

EVERY LIGHT IN EVERY WINDOW, EVERY TOOTH IN EVERY MOUTH

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FOR JACK.

*SO YOU WILL ALWAYS KNOW: I WAS HERE, AND I LOVED YOU BEFORE
I EVEN KNEW YOU.*

“Come back. Even as a shadow, even as a dream.”
— Euripides (trans. Anne Carson)

1. THE ARCHITECTURE OF INERTIA

It's the first day of October, and winter is already biting at the edges. They say it's coming early this year: wild and hunting. Julian believes it. The city seems complicit, casting its chill across the streets, ushering in what no one had invited.

He stands in the kitchen, body idle but mind racing. He stares into the blank space between the walls and remembers when mornings felt like they had a reason to begin. They used to arrive carrying purpose instead of silence. Now they come heavy, dragging themselves through the door, and he just lets them in because what else is he supposed to do?

This apartment was supposed to become his home, a blank canvas on which to paint his life after Claire. Instead, it has become a monument to his own inertia, evidence of his inability to build anything real. He has been mostly alone since he moved out of the house they shared two years ago. He doesn't find joy in solitude, but the bricks required to build a new life feel heavier than being alone.

He opens the cabinet and worms his fingers past the torn flap of the carton, retrieving a single coffee pod. He used to make whole pots, refilling his Garfield mug freely throughout the day. Lately he's been warned about his blood pressure, the doctor gently pointing to

caffeine as something to watch. He switched to pods not long after, knowing himself well enough to understand that discipline had to be engineered, not chosen. He drops the pod into the machine, pulling yesterday's punctured husk from the slot first. The machine rattles like a wet cough. He's already drifted to the chair by the window, the coffee half forgotten before it's brewed. The table beside him holds a stack of library books; books a better version of himself would read. He tries sometimes, but the words collapse beneath the noise of his own thoughts.

The scent of coffee intrudes on his senses. Coffee is like wine, he thinks: he has never been able to tell the difference between the gourmet and the discount. The aroma should pull him out of his chair and back to the counter, but he remains in place. It's a small part of the larger pattern he's slipped into, where even the simplest movements become monumental.

He wants to believe this kind of stillness is inherited. His mother is prone to leaving a reheated mug of coffee in the microwave, only realizing hours later that she never retrieved it. It would be comforting if this tendency were genetic, passed down like a broken locket or the way his hair curls when it grows too long. His mother is always in motion though, scrubbing baseboards or trying to sweep in places no broom was meant to reach. This is different. His stillness is systemic; her distraction is born of fullness, his from emptiness.

He thinks of himself as a well-oiled machine with some serious design flaws. The pieces are there, the parts fit together, but the timing is off. He can see the task in front of him, can even set the course, but then the gears grind, the motion stalls, and everything comes to a stop.

Outside, the trees are shedding their golden cloaks. Today is abnormally windy, dirt and dust kicking up with the fallen leaves. Normally by this time of day, there are some signs of life—parents wrangling their kids into minivans, neighbours moving like shadows behind illuminated windows. Today there's nothing but the trees

thrashing against the sky, and the man with the beagle, carrying on as if the wind were no concern of theirs.

Julian sees them every day, or at least it feels that way. The beagle pulls urgently at the leash, the man trailing steadily behind. Without fail the dog lunges for some discarded crust or chocolate wrapper, and without fail the man reacts swiftly but gently. The pattern never changes: the man protects the dog from itself. Julian finds comfort in how simple the bond is, how unambiguous. He watches until they turn the corner and vanish. The street is empty again. Soon the children will return, coasting past on bikes that will soon be stowed away for the winter. For now, he lingers, eyes fixed on the swirl of leaves where the man and the dog had been, as if the air itself still carried their absence.

Julian is nearly forty now, though some mornings it feels as if his body was born tired. Once there were dreams, a clear course ahead. Now he drifts, rudderless. Inertia has become his identity. He doesn't move, not because he can't, but because even the idea of it—the act of wanting, of reaching—feels exhausting.

The world feels far away, like a party glimpsed through a lit window. He can see the shapes inside: the laughter, the gestures, the leaning-in closeness of people who belong to each other. He can almost convince himself that if he knocked, someone might open the door, draw him into the warmth. But he never knocks. He lingers outside, breath fogging the glass, waiting for a sign that never comes. Sometimes he imagines they've already seen him and turned away, deciding he isn't who they want at their table. Other times it feels worse—that no one has noticed him at all.

Even the idea of love, looking back, feels less like something he lived and more like something he once overheard, the way you might catch the faint hum of music from a neighbour's house. He has always found it strange: how a single night can mean everything to one person and almost nothing to the other. How you can sit across from someone, feel something shift, something begin to hum beneath the conversation, and imagine, foolishly, that they feel it too.

Sometimes he thinks the cruellest part isn't the loneliness at all, but the imbalance of wanting: one person walking home lit up, the other already brushing their teeth. He has been both. He tells himself he knows better now than to take silence personally, but it clings anyway, like smoke on a sweater.

Once in a while, though, someone matches your pace. Same step, same smile, the same fragile future forming between you. It doesn't happen often. When it does, it feels like an accident too rare to trust—like luck, like grace, like something that might dissolve the moment you name it.

At this age, he can't imagine falling the way he once did, drowning in that kind of longing. He doesn't know if that's cynicism or wisdom, only that desire feels heavier than it used to, as though even the heart has grown tired of sprinting after its own illusions. Maybe that's what makes the rare alignments feel so impossible when they arrive: not the beauty of them, but the certainty that they can't last. Every beginning already contains its ending, written in advance like the last pages of a book he has read too many times before.

Julian spends too much time thinking about the times he has been in love. Sometimes it lasted for years; other times, only a few disorienting weeks. Once, he even convinced himself he was in love with a server at the pub—for the span of forty-five minutes.

The pattern never changes. He dives in blindly, trampling every red flag in his path, certain that this one—this time—will be magic. The unraveling follows its own familiar script: an unease creeping in, a sense that they're already gone, even as they stand in the room beside him. When it ends, it only confirms what he suspected all along: they never really wanted him. And if they did, it was only for a version of himself he is too exhausted to keep alive.

More than once, he has been accused of keeping one foot out the door. They are never wrong, but it is not because he doesn't want to stay. It is because he never knows where to stand when the ground feels as though it is shifting beneath him. There is a particular terror

in believing that everyone you love is only a breath away from waking to the truth—that you were a mistake they made along the way.

When the walls eventually give way to gravity, as they always do, he is left picking through the rubble, searching for something solid enough to build on. Each time he tells himself that the next attempt will be different, that he will speak more plainly, see himself more clearly, resist vanishing into his own land of make-believe. Yet somehow, he always begins again on the same cracked foundation, as if he can't help but return to it, as if there is no other ground at all.

He thinks of the friends he has lost: people who once poured too much rye and too many dreams into plastic cups in a backyard with broken patio chairs. One night, someone had said, "I can't wait to see what we are all like at forty." They never made it. Not together, anyway.

The present rushes back with a gust that rattles the windows, scattering another flurry of leaves across the street. Nothing has moved since the man and the beagle disappeared around the corner. The mug of coffee still sits in the machine, probably cold by now. He imagines microwaving it, then imagines pouring it down the sink. Instead, he thinks of the workday ahead: the labour of forced smiles, of careful accommodation, of pretending to be visible when the truth is he barely feels there at all.

Some days he wishes for rescue. Wishes he could be like the beagle: pulling forward blindly, nose to the ground, oblivious to what lies ahead until a hand, steady and sure, pulls him back.

Eventually, guilt outweighs dread. He shrugs on his coat, pockets the keys. The wind catches the door as he opens it, flinging dust into his face and nearly drowning the sound of leaves crunching beneath his feet. Later, when he returns, the cold coffee will still be there: proof of his own small failings. He will pour it out and tell himself that tomorrow he will drink it, that tomorrow he will rise earlier, that tomorrow something will finally shift.

Maybe, one day, he will even move just far enough ahead for someone to pull him gently back.