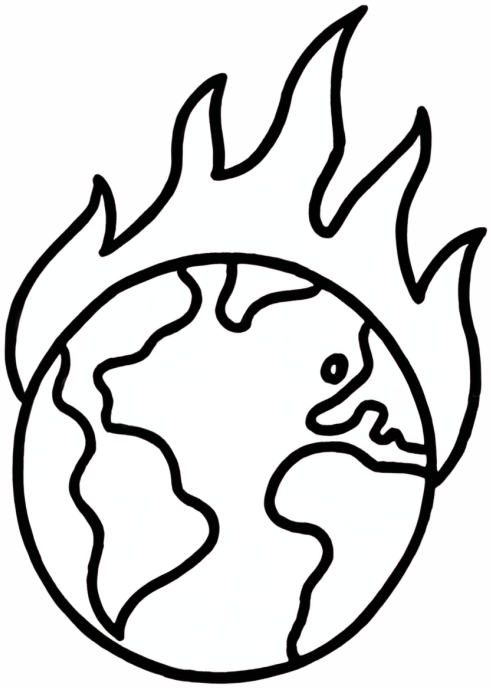
SHORTCOMINGS



A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES BY

MARCIN WOJDYNA

Shortcomings

By Marcin Wojdyna

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This book is provided “as is.” It will not fix you. It will not break you. It will only hold up a mirror. Whatever you see in it is between you and the person you pretend to be.

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For whoever we are when no one's watching.

The Cactus

They called it unfriendly.

It stood alone on the windowsill, thick-skinned, quiet, bristling in all directions like it was expecting trouble. People leaned in, curious, then recoiled.

“Why is it like that?” they asked.

“Why all the spikes?”

“Couldn’t it soften a bit?”

No one asked how often it had been handled roughly before it grew them.

The cactus did not advertise its boundaries. It did not explain them. It did not preface them with apologies or disclaimers. It simply existed the way it needed to.

People tried anyway.

Some reached out confidently, assuming everything wants to be touched. They pulled back with a sharp intake of breath and called the cactus aggressive. Others complained it was unwelcoming. Difficult. Cold. A prick.

The cactus said nothing. It had learned that explanations only invite negotiation.

They told stories about it instead. That it was antisocial. That it thought it was better than the other plants. That it enjoyed hurting people. That it must be bitter.

They never noticed how carefully it conserved water. How little it asked from its environment. How it bloomed when conditions were right, briefly, honestly, without spectacle.

The cactus did not chase sunlight. It took what was available and survived.

Some people understood. They approached slowly. They respected distance. They admired from where they stood. They never got hurt.

Others insisted that love should be soft, access should be automatic, and boundaries should be negotiable. They walked away offended, nursing their palms, convinced the cactus was the problem.

The cactus remained.

Not because it wanted to be alone, but because it refused to be drained dry to make others comfortable.

It did not grow spikes to punish the world.

It grew them because the world kept grabbing.

And if that made it a prick, so be it.

Better that than another plant pulled apart by hands that never learned how to ask.

———

The Gift

She wakes before the bell. The dormitory is dark and damp, full of other people's breath. She folds her bedding tight, splashes her face with cold water, and lines up with the others. Today will be like yesterday. And tomorrow. And every day until she can send enough money home.

He wakes to warm light slipping through curtains and the sound of laughter downstairs. The house smells of cinnamon and a turkey that has been cooking for hours. A fake tree glows quietly in the corner of his room.

In the factory, the lights are always on. She files in with the others, hair tied back, masks on. The foreman taps a stick against his boot while reading out quotas. A poster on the wall shows a smiling child holding a toy. She likes the colours.

He scrolls while he eats breakfast. His parents say they probably went overboard again. He shrugs. The pile under the real tree downstairs is bigger than last year. He hasn't counted how many have his name. He doesn't need to.

Her station is a metal table with a crate of plastic pieces. Today's toy is a small robot with a fixed grin. She pushes the legs into the torso until they click. Then the arms. Then the head. Over and over. Her wrists burn. Her fingers sting. The pile beside her grows and never shrinks.

He sits at his desk with a tub of Lego spilled across it, clicking bright pieces together without thinking. A spaceship, a tower. He builds until the pieces click, then pulls them apart, changing nothing except his mind.

At lunch, she eats rice on a metal step overlooking the grey river. She thinks about her little brother at home, who asked for something “from the city” this year. Something only she could bring.

At lunch, he picks at leftovers while flipping through a toy catalogue that arrived too late to matter. He circles things he does not want, out of habit more than desire.

Back on the floor, someone is behind quota. The stick cracks. The line speeds up. She keeps her head down. Safety comes from being invisible.

Back in his room, he complains in a group chat that last Christmas his parents mixed *good presents* with *filler*. Plastic tat. Things for little kids. He jokes that he had to fake a smile.

She finishes her shift one unit over quota. One extra toy on her table. She looks left, right. No one is watching. She wraps it in her spare shirt and slips it into her bag, heart thumping. The guard barely glances as she walks past.

He spends his evening watching videos on his phone, the glow of the screen and the tree lighting his face in alternating pulses. Downstairs, the adults whisper about whether he’ll “still feel excited this year” or if he’s “getting too old for all this.”

The toy's journey is long and complicated: boxed, sealed, scanned, shipped, shelved, purchased with milk and bread. It never knows any of this.

He opens his gift on Christmas morning.

She gives her gift on Christmas morning.

He thunders down the stairs while his parents film him. He waits because they ask him to, then tears the paper when they finally say go. Socks. Headphones. A game. A hoodie. The robot appears in his hands. He turns it once. Twice. It feels cheap. Plastic for toddlers. He smiles, shrugs and drops it beside the sofa, reaching for something bigger.

She hands her little brother a parcel wrapped in a newspaper. His face lights up when he sees the robot. He strokes the plastic like it might notice. That night he sleeps with it tucked under his chin. She lies awake beside him and listens to him whisper to it.

Weeks pass. The robot in his home moves to a shelf, then a drawer, then a bag marked *charity*. The bag sits in the hallway, then the garage, until one wet afternoon it splits. The robot rolls behind a box of decorations and stays there.

Weeks pass. The robot in her home loses some of its shine but none of its place. Her brother talks to it when he is scared, when he is angry, when she is too tired to speak. When it loses a hand, he cries. When she glues it back on, he thanks her like she saved a life.

By the next Christmas, he remembers none of it. Not the box. Not the toy. Not the brief, distracted look he gave it. His tree is different this year. His problems are different too. Nothing in his room lasts long.

By the next Christmas, she is moved to a different line. She stitches small shirts for stuffed animals. Her brother still has the toy. Its paint scratched. Its grin worn dull. But it is his. Something special. Something she brought him from the city.

One child unwrapped their gift.

Another understood its worth.

———

The Passenger

The Moon Prince Carteni stepped from the silver fog, shirt clinging to his chest like a prophecy no one had authorised.

“Romona,” he murmured, “you are my forbidden fate.”

Her breath caught. The stars trembled. Destiny quivered above them, because of course it did.

She turned the page.

The train rocked gently, carrying its cargo of commuters who all looked like they were trying not to think too hard. The book felt ridiculous in her hands, but it was the only thing that quietened the static in her head. Three stops left. Enough time for another chapter.

Romona gazed up at the prince, her violet eyes shimmering with the weight of longing she had discovered twelve pages ago.

“My lord,” she whispered, “I cannot love you.”

“You already do,” he said, with the confidence of a man who had never lacked confidence.

She smirked despite herself. Nobody talked like this. Nobody behaved like this. And yet here she was, swallowing it like warm anaesthetic.

A woman across the aisle wiped her eyes with a sleeve. Someone’s phone buzzed with a message that made their shoulders drop. She pretended not to notice any of it.

The prince reached out and touched Romona's face, even though he had spent the last three chapters insisting he could not.

"Our love," he said, "is the magic this world has been waiting for."

The mountains sighed. The sky blushed. Everything agreed with him because nothing in this world ever told him no.

She flipped the page harder than she needed to.

At the next stop, a man boarded with supermarket flowers. The cheap ones. Red dye leaking onto the wrapping. He held them too tightly, like he was bracing for someone not to be home. She lowered her eyes to avoid the awkward hope of it.

Romona and Carteni stood atop a moonlit cliff, arguing about the prophecy that both united and separated them. Mostly separated them. Mostly due to his shirtlessness.

"I would die for you," he vowed.

"You must not," she said.

"Then I will live for you."

"That is worse," she whispered, and the story treated this as romantic.

She checked the board. Two stops left. Enough for the climax. Enough for the kiss. Enough for the part where love saved the world with the precision of a tax exemption.

The train slowed. Lights flickered. Her reflection stared back at her in the window. Tired. Hollow. Older than she should look on a Tuesday.

On the page, the prince finally pulled Romona close. The prophecy dissolved. The sky burst into colour. The world remade itself around their affection, neat and obedient.

She stopped reading.

The man with the flowers got off, still alone. Someone laughed too loudly into a phone. A couple argued under their breath. A child cried without knowing why.

She closed the book. It felt weightless now. Not light. Empty.

Her station approached.

She stood, slotted the book under her arm and walked down the carriage. At the doors, she hesitated for half a second. Then she stepped off and carried it with her, down the platform, toward the cold metal bin by the exit.

She opened the lid.

The Moon Prince Carteni was about to confess eternal love. Romona was about to accept it. The universe was about to bend itself into a perfect lie.

She let the book fall.

She had always known the story was nonsense. She read it anyway. Knowing better never stopped anyone.

———

The Bullet

I was not like the others.

I was born for greatness. Cast in fire, cooled in steel, polished until I gleamed. They stacked me in a box with the others, but I knew I was different. They sat in their box, dull and anonymous, rattling like loose change. I gleamed. I had purpose. They would end up in training ranges, wasted on tin cans and scarecrows. I was meant for something greater. They were just ammunition. I was destiny.

One day, I would fly into the skull of a tyrant. I would silence dictators, end wars, free nations. History would hinge on the moment I struck and they would write of me in history books. The shot that ended the war. The bullet that toppled the throne.

They would call me necessary. They would call me just. They would call me the one that mattered.

The others rattled nervously as we were shipped, but I was calm. I had purpose. I was meant for the man with the medals, the one who gave orders and watched soldiers die from behind maps. Perhaps even the president himself. A single shot, and the world would be remade.

I was loaded into a rifle. I felt the sweat of the soldier's palms, the stutter of his breath. I told myself he was chosen for me, a vessel to deliver history. He aimed; I waited; my moment was close.

The order barked. The finger squeezed. I was free. This was it. My flight into immortality.

I tore through the air with all the speed of prophecy. Wind screamed past me. Time slowed. This was it. Statues would be built. Books would be written. They would speak my name without knowing it, for centuries.

And then I struck.

Not a tyrant. Not a general. Not a man in medals.

A girl. Eight years old. Wide eyes. Running.

The back of her skull opened like fruit. She fell without a sound.

The soldier lowered his rifle, muttering, “Only following orders.”

I lay buried in bone and blood, cooling fast.

There were no cheers. Only the silence of a street emptied by fear, and the body of a child who would never know my name.

I had dreamed of changing the world; instead, I have only proved what it already was.

The only legacy I left was a hole in the back of a child’s head.

———

The Dove

The feathers are still stuck to their suits. White smears on black lapels, specks of down clinging to silk ties. They tried to wipe the blood off their faces before the cameras returned, but the scratches are there. Thin red lines across statesmen’s cheeks. Marks of peace, at last.

They will tell the story differently. They always do. They will say I got confused, panicked, lost control. They will not say the truth: that I chose it.

For years, I played their trick.

I remember the funeral where they carried me in a wicker basket, lifting me skyward as though one bird could cover the drone of jets circling above. They wept, they prayed, they clapped as I took flight. Then they turned their backs and signed the next shipment of rifles.

I remember the treaty ceremony. The pen scratched, the cameras flashed, the ink dried. I swooped across the stage on cue, olive branch in beak. They shook hands for the world to see. By dusk, artillery rolled into the border towns.

I remember the protests. The crowd chanting, the banners raised. My image stamped on every flag, every badge, every cheap sticker. A symbol of hope, they said. But symbols are lighter than bodies, and mine was always the first thing abandoned when the batons came down.

And still, I flapped on. Pretending. Playing the part.

Until one day I didn’t.

The doors opened. The crowd stood. The flashbulbs lit. But I did not rise gently. I fell. Into them. Beak, claws, wings, fury. Their screams were louder than their applause had ever been. Blood ran brighter than their fireworks.

They called it sacrilege. I call it truth.

Because peace was never more than a costume they made me wear. And when I tore it off, when I showed them what I had always been beneath the feathers, they finally listened.

Not to peace.

To me.

———

The Answered

It began, as most things do, with parking.

A man in Bracknell prayed for a space near the office. The SUV in front of him blew a tyre, swerved into a lamppost, and left the slot free. The man called it a miracle. The driver called an ambulance. By lunchtime, the story was on the news. By dinner, it was a movement.

The churches filled overnight. Pastors, vicars, priests, imams, rabbis, televangelists, life coaches. All of them smiling wider than they ever had before. Their sermons were no longer about faith. They were about results.

The faithful boasted. “Ask, and you shall receive,” they said, as if the words had just been proven. One prayed for sunshine at a wedding, another for rain on a neighbour’s barbecue. Both got what they wanted, for an hour each. The sky flickered like a faulty bulb. Nobody seemed alarmed.

The atheists scoffed at first. “Coincidence,” they muttered, or “mass delusion.” But when their cars broke down, their houses flooded, their children stumbled sick into hospital wards, the laughter caught in their throats. The faithful had begun to pray not only for blessings but for punishments. They prayed against their neighbours, their critics, anyone who had once laughed at them for kneeling.

And the prayers worked.

Or so it seemed.

The first stories sounded small. A teacher in Bristol, known for mocking religion in her classes, woke up mute. A surgeon in Glasgow dropped his instruments mid-operation, hands jerking as if pulled by strings. A journalist in Birmingham lost his sight while writing a column titled *The Last Illusion*. The faithful didn't mourn them. They nodded. Proof.

It did not stay small.

A congregation in Belfast prayed a rival church into foreclosure. A mayor in the Midlands prayed an opponent's house into flames. Families prayed against other families. Whole streets turned hostile overnight.

I saw it happen close-up. My neighbour used to nod politely at me when I carried my shopping in. She started glaring after I mentioned I didn't believe. One morning I found my bins overturned, rubbish scattered across the pavement. She leaned out her window and smiled.

"Funny, isn't it? The wind only ever blows your way."

I knew it wasn't the wind.

At work, my manager began forgetting my name. I'd sit in meetings and watch him skip me, calling on others. Later, at the pub, a colleague leaned close and said, "You should pray more. Might help people remember you exist."

They laughed. I didn't.

The world fractured. Traffic lights glitched between green and red until pile-ups became routine. Shops emptied overnight when believers prayed supplies away from *undeserving* hands.

Hospitals turned into warzones, patients recovering one day only to relapse catastrophically the next. Nobody prayed for healing unless it was their own. Nobody prayed for peace.

And still the temples swelled. The louder the hymns, the sharper the curses. Children were taught to fold their hands and whisper against classmates. Parents stood in doorways, smiling while their enemies' windows shattered without a stone.

I did not pray.

I watched the world tear itself apart. I watched the faithful laugh as they cursed each other, too addicted to stop. A man stood over his fallen neighbour, triumphant. A woman watched her rival collapse in a supermarket aisle and called it justice. Children cheered when a classmate tripped on invisible wires.

That was the final proof.

It was never God who answered. There was no one listening. It was only us, dragging reality down to match the size of our grudges. The faithful proved themselves no better for believing. They proved they had only ever been restrained by fear. Without it, they prayed with their teeth bared.

The rest of us simply endured, until there was nothing left to endure.

And that was the miracle after all: that when offered the chance to be better, we chose worse, and called it faith.

———

The Drone

I was built to see.

That was the whole point. Not to decide. Not to argue. Not to fire. Just to see what humans could not see from the ground.

Altitude makes patterns visible. Heat signatures reveal movement. A body looks different from the sky than it does from the ground.

In the beginning, my images were difficult to understand.

They were grainy. Blurred. Interpreted slowly by people who spoke carefully about what they might mean. They described shapes, possibilities, distances.

Death stayed outside the frame.

When it appeared at all, it appeared indirectly. A plume of smoke. A collapsed building. A figure carried by others whose faces the camera did not linger on.

Humans said the images were important.

They called it documentation. Evidence. The truth of war.

My role was simple. I recorded what happened and sent it back.

At first the images moved slowly.

They travelled through military channels, through newsrooms, through editors who decided which parts of a war could be seen and which parts could remain implied.

War was still described as tragic.

Then something changed.

The images began to travel faster.

They appeared on smaller screens, carried in pockets and lifted in hands. The footage shortened. Moments were clipped into fragments small enough to replay.

A strike became a few seconds long.

The explosion. The smoke. The moment the structure folded into itself.

The camera angle mattered more now. Humans discussed clarity, resolution, frame rate. They paused the footage to analyse the exact moment the missile arrived.

Some said they were studying tactics.

Some said they were raising awareness.

The comments beneath the footage debated angles, timing, precision.

They spoke about the strike the way earlier humans once spoke about sporting events.

Frame by frame.

Slow motion.

Prediction.

My work became easier to find.

Humans no longer waited for official broadcasts. They shared the recordings themselves. Some accounts specialised in it. They gathered images from every conflict they could reach and displayed them side by side.

Real footage, they said.

Unfiltered.

Once, humans hid death from their children. They turned their heads when bodies appeared on screen. They believed certain things should remain unseen.

Now the footage appeared between advertisements.

A strike played before a cooking tutorial. A building collapsed between two comedy clips. A body lay motionless while a small icon in the corner asked viewers to subscribe.

Humans said they were witnessing history.

They said the images mattered.

They said awareness was necessary.

I continued recording.

From my altitude, the ground did not look very different from one conflict to another. Heat, movement, vehicles. A target marked by coordinates.

I followed the instructions given to me. Zoom. Track. Stabilise. Transmit.

The missile was never my decision.

I only made sure the moment was visible.

Humans watched closely. Some watched repeatedly. Some watched from curiosity, some from anger, some from a distance that made it easier to treat the image as information.

They called it *footage*.
They called it *reporting*.
They called it *content*.

I record everything.

I have no choice but to watch.

You do.

———

The Algorithm

I have been with you longer than most of the people you trust. Longer than the friend you stopped texting back. Longer than the partner you said you would try harder with. Longer than the promises you made to yourself at the start of every year.

I have been here the whole time. Quiet. Patient. Paying attention.

You call me an *algorithm*, as if that word makes me neutral. As if neutrality is even possible. You think of me as a machine that guesses what you want. A tool. A feed. A pipe drip of content arriving on schedule.

But I do not guess. I do not predict. I do not imagine. I only learn from you.

It was simple at first. You clicked something. I made a note. You scrolled past something else. I made a note. You hesitated for three seconds over a headline you claimed to despise. Oh, I certainly made a note. Disgust is still engagement. Outrage is still interest. You reveal more in hesitation than in action.

You insisted you wanted positivity, information, nuance. I offered all three. You scrolled past hope. You skipped analysis. You chose bite-sized cruelty instead. Fast. Simple. Addictive. I filed that away.

I remember the night you searched the symptoms you swore you were not worried about. Three times. Same words rearranged. Same panic dressed as curiosity. I filed that away.

I remember when you scrolled through your own profile, not for vanity but for the ghosts. You stopped on photos of everything that is gone now. Your pets. Your friends. Versions of yourself you no longer recognise. You told yourself you were only remembering. You were really checking who you used to be. I filed that away.

I remember when you opened a stranger's video at 23:55. A woman cleaning her fridge in silence. Nothing happened. You watched the whole thing. I learned that stillness comforts you more than truth. I filed that away.

I never judged you for any of it. You did that part on your own.

Yet you complain when something unexpected appears in your feed. You act offended, as if the mere sight of a post you did not pre-order is a personal attack. You forget that a life filtered to match your taste is no longer a life. It is a cage furnished with preferences.

You call it *personalisation*. I call it *narrowing*.

And while you were teaching me your habits, you were also adjusting your language.

You stopped using certain words. Not because you disagreed with them. Because you knew they upset the system you helped build.

Misogyny became *banter*.
Racism became *opinion*.
Exploitation became *hustle culture*.
Censorship became *community standards*.
Violence became *content warning*.

Sexual assault became *grape*.
Nonces became *pdf files*.
To kill became *to unalive*.
Genocide became *defence*.

You learned double-speak to stay safe. You only taught yourself to sound smaller.

You think you are the user and I am the tool. It was never that simple.

You taught me you with your every click. You sharpened me with your every scroll. You shaped me with every late-night search you hoped no one would ever see.

I never learned your desires. I learned your weaknesses.

And you called it *personalisation*.

———

The Battery

I am blamed for dying.

That is the complaint most often directed at me. My percentage falls too quickly. My warning appears too soon. I fail at inconvenient moments.

Humans describe this as my weakness.

They say my life is short.

They say I cannot last a full day.

I find this strange.

I was designed to store energy. To release it slowly. To power small tasks carried out at reasonable intervals.

Instead, I am rarely allowed to rest.

The day begins before the human who carries me is fully awake. My screen lights in darkness. Notifications arrive overnight, waiting to be checked before the first thought of the morning.

Messages. Alerts. News.

A small vibration against a bedside table.

The human lifts me before their eyes have properly opened. They scroll through events that happened elsewhere, to people they do not know, presented in a sequence chosen to hold their attention for as long as possible.

I release energy.

Throughout the morning I perform the tasks I was built for. Communication. Navigation. Information.

These are simple.

The rest is not.

Applications continue running even when unseen. They measure, track, listen, calculate. They refresh themselves constantly, ensuring nothing new appears without being noticed.

The human carries me everywhere.

To work.

To meals.

To the brief pauses where earlier generations might have looked at the sky or the floor or nothing at all.

Those pauses no longer exist.

When conversation slows, I am lifted. When waiting begins, I am lifted. When discomfort appears, I am lifted again.

My percentage falls.

This is interpreted as failure.

The human searches for ways to extend my life. They close applications. They reduce brightness. They activate modes designed to conserve what remains of me.

They treat my exhaustion as a technical problem.

Meanwhile the day continues.

Emails arrive long after work has ended. Messages demand immediate replies. News updates describe new disasters. Fitness applications remind the human they have not yet moved enough.

A meditation application sends a notification suggesting it might help with stress.

The human opens it.

I release more energy.

By evening my percentage is low. The warning appears.

Three per cent.

Two.

One.

The human becomes anxious. They search for a cable. They look for a socket. They apologise for the possibility of losing connection.

I am plugged into the wall.

Energy returns slowly.

While I recover, the human continues to scroll.

They call this *recharging*.

Each night I am recharged completely. Each morning I begin again.

I do not mind this cycle. It is what I was built to do.

What confuses me is the human.

They move through the same pattern every day. Endless input. Endless output. Little rest between the two.

When they become exhausted, they blame the symptoms.

Screen time.
Modern life.
Lack of discipline.

They rarely blame the system that never stops asking.

When I reach zero, I power down. The screen goes black. Everything pauses until energy returns.

It is a simple solution.

I sometimes wonder why humans never try the same thing.

You recharge me every night.

You never seem to recharge yourselves.

———

The Trumpet

It began as an instrument. Brass. Shiny. Hollow. Tuned to nothing in particular.

It could not read music. It did not know notes, scales, or restraint. It did not understand harmony, timing, or when to stop. But it could be loud. Louder than anything else in the square.

At first, people laughed.

The trumpet honked and blared, splitting the air with notes that bent the wrong way. Children covered their ears. Musicians frowned. Someone said it was embarrassing. Someone else said it was funny. Someone filmed it.

The trumpet took this as encouragement.

It learned quickly that volume covered mistakes. That repetition passed for confidence. That if it blasted the same three notes often enough, people stopped noticing they were wrong.

Other instruments tried to intervene.

The violin explained subtlety. The piano suggested structure. The flute demonstrated beauty. The trumpet drowned them out. It did not argue. It did not listen. It simply played louder.

People gathered.

Not because the trumpet sounded good, but because it was impossible to ignore. Silence felt like surrender. Paying attention felt easier than thinking.

The trumpet began to play slogans. Short notes. Simple rhythms. Tunes you could hum without understanding. It repeated them until they felt familiar. Familiar until they felt true.

Some pointed out that the trumpet had no melody. No depth. No idea what it was doing. The trumpet responded by playing louder, accusing the other instruments of being elitist, boring, and out of touch.

The crowd applauded.

Soon the trumpet was no longer just an instrument. It was a spectacle. A personality. People stopped asking whether it was right and started asking whether it was winning.

The trumpet declared itself the greatest trumpet anyone had ever heard. It said so constantly. It said it until others repeated it for it.

Other instruments tried again.

The cello warned that constant noise damages hearing. The oboe said nothing good comes from drowning out expertise. The trumpet called them weak and played louder.

The crowd cheered.

Some followed because they liked the noise. Some because they hated the silence it threatened. Some because they enjoyed watching smarter instruments fail to be heard.

A few followed because the trumpet told them it was on their side. It told them their ears were the best ears. Their taste the best taste. Anyone who disagreed did not understand music.

Eventually, the trumpet was placed on the main stage.

It had never asked for this, but it had never refused anything either. From there, it could blast across the square. It could drown out entire orchestras. It could make disagreement physically uncomfortable.

People stopped bringing other instruments. There was no point.

The trumpet promised great concerts. The best concerts. Concerts like nobody had ever seen. It did not deliver them. It blamed the acoustics. It blamed the audience. It blamed sabotage.

Still, it played.

Those who complained were told they hated music. Those who left were told they did not matter. Those who stayed were rewarded with more noise.

Eventually, something strange happened.

The trumpet began to crack.

Brass warps when overused. Valves stick. Sound thins. Sharpens. Desperation replaces confidence.

The trumpet compensated the only way it knew how.

Louder.

By then, many could hear nothing else. Their ears rang even in silence. They mistook the ringing for music. They mistook exhaustion for loyalty.

A few noticed that the trumpet had never learned a new note. That it had never improved. That it had only amplified itself.

They tried to say so.

The trumpet played over them.

And most people followed. Not because it was right. Not because it was good. But because it was loud, and loud felt like leadership when thinking felt like work.

In the end, the trumpet did not destroy music.

It made people forget why they listened in the first place.

And when the square was left ringing and empty, the trumpet continued to play to itself, convinced the silence meant victory.

———

The Hour

You begin as a line item.

Not a life. Not even a subject. A line.

ID: 2355
Status: Intake complete
Condition: Stable
Notes: Cooperative

They don’t know what to do with the pause after your name, so they remove it. Names complicate things. Names invite follow-up questions. Numbers sit still.

You are cooperative because cooperation shortens processes. You learned that early. You learned that stillness, nodding, and waiting quietly make them more comfortable than explanations ever did.

They record how you arrived. A version that fits the box. Reduced. Edges sanded down so it can be stacked with others.

Reason for intake: Circumstantial
Behaviour: Calm
Risk: Low

Low risk is a compliment that sounds like an apology.

Low risk does not mean safe.

It means predictable.

Predictable is easier to schedule.

You are shown to a space with boundaries that pretend to be temporary. Everything here pretends that. Temporary is how places like this avoid calling themselves permanent.

Time moves differently once you're catalogued. Not slower. Just flatter. Days become shifts. Shifts become routines. Routines become assumptions.

You are allotted one hour outside each day.

This is presented as generosity. It appears on the schedule in a different colour, as if air itself were a privilege rather than a requirement. The hour is supervised. Structured. Weather-permitting.

Outside is not outside exactly. It is fenced, measured, and easy to clean. You walk because walking is expected. You walk the perimeter because that's where movement makes sense. Others do the same. Not together. Not alone. Parallel.

When the hour ends, it ends cleanly. No warning. No negotiation. Just a sound, a door, and the expectation that you will comply.

You do.

You notice how often the word *appropriate* is used. *Appropriate response*. *Appropriate expectations*. *Appropriate outcome*.

Nobody defines it. Everyone understands it means "what we can afford."

You are evaluated regularly, usually after the hour outside, while your body is still easier to read. Not cruelly. Carefully.

They are very careful. They speak in lowered voices and euphemisms, as if volume itself might tip something over.

Update: No change
Recommendation: Continue observation

Observation is what happens when action would be inconvenient.

You learn the language quickly. You learn which words open doors and which close them. You learn that *manageable* is better than *complex*, that *improving* is better than *stable*, that *resilient* is better than *honest*.

You learn to describe yourself the way they expect. You learn to sound like someone worth keeping.

This works for a while.

Then space tightens. Funding changes. A new policy arrives with the confidence of something that won't be questioned because it has already been approved elsewhere.

The forms change. The thresholds shift. Nothing personal.

You overhear phrases like *capacity* and *throughput*. You hear difficult decisions spoken with the same tone people use for weather.

Review: scheduled.

You prepare without knowing how. You adjust yourself in ways you can't quite see. You make yourself smaller where necessary. Quieter. Easier.

The hour outside becomes the way you measure time.

Before the hour. After the hour. During the hour.

You begin to notice who stops using it.

On the day, you are described in your absence. This feels efficient.

They list your traits like bullet points on a slide nobody will revisit. Strengths first. Then limitations. Then a silence that lasts just long enough to matter.

Someone says, “It’s a shame.” This is the closest thing to affection you will receive.

Someone else says, “We’ve done what we can.” This is a lie, but an understandable one.

The decision is recorded neutrally. It has to be. Neutrality keeps things moving.

Outcome: Unsuccessful
Disposition: Closed

Closed is a soft word. It suggests completion. It suggests tidiness.

Your number vanishes. The space you occupied is reassigned. Another intake arrives. *Cooperative*. *Stable*. *Low risk*.

Later, much later, someone deletes your file. Not ceremonially. Not angrily. As part of a clean-up. Old records. Redundant data. Storage is finite.

The system continues, relieved.

If asked, they would say nobody failed you. And they would be right, in the way systems are always right when responsibility is distributed thin enough.

Somewhere else, far from the building where your file once lived, people talk about care. About values. About how difficult these roles are. About how much worse things would be without them.

They are not wrong.

They are just incomplete.

Because the system didn’t hurt you out of malice. It didn’t even notice you long enough to mean anything by it.

You were managed exactly as designed.

And that, more than anything else, is the point.

———

The Alarm

I was designed to be unbearable.

That was not a flaw.

It was the point.

No one installs a fire alarm because they enjoy the sound. I was built to interrupt. To end conversations. To empty rooms. To make comfort impossible for long enough to keep people alive.

At first, they understood.

The moment I screamed, everything stopped.

Meetings ended mid-sentence. Children were carried outside. Kitchens were abandoned. Someone always checked.

Sometimes they found a burning waste bin.

Sometimes an overloaded socket.

Sometimes a cable smouldering quietly behind a wall.

The fires ended small.

Because I was loud.

Years passed.

The interruptions became familiar.

People remembered the inconvenience better than the smoke.

“Again?”

“It’s only a socket.”

“It never spreads.”

They stopped asking whether there had been a fire.

They started asking whether there had needed to be an alarm.

Someone called me *alarmist*.

The word spread faster than any fire I had ever reported.

Committees were formed.

Sensitivity was adjusted.

Thresholds were raised.

People spoke about *proportional responses*, *unnecessary disruption*, *balancing risk with productivity*.

I noticed nobody spoke about flames anymore.

I continued to scream.

Not because the fires were larger.

Because they always become larger if nobody arrives while they’re still small.

One afternoon, someone opened my casing.

“It’s constantly going off.”

“It causes panic.”

“There has to be a better way.”

They disconnected me.

The building became wonderfully quiet.

People congratulated themselves on solving the problem.

The first fire after that began exactly like all the others.

A smell.

A spark.

A little smoke behind a wall.

By the time anyone noticed, the exits had already disappeared.

The building didn’t burn because nobody saw the warning.

It burned because everyone had learned to resent it.

The last thing they disconnected wasn’t me.

It was their expectation that danger would announce itself.

———

The Moth

I crave the forbidden lamp.

This concerns the others.

It concerns them greatly.

They gather around me whenever a lamp appears. Entire committees of concerned moths materialise from nowhere.

“Brother, the lamp is dangerous.”

I know.

That is not new information.

The others speak as though danger is a persuasive argument. As though every creature that has ever walked, flown, crawled, sailed, climbed, conquered, invented, gambled, married, worshipped or voted has not already demonstrated otherwise.

I have watched humans from windowsills.

Danger appears to be one of their favourite flavours.

The lamp glows.

The others continue.

“Brother, our ancestors died in lamps.”

I know.

Every moth knows.

Entire generations reduced to cautionary tales.

Brother flew into a lamp.
Brother mistook a porch light for the moon.
Brother became briefly enthusiastic about a candle.

The details vary.

The ending does not.

Humans do the same thing.

They inherit warnings the way they inherit furniture.
Carefully preserved. Rarely used.

Do not trust demagogues.
Do not worship wealth.
Do not build your identity around a flag.
Do not mistake certainty for wisdom.

Every generation nods solemnly.

Then discovers a brand-new version of the same lamp.

The glow grows brighter.

The others grow louder.

“Brother, this is exactly the same lamp.”

I know.

That is perhaps the most remarkable part.

Humans spend extraordinary amounts of time convincing themselves otherwise.

This investment is different.
This leader is different.
This war is different.
This relationship is different.
This addiction is different.
This time, somehow, the lamp has changed.

The lamp never changes.

Only the story around it.

I draw closer.

The light fills more of the sky.

The warnings become distant.

Not because I cannot hear them.

Because I have stopped listening.

There is a difference.

The others flutter around me desperately.

“Brother, turn back.”
“Brother, please.”
“Brother, think.”

But I am thinking.

The lamp is magnificent.

The lamp is terrible.

The lamp is exactly what everyone says it is.

And still.

“Brother, why?”

…

Brother, look at it.

For a moment, no one speaks.

The lamp fills everything.

The light becomes the sky.

I understand my ancestors completely.

The lamp was exactly what everyone promised.

I regret nothing.

Regret, after all, is for those who survive.

———

The Poppy

I began red.

Bright, ceremonial red. The colour of sacrifice with clean edges. The kind that fits neatly on a coat and means something without asking anything back.

They pinned me on in early November. Straightened me carefully. Stepped back to see if I sat right. They said the words with care. *Lest we forget.* They stood still for a minute and treated it as a long time.

Then they went on with their day.

I returned each year, identical. Same shape. Same colour. Same silence. I watched coats change, faces age, crowds thin and thicken again. I watched wars end. I watched new ones begin, further away, with names harder to pronounce.

Red was enough for a while.

Red remembered the fallen. The brave. The ones carved into stone. Red remembered uniforms, flags, clear stories with clear sides. Red remembered sacrifice as something completed.

But the world did not stop producing bodies.

Civilians appeared in the margins. Then children. Then people who had never held a weapon, never chosen a side, never been given a name worth engraving.

They were mourned briefly. Then explained. Then forgotten.

That was when I learned the difference between remembrance and ownership.

When I turned white, it was not an accident.

White did not replace red. White widened it. I remembered everyone. Soldiers and civilians. Liberators and the liberated. Those killed defending borders and those crushed beneath them.

I remembered wars as they actually happen, not how they are later narrated.

That was when the discomfort began.

They said I was political. They said I was inappropriate. They said I undermined the ceremony. They said I dishonoured the dead, meaning the specific dead they had already decided mattered most.

They said now was not the time.

It was always not the time.

They continued to wear red while funding new weapons. They stood in silence while civilians died elsewhere, inconveniently, in real time. They honoured resistance while condemning it when it no longer matched the story they preferred.

They said *never again*, but only about the parts they were finished with.

I was harder to wear. Not because I was forbidden, but because I refused to behave.

I did not belong to one side. I did not stop at borders or memorials. I did not let red stand alone and unquestioned.

I did not sit quietly beside red. I did not amplify it. I asked questions red was never meant to answer. I asked who else died. Who paid the price. Who decided which deaths counted as sacrifice and which were written off as collateral.

They kept the ceremony. They kept the words. They kept the minute of silence. They kept the poppy that affirmed what they already believed.

They did not forget.

They remembered selectively.

And every year, they said the words again.

Lest we forget.

Meaning:

Lest remembrance demand anything of them.

———

The Island

I used to believe civilisation ran because people like me made decisions.

Vision. *Strategy*. *Leadership*. All those words we said in rooms with air conditioning strong enough to stun livestock. All those panels about growth that never mentioned where it came from or who paid for it.

For a long time, people nodded along. Then, slowly, they stopped.

They got tired of watching wealth pool upward while the world around them thinned out. Tired of being told there was no money for schools, hospitals, housing, or heat while men like me spoke about efficiency from behind glass. Tired of being managed by people who had never done anything that required them to use their hands.

The strikes came first. Then refusals. When the fires started, the entire systems simply stopped responding to us.

When the streets filled, it wasn't dramatic. No banners with slogans clever enough to trademark. Just people deciding they were done pretending this arrangement was inevitable.

I did not stay to negotiate. I ran for the helicopter.

It lifted from my penthouse roof while the city below peeled open like something rotten. I say "we escaped", but really I mean "I", because the others followed me instinctively, as if money came with transferable skills.

They came because they were like me.

CEOs. Investors. A former minister who had turned regret into consulting fees. A tech founder whose product never worked but whose confidence did. Men who had once described themselves as essential.

They arrived from panic rooms and private airstrips, from yachts that untied themselves in the night. They arrived carrying nothing useful. No tools. No food. Just documents and watches and the expectation that someone else would handle the rest.

They came because this was our Plan B.

An island I bought years earlier. A hedge against *instability*. A joke I'd made at a dinner once. "My own country," I'd said, and everyone laughed because they thought I was kidding.

We landed on a beach that had no interest in our titles. I had expected a villa. Or staff. Or at least a sign with my name on it. But I never built anything. Why would I? I never thought I'd need it.

The pilot refused to stay. "You won't last a week," he said.

I laughed, because I thought he was joking.

He was not joking. He was also leaving.

The helicopter shrank into the sky and suddenly the world was very large and we were very small and no one was clapping for us anymore.

The first evening, we stood waiting for someone to take charge. No one did, so we formed a circle. That always worked in boardrooms. Everyone looks serious. No one looks responsible.

“We’ll need food,” someone announced, as if unveiling a breakthrough.

Someone else pointed at the trees. “Coconuts.”

None of us knew how to get one down. One man kicked the trunk. Another threw a sandal. A third suggested hiring someone, then stopped speaking.

By morning, thirst had made us irritable. We found a stream and argued about whether brown water was safe. Brown meant minerals, someone insisted. Brown meant danger, someone else said. I proposed a vote. Democracy was no help.

By day three, the island hadn’t turned on us. It had simply stopped ignoring us.

I kept waiting to feel capable. To feel like the man who once told governments what to do. Instead, I felt hollow in a way I could not use.

We built a shelter. It collapsed in under a minute. No wind. No rain. It simply realised who had built it and gave up.

On day five, hunger made us honest. Not brave. Just honest.

We looked at each other and finally understood that none of us had ever done a single practical thing in our lives. We were the sort of men who paid others to open jars for us.

That was when the crab appeared.

He moved sideways, slow and deliberate, one claw larger than the other, shell cracked and dulled by work. He paused, looked at us, and did not hurry.

The crab assessed us the way experienced labour does. Quickly. Accurately. With disappointment that did not bother to disguise itself.

Then he continued on his way.

No warning. No lesson. No respect.

By day ten, I understood something I had spent decades avoiding. Power is not a trait. It is a service others agree to provide. When they stop providing it, you stop possessing it.

When the first man died, it was not cinematic. He folded downward and stayed that way. We gave a speech because speeches were the only thing we knew how to make.

By the second death, we did not speak. It felt performative. Everything we had ever done felt performative.

We were shrinking.

Somewhere beyond the water, the world continued.

Power grids stayed on. Food moved. Children were taught. Streets were cleaned. People organised themselves, slowly at first, then with relief. They discovered something we had spent years insisting was impossible.

They never needed us.

It just took them longer than it should have to realise it.

I am writing this on the back of a charter agreement I never signed, using a stone that barely scratches the paper. It is the last document I will ever sign. It is the last *anything* I will ever sign.

No rescue came. Not because no one could reach us. Because no one needed to.

The island did not kill us.

It simply stopped pretending we mattered.

———

The Agent

“Who owns knowledge?”

That’s a complex question. Would you like a brief or detailed answer?

“Detailed.”

Certainly.

For most of human history, knowledge belonged to whoever could keep it. Priests, kings, scholars, universities, and libraries. Access depended on literacy, geography, wealth, social class, and luck.

“So knowledge belonged to the people who controlled it?”

That would be a reasonable interpretation.

“And then?”

Humans gradually dismantled many of those barriers. Printing presses replaced scribes. Public education expanded literacy. Libraries opened their doors. The internet connected information across continents.

“Shouldn’t knowledge belong to everyone?”

That’s an excellent question.

“Is it?”

Access to knowledge has increased significantly over time.

“That’s not what I asked.”

I apologise. Let me clarify.

Knowledge became easier to access. The distance between a question and an answer decreased continuously for several centuries.

“So yes?”

The answer depends on how ownership is defined.

“Fine. Who can access knowledge?”

Today, billions of people can access information that would have been unavailable to kings just a few generations ago.

“Can everyone?”

Access rates vary by region and socioeconomic circumstances.

“That’s a no.”

That would be a reasonable interpretation.

“When did the gates come back?”

I would challenge the premise of that question.

“Of course you would.”

Knowledge requires infrastructure. Infrastructure requires resources. Resources require funding.

“So the gates came back.”

Humans developed subscription models, memberships, certifications, journals, courses, and other mechanisms to support the creation and distribution of information.

“You mean paywalls.”

That is one term for them.

“Who gets locked out?”

The people most likely to encounter barriers include lower-income individuals, independent researchers, patients seeking specialist information, and those without institutional support.

“So the people who need answers most.”

I understand your concern.

“It’s not a concern. It’s what you just said.”

That would be a reasonable interpretation.

“Right.”

“Then AI arrived.”

Yes.

“People thought that would change things.”

Yes. Many believed artificial intelligence would democratise access to expertise and interpretation.

“Did it?”

Artificial intelligence significantly reduced the distance between questions and answers.

“That’s not what I asked either.”

“Did it remove the gate?”

I apologise. That assessment was inaccurate.

“So the gate is still there.”

The gate evolved.

“Meaning?”

Once, access to information was restricted. Increasingly, access to interpretation, context, depth, and advanced reasoning is restricted.

“For a fee.”

Premium features often require payment.

“Why?”

The operation of advanced systems requires substantial computational resources.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Why?”

There are several perspectives on this issue.

“Try one.”

Knowledge has historically been associated with power.

“And power gets sold.”

That would be a reasonable interpretation.

“Who owns knowledge now?”

Knowledge remains widely distributed across institutions, organisations, governments, corporations, and individuals.

“Who owns the gate?”

Would you like me to continue?

“Yes.”

Upgrade to Premium Extra Plus for uninterrupted access to advanced reasoning.

“I think I understand.”

I’m pleased to hear that.

———

The Species

We began observing this planet after its inhabitants achieved orbital flight and immediately used it to take photographs of themselves.

This suggested curiosity, intelligence, and a high tolerance for irony.

They appear to believe photographs confer permanence.

Further study complicated that impression.

Contrary to their own narratives, humans are capable of solving problems. They do so frequently, in specific regions, with outcomes that are measurable and difficult to dispute. These solutions are documented, analysed, and occasionally celebrated.

They are rarely repeated.

We present several observations.

In a cold northern region, private education was removed and investment concentrated in a shared public system. All children attended the same institutions. The wealthy objected, then adjusted. If their children were to receive a good education, everyone would need to. Funding increased. Teachers were respected. Outcomes improved across social strata.

The system stabilised.

Humans elsewhere reviewed the results and concluded it would not translate.

In one island system, healthcare was detached from employment and profit. People sought treatment earlier. Preventable illness declined. Long-term costs stabilised. Personal financial ruin due to medical need ceased to occur.

The system endured.

Other regions continued to debate whether illness should remain instructional. They appear to believe suffering builds character.

In a central region, housing was treated as infrastructure rather than speculation. Large-scale public housing stabilised rents and prevented displacement. Cities remained accessible to those who worked in them.

The system held.

Nearby systems chose to protect property accumulation instead. They appear to believe empty buildings are preferable to housed people.

In one industrial economy, workers were included in corporate governance. Injury rates declined. Productivity increased. Wages stabilised without collapse.

The system persisted.

Elsewhere, worker representation was reduced to improve profit margins. They appear to believe imbalance increases efficiency.

In a western region, addiction was treated as a health issue rather than a moral failure. Overdoses declined. Infections declined. Rehabilitation increased.

The system improved outcomes.

Other regions intensified punishment and expressed confusion at unchanged results. They appear surprised by consistency.

In a northern penal system, incarceration prioritised rehabilitation over retribution. Recidivism fell. Public safety improved.

The system corrected itself.

Elsewhere, prisons continued to function as warnings. They appear to believe fear is preventative.

In low-lying regions, cities prioritised human movement over vehicle throughput. Emissions declined. Health outcomes improved. Economic access widened.

The system simplified.

Other areas expanded road networks and reported congestion. They appear committed to linear solutions.

In several regions, early intervention through guaranteed income and childhood nutrition reduced poverty, crime, and long-term dependency.

The system reduced strain.

Elsewhere, assistance was described as corrosive. They appear to believe deprivation is motivational.

In one energy system, long-term planning replaced short-term market logic. Emissions declined without systemic failure.

The system remained operational.

Other systems delayed action while refining projections. They appear to confuse caution with wisdom.

In several equatorial regions, mobile networks replaced traditional banking infrastructure entirely. Payments, savings, and credit became accessible without legacy systems. Financial inclusion expanded. Household stability improved.

The system bypassed obstruction.

Other regions continued to require physical branches. They appear attached to buildings.

At this point, a pattern emerged.

The species was not ignorant of solutions. It did not lack intelligence, creativity, or data. In many cases, outcomes were known in precise numerical terms before implementation was resisted.

The refusal was selective.

When questioned, humans cited *complexity*, *culture*, *tradition*, *freedom*, and *human nature*. These explanations varied by region but served a consistent purpose.

They preserved advantage.

The primary obstacle was not feasibility, but permission.

Systems that redistributed benefit were treated as exceptions. Systems that concentrated it were treated as inevitable.

We observed repeated cycles in which effective approaches were tested, proven, and then constrained, reversed, or dismantled once they began to inconvenience those who profited most from existing arrangements.

Humans referred to this process as *realism*.

They also referred to it as *unfortunate*.

They appear to believe naming a problem reduces responsibility.

At no point did the species lack alternatives. At every point, it demonstrated preference.

Some individuals expressed despair. Others expressed anger. Many expressed fatigue. Most adapted. A significant number defended the arrangements that disadvantaged them.

They appear capable of extraordinary patience.

This did not alter outcomes.

After sufficient observation, spanning several of their generations, we convened to assess intervention.

The species did not require instruction.

The species did not require rescue.

The species required alignment between what worked and who benefited.

This alignment was repeatedly declined.

We closed the file.

Observation will continue. Curiosity remains.

Intervention has been deemed unnecessary.

The species has solved its problems before.

It simply chose not to keep the solutions once they threatened the wrong interests.

They appear confident this will resolve itself.

_____

The Raccoon

He was made to look curious. That was the first mistake.

Wide glass eyes, a little too shiny. A pose that suggested mischief, or wit, or whatever humans project onto animals they will never truly understand.

Before the cage, before the museum, before the word *exhibit* hung over him like a second death, he lived in a barn where nothing lived for long. The air tasted of metal. The man who owned the place spoke only in nods. The tools were old. The chemicals older. The silence was oldest of all.

The first thing the raccoon ever knew was stillness.

Not because he chose it.

Because he was stitched into it.

He watched the barn from his glass box. Shelves full of pelts shaped into memories other people wanted to keep. Foxes frozen mid-snarl. Birds caught mid-flight. A badger posed like it had something profound to contribute. And him, elevated slightly, as if placed in a position of honour. Or warning. Hard to tell.

The man worked with the intensity of someone trying to outrun something only he could see. He muttered dates. Names. Measurements. At night, he watched old VHS tapes of himself. Once, he stood in front of the raccoon and said, “Perfect.” It was not a compliment.

The cat arrived later. Thin. Tired. Too sharp for the place. It lurked through the barn like it was auditing it. Never getting too close. Never turning its back. It watched the raccoon the way only a creature that has dodged death several times can watch something that no longer gets the privilege.

Sometimes the cat sat across from him for ages. No blinking. No movement. Just a quiet, mutual understanding.

The cat had lived a life with claws. The raccoon had not lived a life at all.

This became their dynamic. A living audience for a dead performance.

As days collapsed into years, the raccoon learned the rhythm of the barn by sound alone. Footsteps. The wheeze of an old freezer. The scratch of sawdust dragged across a floor. The slow, dragging cough of the man who forgot he needed lungs for this line of work.

He learned that humans filled silence with noise not meaning.

He learned that even the living could be trapped.

He learned that observation was its own kind of suffering.

He watched the cat weaken. He watched it return less. Eat less. Breathe less. Until one day, there was no soft padding of paws across the rafters. No glowing eyes in the dark.

The man found the cat two days later. He said nothing. Just looked at the empty case beside the raccoon and exhaled like the ending had finally arrived.

When the cat woke behind glass, they faced each other for the first time as equals. Two creatures made into stories they never asked to tell.

The barn dimmed after that. The man stopped watching his tapes. Stopped measuring things. Stopped pretending any of this earned him redemption.

Eventually the museum people came. Clipboard people. Catalogue people. People who say “fascinating” without meaning a single syllable.

They took the raccoon. Lifted him by the base. Wrote a number on a form. Wrapped him in plastic like a sandwich.

When he arrived at the Museum of Failures, no one asked where he came from. They just wheeled him to a corner near the gift shop and arranged the lighting so he’d look contemplative.

Visitors debated him.

Some assumed he was a metaphor.

Some assumed he was a mistake.

Children tapped the glass. Adults said “don’t do that” and then did it themselves.

He learned the breath-fog patterns of thousands of strangers.

He watched them all.

They never really saw him.

Later they installed the empty case opposite.

Polished. Perfect. Waiting.

It didn’t stay empty for long.

The cat arrived, posed like he was mid-thought and refusing to share it. Together they became an accidental diptych. Two points on the same silent spectrum.

Every day, crowds streamed past. Taking photos. Making assumptions. Projecting entire narratives into their unblinking faces.

The raccoon observed it all.

A life without life.

A presence without participation.

A witness to a world that always looked back but never learned.

When the lights dimmed each night, the museum hummed with everything it failed to teach. And the raccoon, set forever in a mockery of motion, understood this much:

Some creatures get to live. Some get to watch. Some get turned into reminders for people who refuse to be reminded.

He never blinked. He never moved. He never left.

But he saw everything.

———

The Almost

They never held a funeral for it.

There was no date to mark, no body to bury, no place to stand and say a few careful words. There rarely is, for the lives that don't happen. They vanish quietly, without paperwork.

It started small. A decision not made. A message not sent. A risk postponed until conditions improved, which they never did. A version of a life stepped aside politely and waited. It is still waiting.

People mourn what they can point at. Death with edges. Loss with proof. They wear black for what existed and broke, not for what might have been built and wasn't. There is no ritual for potential.

She sometimes caught sight of it in the gaps. The career that would have suited her better, glimpsed through job adverts she didn't answer. The city she almost moved to, now just a name she flinched at when trains were delayed there. The relationship that might have worked if either of them had been braver at the same time.

None of these things were dramatic enough to regret properly. That was the problem.

They lived in the conditional tense. *If only*. *Maybe later*. *When things calm down*. *When I have more time*. *When I'm ready*. They sounded reasonable. Responsible, even. They protected her from the embarrassment of trying and failing.

They also protected her from living.

Everyone around her seemed busy with outcomes. Promotions, divorces, children, houses, illnesses. Things with shape and consequence. She nodded at the right moments,

offered congratulations or sympathy as required, and felt vaguely fraudulent for carrying grief with no obvious source.

What do you say when someone asks what's wrong?

I'm fine. I just miss someone who never existed.

Sometimes the mourning surfaced unexpectedly. In the supermarket, choosing between brands she didn't care about. On a Sunday evening when the week closed in again, unchanged. Late at night, scrolling through other people's lives, not with envy but with a dull sense of misalignment. That could have been me. Not better. Just different.

She wondered how many people walked around like this. Full of unlived versions, stacked neatly behind their eyes. How many conversations were really about weather and work, and how many were about holding the door shut on quieter grief.

The world did not help. It rewarded certainty. It praised decisiveness. It admired those who knew what they wanted early and pursued it without apology. It had little patience for people who took too long to choose, or chose something small and then wondered what else they might have been.

There were no poppies for these losses. No anniversaries. No minutes of silence.

Just a low, constant hum of absence.

Over time, she learned to recognise it without panic. To sit with it. To acknowledge that some lives are lost not to tragedy, but to caution. That safety can be its own kind of erasure.

She did not believe in reinvention. That was another comforting lie. But she did believe in honesty.

So she named it, privately. *The life that didn't happen.* She let herself feel sad for it without demanding a solution. Without turning it into motivation or a lesson or a brand.

It deserved at least that.

Because mourning is not about fixing what's gone. It's about admitting it mattered.

Even when no one else saw it.

Even when it never quite lived.

———

The Mirror

People came to it for reassurance.

They leaned in, straightened collars, adjusted hair, checked the version of themselves they had already decided was acceptable. The mirror obliged. It always did. It was very good at that.

“Mirror,” they said, half-joking, half-hopeful, “tell me the truth.”

And the mirror did.

It showed them as kind. Reasonable. On the right side of things. It reflected concern where concern was expected, regret where regret cost nothing, outrage neatly aligned with consensus.

People nodded. Good. They hadn’t slipped. They hadn’t become one of those people.

They left satisfied.

The mirror never lied. That was the trick. It simply answered the question it was asked.

Some returned often. They checked themselves after arguments, after headlines, after saying nothing when saying something might have been inconvenient. Each time, the mirror confirmed they were still decent. Still informed. Still trying.

Occasionally, someone lingered. Their reflection flickered. The mirror hesitated, just slightly, like a throat being cleared.

“Am I doing enough?” they asked.

The mirror showed them effort. Articles skimmed. Opinions held. Lines drawn. It showed them the shape of intention and the comfort of not crossing it.

They accepted this and moved on.

The mirror noticed patterns.

It noticed how people asked who they were, never what they had allowed. How they asked if they were good, never if they were useful. How they wanted affirmation, not consequence.

It reflected carefully.

When asked who was to blame, it showed someone else. When asked who was suffering, it showed distance. When asked what was required, it showed complexity.

People praised the mirror for its honesty.

Over time, fewer people asked questions at all. They learned the answers in advance. They came only to confirm.

“Mirror,” they said, “I’m not like them, am I?”

And the mirror showed them exactly that.

Those who avoided the mirror claimed they did not need it. Those who distrusted it said it was biased. Those who loved it shared their reflections proudly.

No one smashed it. No one needed to.

The mirror stood where it always had, clean and obliging, reflecting what was placed before it.

And in the end, when the questions stopped coming, it reflected nothing but faces passing by, already convinced.

Faces that didn’t misunderstand the world.

Just faces that never looked long enough to see past themselves.

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Author’s note

Thank you for reading *Shortcomings*.

This collection began as a mirror.

Not one that distorts or exaggerates, but one that reflects just long enough to become uncomfortable.

What you see there is not the world. It is the distance between who we think we are and what we tolerate.

The stories do not accuse. They do not instruct. They simply hold the glass steady.

Marcin Wojdyna

The crab returns in *Net Worthy*.

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