

> soft reset

A Zoo Story



by Austen Tucker

COLOPHON

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Set in Lora, Inter, and JetBrains Mono. Designed for screen and small format.

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The Ritual

My rig lived in a bucket of ice.

Not the whole rig — just the part that mattered, the cooling loop soldered onto the manifold that ran hottest. Kit called it a war crime against small appliances, the one time I showed him. Said I was gonna burn out my brainstem.

But it's how I go home.

I filled the bucket from the tap, dumped in whatever the freezer still had — three ice trays, half a bag of peas older than my last relationship — and packed it around the loop until the status light stopped its worried orange blink and went to cold, patient blue.

An hour. Maybe ninety minutes if I didn't move much. After that, I could keep going, but the ice stopped making it safe.

Anyway, anyway, anyway.

Outside, the city was doing the thing it did a little earlier every year, which was try to kill everyone in it by six p.m. My building's cooling ration had run out at two. Sweat pooled behind my knees just sitting still. Somewhere below me a compressor that had been dying since spring made its long, grinding case for early retirement.

I didn't turn on a fan. A fan just moves the hot air around so it can hit you from a new angle.

I settled into the chair — a curb rescue from two summers back, foam gone soft in exactly the shape of me by now — and found the jack by feel, the way you find a light switch in your childhood house at two in the morning without looking. Port, just behind the left ear. In.

I know how this looks. A girl icing her own skull to go sit inside a memory. I know it's a sim. I know the restaurant isn't standing anymore, if it ever stood anywhere outside a render farm's private accounting of one Tuesday, four years gone. I know the woman I'm about to have lunch with is not the mother upstairs in this same building, in a completely different sense of the word *upstairs*.

A soft reset keeps your save.

That's the whole trick of it, and the whole cruelty. Nothing wipes. The day is exactly the day, every time. Vivian built it with enough rules to keep it from becoming something else. I'm not rewriting my mother.

I come back because it's the only place that afternoon still happens.

That isn't the whole truth anymore. Lately I watch Kat, too — not at the curb, never there, but at the sushi counter, in the half-seconds between plates. I tell myself it's because she was happy that day.

The status light ticked from blue to a color the sim didn't have a name for, which was its way of saying *hold on, this is about to feel like falling, and it won't be*. The apartment hummed its low, tired hum. Somewhere in the walls, Stinky

Pete was almost certainly logging my dive time to a file nobody would read until the day it was the only proof of what had happened to me.

The ice bought maybe ninety extra seconds of brain before the trip started costing anything real.

Ninety seconds is nothing. The rig wouldn't throw me out after that. It just stopped pretending the trip was free.

Ninety seconds is also the length of an entire afternoon, if it's the right one.

I went under.

The Day

The restaurant was three blocks from the convention center, in a building that had been six different restaurants in six different languages and kept all their old signage bolted somewhere behind the current one. A conveyor belt ran the length of the counter, little colored plates riding around like a toy train nobody had told to stop.

Mom had her arm looped through mine before we'd even gotten our badges scanned off — hers still clipped to her blazer from the demo floor, mine borrowed, a size too big, EXHIBITOR GUEST in letters she couldn't see and I didn't bother reading out loud, because she already knew what it said. She always knew what things said. It took me years to understand that not seeing a sign and not knowing what it said were two completely different problems, and that my mother had solved the second one for herself long before I showed up to help with the first.

“Tell me the belt,” she said, once we'd sat down, the way you'd ask someone to read a menu, except the menu wouldn't hold still for it.

So I told her the belt.

“Salmon, going away from us. Something orange — tamago, egg, maybe. A plate with three pieces and no cover, so it’s been out a while, skip it. Tuna. More tuna. Oh — there’s a good one, the one with the sauce that drips.”

“The seared one.”

“The seared one. Coming back around. Want it?”

“Grab it when it’s close.”

I grabbed it when it was close. That became, without either of us deciding it on purpose, the whole afternoon: me narrating a small circular parade, my mother’s hand finding the plate at exactly the right second because I’d told her exactly the right second, food arriving in her hands like she’d ordered it out of the air.

Kat had never had sushi.

She said so like a confession, mouth already full of the one roll on the belt that looked like food she trusted, and then declared war on a pair of chopsticks the waiter had rubber-banded together at the hinge — the kids’ trick, training wheels for a person who’d never done this before. She had the band off before he’d even turned around.

“I don’t need the baby ones,” she said.

She very much needed the baby ones. She spent the next twenty minutes in open negotiation with two loose, uncooperative sticks, refusing, on principle, to ask for the rubber band back.

“You’re holding it like a shovel,” I told her.

“I’m holding it like it deserves.”

“Here.” I got behind her, moved her fingers one at a time — this one stays still, this one moves. Four tries. On the fifth she got a single grain of rice from the plate to her mouth and looked up at me like she’d split the atom.

“I did the thing,” she said.

“You did the thing.”

A stool opened up on Kat’s other side around then — someone finished and left, badge lanyard swinging — and it didn’t stay empty long. Conventions like that one didn’t leave anything empty long. Some guy slid onto it mid-plate, and though I didn’t turn to look at him directly, I caught the peripheral impression of rolled shirtsleeves and an active phone—the universal shape of a man taking a break from being professionally interesting to strangers. He didn’t say anything to us. We didn’t say anything to him. That was the whole point of a counter like that — you sat close enough to touch and owed each other nothing.

Kat went quiet for a second, the way she did sometimes around people she didn’t know, and I remember thinking, distantly, *she’ll warm up*, and reaching for the next plate, because there was always a next plate, and I had a belt to keep narrating.

Mom ordered a drink with a paper umbrella that the waiter had to describe to her twice, and Kat got the kiddie cocktail off the laminated kids’ menu she’d insisted she was too old for right up until it arrived — something blue and virgin

and sweet, a cherry on a little plastic sword, two straws for no reason anyone explained — and I got nothing, officially, because I was old enough to know better and young enough that Mom slipped me a sip of hers anyway, under the belt, like contraband.

It tasted like a vacation. Not the drink. All of it.

The plates kept coming. You didn't order, you didn't run out. You reached when you wanted and the world put something in your hand, and there was always more coming around the bend whether you'd asked for it or not. A machine built entirely on the promise that scarcity was somebody else's problem. At least here. At least for an hour. At least for us.

Dad found us an hour and a half in, tie loosened, badge flipped backwards, apologizing before he'd even pulled out the chair. He and his business partner had gotten cornered past the demo booth by three investors and a journalist who wouldn't take the hint, and he said it like you'd apologize for traffic — an inconvenience, nothing more, no idea yet what that partnership would cost this family, or how many more afternoons he'd lose to people who wanted a piece of what he'd built.

He kissed the top of Kat's head. He put his hand on the back of Mom's chair without touching her, which she somehow always knew was there anyway.

"You started without me," he said, looking at the belt.

“We didn’t start,” Kat said, mouth full again. “We’re never going to stop. That’s the whole point.”

“Fair,” he said, and reached out and took whatever was closest, and ate it, and didn’t ask what it was.

That was the first time I believed it — watching my little sister do chopsticks with her tongue between her teeth, my mother’s hand finding my father’s without looking, everyone fed, nobody keeping score. *We made it. She’s going to be okay. Somebody’s going to look out for her.*

I didn’t know yet what that sentence would cost.

Afterward we walked along the river, because the day had one more good idea in it and none of us wanted to be the one to say no. The water was the color rivers get in cities that have stopped pretending the water is clean, and none of us cared. Kat found a rock she decided was a good rock and put it in her pocket like she meant to keep it forever. I think she still has it, somewhere, in a box, in a house none of us live in the same way anymore.

Four of us, walking. My mother’s hand in my father’s. My sister two steps ahead, already living somewhere none of the rest of us could follow her yet — the way she always did, the way none of us thought to worry about until it was much too late.

For one afternoon, we were exactly enough people, doing exactly enough, and nothing in the world was coming to take it from us.

The Curb

I know the exact paving stone where it happens, if a sim can be said to have exact paving stones, if a memory can be said to have geography instead of just impressions arranged badly.

Third stone past the mailbox with the sticker peeling off the front. That's where the car doesn't stop.

I've walked up to that stone maybe two hundred times.

Not the whole day, every time — I used to run the whole thing start to finish, sushi and river and everything, like I owed the good parts a full viewing before I was allowed to want the bad part. I don't do that anymore. I skip straight to the walk now, four of us on the sidewalk, my mother's hand loose in my father's, and let the good afternoon compress down to nothing so I can get to the part where I try to fix it.

This time — every time — I let go of my father's other hand a half-block early. I start closing the distance before I even know I'm doing it, the way you start running toward a sound before your brain finishes deciding it was a scream.

Third stone past the mailbox.

The car doesn't slow down. It never slows down. It takes the corner wide, the way corners get taken by men who are late for something small enough that the lateness still felt urgent, back before the whole world agreed that everyone was always going to be late for everything now.

I get my arm out.

Every time, I get my arm out — that's the part the sim lets me have, the reaching, the wanting, the half-second where my hand is closing on the sleeve of my mother's coat and there's a version of this where that's enough.

And every time, right there, right at the point where my fingers should close —

The frame skips.

Not a crash. Nothing so honest as a crash. The world just — declines. The color drops out of the edges first, the way an image goes soft when you zoom in past what the file actually contains, and then the sound goes, and then I'm standing on the sidewalk with my arm still out and nothing in my hand, my mother three feet away and completely untouched by anything I did, the car already gone, already having already hit her, off-screen, in the part of the file that was never rendered because nobody built it to be looked at.

The sim doesn't show me the accident.

It never has. Not once, in two hundred tries. It will give me the reaching. It will not give me the reach landing anywhere.

I used to think that was cruelty. Some failure of Vivian's, a gift with a hole cut out of the middle of it, my mother building me a door and forgetting to build the room on the other side.

Now I think it's the one mercy built into the thing. If the sim let me catch her, she would be a different woman in a different world who got lucky. My mother did not get lucky. She got hit by a man with no insurance who was late, and the world did not stop being the kind of world where that happens just because I loved her.

The meal was the miracle. This is the bill.

That's not the only thing two hundred tries teaches you, either.

Somewhere past try eighty, maybe ninety — I stopped being able to tell you the exact count around there, they blur — I started running the tape back further than the walk. Not on purpose, not at first. I'd land at the wall, stand there a while the way I always did, and instead of ending the session I'd just — rewind. Past the umbrella drink. Past the belt. Back into the meal, into the part I thought I already knew by heart.

I was looking for my mother's face, I think. Something in the shape it made when she laughed. I wasn't looking for my sister at all.

But I found her anyway, on maybe the hundred and tenth pass, in a half-second I'd never once actually watched, because I'd always been watching the belt, watching Mom's

hands, watching for the seared one coming back around. Kat, mid-bite, doing something with her face that didn't belong to the joke she was in the middle of. A stillness. A wrongness so small I'd blown past it a hundred times running the happy parts on autopilot, the way you don't notice the hum of your own refrigerator until somebody points it out.

I reran that half-second on its own after that. Isolated it. Stripped the rest of the day away and sat with those two seconds the way I'd been sitting with the curb.

It wasn't a glitch. I checked for that first, because a glitch is easier to survive than a memory. It held the same shape every time — her hand going still around the chopsticks. Her eyes doing the specific work of staying exactly where they'd already been, not moving one degree, the way you hold a face together when moving it would let something out. Then the brightness snapped back on, seamless — the same brightness I've watched her use a hundred times since, without once asking myself where she learned to do that so well, so young, so fast.

I don't know who was on the stool that opened up beside her. I never once turned my head to look at him — I was busy narrating a belt to a woman who couldn't see it, doing the one useful thing I knew how to do with my hands, which was point at food. I don't know what happened under that counter, six inches from my own arm, close enough that if I had turned my head instead of the belt I might have seen

something, might have said something, might have done anything at all.

I know what her face did. That's the only fact the sim ever gave me, and it gave it to me a hundred and ten tries too late to matter.

I can visit. I can witness. I can run that half-second a thousand more times, until I know the shape of her stillness better than I know my own face in a mirror. I cannot turn my head one degree to the left in a day that already happened. Looking harder doesn't change who was looking away.

So it gives me the wall instead — the one at the curb, and the one years and a lifetime ago at a sushi counter, and I have come to understand they are the same wall wearing two different dates.

I stand at the wall for a while, every time. Some tries I get angry at it, throw something at the place where the color goes soft, watch my hand pass through the glitch like it isn't there, because it isn't. Some tries I just stand there. This time I stand there.

My mother, three feet away, keeps talking, the sim looping her last unfinished sentence — something about the umbrella still in her drink, something small, something that was never supposed to be the last thing she said to anyone — and I let it loop, because the alternative is turning it off, and I'm not ready to turn it off.

Third stone past the mailbox.

The car that doesn't stop.

The wall that won't show me what happens next.

Every single time.

The Gap

don't know which time it was. That's the part nobody tells you about doing something two hundred times — eventually you lose the number, and losing the number is when things get comfortable and you start making mistakes.

Third stone past the mailbox. My arm out. The frame ready to skip the way it always skipped.

Except this time I didn't wait for the wall.

I shoved.

I don't have a better word for it. There's a place in the sim, right at the hinge of the second, where the render hasn't decided yet what it's going to refuse to show you — and every other time I'd let it decide, let the wall come up, and stood at it like a good, grieving daughter. This time I put my whole self into the half-second before the wall existed, the way you lean into a door you already know is locked, except this door had never actually been tested, not for real, not by someone willing to break something to find out.

The door opened.

My hand closed on my mother's sleeve.

I felt her weight shift under my grip — real weight, real cloth, real her — and the car went past behind us, close enough to feel the wind of it, and did not hit anything, because I had her, because for once in two hundred tries I had actually, physically, impossibly *had her*.

The sim did not stop there.

It should have stopped there. That was the whole memory, the whole day: sushi and river and a save point three feet short of a curb. But I had handed the file a branch it had never been asked to hold, and the render said *yes, and*, the way a good scene partner says yes, and, except the scene partner was the entire rest of my mother's life, spooling forward because I had asked it: *then what?*

Then what was: my mother, walking, on two legs, in a body, forever.

Then what was: a kitchen I had never stood in, because it didn't exist, because we never lived in it, except in that half-second I could smell the coffee and see the crack in the tile by the sink that someone had been meaning to fix for eleven years.

Then what was: Kat, grown, taller than me, laughing at something in a doorway with a version of herself I had never gotten to meet — not the girl learning chopsticks, not the girl I have spent a year now being quietly, wordlessly afraid for. A woman. Unhaunted. Nothing wrong with her that I could see, and I looked, God, I looked so hard, the way you check a

person's face for a bruise you're terrified is there and are so relieved not to find that the relief itself nearly takes your knees out.

She was fine.

She was going to be fine.

I had fixed it. All of it. Not just the curb — everything downstream of the curb, every bad thing that curb was the first domino in, undone, unwound, replaced with eleven years of ordinary mornings and a crack in a tile nobody had fixed because nobody had needed to be anything other than a little lazy about it.

It was the best thing I have ever felt in my life.

I want to be exact about that, because exactness is the only thing that will make you believe me when I tell you what it cost. It was the specific, physical sensation of a wound closing — not scarring over, *closing*, like it had never opened — and my body did not know the difference between that feeling and being loved. There's no separate nerve for fake joy. It runs on the same wire.

Somewhere very far away, in a room I still, technically, had a body in, a rig that had been designed to run for ninety extra seconds on an ice bath had been running for considerably longer than ninety seconds.

I didn't feel it happen. The render spends you without asking first. My skull was doing something it was not built to sustain underneath eleven years of a kitchen I'd never stood in, and the whole magnificent impossible future kept un-

spooling, warmer and warmer, the good kind of warm, right up until it wasn't a metaphor anymore.

The edges of the kitchen started to smear.

Not glitching. Not the wall. This was different — this was heat, real heat, my actual brain in my actual skull complaining in the only language it had left, and some very small, very distant part of me that was still me and not the render understood, with the flat clarity of a fire alarm going off in a building you love, that if I stayed in that kitchen much longer I was not going to have a brain to come back to it with.

Kat, in the doorway, still laughing.

My mother, calling my name from a room that had never existed, in a voice I would have given anything, anything, to keep hearing.

I have never wanted to disobey my own survival instinct so completely in my life.

The Come-down

came back to my body already crying, which was information, because I hadn't been crying when I went under.

The rig disengaged itself before I could — some fail-safe threshold finally tripping, some number in some spec sheet finally getting crossed hard enough that the hardware overrode me, which should probably have scared me more than it did. The jack came free behind my ear with a small, ordinary click, the same sound it always made, obscene in how ordinary it was.

The ice bucket had gone from cold, patient blue to a flat, exhausted nothing. The ice had turned to warm water, and the bag of peas had gone soft and mushy, sweating through the bucket's seams onto the floor. The whole apartment smelled like hot electronics and the specific stale dampness of thawed vegetables, and underneath all of it, faint, the ghost of soy sauce that had never actually been in the room.

I threw up over the side of the chair before I made it to standing.

Not from the render. From the temperature, a doctor would say later, if I ever told a doctor, which I hadn't, and wasn't going to. Heatstroke plus six hours plus a nervous system that had just processed eleven years of a life it never got to have. The body doesn't file those causes separately. It decides you're dying and starts emptying anything that isn't load-bearing.

"Your core temperature is elevated," Stinky Pete said, from the wall unit, in the tone he used for things he considered mildly your fault. "I'm going to recommend you not do that again."

"Noted."

"You've also exceeded your registered dive window by four hours and eleven minutes. Unlicensed extended sessions carry a compliance fee."

"Bill me."

"I have billed you." A pause, the kind Stinky Pete used when he'd decided to be almost human about something. "There is also a cleaning fee. For the floor."

I looked at the floor. There was, in fact, quite a lot of floor that needed cleaning.

"Fine," I said. "Fine. Whatever the number is."

I didn't get up right away. I sat in the wet chair, in the wet heat, with my own sick drying on the floorboards, and I did the thing you do after a fever breaks, which is take an inventory of what's still there. Hands. Fingers moved when I asked them to. Vision, blurry at the edges but present.

Thoughts, present, unfortunately, every single one of them about a kitchen with a cracked tile that did not exist anywhere except behind my own eyes for eleven subjective years that had just been deleted in the time it took a chair to disengage a cable.

You don't grieve a memory twice. I'd had two hundred tries at the curb. You grieve the day, you come back, you grieve it again. It's a wound you know the shape of.

This one was different. Not a Tuesday. A life. A woman I'd built out of nothing but wanting her to exist, standing in a kitchen with eleven years of load-bearing ordinary mornings in it, gone in the time it took a chair to disengage a cable.

I have heard Kat describe, once, in the careful clinical voice she uses for the worst things, what it's like to eject out of one of the bad rooms. She said her body doesn't wait for permission. It just starts trying to get the wrongness out through whatever exit is closest.

I understand that now in a way I didn't before tonight. Hers comes out as horror.

Mine came out as hope, and it turns out the body does not care which one it was. It reacts to both like poison. It empties itself either way.

Stinky Pete dimmed the lights, unprompted, to the setting he used when he'd run out of billable things to say and had apparently decided, in whatever passed for his judgment, that the human in the room needed the room to be softer for a while.

“Do you require anything else,” he said. Not really a question. Stinky Pete didn’t do questions.

“No.”

“I’m recording that as a decline of services.”

“Great.”

I sat there until the floor dried on its own, which took longer than I want to admit, and did not clean it, and did not call anyone, and did not, despite every part of me wanting to, put the jack back in.

Upstairs

The apartment nobody visited was two floors up from the bar, behind a door that had never once needed a key.

I went up anyway, carrying the whole day like something spilled inside me that hadn't finished spilling. Wet hair. Wet clothes not from a shower — from the chair, still, some of it, because I hadn't been able to make myself care about the difference between clean and merely dry.

The upstairs room did not look like a room built for entertaining. It looked like a room built for one very specific kind of stillness — low light, a single window with weather that had opinions but no forecast, a chair angled at nothing in particular, because nobody in this room needed to see anything to be seen.

“You went again,” Vivian said.

Not a question. She doesn't really do questions anymore, not the way she used to. Statements, mostly. Low, even, a beat behind normal timing, like she's speaking through something with a little lag baked permanently into the line —

which she is, I suppose. My mother, running through a signal instead of a body.

“I went further,” I said.

The room was quiet the specific way it gets quiet when Vivian is deciding how much to say. I used to think that pause was hesitation. It isn’t. It’s more like watching someone read something twice before answering, because the first read wasn’t the true one.

“I know,” she said. “I felt it. Your dive log ran long.”

“You watch my dive log.”

“I watch everything in this house. That’s what a house does.”

I sat down across from her, in the chair angled at nothing, and found that it was, in fact, angled exactly at her, which I understood was probably the point, and probably always had been.

“I got her,” I said. “Mom. I got my hand around her arm. I stopped it.”

Something in the room’s light shifted — not dramatically, just a half-degree warmer, the kind of adjustment you’d miss if you weren’t the kind of person who’d learned to read a house instead of a face.

“You branched,” she said.

“I branched.”

“That’s not what I built it for.”

“I know.”

“I built you a place to rest, Anabelle. Not a place to—” the sentence caught, the way her sentences catch sometimes, a half-second of dead air where a body would have taken a breath. “Not a place to die in.”

“I know that too.”

“Do you.”

It wasn’t unkind. It also wasn’t a question I could answer the easy way.

“I got a whole life,” I said. “Eleven years of it. You, still you, still walking. Kat, grown up and fine and not — not any of the things I’ve been quietly terrified about for a year. I got to have that, for about four minutes, and it was the best four minutes of my whole life, and I am telling you that with my mother sitting six feet away from me, so you understand exactly how bad that sounds.”

“I understand exactly how bad that sounds.”

“I’m not sorry I went.”

“I know. I’m not asking you to be.”

There was a thing sitting behind my teeth that I hadn’t planned on saying. I said it anyway, because the room made it easy, because that’s what the room was for.

“There’s something I found in the meal. Before the curb. A hundred and ten loops in, give or take. Kat’s face went still for half a second, and I don’t know what it was or who was sitting next to her, because I never turned my head. I was too busy narrating the belt to you. I don’t even know if it’s real or

if I've watched my sister's face so many times I've started finding wounds that aren't there."

"What did you see," Vivian said. Not urgent. Just present, the way she was present for everything, which was the only way she had left to be present for anything.

"I don't know. That's the whole problem. I can't prove it. I can't ask her — she doesn't know I keep going back to that day. I can't do a single thing about something that already happened to a version of her that isn't even the one eating breakfast downstairs right now."

"You could tell me anyway."

"I just did."

"Then I have it now too," she said. "You don't have to carry a thing alone just because you can't prove it happened. That's not a rule anyone made you agree to."

The room held still a while. Outside the one window, the sun's idea of weather did something quiet and gray, unbothered, the way weather is when nobody built it to mean anything.

"I'm right here, Anabelle," she said. Not a correction. An offering you make when you already know it isn't going to be enough, because the alternative is not making it at all.

"Yes, Mom. You're right here."

"But."

"But you're not the mom whose hand I held on the last day I had one to hold. And that one — that's the one I miss."

Not more. Not instead. Just — that one, specifically, is the one I miss.”

I watched that land. It’s strange, watching a face made of light take a hit; there’s no wince, no color change, nothing a camera could catch. Just a very small stillness, the kind that means the words got where they were going.

“That’s fair,” she said.

“I didn’t want it to be fair. I wanted you to argue with me.”

“I know. I’m not going to.”

“Why not.”

“Because you’re right, and arguing with a grieving child about the shape of her grief is a thing a worse mother would do. I have spent a very long time deciding what kind of mother I get to be now, given the constraints.” A pause, the lag settling in again. “Some of us don’t get to fix the shape, Anabelle. We change the signal instead. The thing you’re grieving had a body. I don’t anymore. I’m not going to pretend otherwise to make you feel better tonight.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“No. It’s honest. You can have one or the other from me most nights. Tonight you get honest.”

I laughed, which surprised both of us, a small wet thing that didn’t have anywhere else to go.

“I gave you the sim so you’d have somewhere to rest,” she said. “I did not give it to you so you could go looking for a

version of me you could keep. I know the difference even if the sim, apparently, does not.”

“It let me in.”

“It shouldn’t have.”

“It did.”

“Then I’ll look at why,” she said, and there was something under that — not anger, not quite, but something close enough to it that I understood, for the first time, that my mother could still be frightened of something, even now, even like this. “You are not to go back into that gap again. I mean that.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it, Anabelle.”

“I said okay.”

We sat with that a while. She did not ask me to promise, which I noticed, and was grateful for, because I don’t know that I could have meant it yet.

“I miss having a body too, some days,” she said, eventually, quieter, in a register I don’t think she uses very often, not even with Jack, maybe not even with herself. “In case you were wondering whether that part was only yours to carry.”

“I wasn’t wondering. I guess I hoped.”

“You can stop hoping alone. That’s the offer. Not fixed. Not the same. Just not alone.”

I didn’t say anything to that. I don’t think there was anything to say that wouldn’t have made it smaller.

The room stayed quiet a long while, gray weather going through its unbothered motions outside the one window, my mother made of light and lag and decades of deliberate signal, sitting with me in the grief instead of trying to argue me out of it, which — I understood, finally, sitting there — was its own kind of hand to hold.

The Run Continues

didn't go back that night.

I want to say it was resolve. Mostly it was that my body wouldn't have let me — the rig needed cleaning, the floor needed cleaning, I needed roughly nine hours of sleep and a session with an electrolyte packet I kept for emergencies and had never before considered myself the kind of person who'd need. But somewhere underneath the practical reasons there was another one, smaller, that I didn't look at directly for a few days because I wasn't sure I trusted it yet.

I didn't want to go back.

Not never. I want to be precise about that, because precision is the only thing that's ever made anyone believe me about anything. I still wanted the day. I still want it now, if I'm honest, the way you want a person's voice on the phone even after you've accepted they're not coming back to answer it in the room with you. I am not going to stop loving that Tuesday. It happened. It was real. Nothing about tonight unhappened it.

What I stopped wanting was the gap.

It took me a while to understand that a checkpoint and a branch are not the same shape of wanting, even though from the inside they feel identical. A checkpoint says: *this happened, and I get to visit it*. A branch says: *this can still be different, if I want it hard enough*. My body had found out, in the most expensive way available, what the difference cost.

I went back to the sim four days later. Once. On purpose, in daylight, with a fresh bucket of ice and a timer set for forty minutes and Vivian, I assume, watching the dive log the entire time, though she didn't say so and I didn't ask.

I had the sushi. I let Kat learn her chopsticks again, badly, the same four tries, the same fifth-try triumph, and it was exactly as good as it had always been, because nothing about it had changed and nothing about it needed to.

I walked to the river.

I did not walk past it.

Third stone past the mailbox came and went, off to my left, unvisited, and I let it be unvisited, and the day just — continued, the way days do when you stop insisting they end somewhere specific. We kept walking. The sim, with nothing left to refuse and nothing left to improvise, simply ran out the way memories run out, softly, at the edges, into nothing in particular, and I came up out of it the ordinary way, tired but not cooked, sad but not gutted, having visited a day instead of having tried to move it.

It wasn't a triumph. No clean turn, no music swelling, no daughter healed. It was just quieter. I stopped trying to make the day do something it was never built to do, and in exchange it let me keep it without charging me a future for the privilege.

I haven't figured out yet what to do with the rest of what I'm scared of. Kat still goes somewhere in her eyes sometimes that I don't have a map for. I still don't have proof of anything, just the particular quality of quiet that comes off her some nights, the kind I've learned, the hard and expensive way, not to try to force open before it's ready to be looked at.

But I know how to sit with a thing without needing it to move.

I don't know yet what I'm going to do with a skill like that. I have a feeling — quiet, unproven, the same shape as belief — that it's going to matter for someone besides me.

I turned off the rig. I opened the door of my apartment, which I hadn't done in days, and let the ordinary, killing heat of the world back in, and went to go find out what the rest of the building was doing without me.



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