked, curious as a little girl.

“Huh?”

“What do you feel?”

“Good...”

I took another drag and laid down on what I thought was the mattress, only to realize it was Sophia’s lap. Dizziness enveloped my head, my brain vibrated, and my muscles tinkled. Lightning struck and illuminated the apartment, casting odd shadows on the opposite wall.

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

“Dammit! Give me that.” She snatched the roll from my fingers and sucked in and quickly released the smoke. She remained quiet for a while waiting for the lotus to do its work.

“It’s not working. I don’t feel anything.”

“You’re doing it wrong,” I said as I sat up. “You have to first suck in the smoke in your mouth cavity, then inhale it deep down to your lungs, hold it there for a while, then exhale slowly.”

She did as I instructed and coughed so hard as a result. “I got virgin lungs and they’re hurting right now. I don’t think I’m fit for smoking.”

“It’s okay. It’s just your first time.” She sucked in another puff. This time the coughing wasn’t as bad as the first time.

“Enough for you. Now relax,” I said as I took the cigarette from her fingers and laid down again. We took turns smoking, leisurely passing the roll back and forth, no words exchanged. Thunder rumbled above our heads, lightning flashed into the apartment as if Zeus was having an argument with Hera, and rain fell harder than ever.

Under my skin, I felt every cell transforming into volatile gas and my brain liquefied turned into a soup of formless ideas. Sophia remained quiet for a while, fully absorbing the experience and the sensation. She didn’t utter a word, but instead, she ran her fingers through my hair, my head resting on her lap. I was neither fully aware that I was laying there, nor was she aware that she was caressing my hair. We knew the location of our body parts and where they were heading, but we didn’t fully comprehend the implications of our actions. Though as innocent as resting on one’s lap or caressing one’s hair, we

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

wouldn't have dared in other circumstances. She leaned closer and whispered, "I have something important to tell you, but first, let's dance."

"You mean right now?"

"Yes."

With unsure steps and clumsy movements, I managed to set up the music player, looked through the playlist and chose a piece among many. Dmitri Shostakovich's *Waltz No 2*.

Dance, dance, dance... and dance we did. As soon as the music streamed out of the speakers, the clank of heavy metal chains falling to the ground echoed through the apartment. Chains that slithered around our bodies. Chains that formed, one ring after another, through all the years of restraint and solitude. Disabling us from truly, gracefully, being free in our own skin. But that night, at that moment, the chains broke, and never before have I felt lighter, nor had I seen her that unsuppressed. I ignored if it was the Blue Lotus, or the storm outside, or being alone in an apartment, or the mystical experience we went through as we played *The Nutcracker's* piece. Or was it because of our union at the heart of the night, an event that was only happening for the second time in twenty-one years? Nonetheless, as soon as the music started, I witnessed a whole different person.

The music turned into luminescent strings, it wrapped around our ankles, wrists, and waists, and played us like marionettes. We moved nimbly and harmoniously as our bodies orbited around each other. She came closer. I rested my hand on her waist. She rests her arms on my shoulder, we swirl, we dance. I pull her against me, I feel her warm breath against my

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

neck. She moved away, she spined, and from the tip of her fingers, I pulled her back to me again. Our hands touched and split, our bodies gently slam and repel. Her arms beautifully outstretched and furl in perfect rhythm with her legs, her hair fluttered and swayed back and forth, covering her face, and when it was revealed it, her eyes meet mine with a blazing gaze.

Abba's Dancing Queen was the next track. The tempo increased and our bodies didn't fail to keep up. Our joints became looser and we entered a state of trance. At that point, all my rushing thoughts parked on the roadside and watched. The Bee Gees' *Stayin' Alive* played after, then Daft Punk's *Lose Yourself to Dance* followed. Then from disco to Chuck Berry's *You Can never tell*, sloppily trying to do the Pulp Fiction's epic dance scene "*C'est la vie, say the old folks, it goes to show you can never tell.*" Afterward, the tempo slowed down, and we concluded the session with an intimate unhurried dance to *Lullaby Of Birdland* by Yoko Kanno.

"What did you give me!" She heaved, trying to catch her breath.

"In any case, I don't regret giving you that."

"And I don't regret taking it. Your uncle must've been a fun company."

"You move, by the way," I complimented.

"In a way, I never thought I was capable of that. No wonder the Egyptians came up with a crazy idea like the pyramids after taking this stuff."

"I can imagine them high and staring vacantly at the desert, and then one of them says: You know what this place needs,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

fucking giant pyramids, that's what." She giggled, and then said, "The aliens built the pyramids."

"Aliens on Blue Lotus."

"Makes sense."

I dashed to the kitchen and poured two glasses of iced lemon juice to drown the thirst. After the sky had shed its share of suppressed tears and the earth had bathed graciously beneath, she opened the window, and the humid fragrance of wet dust wafted in the air. I sat on the windowsill and helped her sit beside me. And glasses in hands, we remained there hanging in the air, facing the slumbering orange city, legs dangling below barefoot. The night was too quiet and appeasing; the warm air exhaled from the wet earth rose and gently kissed our feet. She spontaneously leaned against me and I put my arm around her as we listened Harold Budd's *The Pavilion of Dreams* in utter calmness. We both understood it was a moment not to be disturbed, not by any word, or sound, or thought. The feeling of her warmth penetrating my ribs and the cool air caressing my skin was one of the sensations I realized I would someday remember with great pain and nostalgia.

"Why is it that lonely people are deep?" she asked.

"Not lonely people, but loners, I guess," I said after I mused over her question for a while. "A loner finds peace in his lonesomeness. A lonely person finds misery in his loneliness." I never considered myself a lonely person, though I used to have many more friends than I do now.

"I guess because all they do in their time alone is dig. They dig inside themselves," I continued.

The Dance of the Blue Lotus

“How so?”

“I think whatever they do in the time they spend alone they do it for themselves. They don’t share it with anybody else, and it’s not for anybody else. They enter their small hut and close the door. They grab a shovel and start digging up treasures. And as the things they collect pile up, they become in need of more storage space, so they dig more to save it inside. And before they know it, a world of wonders and gold is created beneath. Treasures upon treasures. From outside, their hut appears to be very normal, nothing special about it. A door, windows, and a roof. However, on the inside, it’s a maze of bewildering stuff.”

“And those who aren’t loners spend their time beautifying their hut from the outside right? But nothing really special on the inside,” she added.

“Yeah, that’s what I was getting at.”

“I never looked at it that way. It makes a little sense.”

“But I think even loners could feel lonely at times. When you take away their company, be it their books, their music, their little small world, their private space, their best friend. They could feel lonely among a crowd of cheerful people,” I concluded, things always unfold for me as I process them out loud.

“Are you lonely?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but I have a story of two lonely loners. It’s about my two friends, those who gave me everything, and took everything away from me. I think it’s time you knew.”

“I am all ears.”

Sophia's Story

“It was the beginning of my first year in middle school. I was thirteen years old and I sat alone far in the back of the classroom. I didn’t know a soul then. I guess it just wasn’t in me to just naturally go and make new friends. For some reason, that process was a little bit more complicated for me than for other people. And so I spent the first few months alone, barely speaking to anyone, until she came, a new transfer. Since my table was the only one with an extra empty seat, she automatically filled it in, and thus filled a greater void in my life I didn’t know existed before.

“She called herself Fay, after the witch in King Arthur’s legend Morgan Le Fay. She neither wanted to use the one given to her by her parents, nor carry her family’s name. Fay wasn’t the friendly docile type of girl, and it was hard at first, communicating with her. But not before long, somehow, she became my best and only friend. She was attractive, smart, funny, eccentric. She hated school, she hated the world, she played the bass guitar and dated older guys, sometimes younger, never her own age. But she was honest and kind and faithful, a saint under the skin of a witch. I was overwhelmed by her character. Although she was my peer, I somehow looked up to

Sophia's Story

her. I was amazed by her courage, her straightforwardness, and her carefreeness. She lived each day as if it were her last. But little did I know at the time the real pain behind her behavior, that she was actually consciously committing self-destruction.

“Fay was a troubled, rich girl. She hated her father and loathed her mother. When she was nine, while trying to surprise her dad in his office with a birthday gift, she caught him cheating on her mother with his secretary. At that age, Fay didn't quite understand what sex was or what it meant for her father to be with another woman other than her mother, but she got a vague idea that what she witnessed was a grotesquely vile scene. That it was something she was not supposed to see, something that no one was supposed to see, and surely not her mother.

“She ran away on the spot and never talked to her father about it ever since, nor did he dare to bring it up to her. Actually, since that day, she hardly ever talked to her father, only the minimum necessary conversation needed. As time passed, the secret grew heavy on her. She told no one about it and it was messing her up from the inside on levels she wasn't aware of. She couldn't bring herself to tell her mother or her older sister about it, lest it would bring doom to her family. She changed, became more withdrawn and self-absorbed and aggressive at times. No one knew what was wrong with her, and they blamed it on puberty instead. Only herself and her father knew the real reason.

“One day two years later, as her mother got fed up with her behavior, they had a big fight. Things escalated very fast and each lost her temper. Fay dropped the bomb. ‘Maybe if you minded your own business, you'd have found out that dad is screwing another woman behind your back.’ That surely put an

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

end to their quarrel, and surprise was all over her mother's face. She was surprised not because she found out that her husband was cheating on her, but because her little daughter knew about it. Fay learned that day that her mother was aware of her husband's infidelities all along. When she asked her why didn't she leave him, her mother answered her ambiguously that these were matters a little girl such as Fay couldn't possibly understand. That sometimes there are more important things at stake than a woman's pride.

"Fay couldn't understand how a woman could accept disgrace for her family's sake, for her daughters to grow up in a steady house with a father and a mother like everyone else. And ever since that fight with her mother, the more she observed how casually she acted around her father, how she treated him as if nothing happened, the more she loathed her.

"Fay idolized her mother. She revered her and beheld her with great respect and admiration. And seeing how the woman personifying her ideals was piteously humiliated and shamed by another man, all her admiration transformed into disdain and scorn. The edifice of what her father represented for little Fay—Wisdom, strength, faithfulness, the all-knowing, all loving father has crumbled down. And the edifice of what her mother represented for her—Respect, pride, honor, love, goodness—has also crumbled down, leaving her in the total nakedness, lost, confused, not distinguishing north from south. She was losing faith in the world, so she rebelled, she cursed her fate, and badly hurt herself in the process.

"Due to her unfriendly attitude, Fay never made a real friend. All the kids avoided her and that looped positively on her loneliness. The more rejected she felt by the world, the more she

Sophia's Story

dwelt on her wildness, and the more she became exactly what everyone expected her to be. Until she met me, and somehow, we found solace in our common loneliness. At first, she was mean to me, but I guess seeing how she didn't frighten me in the least, but amazed me instead had won a soft spot on her heart. She was the right amount of chaos I needed in my life, and I was the right amount of hope she needed in humanity. My candid innocence became a symbol for all that she had lost in her parents. And thus we became inseparable friends.

“Four years later, in high school, we met him, the second loner in my story. We spotted him sitting all by himself in a corner every day, smoking and reading. We ignored the reason why he was alone, but it didn't matter. In a way, we felt he belonged to the secret brotherhood of loners. And so we decided to approach him, though it was Fay who made the first move.

“He was the kind of guys with the shadow of a tortured soul looming over him, kissed by the devil, withdrawn in his own world and miseries, not much of a talker with a hue of a genius artist on him. He was tall and handsome and his hair was always messy but in an attractive way. And he had this little scar on his cheek that held in its depth an untold story of a brave mistake. A scar that aligned with his dimple whenever he smiled, which made him all the more handsome and mysterious. And he beautifully played the trumpet. We were captivated by our little discovery, so we made him hang out with us, and in no time became the third member of our little group.

“We called him Lee after Lee Morgan the famous trumpet player. Lee came down from a divorced couple. Father working abroad in Asia, and mother remarried and made her own new family. He lived with his grandmother alone, and growing up in

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

a quiet atmosphere, he learned how to accommodate with the silence around him, and how to amuse himself without much need of a companion. So he turned to books, to music. However, there was a frightening hollowness in Lee. He had no dreams whatsoever. He believed that a kid abandoned by his parents didn't deserve such a luxury, and he never truly knew what he wanted. All he wished for is to be able to go through his day undisturbed, doing what he enjoys."

"So, she's Morgan Le Fay and he's Lee Morgan. What Morgan were you?" I asked.

"I am actually just Sophia Morgan. My biological mother's name was Leonie Morgan."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, from time to time, fate performs a little magic trick to remind us of its presence."

"That's an elegant trick he made there. Go on."

"A mysterious force cast its spell and tied a strange bond between the three of us. We understood each other, we had enough in common, and when we met boredom was the last guest to arrive. We kept no secrets from one another, everything we felt inside we expressed, everything we thought we put it on the table. It was one of those rare things in which you could be your true self without worrying about prejudices. When we didn't meet at school, Birdland was our little base. Fay's father owned the Hotel and we were able to meet there whenever we wanted. We also hung out in each other's places, and sometimes we'd spend holidays together in a distant place, another country, or another continent. After a while, the idea of a Trio popped

Sophia's Story

into our minds, and we created a small Jazz Trio. We actually played a little of everything, but mainly Jazz. I was on the Piano, Fay on the Bass guitar, and Lee on the Trumpet.”

“So, that was the little band you played in.”

“Yeah, the best little band ever.”

“What was it called, your trio?”

“*The Morgans' Bane.*”

“Illusive. Go on.”

“Naturally, something more than friendship was bound to arise between us, and the alchemy was already happening under the surface. Although I wished we'd forever remain friends, there are some things we cannot control, some things are simply inevitable. I always thought that they would make a perfect match, Fay and Lee. I'd say that their demons would get along very well; mine were still in disguise as angels at the time, and sometimes I really felt I was a stranger among the two of them. They connected so well, on a level I didn't always understand. They shared the same color of misery while I had none. They had the same vision, the same hopes, and dreams, which were none. They both lived in the moment, totally abandoning the future, like it was something only normal people would aspire for, not them. And I felt weak and conventional clinging to the future compared to them. I believed it was just a matter of time till fire will spark between them. Little did I know how blind I was.

“I was wrong. Lee developed feelings for me instead, and I, though I tried to deny it, but felt the same. Somehow I was attracted to him, something about him made me dream, made me

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

fantasize. Perhaps I just saw a broken man and I foolishly wanted to be the one to fix him. Perhaps he symbolized an adventure I was eager to live, I'm not sure. Nonetheless, I liked the feeling. He confessed, and I did the same, and gladly enough, Fay was supportive.

"I was skeptical at first, and insisted that she'd be honest with me about the situation. Had she felt the slightest emotion for him, I would have backed up without hesitation. But she admitted to never having seen him any differently than a friend, and it was a relief to hear that. The last thing I wanted was to ruin a friendship over a love quarrel. A friendship that meant the folds of reality and time for me.

"Another chapter began in our lives. This time with a spray of romance over it. I was in love for the first time in my life. I was happy, so happy if you'd stabbed me in the heart, a spring will burst out that would flood the sky purple. I still had my best friend, and the guy I loved, and I didn't have to make any compromises to keep one over the other. They were both present at the same time. Our routine didn't change much. We still had fun at school, then more fun during our sessions. We remained a solid item, except that sometimes Fay would retreat and give us some time alone. Everything seemed too perfect, too quiet. I started to believe that we will age like that, the three of us. It pains me when I remember how stupid I was, and how candid.

"During our last year in high school, things started to gradually change. Fay's attitude towards us became more reserved and hostile at times. Whenever I tried to extract an explanation from her, she'd just throw me a standard answer, that she was just feeling moody over matters at her home, that she's sorry and that there was nothing to worry about. These

Sophia's Story

episodes became more frequent and intense with time. Although I knew something was not right, I had no choice but to accept her made-up answers whenever I insisted upon her to explain. And neither was Lee able to discern any truth from her. I feared that she was beginning to resist my relationship with him, that she felt abandoned and pushed back from the picture if she just confessed to me with the truth.

“Then one day, suddenly, everything turned back to normal. Just like that. Prior to no heart to heart conversation, or a fight in which she divulged all her buried emotions. One day she was quiet, reserved and the next one she was herself again. I was glad and confused. What could possibly have happened, I wondered, but I was just grateful that she worked up whatever conflicts she had within. Whether it was about us or about something else, and I didn't dare to ask. Once again, time flew peacefully, though this time, something in me remained restless.

“Months passed, and then, one night, I had a *dream*. The trigger of what I consider the downfall of what I called my life. I've known nightmares all my life, but what I had experienced that night was nothing even remotely to that. I felt all my senses maximized. I was aware of my own body yet I knew I was still in a dream. I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe. Every cell in my body screamed, and I was haunted by fear I couldn't conceptualize even if I tried. A dread greater than anything I've ever experienced. Then, I felt this entity standing beside my bed. It was tall, it had the face of a... And eyes, eyes too dark to be alive, too vivid to be dead. And they lay heavy on me, staring right at my soul. I didn't feel like it willed evil towards me, but it made every inch of my being tremble in fear.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Then, I felt as if my soul was being forcefully sucked away from my body, and I stood up, not the real me with this material body. But for me as a little girl. I watched myself leave the bed, hold the entity’s hand, and walk away from the room. I don’t recall exactly what I felt at that moment, but remembering that scene always gives me the creeps, it felt as if I lost something that night, a very important part of me. And I still feel its absence to this day.

“I woke up in the middle of the night, and it was all gone. I felt relieved that it was all just a dream and it was over. But then, I noticed that I didn’t feel my legs, nor was I able to move them. I panicked, I screamed, I cried and hit my thighs as hard as I could, but nothing. And a whole future in which I couldn’t walk flashed before me, flattening every dream and hope I had in its way, and I was just starting to lose it. Then my father reached me, reassured me, he told me that sometimes this could happen, that it was probably a momentary nerve block. He took me to the hospital and... They fixed me. After several hours, I was able to walk again. *Hardly*.

“I wanted comfort, someone I could talk to. I felt weak and miserable, hollow, and about to break down. I looked around and I couldn’t shake the feeling that the world had lost a color or two. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I felt something was terribly missing, and that made me terrified. The first person I called was Fay. I called her several times on her cell phone, but she didn’t pick up. Next, I called Lee, but in vain again. They always kept their cell phones close, but somehow that day they weren’t able to pick up. The day I needed them most.

“I asked my father to drive me to Fay’s house, but he insisted that I needed rest and she should come over instead. I told him I

Sophia's Story

couldn't reach her and I needed to see her. So, he dropped at her door, and asked me to call him whenever I wanted a ride home.

"It was an October day. The sky was gray and the air was cold. I opened the door and let myself in as I always used to. Her mother often insisted that I am a member of the family and I shouldn't knock each time I wanted to see Fay. I said hello, but no one answered, so I walked the stairs up to Fay's room. I knocked and opened the door. There I found them, Morgan Le Fay and Lee Morgan. In her bed, *together*.

"It's an archetypal love triangle story, a cliché, if you ask me. Two people falling for one person, and he is torn between the two of them. Love and betrayal rise in the middle as a result, like the sun and the moon, one shines in the day, the other glows in the darkness when everyone's asleep. A thin, crescent at first, but it grows wider with time, until it becomes a full moon, and you can no longer miss its glimmer in the sky.

"I thought I was too smart not to fall for such a simple trap. I wished she had confronted me with the truth, that she was in love with him from the start. I would have understood and backed up peacefully. But I understand now that she only did what I would have done had I been in her shoes. She also thought that she was backing up peacefully for my sake, but it turned out it wasn't as easy as she thought it would. Her feelings eventually won over her. Perhaps had I been in her shoes, I would have done the same thing too; perhaps I would have betrayed her after all. Only now I realize that she truly loved him, perhaps even more than I did, that I should have been more forgiving, that I should have just let them be. If he betrayed me for her, it only means that what he felt for her was more real. But it is too late now.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“It’s funny. I caught them together, and I dashed out of the house as quickly as I could, crying my tears out, dragging my numb legs along, and somehow, all I could think of at that moment was the boy from the hospital that night when I was nine. A memory I hadn’t recalled in years. But that day, at that moment, it popped up from the depths of my mind to the surface. Where is he now, I wondered as I ran and cried. What sort of life is he leading, is he happy, is he miserable, is he a deep person? Or did he grow up to be shallow and insubstantial? How does he look like... and I mused. Would he have hurt me the way they did?

“You see, even if it’s a cliché love triangle story, but the pain was real. Too real and too sharp, and it ached stronger than any physical pain I have experienced. When the soul bleeds, it gushes blood more vital and darker than the one rushing in our veins. Blood that once we lose, we lose forever. I also believed in my foolishness that I was too smart not to let myself get hurt, that I was too careful not to expose my heart to the naked air. That it will always remain well protected inside closed walls. But once you meet people with whom you wove real relationships, you’ll willingly open the gates of your fortress widely for them, invite them inside, and give them everything you have. And eventually, you’d give them the keys of the most protected chamber in your fortress, the one in which your heart lies safely inside. And you’re glad about it, because when they gently brush their hands over your heart, when they caress it, kiss it, it feels transcendent, majestic. But, if they stab it, even accidentally, even if hurting you was the last thing they wished for, well... it hurts like mad.

“Fay tried to reach me several times afterward, so did Lee. But I had no desire to see any of them. I was too mad, too hurt.

Sophia's Story

No word they uttered would've undone what they did. And for how long, for how long, was I fool among them, for how long had they been together behind my back? I questioned the reality of every day I had spent in their company, every emotion, every truth. Had it all been a lie? I wasn't sure of anything, so I questioned everything. And the more I dwelt scrutinizing the past the more I sunk deeper in my solitude and depression. Fay left me several letters, in which she explained how sorry she was that she didn't intend to hurt me, that she tried her best not to cause me any harm. That it just happened, that it was out of her control.

"She wrote that she realized she had feelings for him she couldn't repress, that he told her he no longer felt for me, that he desired her more than anything. That she resisted him for so long, but eventually gave in to the temptation. That she didn't know what to do. She confessed that she was seeing him for over a year, and it felt too good to be with him, but too absinthian that she was doing it behind my back. She also said that she doesn't regret being with him, that her feelings for him were the most real she had ever experienced in her life. But she deeply regrets that it had to be this way, that she had to be with him behind my back. She pleaded guilty, guilty of everything and she just begged for mercy and forgiveness. She explained in her letters that she couldn't afford to lose me, that I was her family and her friend, her only solace in this world, her only haven. That she'd do anything to mend our friendship, and that it would destroy her if lost me for good.

"Her honesty was both a relief and salt on my wound. The truth hurt even more, but only now I realize she only said it because it would set me free in the long run. And I was aware at the time that she meant everything she said. A part of me had

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

already given up on everything I have lived, and accepted the lies and deceptions, and was ready to forgive and move on. But I was stuck in my own fury, anger was eating me away from the inside, and for the first time, I heard my demons whisper to me. I wanted them to pay for what they did. I wished doom upon them. I wanted them to feel every bit of pain they made me go through.

“But they were my friends, the people I had spent the most joyful times of my life with, and I knew they cared for me. Everything we experienced together wasn’t a lie. I was torn in half between two sub-personalities, a mad furious one, and my old, forgiving, innocent self. Eventually, one won over the other. I had responded to none of Fay’s letters, or to any of Lee’s calls. Three months later, I received the last letter from Fay, in which she gave up, and bid me farewell. I remember the letter, I read it so many times, it said:

I hated my father because he betrayed mother, and I hated mother because she was too weak to stand up for herself. And I made an oath to myself that I will lead a life devoid of any unfaithfulness or weakness. That I will never become like my parents. That I will never become the only thing that made me hate life itself. But what have I done instead? I betrayed the only person that brought real joy into my life, my closest and only friend. And I was too weak not to refuse him for your sake. I became exactly what I loathed most in this life. I guess it is my fate to become like my parents. You refused to take me back, and though I wish with all my heart that you’d change your mind, I don’t really blame you. I deserve this. I imagine I hurt you the worst possible way, and for that, I deserve the worst possible punishment. Again, I am deeply sorry.

Sophia's Story

You know, Sophia, he told me he would die for me. No one has ever said that to me before, and he meant it. He said that life is not worth living without me. Do you realize what that meant for me? It made my heart melt like butter in the sun. Understand that I am not saying this to tease you, but it made me feel so happy that I wanted to share it with someone, and if there's any person who'd be happy for me in this world it's you.

This is my last letter. If you don't take me back after this I will leave forever, if there's any bit of forgiveness left in your heart then, please, use it now, because it might be too late afterward.

I will wait for your answer.

*Yours only,
Lonely friend, Fay.*

"I was moved, but my anger was stronger than my mercy. My demons took over my castle and sat on the throne right above my wounded heart. I wanted peace but I was too blinded and hurt. I wanted them to pay more, to feel my pain even a little bit more. And you know what I have responded? I said the words I will regret for the rest of my life, I told her, *'As you live, you'll meet bad people, and you'd think how could such people exist, and you'd be shocked by how evil they can be, and you'd feel mad and angry when they harm you. When that happens, I want you to remember my words. You are no better than them, you are exactly them, if not worse.'*

"That same evening, Fay killed herself. She stole the keys of her father's most valuable car. She wore her mother's most expensive clothes and jewelry, and she drove as fast as she could and smashed the car against a huge rock in the suburb of this

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

town. She died on the spot. But Lee survived. They were together inside the car. I still don't know if he knew what she was about to do or not. He was sitting in the passenger seat, but somehow he survived the accident. However, I was told that he could no longer walk or talk. His father took him somewhere far and I never heard of him ever since. I tried to look for him but it was of no avail. He just disappeared.

“Fay took her own life, Lee lost everything, and that’s all because of my selfishness. At first, I thought it was an accident, but I immediately recalled what she wrote in her last letter. *‘If you don’t take me back after this, I will leave forever.. he told me he would Die for me.’* And knowing Fay’s impulsiveness and madness, I immediately realized what she did. Those words kept resonating in my head, over and over again. They still do. It was her call, and I was too blind to read into it. I ignored it, and told her the worst possible words she could hear. Her parents still think it was an accident, and I couldn’t bring myself to tell them the truth. That their daughter actually took her own life. And how could I when she did it because of me. It has been a year now since it happened, and ever since I lived carrying a weight too heavy on my soul. I’ve been barely crawling underneath it, going through one day to another. A killing regret, an acid guilt, and the secret of Fay’s suicide and Lee’s accident like a needle inside my throat each time I breathe, each time I move or speak, it hurts. Ever since that day, I loathed myself, and I believed I don’t deserve to be alive for what I did. I renounced life itself. I quit college and spent every day in utmost solitude. As a chastisement, a retribution for the atrocities I have caused. I pushed away anyone who tried to approach me. I spoke the bare minimum. I denied myself every pleasure, and no day had

Sophia's Story

passed ever since without thinking of them. And then you found me.”



Sophia covered her face with her hands and sobbed silently. I held her and remained quiet. It seemed the only right thing to do. I couldn't begin to imagine the burden she had been carrying all this time. I always believed that the worst kind of mistakes were the ones you couldn't mend, remorse for life. Like a tight black rope around your neck, tying you forever to the past, enabling you from moving on. The thing was, you could easily cut the rope loose and set yourself free, but you don't do it, because you don't believe you deserve it. You can't find enough reasons to forgive yourself, and thus you remain forever entrapped in one state. You can't move forward, you can't go back in time to fix your error. Time would freeze around you while it keeps flowing for everybody else. I suppose that was what Sophia had been feeling.

“In Dante's *Inferno*, the first part of his Divine Comedy,” I began, after I let her take her time weeping. “Dante is guided through hell by the ancient Roman poet Virgil. Hell is depicted as nine concentric circles of torment and agony, and at the deepest level of hell, the ninth circle, Dante finds Satan himself encased in ice. Satan has three faces, and each mouth chew on the body of an arch-traitor. Eternally eaten by Satan are Brutus and Cassius for the betrayal and assassination of Julius Caesar, and in the middle Judas is stuffed headfirst into Satan's mouth, his back skinned by the devil's claws, eternally suffering. Dante considered the greatest sinners are the traitors, those who betray the trust and love of the people around them. Your anger towards

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

your friends' betrayal is justified. You didn't know she was about to do what she did. Whenever someone hurts another, they better be ready to receive at least as much pain as they have caused. Perhaps what you've said to her was sharp and cruel, but compared to what she did, it is understandable. God bless her soul, but it isn't your fault that she took her own life, and you must believe that if you wanna keep on living."

Sophia wiped her tears and said nothing. Eyes red and grieving, she stared blankly in the distance. A passing plane blinked amid the violet clouds, a gentle breeze blew our way, fluttered her hair and tickled my nose.

"Why did they have to cheat on me? Why do people betray one another..." she finally spoke, her voice low and weak, and although I knew she wasn't expecting an answer really, I responded anyway, to fill in the gaps of silence.

"Some people betray for money, for power, for lust, for attention. And some others do it because they find meaning in it."

She eyed me questionably, intrigued by what I said.

"I think sometimes the new cause for which we betrayed the old one is more important, more meaningful to us," I went on. "A religious person for example, might betray his religion for another because he believes it's the truth, and though he is regarded as a traitor, but he bears the pain, because the pleasure he derives from breaking free from the old to the new, which he believes is the truth, is greater than the pain of being regarded as a traitor. The same goes for a man betraying his woman for another because he believes he found true love. A person betraying his own self for a new one because he believes it's his

Sophia's Story

ideal self. The same principle could apply for anything we're faithful to, and not all traitors are bad people. Sometimes to become more, it is necessary to betray."

"But still! Does that make it right?" she asked, almost infuriated.

"When you betray a principle, an idea, it isn't gonna get hurt. But when you betray someone, you're inevitably gonna inflict pain upon them. I believe that when it comes to human relationships, it is always wrong. If you're not sure you're ready to commit, then don't commit at all."

She nodded, and withdrew again in her silence.

"You think you can ever love again after what happened to you?" I ventured.

She slowly shook her head.

"I see..."

"I can't. I'm never going to risk my heart again. And even if I tried, I don't think I am able to. My heart had locked itself behind iron gates, and threw away the keys in the middle of a sunless desert, forever lost."

I nodded, and swallowed the bitterness of her words. Does she know I was risking my heart, too? Would my feelings ever reach her? Probably not.

"I have nothing left here, and neither do you. Let's leave this place, go somewhere far away, somewhere different," I proposed and she looked at me curiously, seemingly I had dusted some of the sadness off her face.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I can sell this apartment. It will get me a good load of money. It’s a good neighborhood. The car, too. It can grant us a good start somewhere.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am. I feel like this city is sucking me dry.”

“Don’t sell the car. Let’s take her with us,” she said after mulling over my words, weighing their impact.

“Okay. The car goes with us. Do you have a place in mind?”

“I’m not sure I want to go somewhere sunny, somewhere near a beach, with an outdoor café, where Bossa Nova music plays non-stop, and probably a guy named Esteban runs the place, his smile brighter than the sun. Or near a small pizza restaurant run by the Antolinis, in a neighborhood with old European architecture,” she said dreamily with a smile, sorrow had vanished and her eyes turned dreamy.

“You seem to have already thought it through,” I said.

“I sometimes dream of a faraway place, where everything is different, foolishly believing that it will change my heart, too.”

“Perhaps your dreams will come true then. I really wanna do this. We can go to school again, study what we want, have a degree, get a decent job, and... who knows what might come after.”

We remained on the windowsill, legs dangling down like a pendulum of a broken clock. I stared among the clouds trying to spot a star, and wondered, *why am I making a lifetime promise*

Sophia's Story

to a person who had just declared she was never going to love me back, but I found no answer.

She looked at me and her eyes had clouded again. She blinked and a tear escaped her socket. I stared back and I wasn't sure what meaning those eyes were trying to convey. Her lips formed a quick smile. It appeared to me, perhaps I was wrong, that she moved an infinitesimal distance closer to me. My body responded and I did the same, but she didn't shy away. Eyes glued, I cupped her face in my hands, her cheeks were warm and wet, my palms cold, and only when she closed her eyes did I realize what I was about to do next. We kissed. Ever-so slowly, ever-so impulsively, and it tasted like a full moon on a faraway beach at the end of the earth. Like death celebrating its first birthday, like wine on fire. And for the first time, I realized that my soul, too, could have goosebumps. I had left this life with her once, and only when we kissed did we truly return. I didn't know how long it lasted, but when I let go I already felt incomplete. I no longer felt myself whole and one. I was divided. I was only half of me, the other half I left on the tip of her lips.

The night retreated and dawn approached. We shared little words afterward, we let the feeling linger in the air, and no word seemed to challenge its silence. She then just said she was feeling sleepy and she wanted to go to bed. I let her sleep in mine, for I found no sleep that night. I prepared myself another cup of coffee and sat on a chair by the window watching the sky painted orange on blue. I glimpsed the glimmer of a distant hope. For a long time, I finally saw a future I was actually excited about. I felt as if I was Sisyphus rolling the rock on a downhill and running after it with joy. How awfully wrong I was... Sisyphus only pushes the rock upward, eternally struggling.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

At eleven in the morning, I left the house to buy some milk and fresh-baked croissant. I wanted her to find simple delights when she woke up, and every morning that came after if I could. However, when I came back she was gone, the only thing she left behind is an aching void and a small note.

Thank you for giving me the best night of my life, and thank you for making me dream again, but it tears me apart to tell you that this is the last time we see each other. Believe me, and trust me, it is for your best, and mine as well. If I told you the true reason behind my cruel act, you wouldn't be able to move on. So, just forget about me, forget we ever knew each other and move ahead with your life.

Perhaps if you came a little earlier, you'd have found the lost key in the sunless desert, and you'd have never given up on me. But it's too late now, nothing could be changed. The gates of fate were sealed. So, please, don't try to find me, and accept this farewell.

Goodbye.

PART 3

Cigarettes and Letters

It must've been two a.m. or three, or one. I sat by the open window, lit a cigarette, and stared vacantly at the clouds clearing past the moon. Six months since the night she left, when we danced and kissed. The more I thought about it, dwelt on its details and sensations, the more it felt like a distant dream that only happened inside my head. And sometimes, in moments of clarity, I even questioned the reliability of my own memory. Did it truly happen? Or was it just a figment of my imagination. Nevertheless, ever since that night, Sophia had completely vanished from my world *for good*.

I sat by the window each night, smoked, and thought. Reliving the scenes of that last night with her, and poring over all the episodes of what had taken place in the past months that preceded her disappearance. From the night the nightmares started. Trying to discern a pattern, to catch the thin thread of logic that weaves everything together. I try to remember the events chronologically, one by one, extract a meaning from each and link imaginary dots to one another. Then, I put them in a different order, observe them from different angles, and analyze

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

them with a detached mind as if it was a story told by someone else; perhaps a secret would reveal itself. I came up with few assumptions, but nothing holds together. No unifying theory. And that was just a theory about my life. I realized Einstein had a much harder job trying to unify the universe in one theory.

With Sophia gone, the nightmares returned with an unprecedented frequency and clarity, and it was always the same dream. *I get paralyzed and haunted by a life-sucking terror, then I see the Rat-man and little Sophia leaving the room. I get up and follow them, out of my room into a long dark hallway. They walk along until they exit through a second door to the sunless desert. I keep tailing them, barefoot, legs shuffling on the cold silver sands, a bright moon looms over us, till they reach the little hut with the white dome. They enter but I never manage to follow them inside. The eyeless old man with the long beard and the wooden stick always stops me, and pushes me out to the real world.*

To accommodate the nightmares and the prosaic solitude that became the color of my days, I slept through the day, and lived by night. I woke up by sunset, and slept a little after dawn. It was an unhealthy routine, but for me it was a haven. At least when I woke up from the nightmares, drenched in sweat and fear, I saw the feeble sunlight streaming through half-closed window instead of the deep darkness that only engulfed me and maximized my unease. Sunlight, I found, was very comforting in moments of distress, and I could go back to sleep peacefully afterward, feeling a little safe. The second reason was, loneliness was more bearable during night time than it was during the day. In the complete silence of the night, everyone, whether asleep or awake before a movie or before his restless thoughts, was alone in his own way. And so, it didn't feel so bitter to also be another

Cigarettes and Letters

loner amongst them. I slept during the day, when people were having a normal social life, laughing and conversing, a life that I didn't have the luxury nor the will to enjoy at that time of my life.

I tried to find Sophia. I wanted an explanation. I wanted to understand what made her disappear. If I could understand it, I thought, then it would set me free. It would have made the acceptance of her departure less acrid. But she left me with nothing. With the absence of a solid answer, I tried to fill that void with all kinds of interpretations: Did she have plans in which I wasn't involved? Did she meet somebody else? Or is it the same thing that happened with her mother, she couldn't feel anything and thus left me like Leonie left Ezra many years ago. How could I know?

Naturally, the first place I sought was her house. Dr. Ezra invited me inside and explained that it was her choice and I must accept it. He said that if she didn't want to see me again, then I shouldn't insist upon her, or seek any answers. And that I must stop looking for her all at once and once and for all. He seemed serious and unhesitant, but I discerned no trace of reproach in his voice. He was certainly aware that Sophia's decision was not a result of something I did, and I wish it was. Even if it was my fault and I had to regret it for the rest of my life, but at least I'd have understood why.

She had no cell phone, no social media accounts, and there was no way to contact her. I tried to look for her at the theater but it was of no avail. Never again did I see her back on the grand piano-like I once did, playing the Nutcracker's Pas De Deux. There was no trace of her anywhere, as if she disappeared into thin air, and I was going mad.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

The only chance I had left was to leave her letters at Birdland. I had breakfast there alone three times a week, which were either at 9 or 10 a.m., hoping that I might someday run into her, sitting alone at our usual table, drinking coffee and eating white chocolate macarons. She'd see me and she'd smile, and I'd sit beside her and we'd talk like she hadn't left a day. All the stale dust would be wiped clean of my heart, and I'd see colors again like I used to.

But that never happened. Each time I stepped into Birdland, I encountered the same empty red atmosphere, the sordid humming of some people making small talk, classical music streaming through the speakers, and the bitter sight of our usual table in the corner. Empty, always empty, as if it was ours and ours alone.

I'd sit there, light a cigarette, listen to music, and watch the city through the glass. Then I'd write her a letter, telling her whatever came to mind at the moment, and leave it with the bartender when I leave. However, she never read them. Six months had passed, and the last letter didn't fit in the drawer inside which the bartender kept all my previous letters. I politely asked him if he could make room for others to come, and he sympathetically accepted my offer.

I heard nothing from the Oracle. Mandolin never again paid me a visit. I never learned what she had discovered from the Amethyst and the Chrysocolla. What secrets did the stones carry within, what did it have to do with my future, I never knew. So, I paid her a visit once, but I was greeted with an aching silence. I found no one in the mansion. I knocked, I tried to peek through the windows, I called over Mandolin, but all I encountered was an abandoned house in the middle of the forest. No one, except

Cigarettes and Letters

the naked, winged man, and he didn't even bother to look down on me.

On the full-length wall mirror of my flat, I hung two pieces of paper on which I wrote the two prophecies,

"I am the bard of the holy night.

The whale In the murky sea.

I am the meek fog in the pending dawns.

Thee endless silence within ye.

In which your demons crawl and your fears lay still.

I am the shadow that lurks in the ashen desert.

The skeleton tree atop the frozen hill.

I follow, I watch, I make no sound, I have no will."

"The Whale will swallow you, take you far away. The Raven will croak, but don't look behind. The bard of the night will visit you, don't give away. Follow him, through the sands and to the edge of time. Only then you'd find your long lost wisdom. And not before you claim it, will you ever return."

I hang the pieces beside each other, and when I stand before the mirror and stare hard at them, my face would show in the middle, in the space separating them. I'd gaze at one piece of paper, at myself, then at the other paper. None of the three ever made sense.

And thus, I spent six months in complete solitude. I didn't want to be alone, but I desired no company either. I was just miserably fine with myself.

-21-

The Dutchess of Burger King Do Trees Whisper at Night?

It must've been two in the morning, or one, or three, I didn't know. I sat there by the window and stared vacantly at the stars. I felt detached, disconnected, and I wondered, how unimportant I am in this universe? How many people are now going about their lives in complete oblivion to my existence? How many had lived before and how many to come, utterly unaffected by anything that I do or I don't? What I am in this massive universe? Does anything I do or say or feel or think really matters? If I disappeared right now, or lived forever, would anything of real substance change? At that moment, the only conclusion I was able to draw was, probably *nothing*. I am but an insignificant aberration at the edge of existence, and it didn't matter whether I lived or died or suffered or laughed or loved. I am like a drop of water in the antarctic ocean. I am nothing, no one, weightless, immaterial. A hollow sculpture without a shadow. That's how I felt. But strangely enough, it felt good. I was inexorably free.

But then a realization dawned at me way before the sun did: why should I care what I am to the world? Or how insignificant

The Dutchess of Burger King

I am to the world. But rather, I should ask, what the world was to me? Because the only *real* thing to me was Myself. And by real I mean the solid rock at the heart of the mud and slush of existence. Much like Neo was real and the matrix wasn't. *I was real*, and the rest was variable, volatile and vain. And the only thing that should truly be of any importance to me was how *I* felt, me, and only me. And the sole matter that should be of my concern was that I felt *good*. And if the world that I live in was failing in making me feel so, then, the world was of no importance in itself. It was weightless, immaterial, and if it disappeared, I wouldn't feel so different.

What would make me feel good right now, I thought was Sophia. If she were here beside me. And for me, at that moment, my feelings for her mattered more than all the world's crisis combined, more than the moon and Venus, more than a blazing supernova a hundred times the size of the sun beating in the corner of space. I realized what I felt inside counted to me more than the whole universe from the beginning till the end of times. I mattered, and everything else was secondary. And I realized that was probably the case for everyone else, whether they were aware of it or not.

Assessing my significance based on where I stood in the world was invalid, I discovered. I was not here to impress the world, or leave my footprint behind, or save mankind. But rather I was the center, and the world existed around me, for me. It was not a form of a disguised narcissism, but each person was a center of his own, around which the world swirls in all its might and vanity. And if one felt good about the way the world was dancing for him, whether in a hut on top of a mountain or in a small apartment in a metropolis, then he shouldn't seek meaning

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

in the world's validation, but in what he did, felt instead. Himself, and nobody else.



A sudden hunger struck me, my stomach felt like a drum and I needed to fill it with something warm. I stared in the direction of the kitchen. I didn't want to get up from my seat but I didn't want to stay hungry either. When was the last time I ate? I couldn't remember. I just ate when I was starved, hunger was what reminded me of all the meals I missed. So, I shuffled to the kitchen and without turning the light on, I opened the fridge; nothing edible was in there, except a bottle of mineral water, two cans of soda, a box of milk, a piece of an undefinable shape of Gouda cheese, and a tomato. *Do I eat the cheese with the tomato? Or have a cup of milk with some biscuits*, I wondered. I opened a can of soda instead. I gave it some thought and then put on a light jacket and a scarf, picked up the keys of my uncle's Aveo and went out on the hunt for something warm to eat.

Past midnight, I would be lucky to find a fast feeding restaurant open, but I had to give it a try. I was hungry, and the smells and tastes of a hot pizza or a bursting burger swelled in my head, and urged me to make them real.

Outside the air was cold and lonesome, a pink blanket of clouds veiled the sky, nothing to be seen up above, no need to search for my stars I thought.

I started the engine and put on some rock and roll, and hit the road.

The Dutchess of Burger King

The city was calm and serene at this hour, like an actress slowly removing the makeup of her face at the end of the day, staring at herself in the mirror alone in her cabin, wondering if she was real or not. All the stores were closed, not a soul wandering about, not even homeless people. Just a few stray cats and blinking street lights obscured by a moth. Radiohead's *Karma Police* was playing when I finally found a Burger-king restaurant open. I finally felt happy again for a long time. Good delicious food was about to enter my forlorn stomach at last. I parked on the side of the road and stepped out, folding my arms together to protect myself from the crisp air, then I entered inside.

The restaurant was empty and warm. It opened its doors just recently, so it wasn't yet ruined by time. I headed toward the counter to order my meal, a charming girl who looked too young for such a job at this hour stood behind the counter.

"Welcome," she greeted with a bright smile.

"Thank you." I examined the menu meticulously as she stood silently before me. I moved my eyes up to her. She was smiling at me. I trailed my eyes back to the menu. Have I met her before? She does look familiar.

"A Whopper or a steakhouse. Which one do you recommend?" I asked.

"Definitely the steakhouse," she replied with so much enthusiasm. *If it was so obvious then why put them both in the menu*, I wondered.

"I think I'll have a Whopper, anyway."

"A Whopper it is then. Beverages?"

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“A Selecto, please.”

“Great!” Her smile never waned.

I took a seat in one corner and waited for my meal. Strangely enough, there was no decoration to speak of inside the restaurant except for one black triangle made of steel hung on the wall. The orange light reflected on its surface was enthralling. Definitely a great piece of art despite it seeming quite simple. A faint Jazz tune was playing in the background. From the special sound of the piano chords, I reckoned it was one of Thelonious Monks.

A little later, the girl behind the counter brought me the meal and the Selecto. *Is she all by herself or there is a cook inside?* I wondered. I heard no noise whatsoever, It was a bit odd, but I soon let go of the idea.

“Enjoy your meal. Holler ask me if you needed anything.”

“Much appreciated.” And after a few seconds of hesitation, I ventured, “Actually, If you’re not so busy, could you join me? I don’t like to eat alone.” She definitely wasn’t busy, considering how empty the restaurant was. And I definitely made an odd request.

My invitation did not surprise her in the least. She looked at me for a short while, and without saying a word, she left. I felt a little embarrassed. *A guy shows up at one a.m. and asks the waitress to eat with him.* That was a bit awkward, I had to admit. After a short period of time, she came back with a burger of her own and more French fries.

“If I’m going to sit with you, might as well eat something myself.”

The Dutchess of Burger King

“You didn’t have to. I could’ve shared my French fries.”

“You don’t have to buy my company at such a high price. No one gives his French fries. Besides I’ve been starving myself. Working night shifts makes me famished all the time,” she talked spontaneously, easily, instantly making me comfortable. She had what looked like an old burn on her neck.

“You don’t look like someone who eats a lot of junk food,” I said.

“Thanks. I guess I have a fast metabolism. I heard that expression before, though to be honest, I don’t even know what it means exactly. I mean I get the general idea, but I’m not sure I’m getting it right. I mean, there’s metabolism, catabolism, anabolism, all sort of scientific terms,” she said, as she poured a little catchup over the french fries.

“Metabolism means all the chemical processes that occur inside your body. It includes anabolism which means building molecules, and catabolism, which means destroying those molecules for energy. Something like that, I think.” A vestige from my bygone college days.

“Impressed! You are the first guy I ate with at one a.m. who made me smarter in the first few minutes.”

“Glad I already have a record,” I said, my mouth filled with delicious Whopper.

“You do. Feel honored.” She chuckled.

“So, I get that you have already eaten with other guys at one a.m. Who made you smarter after more than a few minutes?”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Pretty much, yeah.” I didn’t know if it was a joke or not. I honestly couldn’t tell.

“Have we met before?” I asked.

“We did. I recognized you the moment you stepped in.”

“Really? Where?”

“In France last summer, you’re the guy who used to go sit on that bench all by himself. I and my friends made theories about who you could potentially be,” she stated, not the least surprised or excited about the coincidence of our encounter.

“Right! I remember. You are the girl who bid me farewell on my last day, who smoked weed with that bunch of guys at the seashore.”

“Bingo!”

“But you had blue hair back then, that’s why I couldn’t recognize you right away.”

“Blue is for summer dreams. Black is for winter dreariness.”

“What are the odds...”

“What are the odds!”

“You bid me farewell. How did you know it was my last day by the way? It always bugged me.”

“I just knew. I sometimes know stuff,” she exclaimed, taking a sip from my Selecto.

“What do you mean you sometimes know stuff?”

The Dutchess of Burger King

“What do I mean... It’s simple. Do you know where your ideas come from?”

“They just pop up inside my head, I guess,” I answered, never before have I pondered over such a question. Where do ideas come from?

“Exactly, they just pop up, but you don’t know from where exactly. Same thing with me, I know stuff, they just emerge inside my head, I can’t explain it.”

“What else do you know? About me for example.”

“Nothing. I just met you.”

“Well, at least something popped up about me.” My stomach was celebrating the meal, and sending words of praise to my brain.

She gave me a long, hard look, then said, “You are terribly lonely, aren’t you?”

“Do I look that miserable?”

“You kinda do. Why would a guy like you come to a burger-king alone at one a.m. looking for company then?”

“Let’s just say, it’s due to an unfortunate twist of events.”

“Interesting. At least it means you’re in the game.”

“In the game?”

“It means you’re not just a spectator. Spectators don’t get twists of events, which is terribly boring, if you ask me.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Even if you end up lonely and miserable like me, you think it’s still interesting?”

“Definitely. Feeling something, whether good or bad, means that things are moving around you, means you are moving, means you’re getting somewhere. Playing it safe won’t get you anywhere.”

Wise words coming from a teenager, I thought.

“You seem like you are having an edgy life yourself, smoking weed and working late night shifts and all,” I conversed.

“Yeah, I deliberately do what I find a little discomfoting. It’s risky. Sometimes stupid, and oftentimes, it ends up really bad. But you know, sometimes, something exceptional happens.”

“Oh, yeah? Name something.”

She took a bite of her burger, rolled her eyes upward, munched and thought, then shrugged. “Hey, I decided to take this night shift and a miserable stranger appears at my door and asks me for company. If I was home watching Game Of Thrones right now, I wouldn’t have met you.”

“I think it’s a little too early to call our encounter something interesting.”

“Yet, it is a very late encounter. It’s past one in the morning.”

“How old are you?” I asked.

The Dutchess of Burger King

“Usually people start by asking me my name, and I am old enough to know why you’re asking,” she said with a mischievous smile.

“Okay, What’s your name, Miss.”

“Ruby Dutchess.”

“Nice to meet you, Duchess,” I said, bowing down with my head, and I told her my name.

“It’s not Duchess, but Dutchess, like in Dutchess county New York.”

“Does it really make a difference?”

“Not really. Just thought you’d know. Glad to meet you. Don’t you find my name a bit odd?”

“I’ve heard ones that are odder. It doesn’t sound very Arabic though.”

“Ruby Dutchess is the name of a cocktail, actually. It was my mom’s favorite. Dad’s Algerian, mom’s Japanese, and, yeah, guess where they’ve met. Paris. Very romantic indeed,” she said sarcastically.

“They must’ve been pretty in love to name their daughter after a cocktail.”

“You think?”

“Oh, yeah, blindly in love.”

She fell silent for a while, finishing her burger, and gathering what was left of her French fries.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Tell you what. I have this cool ability. It sometimes works. Sometimes it doesn’t. Wanna try?” The Dutchess said.

“You have telekinesis?”

“Oh, that’s way too cool, no. But I can find lost people instead, lost stuff, so...Is there anyone or anything you want to find? Perhaps an old elementary school sweetheart or friend?”

Of course, the first person that came to mind was Sophia.

“Elementary school sweetheart? Is that what people usually try to find?”

“Yup.”

“How does it work?”.

“I can’t explain how it works exactly, but I have to eat from your plate, and you eat from mine, and then, somehow, I’ll find the thing or the person you need the most.”

“Let’s do it then. Do I tell you what I wanna find or do I just think about it?”

“So, you *do* have someone you want to find. Already have an idea why the midnight prince is so gloomy. Somebody’s missing, I see. And nope, you don’t have to do anything. Whoever you need to find, it’ll just come to me. It’ll pop up.”

I ate what was left in her plate of French fries, and she ate what was left in mine, which was a rather fair trade. Then, she asked me to close my eyes, empty my mind and just focus on the music and nothing else. She held my hand from across the table, and the whole process didn’t take more than a few seconds. After which she told me to open my eyes.

The Dutchess of Burger King

“So?”

“So?”

“Now what?”

“I don’t know. Now I wait, I guess. If it worked, you’ll find them.”

“How long do we have to wait?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes a few minutes, sometimes days.”

“You are the worst psychic I have ever met.”

We finished our meals. My stomach was satisfied and I was ready to go back to my world. I paid and thanked her for her company. It was a long while since I had a normal conversation with a normal person, though I wouldn’t exactly call The Dutchess a normal person, but with her, I felt a little less lonely, for which I was deeply grateful.

“Hey. Would you drop me at my place, please? We’re closing for tonight.”

“Sure. I’ll wait outside.”

“Be out in a sec!”

I started the engine and waited. When she finished closing the restaurant, I blinked at her with the car’s front lights. She saw me and jumped in the passenger seat. Only she came out of the store, so she was indeed on her own.

“Nice car!” she commented, turning on the car stereo, *Karma Police* was still playing. “I love this song.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Where to?”

“Just drive.”

“Just out of pure curiosity, don’t you think you trusted me a little way too fast to drive you home at this hour? We’ve just met.”

She gave me a ‘Relax’ kind of look. “Are you going to kidnap me?”

“I don’t think that’s on my plans for tonight.”

“See§ You’re not gonna hurt me, so nothing to worry about.”

“I like the way you think. I mean sure, if I were a kidnapper I would tell you exactly what I’ll do to you. You still haven’t answered me.”

“I have a guardian angel, and a gun. No one could harm me.” She winked and fell back in her seat, pulled out a Marlboro and put it between her lips.

“Don’t give me that look,” she said.

“What look?”

“The ‘girls shouldn’t smoke Marlboro’ look.”

“That wouldn’t be exactly the look I would give if I were to give you any look.”

“But in case you were giving me that look. When Marlboro was first produced, it was for women.”

“I really can’t debate with that.”

The Dutchess of Burger King

“Cool.” She opened the window and leisurely smoked her cigarette.

And that was how I first met The Dutchess, The Algerian-Japanese girl who smoked Marlboro. She, too, was an aberration on the verge of existence, a silent mutation, going about her way, disturbing no one, disturbed by no one. Her parents met in Paris at an art bazaar and decided that they liked one another enough to get married. He was a businessman in the Mustard Dijon trading company. Her mother was a psychoanalyst. They married, had The Dutchess and two other girls, The Dutchess being the middle daughter. They lived both in Algeria and France, traveling back and forth, her father was still in the business, her mother became a psychology professor at the University of Bone. A rather normal family, and as it often went, it was often *normal* families that produce the most abnormal people. Mostly, middle children.



I kept driving, and on each turn, she'd tell me whether to go right or left, right, right, left, right, left, keep going, right, left, left... Not until a half an hour later that I discovered she was giving me random directions.

“I don't wanna go home. I like the city at night. I disappear during the day, the night was the only time I get to breathe.” And it was true. Somehow, I never met The Dutchess during the day. Not that I couldn't, but it happened that only after midnight did we ever got to see each other.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I lit a cigarette myself and drove ahead. After all, I had no one and nothing to go back to. I was home from wherever I was, because all I had left was myself.

“You watched *Fight Club*?” she asked.

“Three times.”

“That movie is my religion. *It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything.* I watched it when I was fifteen, and it hit me like a hard dry soap in the head. There's this speech performed by Brad Pitt, and it's fucking awesome, so awesome, I memorized it by heart. Wanna hear it?”

“Sure, go ahead.” She inhaled a load of smoke then adjusted her position so it would face me, her back against the side window, exhaled, and started.

“I see all this potential, and I see it squandered. God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables, slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war... Our great depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars, but we won't. We're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.”

“I remember that one. Pretty strong stuff. You should consider an acting career.” Though, it sounded a bit funny performed by a teenage girl's voice.

“You think so?”

The Dutchess of Burger King

“Yeah, perform that speech in the audition in case you ever gave one.”

“Flattered! But as it said, we all believe we’re gonna be great someday, but we’re not. So, I just accepted it, and let go of the idea. Now, I’m free of that burden. I just wanna enjoy my life, and die a nobody, that would be enough for me. I’m just a passenger, I realized it’s not about me, or about anybody else, no one is special,” she said as she sunk back in her seat, sounding very serious all of a sudden.

“Then we’re just two nobodies scrolling the empty roads of an African city in the middle of the night. We’re the middle children of history; no purpose or place.”

“Cheers to that!” We clinked our cigarettes.

“Take the next turn!” she suddenly blurted.

“But that leads to the hills.”

“Okay, perhaps I wanna see the hills.”

“At this hour?”

“Exactly at this hour, on this day, or else I don’t want to.”

A full moon transpired through calm waves of clouds, revealing hordes of muted pine trees on both sides. The air was still, and no leaves rustled. It felt as if the trees were holding their breath at our sight, waiting for us to disappear to resume their whispers, telling tales of old times to the hobos and black birds, but not for us humans. They deemed us unworthy of their tales. Perhaps we did chat with the trees once, in the old times, but not nowadays, we betrayed the unspoken pact.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

The road was dark and slithery. I drove slowly and contemplated the trees. It felt as if the full moon's glow revealed something bewitching about them. I almost expected to see some fairies and a Deer-god with glittering horns emerging from the woods. But instead, for a fleeting moment, it appeared to me as if I glimpsed the silhouette of a man standing before a tree, but soon disappeared after. I slowed down, shifted into reverse gear and drove backward.

"What's the matter?" asked The Dutchess.

"I think I saw something."

And indeed, I saw him again. It was definitely a man, standing alone before a tree staring at something up above. I contemplated him for a while, but I couldn't see much. Without making so much noise, I stepped out of the car lest I scared him. The Dutchess followed me and we calmly sneaked closer to him behind the bushes.

Something in my heart tickled, like a little nucleus of a vibrating anxiousness, expanding and throbbing, taking more space inside my chest, rising up my throat. The mark on the back of my shoulder burned. What was it, I didn't know.

It was hard to see in the darkness, but I could discern a clear image of him. He was a tall slender man, his hair meticulously pulled backward, face shaved clean, wearing a black suit and standing still before a pine tree in the complete darkness. *Who is this man, and why am I watching him?* I should just mind my own business and let him go about his, but I felt compelled to see, what he was going to do next.

The Dutchess of Burger King

He drew near the tree and glued his ear on its trunk, as if trying to listen to something inside. He remained in that position for a little while, then moved back, the expression on his face unchanged. After, he did the same with another tree, and then another. The Dutchess didn't say a word. She stood behind me and watched. She seemed to be, as I was, absorbed in the strangeness of the scene. We remained frozen, we did as much noise as the rocks on the ground, and yet, suddenly, the man turned his glare in our direction. At first, I wasn't sure if he saw us or if he was just gazing at the space we were occupying. We held our breaths and anticipated, but his gaze didn't waver; no doubt, I realized, he was staring at us.

The man started to walk toward us, with each step he took closer decisions clashed inside my head, should we run away? he could be dangerous, she could get hurt. Or should we just explain ourselves and leave peacefully? But what to explain, we were simply spying on him for no reason, and there was no other way to put it. Eventually we froze in our spot, and before I knew it, he was already standing before us.

“Could you give me a lift downtown, please? If I am not interrupting anything of course,” he said, his voice flat, devoid of any hint of emotions.

What...?

“Sure...” I said, trying to maintain my demeanor. “The car is parked down the road.”

“I hope this is not an inconvenience for you,” he stated with a grin on his face.

“Not at all...” I replied.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

We trudged down to the car, and he silently followed. After taking a closer look at his figure, I could tell he was old, too old, but he stood erect and walked straight like a fully-fledged, young man. Wasn't he even a bit curious as to why we were spying on him? Before I could say anything, The Dutchess broke the silence.

"What were you doing there, mister?" As bluntly as that.

"I was listening to the trees."

"Really? What sound do they make?" she asked again, now walking beside him.

"To be honest my dear, I forgot. I once heard them, many years ago, on a night like this, where a full moon hung bright in the sky. But it was only once. Never heard them again ever since."

"No tree has ever spoken to me, so you shouldn't feel so bad about yourself. But why are you trying to listen to them?" she asked.

"To chop them off. The tree that whispers to me, I chop it off."

"No wonder they don't speak to you anymore," she commented so casually.

"It is the tree's will to be chopped off. If the tree wishes to be heard by the whole world, she'd whisper it to my ear."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

We entered the car. He took a seat on the back and we drove back.

The Dutchess of Burger King

“I make violins,” he finally said.

I dropped The Dutchess by her house, a friendly neighborhood apartment in one of Bone’s humble sides. She bid us goodnight and left. As I began to wonder what would her parent’s reaction be at their daughter coming back home a little after two in the morning, dropped off by two men, I stopped. I knew I wouldn’t find an answer even if I asked her. It was obvious she lived by rules uncommon to ordinary people, and I just decided I would accept them as they are.

I started the engine and drove ahead, just me and him in the car. We were both silent for a long time. I peeked at him in the rear view mirror every minute or two, but I never glimpsed him looking at me. I didn’t know what was going on inside his head, and I didn’t ask. I didn’t ask for directions. Somehow, I knew exactly where to drive him. I couldn’t be mistaken. I could almost be certain. This was Mr. Amati, and to the store, with the green iron gates I could drive him. I didn’t ask for directions, and he didn’t bother giving me any. A tacit understanding floated in the car, in the space between us. I finally found him, or The Dutchess did.

I parked beside the store. He stepped out, thanked me, and slowly opened the iron green gates. I remained seated in the car and watched him intently. Then he turned towards me. “Would you like to come in? I will make tea,” he proposed.

He entered, and I followed him inside. It was dimly lit. The air was stale impregnated with the smell of wood. When he turned the light on, a sundry of wooden instrument stretched out before me, hung on the walls on both sides. Mostly violins, finished ones and ones only half done, but there were guitars,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Ouds, Cellos, carpentering instruments, and a lot of wood. He gestured with his hands for me to take a seat and he retreated back through a second door. I contemplated the place, since it was the first time I've been in the workshop of a violin maker. It was inside this place that a simple chunk of wood metamorphoses into this magical hollow instrument that gave birth to the sweetest sounds ever known to the human ear. It felt like witchcraft, so mystical and riddled. I stood up and was about to touch a half-finished violin when he came back with two cups of tea. I retreated to my seat.

He sat facing me from across a little round table, his black suit was clean, his eyes golden colored, dead flat, highly contrasting with the depth and mustiness of his workshop.

“Do you indulge in music?” he asked.

“To some extent, yes. I listen to it, and I recently started practicing the violin.”

He fell quiet for a while. Was he staring at one of his violins hung on the wall or did he just spaced out, I couldn't tell? Even when he looked me straight in the eyes, it didn't feel like he was seeing me. His gaze only pierces through things, to a place far away invisible to people, never resting on anything, never seeing anything.

“Have you ever shed tears while listening to music?” he asked. As if he suddenly remembered I existed before him.

“I have. Once or twice.”

“That's good.” He nodded. “That's good... It is said that before we came to this world, we all stood before God, and God spoke to all of us. And when God spoke, it was the most

The Dutchess of Burger King

beautiful music we have ever heard, a beauty beyond anyone's imagination, beyond anyone's creation. That's why, sometimes, we listen to splendid music, and we start to weep. Because it reminds us of that time, when God spoke to us. It makes our souls nostalgic, our hearts torn to pieces, and suddenly death doesn't seem so tragic or frightening anymore. We accept it, embrace it, because all we want is to return to God."

I nodded, listening carefully.

"Musical notes are a divine language," he continued, still staring vacantly at something in the opposite wall, rarely looking me in the eyes. "A language only the soul can read and understand. And when sometimes, the soul of a musician remembers the words it once heard from God, and tries to rewrite them into musical notes, magic happens, and the piece of music becomes a divine work. It never dies. It survives through ages and time, and each generation would jubilate it the same, because it reminds every soul, equally, of God's words."

"Is that why you became a violin maker?" I asked.

He nodded. "I first loved listening to music, then I felt the need to make music. And so, I learned the violin among other instruments. Then I felt the need to make the instruments that produce that music. And it's all thanks to one man. I listened to him play, he taught me how to play, and he taught me the craft."

"You must be very grateful to him."

"I am..." he said, "Very grateful, and very sorry."

I was going to say something, but then I refrained. He spaced out again, and I kept watching him. I remembered what Sophia said about the thing that lay behind the green Iron gates, '*A huge*

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

lump of despair, ' she called it. Why did Sophia feel the presence of this person. Why do *I* feel his presence? Here I was sitting beside him, but what was I going to discover exactly? He was just a simple, frail, old man.

"I can no longer feel music, play it, or make good instruments. All I make is dead pieces of wood, devoid of any soul. The music I play is monotonous and dry, and all I hear is noise."

Why was he telling me this?

"Why do you keep making them then?"

"Because I can, and because there's nothing else to do."

"Do you even sell them?"

He shook his head slowly. "I do it because it is the closest thing to being alive. Making instruments is the only thing left for me to do in this world. I once enjoyed it, did it with passion, but now I no longer could."

"We just met, and I drove you exactly to your store. You didn't give me any directions."

"Ah, right... Thank you again," he said, as if he'd just noticed that fact, and it didn't even strike him as strange.

"You're Mr. Amati, right?"

"Yes, I am. Pleased to have made your acquaintance."

"You said you once heard the trees talk to you."

"I have. Once."

The Dutchess of Burger King

“Did you chop off the tree and made a violin of its wood?”

“Yes. It was the finest piece of violin I ever made, the only one.”

“Can I see it?”

He shook his head. “I lost it a long time ago.”

“And ever since, each month on the full moon night, you dress up and go listen to the trees?”

He nodded. “For so many years in a row, I feel like I lost something there, and if I could find it, it’ll help retrieve my soul.”

“How old are you? Mr. Amati.” I asked.

“I must be 91, or is it 93... Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he mumbled as he stood up. “I’ll go change, then start working.”

“Can I watch?”

I watched Mr. Amati work that night, and I was fascinated by the precision and dexterity by which he crafted. I witnessed how a shapeless chunk of wood gradually turned into different parts of the violin. How he slowly but meticulously, patiently, carved them, cut them, painted them, let them dry. I felt a strange admiration for the work, I was drawn, compelled, enchanted. I felt like I could do it too, and I wanted to do it. When the first rays of dawn rose in the east, I asked Mr. Amati. “Can you teach me the craft?”

He glared at me, not in wonderment nor in belittlement, he just glared and said, “Do you really want to do this?”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I do.”

He looked to the floor for a while, nodded, and kept working. I waited for his response, but none came. Was he thinking about it or did he instantly forget that I asked him a question?

“Come back tomorrow. I start working at 4 a.m. I’ll teach you.”

-22-

Another Six Months
After Twilight
Before the Day Breaks

And thus, over one single night, I made two friends. Or at least it was truer to say that I have met two human beings, flesh and blood, to whom I could speak and with whom I spend some time. This may not seem much for some people, but thanks to them, my long days of solitude had come to an end.

I've always found an inexplicable comfort in solitude. I would think of myself as one belonging to the loners side of the spectrum. I was an introvert by nature. I didn't survive under the spotlight. My soul withdraws and becomes pallid if it was subjected to social interactions for too long, like a shadow tropical tree, expose it to the sun long enough and it will peter away and die. This was just my nature. It was neither a quality in itself nor a mediocrity. It was simply how my psyche was made.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

And yet, loneliness, I found, was killing. No matter how much of an introvert I thought I was, no matter how much I believed I could do well in solitude, not being able to feel that I was a part of a group, that I was linked to other people, in one way or another, made me feel like I was gradually disappearing, like I wasn't part of life itself. It felt like, if everyone forgot about me, I would simply cease to exist. I needed to know that I was perceived by another person, that I could exchange thoughts and feelings with someone other than my own self, as a testimony of my own existence. No matter how absurd it may seem, but it felt like if I conversed with someone, and if he could see me, and understand me, then it was proof that I was really linked to this world and still a part of it. However, with the total absence of human interactions for six consecutive months, I almost no longer saw my own reflection in the mirror. But everything changed when I met The Dutchess and Mr. Amati.

Over one night, my daily routine had changed. I woke up by sunset, had breakfast at Birdland, wrote Sophia a letter and left it by the bartender. Then I wandered the city, or drove to the sea, then I had lunch at Burger-King with The Dutchess, and she had never once made a comment about my daily visit for food and company at one a.m. She welcomed me silently into her world, and I walked in without making so much noise. And when dawn approached, I knocked on Mr. Amati's doors, and began my apprenticeship as a violin maker. Around eight in the morning, I went back home, and slept, slightly excited about the next day.

However, since the day Sophia left, I never again played the violin. I put it back into its valise and tossed it under the bed. The only music I wanted to make was the one with Sophia. When she left, not only did she take away half of me, but half of

Another Six Months

all the musical notes, and half of all the colors, away from my world.

I found something liberating in The Dutchess' company. She didn't know who I was, so I had the chance to be anything I wanted, or nothing at all. She expected nothing of me, so I never felt obliged to offer anything. She was bound by no ideal or conviction, so she never judged me or the way I lived. She was curious but never pried into my life, so I never had to share anything personal, however, we never ran out of things to talk about. She was completely selfless. I sensed no vulnerable pride in her that could be hurt, so I felt at ease being myself around her. And furthermore, she knew I was in love with somebody else, and she had a boyfriend of her own, though none of us had ever mentioned anything about his other. It was just a silent mutual understanding.

"Whenever I go to the beach, I always swim as far as I can, then dive vertically downward, and try as I might to touch the bottom of the sea, grab a fist of the wet sands below, then I spiral upward as fast as I can," said The Dutchess, as we ate steakhouse burgers facing the sea one night.

"I think I do that, too. There was something satisfying about it, though I can't quite put my finger on what it is exactly," I said.

"It's a metaphor for life, I think."

"How so?"

"It's like we're all floating on the surface of the sea, peacefully swimming. We look up to the sky and we see the sun shining down on us, and we wish we could fly, reach and touch

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

that light. We believe that it's the pinnacle of the human experience, that this is our ultimate destiny, to make it to that light, and to become enlightened and whole. But that's only half of the story. We all start our journey upward, trying to become better people, trying to reach the closest possible version of our perfect selves, but we all fail and fall down halfway upward. No one really succeeds, no one really finishes his journey. Some keep trying till they die, some will just give away and stay where they are, swimming peacefully on the surface."

"We fail because we can't grasp what light is without knowing real darkness." She finished her burger, sipped from her soda, lit a cigarette and continued. "The trick is, you must go down first, to the depths of the ocean, to the uncharted darkness, where the real monsters lay still, waiting for you, ready to devour you alive. If you have enough courage to go down there, enough strength to fight those monsters, and enough luck to make it back alive, only then you can fly to the light. Otherwise, you'd keep making useless attempts till your days run out and you die an empty soul. There's no easy way to that light. And as they say, a certain darkness is needed to see the stars."

I stared at her in bewilderment and then to the sea. Did she know what she was talking about? Did she come up with that herself or did she hear it elsewhere else? The Dutchess always puzzled me when it came down to what she thought and felt. She was confused and carefree most of the time, but sometimes she spills out a sudden wisdom. After all, she was a psychic, terrible but real. Yet, those words of her sank deep in my soul. If there was one thing I know, was that if you risk nothing, you gain nothing; the greater the risk the greater the gain; and you certainly can't attain the light of God without risking your life first. Those were the kind of conversations I had with The

Another Six Months

Dutchess. They start so mundane, so absurd, and gradually turn into something deep and obscure. And then return to their innate absurdity.



I wished that I could send at least once message to Sophia. If she didn't want to see me, it was fine, but I wanted her to meet Mr. Amati. I remember telling me that in her dreams, she walked along the empty streets of Bone under a heavy clouded sky, from the theater to Amati's shop. She felt compelled to go there. She sensed his existence, and he was, consciously or unconsciously, calling out for her. I wondered what would happen if they met, what sort of connection do they have, and what sort of connection did *I* share with him? That, I was yet to discover. She led me to him, and, perhaps, I should lead him to her.

However, the shell around Mr. Amati was diamond hard. No matter how hard I tried to pierce through it, to have a glimpse on what was inside, to make him leek one little detail about his life. I always failed. And it didn't feel like what he needed was trust, or a deep level of intimacy, or real friendship, to speak out his secrets. It rather felt like he had completely forgotten about his past, like he wasn't even aware of the notion of *the Past*, and his mind couldn't process any question related to that. It would just fade somewhere in between his ear-drums and his cerebral cortex, they never reach their destination.

"Carve the wood slowly, gently, carefully. Don't let any go to waste. It took many years for it to form, to reach its final shape, its final evolution, a beautiful violin," he'd say to me as he watched me practice.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I still can’t manage the measurements right, but I’m on it. I feel like I know my way around.”

“It’s not about the right measurements. Making a violin isn’t a work of the mind, it’s a work of the heart. The perfect curve is not the one with the right measurements, but the one that sways in harmony with the beauty of the world, with the beauty of your soul.”

“I’ll try.”

“Don’t think too much about it. Don’t interfere with your hands, just watch yourself work. Real art comes from within. Your soul is a part of God’s soul, the source of all beauty.”

I nodded, and tried to do as he said, though I found it difficult. That perfect moment of lucidity would only come for fleeting seconds, in which I really sense that it was not me but something in me that was doing the job, but as soon as I pay attention to it, it disappeared.

“Is that how your master taught you?” I asked.

“Hmm...” He nodded.

“What was his name?”

He fell silent. Did he not hear me? Or was he intentionally ignoring my questions?

“I said what was his name?”

Again no response. I knocked, and my knock didn’t even make a sound. The shell around him absorbed everything inside, even sounds.

Another Six Months

“Do you know someone called Sophia?” I asked.

He stopped what he was doing, put the tools on the table, and stared vacantly at something on the ceiling. Like a wanderer eternally walking a dark windless forest, who heard the echo of a bell ring in the far distance, stopped, looked back into the direction of the sound, and then resumed his eternal walk.

“No... I haven’t.”

“Does it ring a bell?”

“Yes...” he said after musing over it for a while. “Who is she?” he asked, now glancing at my direction.

“She’s a girl I once passed away with when we were nine. Then I met her again this year. She used to dream of walking to your workshop, but she never found you.”

“Oh...” was all he said, then spaced out.

“But I lost her now. I can’t find her. She disappeared.”

“That’s rather unfortunate.”

“Do you have a family?”

He grabbed his tools and resumed his crafting. My question, again, like many others, faded away.

“Mr. Amati!” I blurted out.

“Yes?”

“Do you have a family?”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

He looked at me, through me, and his gaze was weightless, devoid of any emotion or life, and it made me restless.

“I once had parents,” he utter, at last.

“What about a family of your own? A wife, kids?”

He pondered over the question for a long few seconds, like asking an amnesiac what was the last thing he remembered, and then he stated, “I’m not sure...”

“You’re not sure?”

Amati suddenly took off his apron and disappeared through the back door. He didn’t come back that morning, and only three days later did he show up again. When I asked him why did he disappear he did not answer. It was then that I realized how dangerous it is to insist on him. That if I kept pushing him back into his past I might risk losing him for good. I did not understand what secrets he was burying within, but I realized he buried them for a reason, and it was wiser if I didn’t stir anything inside him. And for months to come, that was as far as I got near him.



Another six months had gone by, and it felt like a new chapter in my life. Ruby Dutchess and Mr. Amati filled a large portion of the void left by Sophia and Dr. Ezra and Mandolin, though I couldn’t really forget about them and move on. It always felt like their fate was still entangled with mine, but I was gradually drifting from one world to another, and just when I was ready to finally give away and accept Sophia’s

Another Six Months

disappearance, and digest the idea that I am never going to see her again.

I received a letter from her.

-23-

Sophia's Letter

I finished my coffee, smothered the cigarette into the ashtray, and put the pen down. I looked at the letter I'd just written to Sophia one last time, then I stood up and was ready to leave. Schubert's Fantasy was playing in the background.

As I walked to the bartender, to pay the fare and leave him the letter, I decided, at last, that it was time for me to stop. It has been a year now, and I only wrote her those letters to help myself through the process of moving on. And for the first time in a long time, I felt like I was ready, finally ready to let go. She was gone, and I must carry on with my life, that was how things should be. People always leave, one way or another, and if everyone put their life on hold each time someone left them, the earth would cease to swirl. I folded the piece of paper and shoved it in my jeans back pocket, greeted the bartender, paid and left.

"Excuse me, sir!"

I turned back, and I found a white envelope on top of a polished metal tray.

Sophia's Letter

“This is for you.”

I held it carefully in my hands, examined it, and I immediately recognized Sophia's handwriting, it said ‘*read me alone*’. Confused, excited, and anxious, I thanked the bartender, ordered another cup of coffee and returned to my seat in the corner table.

I opened it, and it felt like I opened the gates into the soul of another person.

All I ever wanted, really, was to leave without so much pain, and to leave behind as little pain as I could. I am dying. This is an undeniable fact, and I believed it would've been easier if I had nothing to cling to. That the world would be the same the day before and after I pass away. I want no one to mourn me, no one to weep over me. I want no one dear to me holding my hand as I slowly drift away. I spent my whole life trying to be someone important, someone good, and to leave behind as many marks into the world and into the lives of people, as many as I could. But here I am wishing to disappear like a pale star at the edge of the sky, unnoticed if it is there of it's gone.

The least I could do for the people I love, in my current helpless state, is to spare them a little sorrow. And the only remaining people I love are you and my father. I couldn't leave my father. I couldn't have made him forget about me. I would have if I could, but I'd like to believe he's strong enough to bare my departure. But I had a choice with you, so I left you, and I wanted you to go about your life as if I didn't exist. I know that I am no ordinary girl to you, we are linked in ways I had never truly understood, and I cherished that. And I know how you feel for me and how it is hard for you to move on. I still don't know

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

if I took the most selfless choice or the most selfish one by leaving you. Perhaps it was me who didn't want to cling to you, and not the other way around. Perhaps I didn't want to clutch to life, and you were reminding me, every day, what it feels like to live. Little by little, I started to dream again, to hope, and it made feel a little happy and a lot scared. Before I met you, I only wanted to embrace death, accept it, and wait for it. But you came, and you were hindering all that for me.

Why did you have to keep writing me those letters? Why didn't you just let go? Each time I came to Birdland, I wished that the waiter would tell me that there were no more letters. But each time I came, I would go home with three or four of them, and I would read them with an acid joy and guilty pleasure. That's what I hated most about them.

The day I witnessed my friend's betrayal, the day I woke up paralyzed, unable to move my legs, I was taken to the hospital and was diagnosed with a terminal disease. They told me I had a finite time to live. I was supposed to be gone months ago, but somehow I'm still alive, one year after I had left you. I feel like something is anchoring me to this world, enabling me to peacefully vanish. Perhaps it is the same thing that made me once escape this life with you, on that day at the hospital. But, alas, at last, I am finally about to go, and I still ignore the essence of our bond.

I cared about life, I treasured it, and I believed it was a miracle. To exist in this vast world, to grow and discover, to love and create, to laugh and cry. There was so much I wanted to experience, so much I wanted to do, so much I wanted to learn and tell. What's cynical about it all is that I believed I was going to live it all and much more. I was excited to be alive...

Sophia's Letter

And yet, on the verge of death, I look at the world and I feel no remorse. Everything seems so different when you are nearing your end, everything is so beautiful. Even the square, gray buildings and the worn out, old cafés. The stray cats and the looming dark clouds on the horizon. Everything takes on a different glow, a different meaning. It's like I have lived my whole life with dusted glasses, and death came and wiped them off for me, and now I truly see.

When I look back on my life, when I try to remember, I see myself walking through an endless mist. All my memories had left me somewhere in the line, most of them had disappeared the day I lived them, or sneaked out the back door of my head without notice. I try to call them out, helplessly trying to find proof that I have lived, but all I hear is the echo of my voice. Nothing is left but dry sandcastles deformed by the silent winds of time, turned into shapeless forms, all alike, all meaningless and vain.

However, amidst that mist, a few salty drops fall down from the sky and moist my face. That's all I feel right now, all I remember, all that truly matters: those moments when I shed a few tears when I was in agonizing pain or in exalting joy. A teardrop enfolds my whole existence, where the two ends of the spectrum of feelings meet, closing an infinite circle. That's all I can recall with vivid clarity and depth, moments with my friends; moments with my father and my late mother; moments before a book; moments with God; and moments with you. Just a few lines scattered in a book full of blank pages, If I gather them all, they wouldn't sum up to a page, they wouldn't sum up to a day. That's all my life's worth, a day, and I am so happy about it. (wet spot)

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I wish you'd found me a little earlier. That we would've stolen a few years from fate, a few years would have been good, a few years is plenty of time, that's all I would've asked for. The truth is, I never forgot about you, since that night at the hospital. I woke up in the morning and my father took me out of there right away. You were asleep beside me. I wanted to tell him to stop, to let me stay beside you until you wake up. I wanted to get to know you, to become friends, to dwell with you a little longer. Because I knew that what I had experienced during that night was unusual. I knew it was something special. At that age, I didn't realize that we had left this life together and made it back, but I knew enough. I knew that you weren't just a kid to me. I didn't try to find you afterward. I just had a strong feeling that we would meet again someday, that we must meet again. During those eleven years apart, I always kept a little spot for you in my heart, a quiet undisturbed place in the corner of my heart.

After the incident with my friends, you became more present in my thoughts. I found myself unconsciously thinking about you: what kind of person had you become, what kind of life were you leading. And then I started dreaming about you. Sharp, vivid dreams, sharper than reality itself. In which, you were always distant and I could never reach you.

One day, however, I had a strange one: I was in a dark tight room, and there was a dead body laying over my feet, and I was scared to death. But you came, you held my hand and lead me out of there, into a vast white desert, and a bright silver moon hung over us. I couldn't see your face, but I knew it was you. Strangely enough, the moon's glow was warm and comforting. I looked at you, and you smiled. The next day you came to the theater and found me.

Sophia's Letter

I ignore what it all means, and I think I'll never truly know. But I'm glad that it could mean something. Isn't that what we're all searching for, some meaning?

I am having surgery the day after tomorrow. I probably won't survive it. No... I will most definitely not survive it. That's how it is planned. I will leave peacefully, and my father will make sure of that.

I've had my share of pain, of medication, of heartbreak, and of false hope. Please understand that as much as I want to live, I also want to get over with it. I am tired, worn out, and all that's left of me is a dying flame, and with its feeble light and it's warmth I write you those few words, because I want you to know, and I no longer want you to forget about me.

So please, remember me as long as you live.

Farewell,

Tiger-striped cat.

In the letter, there were many wet spots that had dried...

[...The distant sound of Ryo Fukui's Mellow dreams is heard from the bar on the 77th floor of the palace. The night is deep and heavy. The whole place is deserted. Not even ghosts come here anymore, and so is the bar except for two men sitting at the bar top.

The Dreamkeeper refills the cups with drinks, serves more lavender macarons, and the visitor lights another cigarette.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“So... tell me what happened,” says the visitor, his narrow eyes brimming with genuine curiosity.

“To tell you the truth,” says the Dreamkeeper. “I’m not sure what exactly happened. One morning, I woke up and I didn’t find her. She said nothing the night before, not a hint or a sign that she was about to leave, we were perfectly happy. But suddenly, she disappeared. And like blood drained out of a body, without her presence the whole palace started to fall apart, until it became what you’re seeing now with your own eyes, just ruins, and dust.”

“Damn, Chico... this is unfair,” replied the visitor.

“It sure is damn unfair, but there’s nothing I can do. This place is all I got, and I lost it.”

“Couldn’t you rebuild the whole thing by yourself? Set it into motion again. I mean, you have to move on. You can’t stay like this forever.”

“That’s not possible. We created this place together, she and I, and it can’t be resurrected unless we’re together. It breathes of our presence. It is tightly linked to our essence. We’re like water and sun to this place. If one goes missing everything peters out and dies, and that’s what happened when she left,” says the Dreamkeeper, twirling an olive between his fingers.

“Damn, I hear you. I mean what you two did back then was truly heroic, we were all surprised and in admiration,” says the visitor, adjusting his glasses and takes a puff of his cigarette. “I remember it very clearly. After spending eons and eons in heaven, and when we began wondering... What’s next? What

Sophia's Letter

comes after? I mean, don't get me wrong, heaven was pretty great for me. It was nothing like any of us had imagined, and it kept us occupied for what felt like an eternity. I can't complain, actually, I've had the best time of my whole existence, and sometimes I get very nostalgic to those times. But at some point, curiosity comes sneaking through the back door of your head and you start wondering, like we all did. Does it end here? Where nothing really ends. What's next?"

"Right around that time," the visitor continues. "The Great Architect finally makes an appearance and gathers us around him, and reveals to us what he had planned for us. You remember that right?"

"Sure," says the Dreamkeeper. "How can I forget? How can anybody forget."

"Yeah, what a day! So he gives us two choices: whether we want to become Architects of our own, and to bring into existence our own worlds and to mold our own creations. Or, to unite our soul with his, to return to him and become a part of him. This, at last, seemed to be the greater prize, the box inside the box, the heaven inside heaven. I was flabbergasted, awed, and nervous at the same time. I mean, both options were unmeasurably breathtaking, but I already knew what I was going to choose. However... there was yet a plot twist."

The Dreamkeeper nods slowly while glaring down at the melting ice in his glass.

"Before anybody gets to make any choice," the visitor says, as he raises his index finger in the air. "Someone must first step forth, someone must volunteer to carry a weight so heavy so no one else will have to. Someone must be the keeper of all the

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

memories and dreams of our late-life on earth, from the beginning of time till the end of it. However, this person won't be granted the two previously mentioned options, he'll forever be the Dreamkeeper."

"We all exchanged reserved glances of surprise and hesitancy," continues the visitor. "Holding our breaths, all anticipating the same thing: who will make the sacrifice, who will give away his prize for everybody else. And not before long, you two came forth."

"We were relieved, and a little guilty, to be honest, because you two did what nobody else had the courage to. Not only that but you did it with pride and glory, there was something epic about it. And somehow, instead of one Dreamkeeper, we ended up having two."

"Yeah, I guess neither of us was really interested in becoming a creator. I never wanted to rule or to be a master of anyone, that was never really my thing. Although the idea of uniting with the sublime seemed very appealing, I must say. I was going for that, but when both she and I heard the condition that had to be met, we knew we were the ones who'll answer the call. Perhaps we will miss a lot of what you guys will get to experience, but at least we'd be together, carrying all the dreams and memories of late times. And so we volunteered, and somehow we wound up being the Dreamkeepers," says the Dreamkeeper, in his voice a shade of regret. He walks to the record player to change the music.

"But look what you've made of all those dreams. You didn't keep them for yourselves, but instead, you created this whole place, where everyone can come and rejoice in the old times.

Sophia's Letter

You turned what looked like a burden into something magnificent. To tell you the truth, I perhaps might have envied you at times, seeing how happy you two looked together, how surrounded you were by all those people who were full of admiration of your work. I often wanted to abandon my world and come join you forever," says the visitor.

"Oh, yeah?"

"It's true."

"Well, glad you didn't. We were perfectly happy together, alone. Thank you."

"Haha! Sure, Chico, sure."

"By the way," begins the Dreamkeeper after he finally picks Someday my prince will come by Bill Evans Trio. The music starts to play and he returns back behind the counter. "How's being... you know, a god, with a small g, working for you? Shouldn't you be busy looking after your world instead of being here?"

"Yeah, lemme tell you. Being a god is really hard. I mean I'm old school, I do things as we all know them. I send prophets and they tell people about me and how to live righteously. But God they're stubborn! First of all, they never believe, I mean, I give my prophets really cool superpowers to prove my existence, but they always manage to find a way to discredit that. Not only do they not believe, but they often end up killing my poor prophets, and then I feel obliged to act like I got angry and punish them all. I mean, I must strike some fear into them and give some praise to those who believed in me. I even once, when it got way out of hand, wiped them all out and started all over.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“And when it finally works out and my word is spreading out, I find myself faced with another issue, Fanatics! God! They do all kinds of things in My name that I never even mentioned or hinted at. They kill each other in my name, they kill other people, they hurt themselves and other people, and all in my Name! I mean, I get they’re doing it for me, but just stop! Please, it’s awkward and you’re only making it worse and I don’t appreciate that at all... I even got a whole sect that wear shoes without socks. Somehow, they came to believe that if you wear socks you’d go to hell... can you believe it? Me, the creator of their whole universe, cares about socks?”

“That’s cringy...”

“Yeah, tell me about it. They offend me by thinking that I might get mad and punish them if they wear socks, they offend me by thinking that I pay attention to these little details. They’re terribly missing the point.”

“What do the smart ones think about you? Do they like you? You know, as a god?” asks the Dreamkeeper.

“Some of the smart ones I’m really proud of, they really dug down deep and understood the essence of it all. Well, not exactly everything but they’re doing fine and I will reward them abundantly. I mean, I gave them minds that work in a specific way I designed myself, a way that if used correctly, will lead straight to me. Well, of course, it’s not that easy nor is it that simple to find me, and I’m not making it hard on purpose, it’s just the way it is. I am far more complex and sophisticated than what they could possibly grasp. But with enough effort, they’d be able to get a glimpse of my essence, and that’s far from

Sophia's Letter

enough for them. Some of the smart ones are doing a really good job down that road.

“However, among the smart ones, there’s a group spreading out like moss on a lake, Atheists! I mean, sometimes I am even impressed by how they can turn the most obvious proof of my existence into something of the exact opposite significance. I’m telling you, they have a counter-argument for every argument I toss at them. It’s amusing to watch them, to be honest. I’m not mad at them or anything. Between you and me, I like them better than those fanatics. At least they’re smart, and some of them are genuinely looking for me but just doing it the wrong way. Besides, they’re a necessary force to drive those who defend me to further develop their ideas and thinking. And most atheists are more or less the same, they either don’t like their fate and are mad at me, or they hate fanatics for their stupidity and therefore, hate me too and can’t accept that a god-like me could actually exist. So, they just choose to erase my existence,” says the visitor, he gulps his drink and heaved a deep sigh. The Dreamkeeper listens intently.

“Why?” asks the Dreamkeeper. “Why did you create them? For what purpose do they have to go through all that?”

“Are you kidding me? I still don’t know why I was created. I guess I just created them because I can, some things are bigger than me and you. Somethings are not meant to be understood, ever. After all this time, God is still a mystery to me. I just can’t figure him out. Perhaps I will sometime in the far future, and perhaps he will forever remain a conundrum to me. That’s why I will forever remain a mystery for my creations, too. I think I understand it now, there must always be an element of absolute mystery, there must always be a great unknown, to give meaning

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

to the known and to the search for truth. Something must always remain an eternal riddle, and there comes the role of a god.”

*“Yeah, perhaps you’re right,” says the Dreamkeeper.
“What do I know really...”*

*“Anyway, I have something really interesting to tell you,”
said the visitor....]*

Excerpt from an Untitled Book.

-24-

Night Owls Massacre: Forgive Me, Friend, for I Have Sinned

I returned to my apartment, heart-pumping boiling blood, a lump of pain throbbing and eating away my chest. I took off my shirt and laid on the cold floor and stared at the ceiling in the darkness. What should I do, now that she's going to die?

I thought I'd finally accepted her absence, but all it took was one letter from her to awaken all the fierce wolves and drums of love inside me. The expression 'Falling in love' is so finite, so true. I did fall into a dark deep pit, where everything was murky and aching and meaningless, everything except her. And it was beyond me, beyond my control, beyond any power I could exercise. All I could do was consume that love, or it would consume me to death.

Did I secretly know all along that I was going to have her back someday? Was that why I kept on going sane and one? Was she ever mine, to begin with? But here I was learning that she was going to die, to leave me for real and forever. That I was never going to see her again, never going to feel her warmth.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

And this fact was robbing me of so much, so much more than I can handle. It was acid down my throat. I hit my chest as I lay on the floor. I hit it so hard, I wanted it to stop aching. I would've torn my heart out of my ribs if I could, and it meant not feeling anything for the rest of my life than I was fine with it, just make it stop...

But it didn't stop. It kept on hurting on and on...

I pulled out the violin from under the bed in an attempt to distract myself. I wiped the dust off of it, and felt sorry for abandoning it. For a whole year, I hadn't touched it, but now, along with her untitled, unfinished book, it was the only thing to remind me of her. Of the night we played the Tchaikovsky piece together, and so much more. Bad memories don't hurt, because they passed. Good memories hurt the most, precisely because they were gone and never to return. I sat in the dark and started playing the melody I once played it with great joy, now with great grief. What should I do? Am I supposed to do anything at all? Does it all end here? I thought and played, what should I do...

"You know what to do," whispered my shadow.

I don't. I'm clueless.

"You do. You knew all along. Let me show you."

I packed the violin back in its valise and left the house. I started the engine and drove to Mr. Amati's workshop, and during all-important moments of our lives, it rained. It rained hard on that night at three in the morning. It must rain.

Night Owls Massacre

I knocked on his door hard, but he didn't take long to open. Amati wasn't asleep. He greeted me as if he was expecting me this early.

"Come in. Sit down. You're wet."

I took a seat amidst a pile of wood and unfinished instruments. He brought me a towel, boiled water to make tea, then joined me right after with two steaming cups.

"What's wrong? You look unwell," he said, his eyes as absent as ever. One can never tell if he was truly worried or if he was just acting mechanically, according to the situation.

"She's going die, Mr. Amati, and I don't know what to do."

"You mean that girl, Sophia?"

"Yes."

"Dear God..."

"I don't know what to do... I feel so helpless."

"Perhaps sometimes, there's nothing you can do."

"I don't know... She dreamed of walking to your place, over and over again. Why is that? Perhaps there's something she needs from you, or perhaps you were calling out for her. Can't you figure it out?"

"I... I don't know what to tell you. I have no idea."

"Try! Think about it. Why can't you tell me anything? You must know something," I insisted as I leaned forward, trying to force him to look me in the eyes.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

He lowered his gaze and seemed a bit nervous, and he started mumbling incoherent words.

“She’s about to die, Mr. Amati! Whatever reasons you have for keeping your secrets to yourself, this is more important. Please, if you know something, anything, tell me, before it’s too late.”

His gaze rested on everything and everywhere but my eyes. He nervously searched his pockets, scratched his hair, stood up and rummaged furtively in the drawers, looking for nothing but to escape his memories. “I... I... I don’t know. I don’t know anything,” he stuttered.

‘Show him,’ it whispered.

At that moment, I knew, and I showed him my violin. He held it carefully in his hands, utterly speechless. He caressed it as if caressing the skin of a newborn baby. He looked at me in disbelief, then back at the violin. Unsure what to say or what to do, he remained confused like the wreckage of a boat floating on a river. A thunderbolt rumbled above the roofs and caused a blackout. Mr. Amati silently retreated through the back door and came back with a candle, never letting go of the violin. He rested the candle on the round table and sat across from me.

“That’s my lost violin,” he said. I remained silent, watching the shadows quiver on his face through the swaying flame. Violin on his lap, he held his head between his hands and closed his eyes, as if suffering from a terrible headache, perhaps he truly was. “I... I... lost it a long time ago. I thought I’d never have it again. How did you... how did you get..” His face was wry and with a frown, seeming to be processing something in his head,

Night Owls Massacre

or perhaps he was confronting memories he'd buried deep long time ago.

"You must have something to tell Mr. Amati."

Head still cupped between his hands, eyes tightly shut, he said, as if to himself, "I had to do it... I had to, or else they would've killed my family."

"You had to do what?"

"I had to do it... I had to kill him..." he said, seeming to be going through a lot of pain. I came by his side and rested my hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, Mr. Amati, and tell me from the start."

He took a deep breath, then another, then he began telling his story.



"I was twenty years old when the Algerian revolution started. It was a time of great turmoil and emotion. All Algerians shared the same feelings about France and its empty promises, its racism, and its brutality. And thus the people raged in a war, and I was one of them, but my story begins a little earlier than that.

"As a teenager, I always went to the theater, this same theater of Bone, and I used to watch a lot of musical concerts and different musicians at rehearsal. Before the war, Bone was the birthplace of art and culture. The blend of various populations, Arabs, Berber, Europeans of different descendants,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

made it blossom into some kind of a unique beauty, a beauty that, unfortunately, was lost, forever.

“It was Herr Wolfgang Alvin whom I always watched and admired. He was this fifty years old violinist; he was born in Algeria but of German descent, a black foot, like all the Europeans and the Jews who colonized Algeria after its fall under the French in 1830. He rehearsed with his band three times a week in the theater, and I almost never missed a session. I’d always climb up and watch them from the little porch atop the stage. I watched in astonishment and bewilderment, I was discovering music, and It felt like unraveling a world of magic.

“Eventually, Alvin noticed me, and one day, he called me down after the rehearsal. I walked to the stage with hesitant steps and the joy of a little boy. He greeted me and asked me to introduce myself, and whether I wanted to learn music or just keep staring at it from a distance. That was the beginning of my journey. My encounter with Herr Alvin was a major turning point in my life. He was my companion and guide through a whole different universe, a universe of beauty and delights.

“At first he assigned me to Madame Roxane, the pianist in his band, his dear friend, or perhaps I should say, his lover. Roxane was a calm mysterious woman, but very kind and a master of the piano. She taught me the basics, music theory, notes, scales, and harmony. And at the same time I practiced the violin with Alvin. I was a very hard-working, motivated student. I absorbed everything they taught me with great passion and enthusiasm. All I wanted was to be able to play like them, like him. And only two years later, Herr Alvin finally decided that, aside from playing the violin, he’d also teach me how to make them, at this same workshop we’re having this conversation.”

Night Owls Massacre

Mr. Amati stood up disappeared through the back door. When he came back, he was holding an old violin case. He placed it on top of the table near the candle and opened it.

“This is his. Mr. Alvin’s violin, his masterpiece. It is said to match a Stradivarius in its perfection. He was a genius at his craft, more talented at making violins than playing them. An unmatched gift he had. He is the one who taught me to listen to the trees on a full moon night. I used to go with him, and he’d tell me which trees to cut.”

“Can I?”

He nodded, and I reached for the violin, and the moment I touched it, the mark on my shoulder burned like it was an erupted volcano crater. I cringed and pressed my shoulder in pain. The pain soon subsided, but didn’t disappear. I touched the violin again, carefully this time, examined it, feeling its structure. After my little apprenticeship with Mr. Amati, I was able to tell a good violin from another, and Alvin’s violin felt like a heavenly piece, truly magnificent.

I held the bow and played the first few bars from *Pas De Deux*. It felt different and strange, a strong feeling of deja-vu took over me. I felt one with Alvin’s violin, as if it spoke to me in a language only I understood. But the more I played, the more the mark on my shoulder burned, up to a point where I had to stop.

“It’s the Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker* and *Pas De Deux*,” stated Amati, almost in surprise.

“Yes, it is.”

“Why... Why did you play this one precisely?”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Because I dreamed, more than once, that I was playing this piece before a crowd. Because that’s what Sophia was playing the first time I met her, and because it’s the only piece I can really play.”

Amati was about to say something, then swallowed the words instead. As I ran my fingers through the violin, I noticed something carved in the back in its wood. I turned it back and I found three little dots aligned obliquely. At first, I didn’t know what it meant, but it didn’t take me long to realize that those were actually three stars.

“What is this?” I asked as I showed him the figure.

“Oh, that. Those are the stars of Orion. Alvin always said that he was not from this world, but came from another one, in which Orion had only three stars in its belt. He said he traveled to this world through the pavilion of dreams, for a reason only he himself knew. I reflected over what he said for years, I never truly understood what he meant by those words. They remain forever a mystery to me.”

‘You understand, don’t you?’ whispered my shadow.

“Please, finish your story,” I said, resting Alvin’s violin back in its case and then sinking back in my chair. The rain fell harder than ever.

“Through Alvin, I came to meet Kristin,” he continued, “his deceased friend’s daughter, whom he took care of and looked after. She was reserved but a real mirth once you knew her. And I guess, in every man’s life there’s one woman, *that* woman. And for me, I knew she was the one the moment she walked past the doors of our workshop, one winter afternoon, bringing a basket

Night Owls Massacre

full of pastry with her. The way she baked, I never tasted anything more delicious and I've never seen a woman so beautiful. I fell for her like mad. Music was truly a beauty in my life, but it was everyone's beauty. However, Kristin, Kristin was my own beauty, my own music, my secret poem. We started to meet more frequently after Alvin introduced us to one another. And the day when I learned that she felt the same was the happiest day of my life... truly the happiest. I married that girl.

“After the war was over, the persecution of the Algerian-Europeans, or the Black Foot, began. They were always regarded as strangers to this land, and what nurtured the hate towards them was their stand towards the revolution. Because most of them were in favor of the French colonization, most of them feared the unknown future of a free Algeria, and they were right to fear.

“Algeria was our Helen, and as the Greeks went into great war against the Trojans to take her back, we sacrificed our blood, our brothers and sisters to free her from the French colonizer. It was a sanguinary war and we fought bravely. However, unfortunately, those who came after sold it back into prostitution to the enemy for a low price, and enjoyed their filthy money for so many years to come. Looking back, I wonder who was the worst enemy, them or our traitors of leaders.

“Right after the war was over, the Oran massacre took place, in which up to a hundred Black Foot were slaughtered, and many others disappeared. That was only the first episode of many to come. Which led to the exodus of the Black Foot back to Europe. Some of them fled to America, others to Australia and Israel, and others chose to stay. Most of them were born in Algeria and for them, they had no country other than Algeria. And so despite

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

the outspread hostility towards them, they stayed. I must say that not all Algerians hated the Europeans, and not all Europeans were against the revolution. A lot of them were friends who grew up together in one neighborhood, but war knows no distinction. A thick line was drawn that separated the two.

“In Bone, a group of angry young men who went to war was formed. They called themselves ‘*the Night Owls*’, and were led by a man only very few people saw, known only by the name of ‘*the White Bard*’. Their goal was to clean Bone free from all the traitors and the invaders, meaning all the Black Foot and the Harkis (Algerian traitors). And whoever they lay a hand upon, they offered him one ultimatum, their famous motto, ‘*La valise ou le cercueil*’ (the suitcase or the coffin).

“Many of the members of *the Night Owls* were my own friends and people I knew. I was asked to join them several times, but I refused despite their persistent invitations. I was against the random slaughter of the Algerian Europeans, not to mention that I was married to one, Alvin was one, and so was Roxane. But soon the fervent invitations turned into threats. They insinuated, very clearly so, that if I didn’t abide I’d be considered a traitor too. That it was either us or them and I had to make a choice.

“It was out of the question for me to turn against Alvin. I didn’t care that I was considered a traitor or not, but I was also understanding of their feelings. France committed the ugliest atrocities against our people, and they had every right to be furious. But it was difficult for me to kill a civilian knowing they’re innocent. It didn’t matter on which side they stood, I just couldn’t and wouldn’t. Not to mention that Alvin and his band were a purely artistic group, they had no political affiliations

Night Owls Massacre

whatsoever. Moreover, Alvin and Roxane believed in the right of freedom for all people, and they secretly offered help to the revolution the best they could. But the Night Owls made no exceptions.

“They knew about my relationship with Alvin, and that I was married to his friend’s daughter Kristin, and one day, the threats became sharper and clearer than ever. If I didn’t join them, they’re going to hurt my family. The first thing I thought of was to flee the country with them, it seemed the only way out, but fate is sometimes mysterious and cynical. That same day, as I returned home, bearing the unbearable weight of the threat, Kristin broke the news to me. She was pregnant.

“That changed everything for me. I couldn’t risk their lives in any way possible. If I expose her to the minimal danger, and if I happen to lose my wife and kid because of that, then it would be the end of me. So, in my utter helplessness, I complied, joined them, secretly hoping that I might be able to change things from the inside. That I might be able to succeed in softening their minds in regard to Alvin and Roxane and the rest of the band. I kept it a secret from Kristin. I didn’t want her to worry. I tried my best to act normal, to act as if life was only going to get better for us.

“At first, I just started attending their meetings, their preachings, their training. I tried as best as I could to remain passive, to not participate in any of their activities chasing away the Black Foot. But I knew all along, that it is only a matter of time before there will blood on my hands. And that time came on an August night, 1963.



The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“It was on the day of the annual celebration of art and culture, when Alvin’s band would play for hordes of people, at the theater of Bone. *The Night Owls* had long anticipated that day, and had already planned to strike when everyone least expected it, and they kept it a secret from me all along, lest I informed Alvin and their whole plan would go to wreck. I was excited for that day myself, but I was also holding my breath. Alvin’s band rehearsed long and hard for that performance, and they were ready to put on a great show.

“The day had come, and as Kristin and I were getting ready to go to the theater to attend the concert, someone knocked on my door and left a note, ‘*Night Owls gathering. The usual place.*’ My heart shrunk and I felt dizzy I almost fell, because I knew exactly what it was. I had secretly feared the worst, and my fears had become real. I told Kristin that no matter what happens you mustn’t leave the house. It was hard and frustrating convincing her to stay, but gladly enough she understood that something terrible was about to happen. She understood all along that I knew things she was better off not knowing, and she never asked. She stayed at home that night, she was then eight months pregnant.

“When I reached the usual meeting place, I found all the members gathered, wearing black shirts, getting their knives sharpened and their pistols loaded, and for the first time, I met the White Bard, their leader. He was tall, well built, and wearing a mask of a blue-eyed rat on his face and a long dark coat. He exuded a strange aura, something about him sent reverence at the heart of men, and you couldn’t tell whether it was fear or respect. His appearance, words and gestures hinted that he was a man of great wisdom but also capable of committing the worst atrocities. He was an unusual figure. That was the day I met him,

Night Owls Massacre

and the last. A sharp memory that hadn't left my mind to this day.

"I didn't have to ask to know what was going on. All I heard was that they're going to strike tonight and it was enough to guess where. They explained the plan to me, when and how they are going to raid and what part I was supposed to play. I thought of trying to stop them, to convince them out of it, but many of them eyed me attentively, anticipating my every move. And I knew it was a loyalty test for me. Every word I uttered could be used against me, and represented a threat for Kristin and my child in her womb. I was walking a very thin line. They gave me a dagger and within a few minutes we were ready to go.

"There were about thirty of us, we moved in the shadows, unnoticed, and impeccably, like pawns on a chessboard, we surrounded the whole theater. We waited, and at The Bard's mark, we barged in. Alvin's band had just finished a piece from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* suite, *Pas De Deux*. And before I knew it, in the heat of applause, the killing started. At first, it began with silent stabbing of the crowds, and within short moments, it turned into a slaughterhouse. The screaming, the chaos, the warm blood spilling everywhere. Some of them begged for their lives, some of them tried to resist, and some didn't get the chance to do either. I stood in the middle, stunned, bewildered, I didn't know what to do. My hands shook, my whole being in turmoil.

"Alvin stood still on the stage while his band members were running away through the back, probably slaughtered as well. I couldn't understand why he was not moving, I prayed that he'd get away safely, but he didn't budge, he didn't flinch. Violin in hand and bow in another, he stood there on the stage, calmly

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

watching the massacre unfold. I fixed my eyes on him as I made my way through the corpses and the moist seats. And just when I reached the front, I felt a hand resting on my shoulder. I looked up and it was the White Bard with his blue-eyed rat mask. He stood beside me, unwavering, as if watching a dull circus show. He then drew near me and whispered in my ear, “*Him*,”—pointing out to Alvin—‘Him or them.’

“It was at that moment that I had to make the hardest decision of my life. The white Bard remained still in his spot, hands-on his coat pockets and watched me as I walked slowly towards the stage, towards Alvin. I wanted to scream, ‘*Run! Run! For god’s sake.*’ But Alvin looked at me with all the serenity you could imagine on a man’s face, he smiled, then nodded. He turned his back at me, put his violin in its case and placed it on top of a chair where I could see it, and slowly walked towards the exit. I looked back and the White Bard was still standing in the middle, erect like a death god, observing me. Never before in my life have I felt so heavy a glare, those stark blue eyes. They watched as if only *I* existed in the world and nothing else. As if my next actions will have the most real consequences. And I felt crushed under their pressure.

“Alvin walked ahead and I was right behind. He knew it was me, but he didn’t once turn around. All the noises, people and the lights around me were sucked away, faded into a meaningless world. It was only me, him, the dagger in my hand, and the decision I will regret the rest of my life. Alvin, or Kristin and the baby in her belly...

“I stabbed him in the back, and he noiselessly fell on the floor, and that was it. Looking back at what happened, it felt as if he understood the agony and distress I was going through,

Night Owls Massacre

every decision I had to make, and he made it all easy for me. If he'd turned around once and looked me in the eyes, I wouldn't have been able to do it. Or perhaps I just want to believe that to reconcile myself.

"It all took about a few minutes, and it was all over. The Night Owls had done a rather complete merciless job, but some survived, and told what happened in there. Kristin eventually learned that I was the one who murdered Alvin, and she couldn't forgive me for it. She ran away with my child in her belly. She ran, and I have never seen her ever since, nor had I seen my child. I never had the chance to explain myself, the difficulty of the choice I had to make. I just lost everything overnight.

"The White Bard disappeared after that incident, and *the Night Owls* ceased to exist. The police turned a blind eye to their crimes, as some of the policemen were members of the Night Owls themselves. And it was all lost into oblivion, as if nothing happened at all. Sometimes, I think that the White bard did it all for the sole purpose to rid me of everything I owned. An unlikely thought, and yet It doesn't feel so wrong.

"I murdered the person who was kindest to me, and lost the woman who was the world to me, lost her and the child she carried. I didn't quite realize what I had done in the heat of the moment until I sat alone with myself in the complete emptiness of my house. It all came back to me with a frightening clarity. And I felt like my whole being was about to break down under the unbearable weight of my action. In a matter of seconds, the future turned into hell and the present into an airless tight room. As I was realizing what my life had turned into, I felt something in me about to explode and I was certain I wouldn't survive, nor

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

there was any way to stop it, like an atomic bomb ticking away inside of me. *Three, two, one, zero.*

“The explosion would’ve turned me into a martial desert, flat and dead. But something strange happened in the heat of the blast. It was as if a black hole was created split seconds after at the heart of the exploding flames, sucking everything inside, the infernal heat, the shock wave, the blaring sounds. It was as if my mind realized it wouldn’t survive it, and so it created that black hole as a defence mechanism, and it prevented the imminent annihilation I was about to undergo. However that black hole didn’t just suck away the explosion, but everything else I held precious inside of me, everything that defined me as a human being. My convictions and morals, my urges and impulses, my anger and sorrow, everything but my regret. It remained erect like a proud monument in a sea of hollowness under a starless moonless sky. I survived. I maintained my basic human functions, but I couldn’t feel anything. Nothing reached me, and nothing radiated out of me. I became a walking corpse, an empty shell of an insect. If I had anything close to a soul one day, I had lost it in that black hole. I desired nothing, craved nothing, all the dreams I had were lost, all the life in me disappeared somewhere. My mind turned into an abandoned palace, where I walked endlessly in its rooms and hallways, expecting nothing, hoping for nothing, except for two things. I wanted to find my family again, and to apologize to Alvin for what I did. However, I was never granted a chance to do that.

“I don’t know if I was abandoned by God or if it is my punishment, but I am still alive sixty years after that incident, in good health, never been sick a day in my life, never was on the verge of death. I was cursed to live in my bleak world for all these years, and who knows how many years to come.”

Night Owls Massacre

The mark on my shoulder burned all along his story, and the pain was only getting worse.

“Didn’t you try to find Kristin?” I asked.

“I did for many years I tried, but I never found her. The closest I came to finding her was a few months after she left, when I traveled to the town of some distant relatives of her. They told me she left the day before I came, she didn’t say where she was going and nobody knew, and that she had a little baby girl... She named Her Leonie...” A tear fell down his cheek. For the first time, I glimpsed the shadow of emotion on his face. “If I could only find my girl... perhaps she’s married, and has kids of her own, I could hold her, hold my grandkids. If I could only do that one single time, I could leave this life a saved man.”

Amati’s daughter was Leonie, and she came looking for him when she was old enough, in the graveyards and among the living. She couldn’t find him but met Dr. Ezra instead. His daughter was Leonie, Sophia’s mother. It all unveiled before me. I understood now why Sophia dreamed of Amati’s place. I understood now why he was calling out for her, why he was calling out for *me*.

As I was about to open my mouth, the pain in my shoulder became unbearable. I felt it burning on my skin, deep in my flesh and bones. It was like I was feeling Amati’s stab all over again.

I fell on my knees and winced in pain. A dry sharp bloodless pain. Amati, as if taken aback, leaped from his seat and silently watched as I writhed in agony, a ghastly look on his face, as if he was witnessing the exorcism of Beelzebub.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I heaved a deep sigh, gathered my forces and hardly managed to stand up. My head throbbed in agony and I felt like my being was being torn apart. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes, and suddenly, it all went dead quiet. For a fleeting moment, I felt that I have turned into mist and materialized again. When I opened my eyes, I saw crowds of petrified people running and screaming everywhere, begging for their lives, losing them. And a tall man with the head of a Rat, the White Bard, was standing in the middle of that chaos, calmly staring at me, and then he muttered into the air. *‘Remember our deal.’*

A flood of pain drowned my head once again, everything became so radiant, so shiny, and the light pierced my eyes like a thousand needles. I shut my eyes as hard as I could, and it all disappeared, and I turned into mist again and came back to the real world. When I opened my eyes I found myself where I should be, against the wall of Mr. Amati’s workshop. The mark on my back was still terribly aching.

‘Isn’t it all clear now?’ whispered my shadow.

The pain only became worse, like a dagger on fire slowly piercing its way through my flesh. I screamed, and when the shrieks failed to convey the pain, my shouts became silent. My mouth was agape, but no sound reverberated. For moments, I thought I was about to pass out, but I never did. I lived through it, and it didn’t stop. I took off my shirt, and remained topless, forehead against the wall, eyes closed, suavely tasting my pangs.

The rain streamed in torrents, and the candle flame danced nimbly to the devil’s song.

Night Owls Massacre

Amati saw the mark on the young man's shoulder, and he knew what it was, he understood what it meant. He was then certain who that person was. Once his master, now his disciple. Standing shirtless in front of him facing the wall of their workshop. He walked slowly in his direction, in awe and fright, and with the tip of his callous fingers, he gently brushed the scar on his back. The exact spot where he once stabbed him, sixty years ago. And when he touched the mark, all the pain suddenly disappeared from the young man's shoulder; it served its meaning, and was then quietly vanishing like ash in the wind.

Amati fell on all fours to the ground and cried sixty years worth of tears, cried and shouted, *'I am sorry.. forgive me, I am sorry,'* over and over again. The young man regained his demeanor and stood calmly as he watched him weep on his feet, and he let him sob his heart's content, because he knew, when someone cries, you just let them. He then helped Amati stand up, looked him deep in the eyes and said, with a deep tone and an unruffled voice that wasn't his, *'It's okay. I know you had to do it. I don't blame you for what you did, and I am sorry you had to lose your family, as a result, live all these years in constant regret and solitude. You didn't deserve all this, but it happened to you, and it happened to you because of me. You may not understand this right now, but someday you will. I am the one who should be sorry. Your daughter, Leonie, is long dead, Amati, but you still have a granddaughter. Her name is Sophia, and I promise I'll bring her to you. I don't know how, but I know you deserve it. That's why you're still alive after all these years. I'll find a way.'*

The tears from Amati's eyes never ceased to stream, and he couldn't bring to make himself stop. He wept for all the pain and solitude he had experienced in the utter silence of his soul. It all

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

came back to him, and he felt it all with unprecedented vividness.

The young man walked Mr. Amati to another room through the back door and put him to sleep on his bed. He rested his long lost violin on the nightstand—the violin that he once bought from a spirit shop in a French town—covered him with a blanket, and left.

That night Mr. Amati wept himself to sleep, and that was the best night he had in years.

-25-

Never Twice Without Thrice Love High Above the Sea Ezra's Curse

Overcast rainy dawns, I found, were the most macabre. The sky did not jubilate the godly colors, it only swung, slowly, from darker shades of gray to more pallid ones. And morning entered the day like a thief, quiet, muffled and faint.

I left Amati's workshop and drove to the seaside. The streets were forlorn, abandoned. The sea was grim and gloomy. Not a bird soaring in the sky, only sombre clouds, as far as the eye could see. I sat on a bench and lost my gaze in the dismal horizon. What should I do now? I had no idea.

She was going to have surgery tomorrow, and from then on she would cross the great divide. I had one day to do something, only, I had no clue what it was. I knew it wasn't the end. I kind of had a vague certainty that it would all sum up to something at the end, and the image will be clear and complete. I needed a clue, a sign, something, anything.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Don’t be so dull,” said my shadow, sitting beside me, legs crossed. “It’s whether she dies and it’s all meaningless. Or she lives, and you may keep on looking for a meaning.”

“But there must be a meaning, right?”

“Must it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You can only find out if you go all the way, and yet you’re sitting on a bench gazing at the sea. The sea has no answers, and neither do I.”

“The last thing I need right now is vague answers.”

“Your whole story is vague, and vague situations require vague answers. You go all the way, go see her, for the last time, and if you could do nothing, then it would be the end of it for you. You must keep in mind that you’re not special, and you shouldn’t think the gods have a greater plan for you. Nonetheless, go see her.”

I stared hard at the facts before me. Sophia was sick, and if there was a way she could be saved, her father would have already figured it out. But he didn’t, which meant that it was inevitable, and certainly, I was not the one with the miraculous cure either. People die every day, every hour, every second. Children, adults, and geezers. She was not special, and neither was I. If she was to pass away tomorrow, no matter how heartbreaking, it would be, I shouldn’t be so surprised about it.

But at least, I thought, I could take her to Amati. He should see his granddaughter one last time. Perhaps that was the meaning behind our strange encounter, so I would be the link

Never Twice without thrice

between Amati and Sophia. To gather a lost man with his long lost blood. To make him feel, once again after a long time, that he was linked to people and to the world. Perhaps he was the one to mend Sophia's wounds and not me. He was the one she needs most, and she was the one he needed most. It wasn't so sad if all I had lived would sum up to this. Yes, I should go see her, and take her to Amati. This wasn't about me, it was about them.

I hopped into the car and drove to Dr. Ezra's villa. The digital clock on the dashboard showed 6:37. It was too early for a visit, but perhaps if I explained to him the full extent of the situation, he would let me see his daughter. Though my gut told me that my visit wouldn't be so warmly welcomed. But I had to do it, for Sophia and Amati. I took off the heavy coat of ego and doubt and rode ahead. There was something fulfilling about doing something solely for other people. Although if it made me feel fulfilled and good, then it was about me more than it was about them. Nothing we do was really for others.

I rang the doorbell and waited. I looked up and the balcony doors of Ezra's office were wide open, curtains fluttering in and out, which was strange considering the weather outside. Had he left and forgotten to close them? I rang again, and this time, he opened the door.

Ezra looked miserable, godforsaken. He had dark circles around sunken eyes, three or maybe four days worth of stubble on his face, his salt and pepper hair was messy, and saltier than I remember. His pajamas swallowed him, and his face had lost all glamor. It was as if he had aged ten years in the few months I hadn't seen him, and his sight sent shivers and sorrow down my spine.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“It’s you,” he said, his words like a cold drop of water gliding down my back.

“Good morning. I hope I didn’t wake you up.”

“Sleep had abandoned me long ago. Come in.”

I followed him to the kitchen and he prepared coffee in a Moka pot, poured down two cups and we sat at the kitchen table.

“How are you doing? You don’t look so well,” I asked

“I am the embodiment of the human tragedy. I have the right to not be okay. Spare me that talk.”

I remained silent. I chose not to comment.

“I don’t even need to guess why you’re here. She told you, right?”

I nodded.

“And what? You came here to bid her farewell?”

“Not exactly. I want to talk to her, one last time, if I may.”

“You may not.”

“Please! It’s important.”

“You can’t. She’s not here, and I don’t know where she is. She left and she won’t come back till the time of the surgery. She promised me that.”

“Is there any way to reach her?”

He looked down at the coffee cup and slowly shook his head.

Never Twice without thrice

“Does she really have no chance of surviving the surgery?”
I asked.

“A very slight, dim, distant chance,” he said in a hushed tone.

“So, she can survive...”

He glared at me with a confused look and said, “Yes, but we’re not taking it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ll grant her a merciful death on the operating table.”

I expected he would say something like that. I said nothing, and kept looking at him hard and deep in the eyes.

“I’m not going to see her suffer through medication only to relapse again. Almost no one survives her illness. I’ve seen many sent to the grave by it. Hope fades into reality like rain into the sea, undistinguished and meaningless.”

“So, she’s going to die at your hands instead...”

He nodded. “She’d have a peaceful death, she deserves it, she”—his voice cracked, and he looked away—“she suffered a lot.”

We fell silent for a while, then I ventured, “Ezra, she’s your *real* daughter, isn’t she?”

He lifted his gaze at me in puzzlement, “What do you mean?”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“You told me that you adopted Sophia after Leonie gave her to you in Germany. You said you never slept with Leonie, so there’s no way she could be your daughter, but, she is, isn’t she?”

“What makes you say that?”

“The black mark on the back of her left ear. You had the same one, but somehow you managed to take it off of your skin with surgery or laser. When you invited me to dinner that night, I noticed that the skin behind your ear was of a different color. It was darker. I found it a little strange at first, but then it hit me, and I looked it up. Those kinds of marks are hereditary, but you tried to hide it. That’s why you keep your hair long enough to cover that area... am I wrong?”

He heaved a deep sigh, stood up from his seat, faced the kitchen window and lit a cigarette. “You have a sharp eye, I give you that.”

“So, is it true?”

“Yes, Sophia is my real daughter. The thing is, however, I didn’t lie when I said I never slept with Leonie.”

“How is it possible then?”

“That bugged me for so long. When I returned home with Sophia from Germany, I believed she was Leonie’s daughter from another man, not mine. But then I noticed the mark behind her ear, the same mark I had. It was odd, and naturally, the first thing I did was to run a DNA test, and indeed the results showed she was my real daughter, my own flesh and blood. I ran the test over and over again, but the results were unchanged. She was undoubtedly, undeniably, my own daughter. Leonie was the only one with the answer, the only one who could explain how

Never Twice without thrice

it happened. But by the time I realized, she was already long gone. And so it remained forever a mystery to me... However..."

"However?"

"As absurd as it may sound, and no matter how long and hard I reflect on it, there is only one explanation I could find. A few months after Leonie disappeared on me, I had a dream, so lucid, so intense and real. I was in a room made entirely out of glass, the room was on top of a steep rock in the middle of the sea. It was dark, calm and windless outside, and a vibrant dazzling full moon hung in the sky, casting a green glint on the surface of the ocean. The room was empty, except for one square bed in the middle, on top of which Leonie was laying, wearing a pale blue nightgown, waiting for me.

"Without going into further details, we made love that night, all night. And it was overwhelming, exulting, mysterial. Nothing like I had ever experienced before or again in my life. After we finished, Leonie whispered in my ear, '*It was inevitable.*' That's all she said, and then opened the door of the room and dove into the sea. And that was the end of the dream.

"I pondered over that dream a lot after that night, about what it meant. But naturally, all I could think of was that It was just a wet dream, a manifestation of all the suppressed fantasies in my head and all the unconsummated love I carried within for Leonie. Making love is, after all, the purest manifestation of feelings. Whereon, all possible means fail to convey the true meaning of one's own emotions, the carnal union fulfills the job in an unmatched way. And believe me, unexpressed feelings are the heaviest and the most painful to bear. They chain you to the past, and no matter how further you thought you had made it,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

they always manage to pin you down, backward. And until you truly convey what's in your heart, you can never be truly free. At least that's how I interpreted that dream. It was a way for my mind to express all those feelings that chained it down and to be finally free. But it wasn't, I can't explain it, but that night... we made Sophia. Even when I checked with the dates, it perfectly matched."

"That's astonishing."

"You believe it?" He asked.

"I'm not saying I believe it is the explanation, because it makes no sense. It could be true, and it could be not. But I believe you. I see no reason why you'd lie to me."

He opened the window, leaned against its frame and took a drag from his cigarette. "I loved three women in my life, Leonie, my late wife, and Sophia. Two have already died in my hands, and tomorrow the third will follow. Never twice without thrice right? What a poetic curse I am damned with, don't you think?"

He blew out smoke in the air, and his eyes glistened with a spark I recognized so well. That of the first layer of tears welling up under the lids. That of the unstoppable torrent of buried agony making its way up to the surface.

"She's young and kind..." His voice broke again, and it sounded like a mountain splitting in half. I didn't know what to say. I was no father. But it shattered me to see a father cry over his daughter. It was an utterly sad scene, that of a man weeping. It only means that the pain was so violent it broke through the strongest of all walls, the wall of a man's heart, that was meant

Never Twice without thrice

to withstand all sorrow and on which everyone could lean when all else fell apart. It was utterly heartbreaking.

“You said that she has a very slight chance of making it through. Isn’t it worth taking it?” I asked.

He wiped his tears with his hands discreetly, then said, “If the surgery fails, she’ll be in an even greater pain than she already is.”

“But... Don’t you think that God had left that very slim chance for a reason? I’m not preaching, and I’m in no way interpreting God’s acts, and I don’t claim that I am in any position to suggest any decision you’d make. But if you believe that nothing is left to chance in this world, that God’s acts are all purposeful in one way or another, perhaps he had left that faint chance, that tiny window through which light can filter through, for those who truly believe in his sovereignty, despite everything that is inflicted upon them. God is mysterious, but one thing I know, the way to God isn’t an easy one, and some must go through the hardest trials to reach him. I know it isn’t fair, but I don’t think we’re meant to understand faith. We just need to experience it. Besides, you really want her to live, and I do, too.”

Ezra returned to the table, fell silent and stared blankly at the coffee cup.

“I’ve put a blind faith in God two times already,” he started, his gaze still vacantly glued to the cup. “And each time, I’ve walked out of it with a deep scar and short of a person I love. I see no reason why this time would be any different. What hurts more than the loss itself is a crushed hope. If there’s no hope there’s nothing to be crushed.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Still, she’s your daughter!” I blurted out, and I knew I said the wrong thing.

“You think you care about her more than I do!?” he burst out, glaring at me with burning eyes.

“How could you just decide her fate?”

“She’s the one who decided to do it. I am just granting her her final wish! And who do you think you are to judge me!? You know nothing about life.”

“You’ll regret it for the rest of your life! When you’re lonely and miserable and you spend every day thinking ‘what If I took the chance, what if she was still alive and well.’ But you can do nothing about it because you’ve already doomed her to death.”

“My regret is my business alone!”

“Is it even legal?”

“Are you going to threaten me with that? You’re going to inform the authorities on me? Go ahead if you like, you have no proof and nobody will believe you anyway.”

“She has a chance... If she’s not willing to fight for herself, then you must fight for her.”

“If the surgery fails, are you going to bear her pain instead? Or am I? She’s the only one who suffered, and the only one who’ll suffer. You’re full of shit and your blind optimism makes me wanna vomit.”

His words made me angry, because they were true. I was full of shit. How could I have felt her pain anyway? How could anyone feel anyone’s pain?

Never Twice without thrice

He looked at his watch and left the table. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go to work. Leave now, and I hope we never meet again. Just forget about everything, about the damn nightmares and about the damn Oracle, and mostly about Sophia. It all ends here.”

There was nothing left to say. It was sad, but it was time for me to leave. He walked me to the front door, and before I stepped out, I stopped before a wooden accent table, on top of which there was a telephone and a notepad and a ballpoint pen. I scribbled the address of Amati and wrote beneath it, *“If you want to meet the person Leonie was looking for the day you met her at the cemetery.”* I folded the paper and placed it beside the phone. He watched me do so, but he neither touched the piece of paper, nor commented whatsoever about it.

He opened the door for me, and with a serene voice he said, “Farewell.”

At that instant, the phone rang. He picked it up, and I continued walking.

“Hello, where the hell have you been?” Upon overhearing that, I came to a halt. Was it Sophia on the phone? I looked back through the open door and observed Ezra’s reaction.

“What?!” he said, a hue of surprise on his face. And then his gaze turned towards me, and he stretched the arm with the speaker in my direction. “Come,” he beckoned, “it’s for you.”

I returned inside the villa and received the speaker from Ezra and glued it to my ear, my heart was beating fast. I was going to hear Sophia’s voice again, it has been over a year.

“Hi...” I said.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“You still remember the way to where I live?” she asked, her voice a bit different.

“I am at your house”

“This is Mandolin. Focus!”

“Mandolin! Long-time no see. How have you been?”

“I haven’t been too great, but that doesn’t matter. You must come. The Oracle needs you.”

“What for?”

“Long story. Not on the phone. When will you make it? We don’t have much time.”

“I can drive right now.”

“Perfect. We’ll be waiting for you at the mansion. Hurry.”

The moment I hung up Ezra asked, “What did she say?”

“She said the Oracle needed me.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say.”

A moment of silence enveloped us, and I felt bad that we were going to part ways on such terms. I didn’t regret the argument. It was necessary. But I hated that it was going to end this way. Sophia was weighing heavy on both of us, and we were both hurting on the inside. We had that pain in common, and we understood each other. At least I understood him. I tapped him on the shoulder, then I hugged him; he remained stiff for a while, but eventually, he hugged me back. I apologized, then left.

Never Twice without thrice
I started the engine and drove off.

Meeting the Oracle: Truth Unveiled

The sun must've been rising somewhere above, unnoticeable, invisible behind a thick dome. A sea of expanding ashes spread upon the sky. It palpitated, sparkled, breathed as if it was alive, gravitating so low it felt as if it was going to close up on earth any time soon. As far as I could see, no beam penetrated the sky, no light kissed the soil.

I drove ahead, silently focusing on the empty road before me, fully submerged in my own mind, in a turmoil of intermingled gloomy thoughts. It felt like I was nearing my end. I visited Mr. Amati, then Ezra, and now it's the Oracle's turn. What could she possibly bring up to the equation, to the inevitable misfortune? Fortunetelling wouldn't save Sophia, and neither would some stones and water. If she had found a way to stop my nightmares then I don't really care. That was not what was in my mind for now. I just want to be able to do something for Sophia, and I felt really helpless about it. For the first time, I felt really tired of it all. Let the nightmares seize my sleep, and let tragedy seize my fate. It was all going to end someday. It must. All I had to do was wait.

Meeting The Oracle

Kristin disappeared on Amati; her daughter Leonie disappeared on Ezra, and then it was my turn, Sophia also disappeared on me. You were right Ezra. Never twice without thrice. Though each had her reasons, but what a family. I guess we had that in common, Amati, Ezra and I. Each was left by a Morgan, and each was marked by it.

After a long drive, I finally reached the entrance of the mansion. As before and each time I visit this place, it always welcomed me with the coldest of greetings, and it always felt like a land at the end of the earth. It would only seem reasonable if a concept or a ghost, that didn't need to eat or interact or get sick, lived there. Strangely enough, however, it did feel the right place for an Oracle to live in.

I parked near the dry marble fountain. The naked winged man stood upright and stiff above unwavering, mutely pointing to the heavens. I stepped out of the car, took a deep breath and looked up to where he pointed. All I saw were the bare branches of trees ramified into the clouds like veins in a necrosed piece of flesh. How did I get here?

It didn't matter now. I was here, and I might as well go all the way. I walked to the front door, stared at the engraved words above '*Nosce Te Ipsum*' for a while, and just when I was about to knock, Mandolin opened the door.

"You're here. Come in," she plainly stated. She was wearing light green pajamas and slippers. Her red hair was everywhere.

"Where's the butler?"

"Around here somewhere. I open the door too sometimes." She walked ahead.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Okay.”

“Come this way, there’s a lot to talk about.”

I followed her to *the room* with the psychiatrist’s therapy bed, which I once laid the first time I came here with Dr. Ezra.

“Am I going to sleep on that bed again?”

“No, not now and not on that bed. For the time being, you’re going to meet the Oracle.”

“Finally, goddammit.”

She walked to the second door that leads to the antechamber, stood before it and faced me. “But first, you’ve got to make an oath. *For life.*”

“To never tell what’s beyond that door, to never speak of the Oracle or what she’s about to tell me?”

“That’s right,” she said firmly, eyes on fire.

“What if I break that oath?”

“You’ll pay dreadfully. That is why it is called an oath.”

“Okay. I swear I’ll never tell what’s beyond that door.”

She eyed me intently, as if to confirm how earnest I was, and then, after she made up her mind, she opened the door.

But of course, I am breaking that oath, because I am writing about it. But it doesn’t matter now.

The antechamber was dimly lit, red curtains filtered the fading sunlight into wine beams. I couldn’t glimpse much of

Meeting The Oracle

what's inside, and I couldn't gauge the real confines of the room. The walls seemed to stretch endlessly into the darkness. The room seemed to be empty, all I could hardly discern was a small triangular tent in the middle. Its sheets seemed to be made of silk or satin, and were hanging in the ceiling in one point and dangling all the way down to the floor. In front of the tent were two-floor cushions around a small wooden low table. On the table, an Arabic silver teapot and one mug were served.

"Take a seat, please," ordered Mandolin, motioning with her hand to the cushion. I did as she said, after which she entered the tent. I heard no sound, no hiss emanating out from inside. The space around the Oracle was mute. She concealed her presence so perfectly like a predator on the hunt. I felt a little nervous to meet her. What could she possibly look like?

After a short while, Mandolin came out of the tent, alone; wearing a golden wheat crown and a green, triangular amulet around her neck. She took a seat before me on the other floor cushion, and said no word.

"So? Is she coming out?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious already?" she barked, glaring at me heavily, her voice quieter and deeper than usual.

"What?"

"I am the Oracle."

Aloud silence flooded the room like a tsunami wave. All my thoughts came to a halt as I eyed Mandolin strangely, in disbelief and surprise.

"What do you mean?"

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I am the Oracle. Always have been.”

“Where’s your grandmother? The one that is supposed to be the Oracle.”

“She does not exist.”

“What... is this a joke? Did she just change her mind about seeing me?”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“I don’t have time for this,” I said, and I jumped from my seat and entered the tent. It was empty, nothing inside but bedsheets, some old books, and a few wooden boxes. I exited and sat back in my cushion.

“What’s the meaning of this? If you are the Oracle, do you live alone?”

“No. I used to have someone look after me, but she passed away a year ago. She was the butler’s wife. Had she been alive, you would have met her instead, as a fake Oracle. She’s the one who used to meet people instead of me, grown-ups sound slightly more credible than children, as you may have noticed.”

“But how come you are the Oracle? Where are your parents?”

“Easy, you’ll have all your answers. Perhaps not all of them, but you’ll know enough.”

“So begin, I’m listening,” I said.

“I am not like everybody else. I have something more. You can call it psychic powers or whatever you want, it doesn’t really

Meeting The Oracle

matter. I know more than what a regular person could know. I can do more than what a regular person could do, and I've been assigned to be the Oracle of this region."

"Assigned by whom?"

"I didn't say I'll answer all of your questions. Besides, we're here because of you, it's you we need to talk about."

"Hold on a second... So the fortune teller I met in France that summer, the little girl was the actual Oracle, and the old lady is just a front?"

"That's right. Her name is Lilith. She's a friend."

I fell quiet for a while, processing all that she'd just dropped on me. So many things didn't make sense.

"So, who's the Oracle Doctor Ezra knew? He said that he met the Oracle in his late twenties, when he suffered the same nightmares I have. That would be like thirty years ago."

"Yes, that would be me."

"Don't bullshit me. How old are you, ten?"

"Nine, actually," she corrected.

Bewildered, I waited for an explanation, but she responded to my quietness with a deeper silence. Nothing in her expression suggested that she was any less serious than a doctor announcing a deadly illness to a patient.

"How long have you been nine?" I finally asked.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Through the red darkness, I glimpsed a mischievous smile on her face, however, she decided to let my question fade away unanswered. I was free to assume anything and everything.

“To be honest,” she broke the silence. “I have never stumbled on a case like yours before. It confused me as much as it confused you, perhaps even more. And perhaps I should say this upfront. I still don’t have the key to the conundrum you are living, but nonetheless, I think I can guide you through it.”

“Through what exactly?”

“It’s hard to explain, but it seems there is an underlying mechanism behind it all. I still don’t know what it is, or why it is happening exactly, but I can help you find out.”

“Okay...” Okay, I decided I would humor her through this, see where this was going.

“But let me say this forthrightly,” she said. “No matter what you do, no matter what anyone does, Sophia is going to be dead tomorrow morning after the surgery. This much can’t be changed.”

A wave of shudders ran through my body upon hearing this. Though I had already accepted her disappearance, and was preparing myself for her final departure. But those words were like giant rocks fired by a catapult, jolting against a wall in me, shaking something very profound. I thought I was ready.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked, a little infuriated.

“Because you need to hear it. Hope is a living organism. It grows inside you till it takes the form of your heart; it invades every corner of it until it leaves no space spared. And then, it

Meeting The Oracle

dries out, becomes like glass. And when it gets crushed, your heart also gets crushed into shreds that you can never put back together, never like it once used to.”

“I wasn’t hoping...”

“You were?”

Okay, I was. How couldn’t I? But I kept that for myself. I cleared my throat, and it produced an unnatural dry sound that echoed loudly within me.

“Now hear me well,” she said. “I am going to put it as bluntly as I could, because there is no other way to put it: *This is not your world. You are a stranger here.* I wouldn’t venture and say you came here for a specific reason, and though the chances are very slim, perhaps it was all the result of an accident. Pure chance, nothing more. You can dismiss everything I say if you want to. I wouldn’t blame you. After all what I am saying is beyond reason.”

“Yes, what you’re saying is way beyond reason, but for convenience’s sake, let’s suppose I do believe you. How is this possible, and where is this going?” I asked, trying to conceal my stress, my confusion.

“Have you ever dreamed that you had a whole different life? Your house is different, the world is different, the people around you are different. And yet everything and everyone feels so familiar, everything seems normal, and it feels like you’ve been living that life since the day you were born. Only when you wake up do you realize how strange it all was. You’ve had those kinds of dreams, right?”

I nodded. I’ve had plenty of those.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“Those lives we dream of are very real, like yours and mine; and they exist in *different realities*, if you like to put it this way. I wouldn’t say there is an infinite number of realities. They are finite but abundant. Sometimes, however, when you are so deep in sleep, your consciousness leaves your body, and travels to the pavilion of dreams, and through the pavilion, it visits other realities. It inhabits the soul, and lives amongst the people of that world; sometimes a day, sometimes even weeks in one single night, because time can flow very differently. But it always makes it back to the original body, and when you wake up, you remember that life, and it feels surreal. The realities are often a replica of one another, they only differ in very minor details; but sometimes, in rare occasions the gap between the two is greater than just a minor detail.

She continued, “In your case, I think one night you’ve gone to bed, you’ve traveled to another world, but you were stuck in there. For some reason, or reasons, you didn’t make it back. This should be impossible, but here you are. I am sure you’ve noticed some changes in this world, as insignificant as they may be, but they are what distinguishes this world from your previous one. Perhaps the most conspicuous difference is the fourth star in Orion’s belt. I think I wouldn’t be so wrong if I assumed that your previous Orion had only three stars in its belt instead of four.”

“How do you know all this? I don’t think you can find this in a science book. It feels like I’d be betraying my intelligence if I just bluntly believed everything you’re saying. Though I want to believe it. Because no matter how hard I think about it, this is the only explanation.” I said.

“Haven’t I proven that I know enough already?”

Meeting The Oracle

“You do know stuff, I give you that, but I shouldn’t just assume that you know everything.”

“I don’t know everything... Do you think that your encounter with Mr. Amati was pure luck? Now you’d wonder how do I know about you and Mr. Amati, and his wife, Mrs. Morgan Kristin, or about your new friend Ruby Dutchess. I even know the dirtiest secrets of Ruby, things she would never even dare to tell you. I know stuff, and I also know what I am talking about. How do I know all of this? That’s none of your concern. Shall we proceed?”

“For convenience’s sake, I’ll believe you. Go on.”

“People have the misconception that reality is what’s real and dreams are just dreams, something imaginary, that has no substance or consequences. But the contrary is true. You can picture reality as a stage on which everybody is performing a specific role. Each of us is both a spectator and an actor, improvising our roles without a script. Each reality is a stage, and each period of time is also stage. And they all exist simultaneously, like a never-ending loop. But the world of dreams is the backstage that links them all together. The nexus of everything and from which all is ramified. And through that backstage, you leaped from one stage to another.”

I listened attentively, searchingly. I didn’t want to miss anything.

“All that being said,” she went on. “That’s only half of it, the other half is the entity that visits you in your unusual nightmares. It is the one, I think, that caused you to shift worlds. It is not a demon or a Djinn. Definitely not an angel. It is something entirely different. They are known as *the Bards of the*

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Night. They aren't mentioned in any sacred text or any book, for that matter, and commonly confused with demons in folklore tales and myths throughout ancient civilizations. They are neither evil creatures, nor good. They are very ambiguous when it comes to judging their nature, and they were created for one purpose solely, and that is to maintain *Chaos* in the universe. As opposed to angels, who maintain order. Like light is meaningless without darkness, like good is meaningless without evil, love without pain, life without death. Also, order is senseless without chaos. Everything and everyone in this universe fit a specific role; known or unbeknownst to us, they all serve a purpose. Except for us, humans. Our purpose is very unclear.

“Organic creatures needed genetic mutations to evolve and to become what we now know as animals, human beings and plantations. The soul also needed something of the same nature to grow and metamorphose; to acquire the faculty of imagination, of perceiving beauty, creating beauty. To judge what's right from wrong, good from evil, and all of what makes up the human psyche. The Bards of the Night exert the same changes on the soul that a mutation does on a living creature. And as you know, mutations are often defective, and they lead in most cases to the death of the living organism. Only very rarely does a mutation cause a beneficial change that will drive the species to evolve. The Bards of the Night push the soul to evolve by inflicting an intense stress upon it, sometimes too great, too agonizing to handle. That is why, in your dreams, you suffered a lot, and you felt that your soul was being sucked away from your body. You're not the only one who suffers from those nightmares. A lot of people go through the same ordeal. Some would bear real long-lasting damages to their soul, some others make it unharmed, and others recover with time. In your case,

Meeting The Oracle

however, I believe that your soul had undergone a serious transformation, and thus was able to shift worlds without undergoing any serious damage. Something as improbable as hitting a target with an arrow from earth to Jupiter. Do you follow?"

"I do... It is hard to believe. But... Why me?"

"I'm ignorant if the bards of the Night have a free will of their own, or if there is any hidden motive behind their actions. I doubt that you have been chosen for a reason. I guess it just happened to you."

"You said it's rare, but did it already happen before?"

"It did. Some of those who shuffled worlds told about their experiences, or put it into artistic works, novels, movies, animations, paintings... and people believed it was just a work of fiction. If I name you some, you'd be surprised."

"You're throwing a lot at me." I heaved a sigh. "But if what you're saying is true, something isn't making sense," I said.

"Why do you still have those nightmares despite having already shifted worlds? What's the point, you're wondering?"

I nodded. "Sure, you can read my mind."

"That, I honestly don't know. That's why I said your case boggles me. It doesn't make a lot of sense. I think it has something to do with Ezra's daughter, but I can't quite put my finger on it. I spoke to her once. She's a very intuitive girl, and it didn't take long for me to sense in her the same imprint of uncertainty I sensed when I first met you."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I remained quiet for a while. Mandolin opened a wooden box and pulled out what looked like a joint. She put it between her lips, and I automatically grabbed the Zippo lighter from my pocket and lit it for her. She smoked leisurely, patiently waiting for me to munch over what I'd just heard.

Then I finally asked, "Now what? When will the nightmares end? When will *the Bard* finally leave me alone? And more importantly, is it possible for me to get back to my world, roughly speaking?"

"I'm afraid I can answer only one question," she said as she released a puff, "You were able to shift worlds, so you must be able to make it back. However, I fear that if you take that road back, there's a risk you'd end up somewhere entirely different. There's no guarantee you'd make it back to your exact world. You might drift even further..."

"Goddammit! Are you kidding me? Why am I in this shit? Is this even fucking real?"

"I understand your confusion, but I know deep down you realize that what I am saying is true. You don't know how it is going to end, so don't doom yourself already. And besides," she paused, sucked in another puff, released it and stared at me deeply. "I am here for you. I'll accompany you all the way through. I won't leave you to it alone, unless you chose to leave yourself."

"I appreciate it, but why are you helping me?"

"Because I feel you'd be able to help me too. We all have our confusions, our unfinished stories, and tragedies. When the time comes, you'd do the same for me."

Meeting The Oracle

“I can’t guarantee I’d be of much help, but yeah, why not?”

“Now, about your second question, *when will the bard finally leave me alone?* Do you truly want to know the answer?”

“Of course. Why do I feel like there’s a twist?”

“Yes, I can show you a *way*, but it is risky, and I don’t know how it would go. I just know it is the only way.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You could lose your soul. You could end up endlessly drifting in void, not knowing who you are or what had happened to you. You could end up a walking corpse, probably spending the rest of your days inside a mental institution, and no one would be able to help you. But that’s the worst-case scenario. You could be driving home and have an accident and spend the rest of your days in a wheelchair, for that matter. You don’t constantly think about that while driving do you? You just have to do the same here and now.”

“They’re both risks but what are the chances of each. What are the chances that I might lose my soul?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“What do I gain from this? What if I just chose to stay here in this world?”

She shook her head silently, saying, “All I can tell you is that I think you should do it. It is a road you’ve already taken, willingly or unwillingly, it doesn’t matter now. You’re already in the game. You must see it through.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I thought about it. I thought about it a lot, but eventually, what the hell. How could I possibly reason this one out, or weigh the benefits versus the risks? Nothing about this was reasonable, so might as well do it.

“Let’s do it.”

“Okay.”

She slowly grabbed the teapot and poured enough hot liquid in the mug. She then encircled the mug with her palms and held it near her mouth, thereon she muttered something into the liquid, something incomprehensible, like an incantation. She did that for a few seconds then handed me the mug.

“Drink.”

I did as she asked, and I recognized the fragrance and the taste of the liquid. It was the same one she served me when I first came here, the *Ayahuasca* if I remember correctly. It was hot, but I tried to gulp it all in one swig, however, this time it tasted stronger than the first time.

“Let’s give it a few minutes. Meanwhile, let’s walk.”



Mandolin stood from her seat, golden wheat crown on her redhead and green amulet, which looked too big and heavy for her slender body, dangling from her neck. She walked to the front door and I followed after. We left the room to the hallway, the mansion was cold and sombre and painfully quiet. I wondered how could she be spending her time here all alone.

Meeting The Oracle

She put on a jean jacket and a red woolen scarf, a pair of boots and we walked out of the mansion after I quickly slid into my shoes and my jacket. We circled around the house, and from the back side, we took a little rough path among the bushes that forged deep into the woods. A sea of gloomy trees surrounded us from all directions. Bird calls echoed through the branches, and cold fresh air infiltrated my lungs. She walked before me, and in the quietness of nature, strangely blending with her surroundings. It was as if she, the trees, cold breeze, the cries of crows formed one single entity, and amidst all that, she stood in the middle, an odd aura of serenity encircled her. So that was the Oracle I thought, and smiled faintly.

“What do you do? With all the time you’ve got...” I broke the silence.

She glanced at me as if to say ‘*you seriously think I have all that free time?*’ But instead, she looked ahead and said, “It might strike you as strange, but I have a TV set, video games, the Internet, a library full of books, and I have musical instruments. And besides, I have other... let's call them clients if you wish. You got your answer?”

“You have the Internet here?”

“Yeah, it was hard to get it, but I finally managed to.”

“Cool... Can I come to spend some time here in the future? I like this place.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Jesus... Okay.”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

The path got narrower as we strode further deep into the ominous woods. It ran uphill and down some steep slopes. Sometimes it writhed around some boulders, but it straightens itself up eventually. The vegetation was still wet and glossy from last night's rain. The trees were high and mighty. Some insects buzzed here and there, but aside from that, we spotted no other living creature.

"Tell me," I asked

"Yes?"

"Don't you know already what I am going to ask?"

"I don't read minds."

"Okay... Are you all by yourself? Don't you have someone close, aside from the butler?"

She kept quiet for a while and then spoke. "I did once, but we have separated long ago."

"What happened?"

"A lot. It's a drag to tell so I'll skip it."

"Okay. Where is that person now?"

"I don't know. Long ago, right before we went separate ways, we promised to meet in the land of Saint Augustine of Hippo. This city. I've been waiting ever since. That's why I can't leave."

"You met him at the same place you met Lilith? Let's say the school where the Oracles were formed."

Meeting The Oracle

“Yeah, you could say that he was very sensitive and profound in a delicate way. Hair didn’t grow on his head like everybody else, and there was a conspicuous deep scar on his scalp that nobody knew where he got it from, so everybody kept away from him and treated him differently. But I wasn’t appalled by him, and we ended up being friends, really good friends. He was really kind and brave, and played the Mandolin beautifully. One day, things took a wrong turn. We escaped the organization, but each took a separate way.”

“I see. You still hope he’d show up one day?”

“I know he will. I just have to be patient. This is the place,” Mandolin said as she came to a halt.

We reached a sort of a round clearing where nothing grew but green grass. A place completely surrounded by trees. The faint morning glow poured down from the branches into the open space, otherwise, it was dim and mystic. A sort of bone-white monolith stood erect in the middle, like a giant half-melted candle about one meter and a half tall. At a first glance, it wasn’t so clear to me whether it was man-made or natural. We walked there to rest, and after giving it a second hard inspection, the mystery was still unriddled. However, I came about an inscription carved deep into the stone, ‘*Nosce Te Ipsum*,’ it said. I brushed the letters with the tip of my fingers, half expectantly that they would whisper how old they are and what secrets do they bear. At that instant, a thunder-like strike of drowsiness fell upon me, like a sudden blackout in all the machinery that kept me awake. I fell on the grass beside the monolith, and was slowly drifting to the other world.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“It’s finally taking effect. We made it on time, relax. And... have a nice trip. Goodbye.”

The scenery around me got blurred gradually, and I felt my being shrinking slothfully, from the tip of my feet up to my knees; from the tip of my fingers up to my elbows; from my thighs up to my genitals and abdomen. All I felt was my chest and face, but eventually, those too disappeared, until I shrunk into a singular point.

Then it all went black.

[...The Dreamkeeper and the visitor fall silent for a long while, each immersed in his own thoughts. Or perhaps each in his own absence of thoughts. They stare absently at their drinks, until the visitor breaks the silence.

“Have you looked for her?”

“Everywhere, but she’s nowhere to be found. It’s like she’s been sucked away in a black hole or vaporized into thin air.”

“That’s odd. There must be an explanation.”

“Yeah, but it’s slipping by me. I can’t seem to understand it. I don’t wanna think about it, because it might drive me crazy, but it’s all I think about,” The Dreamkeeper says, heaving a deep sigh.

The visitor falls back in his silence, and then, as if he had suddenly remembered an important detail, he breaks off, “I think I know someone who can help you, Chico. Actually, the only one who can truly help you. I don’t know why I haven’t thought about that earlier.”

Meeting The Oracle

“Who might that be?” says the Dreamkeeper as he looks him in the eyes.

“I doubt you’ve ever heard of them. They’re off the records of history. Their existence has been meticulously concealed. They’re shadows. They basically don’t exist, and they have been kept a secret for reasons unknown to you or to anyone. Along with angels and demons, humans and djinns, God had created another kind. They go by the name of The Bards of The Night. I don’t know for what purpose had they been created, but one thing I know for sure is that they can move freely through time, space, realities, something we can’t do. And I’ve stumbled upon one of them by pure chance long ago.”

“That name surely rings a bell. How come I never heard of them?” says the Dreamkeeper as he eyes him in disbelief.

“Beats me. I never heard of them, too. But apparently, a very small group of people was successful in making contact with them in the past—you know, in the days of earth. Ever heard of the Oracles of Delphi?”

“Yeah, I guess. What about them?”

“They were the only ones who managed to make contact with the Bards of the Night. Back in ancient Greece, as I have been informed, the high priests collected little kids from across the nation, kids who were bestowed with strong psychic powers, or at least with a psyche more developed than their fellow peers. They secretly gathered them all in the Temple of Delphi and waited for them to turn nine. Apparently, that was the perfect age for a kid to possess a perfect balance of matured psychic processes and a rich amount of purity at the same time; not too old, not too young. When they turned nine, they performed

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

certain rituals on them, forbidden, dangerous ones, to make them ageless, immortals, or at least live for very long spans of time. They never grow up physically, they will forever stay nine years old.

“Those who survive the ritual become the Oracles of Delphi, the only people who ever knew about the existence of the bards of the night, and the only people who were able to handle an actual contact with them. They taught them how to speak to them, and how to benefit from their esoteric knowledge. Can you believe that? Those poor kids.”

“Damn... That’s cruel.”

“It is. The Bards are retired now. After all, is finished and life on earth is over—even life in heaven has come to an end—they have nothing else to do. I think we can hire one, the only one I know of. I can bring him to you, and he’ll try to investigate where and why she’s gone. I’m telling you, he’s very good at what he does.”

“Okay, let’s do it,” says the Dreamkeeper, a trail of hope lingering at the back of his voice.

“I’ll leave now, but I promise I’ll be back, even if I couldn’t find him, I’ll come back. I won’t leave you hanging.”

“Appreciate it, buddy.”

And thus, the visitor left on his quest, leaving the Dreamkeeper once again in his vast solitude. He prepares a hot mug of coffee and walks to the balcony of the 77th-floor bar. He stares vaguely at the fog veiling the sky and the horizon, and after a very long time, he senses warmth in his heart, so distant and feeble, but it’s there, growing slowly but steadily.

Meeting The Oracle

“The Bards of the Night, who sing the Song of God into the void of the universe,” he found himself muttering...]

Excerpt from an Untitled Book.

-27-

Last Dream
Meeting the Bard
Final Act

I opened my eyes gradually; images started to form in the back of my retina. I laid there motionless on the grass, and I took a while recollecting who and where I was, staring blankly at a starless, flamingo sky through a circle of treetops looming over me, as if I was at the bottom of a well. My body felt light, like it was made of cold air. I tried to sit and observe my surroundings. It was the same spiral clearing of land I reached earlier with Mandolin, I noticed. However, it was painfully quiet. Not like the usual utter calmness I was used to, but rather a different kind of silence. It didn't feel like the air particles weren't vibrating, but instead it felt like there are no air particles at all. The scenery around me was the same, trees and grass and sky, but it felt like it's made of entirely something else, like it was all but a hollow image. Only then did I notice that I was not actually breathing, though I was not suffocating either. I did feel rather fine.

Last Dream

After I gather my thoughts, I have come to notice the disappearance of two major existences from my late memory, Mandolin and the white monolith I fell asleep on. I was alone. I scanned the area around me but she was nowhere to be found. The idea that I should call out for her grabbed my attention for a split second then it dissipated. Somehow, I realized, I should be alone.

On the spot where the monolith stood, I saw an abysmal hole the size of a dinner table. On the side of the hole, metal stairs were attached that go vertically down. I crawled to the edge of it on my knees and stared deep into the complete darkness below. It seemed to be bottomless, no sound, no air, no light.

I stood up, gave my background another skim, but nothing seemed to stir, nothing hinted that it was going to change any time soon. Not after I was gone, not forever. This place had always existed the way it was right now, and it would eternally keep on existing unchanged.

With careful steps, I started to climb the metal stairs down the hole. The iron felt cold on my hands, but steady and solid, which gave me a feeling of safety. I slowly landed my feet at each step of the way, and held a strong grip on the metal rail with each stride down. I descended unhurriedly but fixedly. I didn't stop. I didn't waver. I didn't hesitate. On top of me, the opening of the hole was gradually shrinking. It first turned into a scarlet full moon on a night sky, then it became a star, then, it disappeared, leaving me in total darkness. I kept going down, step by step, one after another. My mind was as hollow, as a cinema hall after the movie was over and everybody had left. All I was focused on was climbing down, down, down...

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I couldn't recall how long I lasted there. I couldn't tell the difference between eternity and a breath. It might've been this or that, or both. But my descent down the abyss had finally come to an end. It seemed that I have hit the bottom. The ground was dry and flat. I was immersed in the same thick darkness as before, and my senses picked up nothing out of the ordinary. I tried to reach into the murkiness with my hands, attempting to map my surroundings. I sensed three walls, at my left, right and my back; upright smooth walls. *Somebody must've built them*, I thought. It seemed that I only had one direction to go, which was forward. So, I walked ahead, slowly, carefully, constantly mapping the site with my hands. It appeared to be that I was walking a long dark corridor the width of my widespread arms. I didn't glimpse anything that suggested it was going to end any time soon. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. I said nothing. I just forged ahead, blank mind, solely focusing on where I put my feet and what my hands touched.

Again, the time flow blurred through my perceptions. I couldn't quite tell how long did I walk in that dark corridor, hours, minutes, ages... But my stroll had ended when I sensed what felt like a wooden door on my left side. I stopped, grabbed a spherical knob on the door, and it made a wet sound that echoed endlessly throughout the corridor as I slowly turned it clockwise. I opened the door and entered.

I stepped through, and a cosmic white desert unfolded before me. Silver dunes were spread out like inert waves and stretch parsecs in all directions. A bright full moon floats above, outshining all the stars in the sky, except the four stars of Orion's belt; they burned as glamorous as the moon.

Last Dream

I let my gaze brush the view. It stumbled on nothing that caught the attention, just sand, nothing but sand as far as the eye could see. The scene pierced through my deepest memories and hit a distant string. It felt familiar. *I have been here before, not once, but many times. Why do I keep coming back? I must do something, I must go somewhere.* I took a few steps ahead and I noticed that the sound of my feet was making as they shuffle through the sands wasn't right. It was crunchy and dry. I looked down and I noticed that I was stepping on a layer of snow; the whole desert was covered by ice I came to realize. I raised my gaze to the sky. It was snowing, a windless, cloudless snow.

I forged ahead, space steady, vacant mind. There was nothing else I could do but move forward, always forward, whatever might happen to me, whatever awaited me, it was not here.

Behind me, the scenery was disintegrating into void the further I went. There was no turning back. I advanced slowly until something finally showed on the horizon: two silhouettes who appear to be walking further from me, that of a tall man, and that of a little girl.

The mist suddenly dissipated from my cognition. It was clear now. That man was the Bard of the Night, and the little girl was Sophia, and she was leaving somewhere far off, drifting away from me, from *my* world. I didn't know what she was doing with him, or where was he taking her, but I knew I had to get her back. Why? *I don't seem to understand the real reason.* I just knew that she shouldn't be with him. I quicken my strides and follow them.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

I felt a pungent sadness in my throat upon recalling Sophia's memory. Why must that be? What was I missing? Why did I feel acid eating me away, promising me great pain and solitude... Solitude, that was the feeling I found myself drown in all of a sudden. I had been alone for so long, and I missed her terribly. Sharp memories came rushing at me, like daggers stained with blood cutting my back, a blood that I had gushed silently for eons. I saw her sitting beside me at the corner table at Birdland. I stared at the profile view of her face as she watched through the window quietly. She looked sad and burdened. She bundled her hair around her earlobe, revealing the dark, triangular mark behind, sipped her coffee, then looked at me, smiling... I was laying on the floor, resting my head on her lap in a dark corner of my apartment. I lost my gaze in the details of her face; her beauty shattered my soul and makes my heart race. She ran her fingers through my hair and whispered something to me. I smiled and stretched out my hand to caress her face; she looked away, but I stopped midway... I was walking with her side by side into a majestic palace. Gigantic golden pillars greet us along the way, celestial horns blew at our arrival, the sky was the rooftop, the walls reached beyond the horizon. I felt home. This was the place we built together, where anyone could dream forever.

I continued crossing the cold white desert. Snow piled up on top of my hair and shoulders. I brushed it away and kept on walking. Relentlessly following their steps. I seem to be getting closer to them, the outlines of their bodies become clearer. The Bard was somewhat tall, his head appeared to be that of an animal. Sophia was holding the Bard's hand, like a little daughter clinging to her father's arm in a crowded place, lest she got lost. They never looked back. Perhaps they didn't suspect

Last Dream

they were being followed, or perhaps it didn't matter to them at all. The more I watched them, the more I wondered if she really wanted to be saved. She seemed to be completely yielding, passive, and that he was leading her somewhere she needed to be across this vast desert. Was it her will to go with him? Or was she just too weak to resist? Ideas of doubt intruded on my mind, disturbing my will to go forward. Was it perhaps all just meaningless? I wondered, *should I just stop?* I looked back and I saw the void eating away this world like black fire devouring a field of wheat. I had no choice. If I stopped moving forth, I'd be lost forever into nothingness. I decided to go where they went, see for myself where it all led.

A distant image appeared in the line separating earth from sky. Hazy at first, then it gradually becomes sharper. It was a little house, as big as one room, with a white dome on top. The Bard and Sophia march towards it until they were finally at its door. The Bard opened it and in, they walk. The door closed behind them.

I hastened my strides, walking right behind them to the Dome house, but when I got close enough, someone appeared before me, stopping. The eyeless old man with a long beard and the stick in his left hand. He was wearing, like the last time, a purple suit with a dark, green tie.

"Thou should not be here, bygone," an ambient low voice said, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

"I can't. There is no place to go back to," I replied with a tone that wasn't mine.

"That is no trouble of mine. Thou bear thy misfortune."

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I must go inside. I must! Nothing is going to get in the way,” I seemed to be saying.

“Fool! Things are the way they are for a reason. There are rules, and a dreadful price must be paid in the event of their transgression. Are thou willing to pay?”

I felt someone rest his hand on my shoulder. I turned their way and I saw my shadow, standing before me. I looked him in the eyes and he nodded

“Do it,” he said.

“Yes, I bear full responsibility,” I replied to the old man.

“So be it,” the same low translucent voice answered. The old man stepped away, and finally let me pass. I walked to the Dome house, held the wooden knob in my hand, and slowly opened the door.



The room was obscured. The inside was splashed by a soft amber glow coming from a single candle standing in the middle on top of a low table. The interior wasn't so spacious, and was jammed with all kinds of items. Old wooden instruments in one corner, a pile of musty books and manuscripts in another, aged canvases of unfinished paintings leaning on the wall, miniature sculptures of some animals and multi-armed deities of faded colors, and many things of shapes and functions I didn't understand.

Last Dream

The Bard of the Night and little Sophia were sitting on the other side of the low table facing the entrance; shades casted by the flickering flame danced on their faces.

“Join us,” The bard says as he gestured for me with his hand to take a seat, his voice divine and sinister.

I approached and lowered myself on the floor across from them. Sophia eyed me curiously from behind the Rat-headed the Bard. She looked scared and fragile, but she didn’t seem to have recognized me. On top of the table, there was a dagger, a plain, standard dagger with a wooden handle and a pointed blade. No ornaments or words inscribed in it; made to fit its purpose and nothing more.

“The world beyond that door has perished. It no longer exists. The only way out is through the second door behind me,” he said.

“Where are you taking her?” I asked.

“I am taking her to the chasm of existence. To the unraveled oblivion. Where no call, no warmth, no memory will ever reach her. To where everybody is traveling eventually.”

“Why are you doing this? Why her?”

“You will come to learn the reason at some point of your existence, when days and nights bear no meaning, when life and death merge into one. But for now, know that I do this because of you,” he said, his deep blue eyes heavily gaze into my being.

“I don’t understand. Because of me?”

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“I am leading her faraway. I am leading her to you. But she is not your destiny. She mustn’t be with you. If you wish to take her, a price must be paid, blood must be spilled. Only two will come out of this room. You make your choice.”

“What price, and who’s blood are you talking about?”

The Bard of the night rose from his seat. Seeing him up-close, he turned out to be bigger than I had anticipated. The sight of his might and vigor sent shivers and woe down my spine. I sensed danger, fear, and reverence. He unbuttoned his long dark coat and reveals a naked torso beneath. His body seemed that of a normal human being. Well-trimmed and well-built, with a bone-white skin that went upward until it connected with a head of a furry rat. In the middle of his chest, right on the spot of his heart, I saw a dark triangle inside a circle on his skin.

“The dagger is on the table. All you have to do is to stab me right here,” he said as he points to the triangle on his heart. “Kill me, and you get to walk out of here with her. It is my blood that needs to be spilled.”

I remained frozen in my seat. My heart started to pound like an Orc’s war drum. My instincts felt a great threat and imminent death. I couldn’t manage to move or make a decision.

“However,” he said. “If you fail to do so, she’ll be thrown into a bottomless abyss. You’ll never see her again. She would be irretrievably lost. I can promise you that. Isn’t that the greatest of evil? To inflict the most horrible of punishments on the most innocent? She didn’t do anything wrong, and yet she’s about to be cast away into the coldest darkness alone. I want you to hate me for it. Pick up the dagger, and kill me.”

Last Dream

He made a slight move towards me, and my alert reflexed respond as quickly. I grabbed the dagger from the table, jolted from my seat and took a few steps back. Sophia remained shrunk on the floor, swinging her blank stare between the Bard and me.

“Yes, that’s it. Now approach, come closer, muster your courage, and stab me right in the heart. Remember this is not about you. It’s either you finish me or I finish her.”

I felt like a weak prey animal under the eyes of a predator. Fear welled, swelled and throbbed in my chest, then spread throughout my blood, freezing my joints. This was a dread greater than any of my previous nightmares. His presence exerted a fierce strain and pressure on my soul; it felt like it was decaying from the outside and torn apart from the inside. I wanted to run away but there was nowhere to run off to. I wanted to leave but there was no way I’d leave Sophia with him. I was left with no choice but to kill him. But even if I overcame my fear and attacked him with the intent of ending his life, I couldn’t. *I don’t think I am able to kill someone, there’s no turning back once you’ve stepped that line.* Perhaps he wasn’t a human being, but he looked like one, flesh and bones. He was alive and conscious and intelligent. How could I live with blood on my hands, knowing that I had willingly ended the life of someone else? Even if he wished it this way, murder was beyond redemption.

“I understand it is hard. It *must* be hard. The prize is unmatchable, and the price is gargantuan. Live without guilt but forever in solitude, or carry a wounded conscience but rejoice your soul’s yearning company. The choice is yours... But be certain, she will pay dreadfully in the event if you make the

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

wrong one. Of course, maybe I wasn't clear enough, you, too, will be stuck here in this room forever, until the void eats it away too. Remember, only two will make it out of here," he said, as he grabs her from the hand. "Time isn't what you have in abundance. Make your decision and make it quick."

I stood still on my spot, dagger in my hands pointed towards him, my muscles stiff as stone. I couldn't manage to say anything, or do anything. I watched him with a vigilant eye, all my senses honed.

"Perhaps you don't grasp the concept of *void*," he continued. "Of course, how could you? All you have known is *existence*, dominated by unbreakable laws. You are certain that when there's a cause, there's a consequence; when there's an action, there's a reaction. That when you put enough effort, whether you want to build or destroy, it eventually pays off. And you know that whatever exists could also perish, what ages will certainly die, what has been dead will be reborn. You know that after pain, comes relief; after sorrow, comes joy, and if that doesn't happen, you could simply end your own existence and be done with it.

"Perhaps you do not know the luxury of living under unbreakable laws. It is rather a bliss, to be certain that everyone is coexisting within the same unchangeable, eternal laws. And that those laws will always, forever, be functional... Not until you know what the absolute void means."

I sensed something transmuting within me. It was faint and weak, but it was taking form. I didn't understand what it could be, but it was of a different color than fear.

"Let me tell you about the void, about the absolute darkness, the absolute nothingness, the eternal vacuum, in which she will

Last Dream

forever drift. At first, you are not aware of who or where you are. You are but a speck floating in oblivion. But gradually, you become conscious, conscious of your own desires and fears, of your needs to interact and converse, to love and be loved, to have a purpose toward which you move forward. You become aware of the terror of solitude, unheard of, unnoticed, unremembered, unloved. You float in the void expecting to be rescued any time soon, expecting that something will change and come to be at any moment, but nothing happens,” he elaborated.

I shut my eyes, trying not to listen to what he was saying. I tried to make my head clear and to think straight, but I couldn't. Something was changing within me, it was getting stronger and more violent.

“You wait and wait, but nothing happens. You live in dread that your worst fears might become a reality. That you might end up forever alone. That nobody is coming to rescue you. After that, you live the real horror when you realize that your fears are indeed a reality. But there's nowhere to hide, no one to run off to, and nothing you can do about it.”

Stop.

“Next stage is fury. When fear finally subsides, ravaging anger takes its place. You become furious at your own fate, at your own destiny. Outraged at God for abandoning you here alone, at your parents who gave birth to you, at the sun and rain that nourished the food you ate, at the people you've met and loved and who filled you with memories that you now agonize about... At the nations for not having used all their warheads and ended all life, yours included and spared you this hell. You become infuriated at everything and everyone. But once again,

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

you can do nothing about it. You try to scream, but *no voice* comes out of your throat. You try to break something, but there's nothing to destroy. You try to hurt yourself, but you feel no physical pain, which makes you even more enraged..."

Stop it...

"Next comes desolation, a sorrow deeper and darker than Neptune's core. Anger, slowly metamorphose into melancholy, depression takes over, black on black. Again, you wish you could take your own life, to stab your heart with a thousand knife, to throw yourself into a boiling hell, but you can't. You just drift in the void, endlessly, eternally. You don't go mad, you don't age and die, you don't get better with time. You just swing from extreme fear to acid anger, from anger to agonizing sadness, and then back to fear again... That's what she will be living, forever, in perpetuity."



[... A thin layer of still dust lays on the furniture like insipid sugar on a cake, a cake that had been forgotten in the fridge for ages. The art on the walls had faded like ink on intimate letters damped in water, and the colors had blended like everything else in indefinable dreary hue. A shy orange light silently bathes the inside, barely making its way through the different parts of the palace, leaving many corners in eternal shadow behind.

The Dreamkeeper makes a tour of the whole palace every day in the melodies of Tchaikovsky's Pas De Deux. It has become a ritual for him. He walks alone and tries to conjure old memories, holding onto a thin thread, the only thread, linking his heart to a distant warm place, like a kite floating aimlessly

Last Dream

through space, linked by a spider's string to a faraway home with a bonfire and someone waiting. It is the only way he could find solace in his barren existence: walking and listening to that piece of music.

After a long time waiting, and after he started losing all hope, the visitor finally shows up once again at his doors, wearing the same oversized black suit and the thick, square-framed glasses. However, the red tie is missing and he wasn't alone. A tall man wearing a long cashmere coat and, for some ambiguous reason, a mask of a white rat on his face stands beside him. He knocks, and not after long the Dreamkeeper opens the door.

"You made it," he exclaims.

"I promised I'd come back, Chico!"

They give each other a quick manly hug and they go inside.

"This is the Bard," says the visitor.

"Welcome to my ruins, make yourself at home," states the Dreamkeeper as he shakes his hand. The Bard nods but says nothing.

Through the elevator, they ascend to the 77th floor and take the best table there is in the 21st-century bar. They manage to get it because the Dreamkeeper owns the place and because there's no one there anyway. Glasses full of ice and drinks on the table, they each take a seat.

"Your friend had briefed me about what you seek. You want to find your lost partner, and you want to know why she had

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

disappeared? If I am not mistaken,” says the Bard, his voice low and divine.

“That’s right!” replied the Dreamkeeper.

The bard nods slowly, then says, “I need something that belongs to her, something personal. I hope you do possess such an item.”

The Dreamkeeper gives it some thought, then he rises from his seat and leaves the bar. The visitor puts a cigarette between his lips and hands one to the bard. They smoke leisurely until the Dreamkeeper comes back, holding a spherical flask the size of his hands. The flask is made of glass and sealed with a cork, in it a throbbing glowing yellow matter the size of an eyeball floats in the middle, diffusing brownish particles in the space inside. He places it on top of the table and falls back to his seat.

“Will this do?” he asks the bard.

“What’s that?” asks the visitor, eyeing the flask curiously.

“This is her pain in a jar. She collected it and handed it to me. That’s all she left me.”

“You mean that when we were cleansed, she didn’t get rid of it?” asked the visitor.

“Yes, she decided to keep it. It finally came in handy.”

The Bard cradles the flask between his palms and holds it midair and contemplates it for a while in complete silence. “Yes, this will do,” he says finally.

“What’s next?” asks the Dreamkeeper.

Last Dream

“My eyes do not behold the world the same way your eyes do. I see different things invisible to you. One of them is fate. I see fate as radiant orange strings that pierce the heart and stretch out infinitely into the future and eons back into the past,” he says as he traces a line with his finger into the air. “If I follow back the strings of fate coming out of your heart and the one linked to the flask you gave me, I could perhaps understand why she left and how to get her back.”

“Wait... How far can you go to the future?” asks the visitor.

“Far away, but not infinitely far away. I can’t break through the great divide. That’s my limit. What’s beyond is out of my realm.”

“Okay. How long will it take you to do your job?” asks the Dreamkeeper.

“Time flows differently for me. I might leave and spend long spans of time in the past and come back and yet it would seem just a few minutes for you. So, I’ll just close my eyes for a while and concentrate on the task. I can also be at two spots at the same time. Well, not exactly at the same time since I’ll be far back into the past. So keep it quiet, would you?”

The flask of pain between his palms. The Bard sinks in his chair and closes his eyes.

Calm lingers in the air around them. The Dreamkeeper and the visitor observe the Bard intently as he dwells on his deed. They don’t know where the strings lead him or what he was seeing. All they can do is imagine.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

“What if...” the visitor blurted out all of a sudden. “And I’m sure it has already crossed your mind, what if... she’s never coming back? You know... what if she...”

“Took her own life?”

The visitor nods.

“That remains a possibility. I just have to hope that she didn’t.”

The visitor pulls out a dagger and lays it on the table. A plain simple dagger with a wooden handle and a silver-colored blade.

“Those tools are our only solace in this existence,” says the visitor, contemplates it absently. “Those daggers given to us by God are the only weapons that can terminate the life of an immortal soul. And each dagger can only take one single life. He gave each of us a ticket, a way out. To be honest, I carry it with me all the time, having it on me is what gives my existence meaning, knowing I can end it any time I want.”

The Dreamkeeper does the same and pulls out his dagger and sets it on the table beside the first one. They look identical, a perfect replica.

“So, you carry it with you, too...”

“I do. You don’t know how many times I considered using it, and how many times I was so close. This dagger is my treasure. Immortality is scarier than hell.”

“Let’s hope she still has her dagger...” says the visitor.

“Yeah...”

Last Dream

The Bard finally opens his eyes. Silently, he leans forward, and elbows on the table, he cups his head with both hands and stares fixedly down at the table. None of them utters a word. They wait for him to fully make it back, and after a while, he breathes a deep sigh and raises his head. He stares deeply at the Dreamkeeper.

“So?” says the visitor.

“This is truly conundrum,” replied the Bard.

“What do you mean?” asks the visitor.

“How did you two even end up together!?”

“I don’t know. It felt like I’ve always known her, like I’ve always been with her. What’s your point?”

The Bard falls quiet for a while. He gathers his thoughts and then he says, “The issue is profound, way more profound than I had anticipated. This may sound odd and hard to grasp, but I’ll put it as bluntly as possible. You two had never met. Not in any previous life and not in any possible reality. You two could not have met under any circumstances. Your encounter is made impossible by the heavens. You two are like two magnets of the same pole drifting endlessly in space in opposite directions. And even if by a miracle you happen to come close to each other, you’d instantly repel one another and go on drifting each in his own path again. Do you get me? It’s like you are the exact opposite of soul mates. It’s ridiculous, even the most random people get to meet at least once in their whole existence. You two... Never.

“That is the reason why she disappeared. She must be somewhere far away from here, because that’s where she should

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

be, anywhere but with you. But that is not the issue, because even if you find her, she wouldn't recognize you, because you two have never met. I have never witnessed the expression 'You're just not meant to be together' materialize so perfectly like with you two."

"But why do I remember her then?" asks the Dreamkeeper.

"I don't know, to be honest. What happened to her must also happen to you, but for some reason, you still remember her. You are cheating fate itself, I give you that."

The Dreamkeeper did forget about her. For twelve years. Just not in this life or this reality.

The Dreamkeeper holds the flask of pain in his hands and loses his line of thoughts.

"The important question is... What could be done?" asks the Dreamkeeper.

"If I could only make your two strings cross even once, that would be enough," says the Bard. "But alternating fate is one of the hardest feats, if not impossible. Not only that but it is also forbidden, something I am not allowed to do."

"But can you still do it?"

"Yes, but it will cost me so much, and so it must also cost you so much."

"What do you want in return?"

"The most precious thing you own," answered the Bard without a shred of hesitation.

Last Dream

"The whole palace is all ruins. Take it if you want. She's more important to me than anything."

"I didn't mean the palace. I meant the dagger."

"The dagger?"

"Yes, I want you to end my life with your dagger. Unfortunately and bitterly, us, the Bards of the Night, we don't have such a luxury. We can't just end our suffering. We're cursed with an everlasting eternity. I existed way before you were created, and I will continue to exist long after you've all perished. It would be a great relief for me to just call out. However, if you end my life, you'd be the one cursed with eternity, you'd lose your only exit. I know it's a hard choice, but it's whether your love or your dagger. Which one will it be?"

The Dreamkeeper dives into deep thinking, then he stands up and faces the window and he loses his gaze amidst the thick unmerciful fog of decay.

"That's a dick move," he finally tells the Bard.

"Sorry, I won't get another chance like this. I can give you something you want, something nobody else can, and you can give me something I want. We can help one another. You owe me nothing and I have no obligation to help you for free. Let me tell you one other thing. In the event where you accept my offer, I am going to remind you that it is extremely hard for me to alter fate. and in order to do that, I might have to compromise a lot. Not only will I change your life and hers, but the lives of many people around you. If you want to change a little but important detail in the script, you'd have to alter many parts of the whole text to conform with the new change. It is how it is. It wouldn't

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

be just about you two, but a few others will have to bear the consequences of my unrighteous act. And yet, I might still fail. I want you to keep that in mind before you make your decision."

"What kind of changes will other people have to bear?"

"I think it's better if you don't know. I will just do my job."

The Dreamkeeper stands mute before the window. He thinks deeply about the offer. He ponders about what it means to be eternal. Time would lose its meaning, and days would be just a dull repetition of themselves. A world without opposites is hell, and he realizes that. But what a world without her would be? He already knows the answer, because he has lived through her absence for a parsec of time, and he truly wants her back, more than anything else. He is confused, but nothing seemed to dissipate the fog from his mind. The visitor gets up and stands before him.

"Think hard about it, think hard and deep about a life without your dagger. Every entry must have an existence. If you lose that, you lose your mind. You lose your reason to exist. Think about it. Because I would never trade my dagger, no matter what."

The Dreamkeeper doesn't say a word, he just keeps on thinking, for a long time. He's truly at a loss. He can't find the right answer.

Finally, he looks at the Bard deep in the eyes, and gives him his final word...]

Excerpt from an Untitled Book.



Last Dream

At that instant, the feeling that had been growing inside me finally took form, like fire casting away swarms of insects, its intensity chased off all the fear from my heart. I felt it vibrating in my chest, leaking into my veins, igniting a fire in my muscles. It took over me, and without really being in control over my actions, I ran in his directions and stabbed him with all my force. The blade penetrated his skin, his ribs, and his flesh and made it to the heart. I felt every layer of it. I heard every sound it makes. I pulled out the blade from his chest and hot blood come oozing out. It stains my face, my clothes and dripped on the ground. I stabbed him once again, and again, and again. My eyes eventually met his, and in the frenzy of the moment, it seemed as if he was smiling, as if he was enjoying every bit of it. He irresistibly let me attack him, arms wide open as if to celebrate my feat. Soon though, his face began to distort in strange ways. He took a step back and covered his wounds with both arms. Then he started making incomprehensible noises, shrieks and heavy sighs until blood came bursting out of his mouth, dying the white fur of his head into dark red. He fell on his knees, breathing heavily and bumping into a pile of items, then he collapsed on the floor. A terrifying convulsion wracked his body. When the agitation ceased, he wound up laying on his back, arms wide open, eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. His breathing slowed down steadily, until it subsided.

He was unmistakably dead.

When I regained track of what was happening, I finally came to witness what I had accomplished. A dead body drowning in blood at my feet, devoid of any sign of life. It seemed that I have stabbed him seven times in the heart, seven linear cuts in the middle of his chest, right on the triangular mark. My hands shook terribly, I dropped the dagger on the ground.

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

Sophia was curled up in a corner. She watched the whole scene but made no sound. She remained frozen in her spot, her gaze glued to the dead body before her. I reached for her and grabbed her by the shoulders. She looked at me in confusion, giving me a stare no different than the one she eyed the dead body with.

“You’re fine now. He’s gone. Come,” I said, holding her little cold hand. Without much resistance, she stood up, and we walked out of the room, through the second door.

Outside, the same immense white desert greeted us. A windless empty succession of dunes, nothing to see or to hear. However, it wasn’t covered by a layer of snow, or snowing.

I looked at Sophia, and she turned into her full-grown self, the one I knew and lost. She looked up to the sky, wavy hair kissing at her shoulders. She held my hand tighter, looked back at me, and smiled.

Above us, the *three* stars of Orion glinted silently.

-28-

The Circus Has Packed Up and Moved Away: It's All Over

The dream is over, I wake up.

I found myself lying on the grass, in the same round clearing in the middle of the woods where I came with Mandolin... When was it, an hour ago? Two hours ago? *For how long have I been sleeping*, I wonder. I pulled out my phone, the battery is almost dead but I manage to see the date. I stared hard at it: 2:37 p.m.; one and a half day later. I slept for over a day and a half.

Mandolin was nowhere to be seen. She must've gone back to the mansion to get some rest. Perhaps she couldn't wake me up, or perhaps she didn't want to, it didn't really matter. My mouth was dry, my head was foggy. I felt an all-consuming thirst and hunger. I rose up and stretch out. Time to head back.

Just when I was about to leave the clearing, I looked back, something is missing: The white monolith beside which I slept was no longer there in the middle. There was just grass and wildflowers. I looked around me. Was this the same spot or is it

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

a different one? After giving it a second skim, I noticed that everything feels different, but this was not a dream. This was reality. I was certain of it.

I walked back the path that led me here. I found it a little difficult to remember, but I manage to find my way through. I forged ahead into the woods, the wind rustled through the trees, insects hiss, birds sing. It all looked calm and peaceful, but I felt like I was forgetting something very crucial. I searched my memory like someone rummaging through a pile of books looking for an important piece of paper. I looked hard, until I finally found it Sophia's surgery...

I quickened my pace, then I started running nonstop across the forest. I had to get to the hospital as fast as I could. I should have been there to see her before the surgery. I had many things I wanted to tell her. Perhaps she had things to tell me, too, or perhaps not; an eye contact would have said it all, but I missed it.

I finally found the mansion, but when I saw it, I'm stunned. It suddenly aged a hundred years. The bright white color of the outside walls turned brown, the pillars at the entrance were cracked and invaded by moss, the tiles on the floor were missing. When I walked to the front door, I found it locked with a heavy, rusty chain. I knocked but no one responded. I peeked through the windows. The curtains were gone, the glass was broken, and the inside was empty and dead quiet. I saw nothing but an abandoned house in the middle of the forest. The Latin inscription on top of the door didn't exist, and neither did the winged, naked man perched on top of the fountain. Luckily enough, I found my uncle's red Aveo parked right where I left it.

The Circus Has Packed up and Moved Away

I decided not to think about it for the time being. I started the engine and hit the road.

I walked up the stairs of the hospital, wide strides up to the pavilion of neurosurgery. People threw strange glances in my direction, a guard asked me to slow down. I bumped into a nurse and something fell from my pocket on the floor, but I couldn't manage to look back. *Will I make it in time, or is it already too late?* Halfway, my heart gave an odd flutter, like dragonflies flapping their wings, scattering all-around at the sound of a distant gunfire. And at that moment, I knew. The circus had already packed up and moved away. It was pointless to hurry.

In the hall of the neurosurgery department, I saw a group of doctors and staff members, some of them are wearing white coats, other surgical gowns of different colors, all gathered around one person. Some of them were patting him on the shoulder in comfort, others were giving him warm hugs, and some were just exchanging fervent handshakes. All in complete silence. Nobody uttered a word. All shared a mournful look their faces. The man in the middle was Doctor Ezra.

When the crowd dissipated from around him, I finally managed to see his face. Burning eyes, tears gliding down his cheeks, and glued lips. A moment passed, and he noticed me, our eyes meet, and all my doubts became real.

It was all over.

Einmal Ist Keinmal

On the southern seaside of Bone, there was a graveyard located on the slope of a hill facing the sea. The cemetery bore no real architecture, the tombs were scattered randomly everywhere under and amidst pine trees. From afar it looked like a roman theater, where souls sat quietly and watch the sea. It was a rather mystical ground, where beauty and death, serenity and ocean merged together in one site. It was the same cemetery in which doctor Ezra used to spend his afternoons in his younger years, and up to this day, he still did.

Upon the hill, there was a fig tree, the only fig tree in the whole cemetery. Nobody knew who planted it or why it stood there alone, and nobody really cared that much anyway. However, some say it was around that tree that people started burying their loved ones. Or perhaps it was fairest to say, it was around one nameless grave, that was nested right beneath the tree, the only one, forever bathing in its shadows.

The identity of the person buried in that grave remains forever a mystery, the letters of his name engraved on the stone

Einmal Ist Keinmal

were bleached by time, so was the date of his birth and death. Nevertheless, the epitaph remains intact. It said:

“What happens but once, might as well not have happened at all. If we only have one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all.”

Recently, however, someone joined the mystery man in his solitude under the fig tree. She was like a breeze on a summer afternoon, quiet and reserved. Her tombstone too, for some reasons unbeknownst to us, was left unnamed.

Doctor Ezra stood before her grave for a while, muttered something in the air as he raised his hands in prayer. Then, he left.

Dusk approached and chased away daylight beyond the horizon, until it conquered the sky. Stars came out of their bashfulness one after the other, and a silence fell over the cemetery. A little boy walked up the hill until he reached the two graves under the fig tree. His head was shaved and bore a conspicuous scar, and on his back, he carried what looks like a mandolin. The boy knelt before her grave, and gently caressed the stone. Then he sat on its edge, and started playing a melody while looking at the night sky.

High above, Orion’s four stars scintillated glamorously.

The End: Six Months Later

I lean on the balcony's handrail; the night is calm and deep and the cold breeze brushes off my face. I light a cigarette and lose my gaze in the distance. The Dutchess is sitting on a chaise-longue beside me.

“Are you going to keep waiting for her?” she asks, rhetorically, because she already knows the answer. I remain silent. “You’ve been coming here almost every single night for the past six months. You’re almost certain she’s going to come back, and I know you want to be present when she does. I don’t want to doubt what you believe in, you must have your reasons. After all, you barely tell me anything. Actually, I kind of admire your persistence, but...” She crushes her cigarette in the ashtray on the floor, then rose from her chair and joins me, leaning her back and elbows against the rail. She looks at me and continues, “But I’m afraid she might never return. You have nothing to cling to. She made no sign ever since that day. I want to know that you’ll be fine either way, it’ll give me comfort because I’m leaving tonight.”

“Leaving?”

The End

“I am. There’s nothing left for me in this town. I must keep moving. Of course, I will miss you terribly. There’s no need to exchange numbers and social media accounts and all that stuff. We both know how useless they are in preventing people from drifting apart, so... Let’s just remember what little we have spent together. We’ll meet again one day, hopefully in the middle of the night, and hopefully not as a waitress and a lonely hungry guy asking for some company. We’re friends for life after all,” she says, resting her hand on my shoulder, then she gives me a hug, and walks out of the balcony. Her hair smells of lavender and tobacco.

Before she leaves the room, she turns back and says, “By the way, I don’t know what exactly happened six months ago, but ever since it felt like you’re someone different. It’s almost as if you came from a different world. Well, I don’t suppose you’re going to explain this one to me, and I’m sure you know what I am talking about. Perhaps another day. Au revoir, stranger.” She smiles, and leaves.

Sophia survived the surgery, for some reason, Ezra changed his mind about granting her a merciful death, and miraculously or not, she’s healed. However, she went into a deep coma, and hadn’t given a sign ever since.

Ezra managed to get her out of the hospital and moved her to resume her sleeping in her room in the villa, along with the whole equipment needed to maintain her basic biological functions, and nurses who come every day to look after her.

I come here almost every night, sit by her bed, and wait. Sometimes I read to her of her own book, sometimes I bring the violin and play her *the Nutcracker’s piece*. Alvin’s violin, the

The Pavilion of Blue Dreams

one given to me by Mr. Amati, the one with the three stars inscribed on its back. It seems that I have brought it back with me to this world, the only thing.

At times, Ruby Dutchess comes and keeps me company. Ezra doesn't mind my presence or hers as long as we're friends of his daughter. As a matter of fact, Ezra and I barely exchanged any words ever since that day. He decided to ignore me, to treat me a total stranger but just happened to be his daughter's friend. I don't know why he acts this way, and I don't really mind. Sometimes, I think that perhaps he truly doesn't know me. Perhaps he and I had never met, at least not in this world. However, the way he looks at me tells me differently.

I lose my gaze in the night sky, and I contemplate Orion's stars. They're three now. I guess I had made it back to my previous reality, or perhaps it is just a reality with a three-starred Orion, I am not sure.

Mandolin has vanished for good, from my life and is gradually fading from my memory as well. There's no trace of her, not in her mansion, not even in Ezra's memory. He ignores my questions whenever I bring her subject. I ignore if he just wants to avoid the past or if he's telling the truth. Either way, I simply have to accept my confusion.

The green iron gates of Amati's workshop are cold and closed. For six months now, he hasn't opened his doors. I don't know where he is and I also ignore if he's ever coming back. The mark in the back of my shoulder had also vanished, as if it was never there. I realized it might take me a while before grasping the alterations of this reality.

The End

I guess I understand it all now, why I had those dreams, why had I been paid a visit by the Bard of the night, why did I once drift to the other side with Sophia when I was a kid, why did I have to be there when Zoe died, why did Mr. Amati had to stab Alvin in the back. Why did Leonie had to leave Ezra, and why Fay had to take her own life? And why Sophia was on the verge of life. I understand it all, and yet, was it all really necessary?

It's midnight. I water Zoe's Magnolia and leave the balcony and sit by Sophia's bed. I hold her hand and close my eyes. Would she recognize me if she wakes up? Is she ever going to wake up... Her hand feels the same, it makes me feel the same, which is enough for me. I made a deal with the Bard of the night, and he doesn't seem the type to break promises. She will reach this side eventually, I am sure of it. I close my eyes and rest my head on the edge of her bed.

A bright moonlight floods the room.

Her hand, ever-so-lightly, ever so-delicately, twitches, and then hold mine back.

The End

