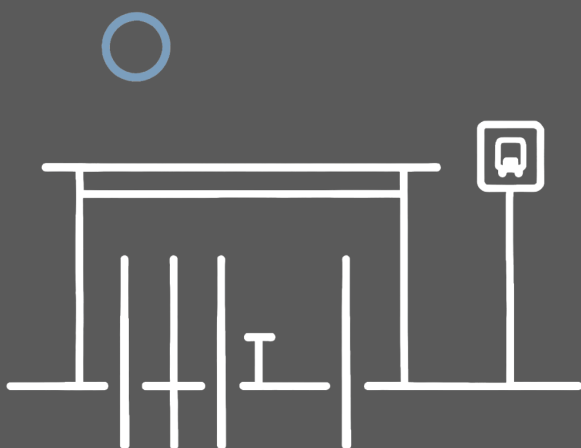


THE FAREWELL FARE



MARCIN WOJDYNA

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ISBN: 978-1-9191668-1-0

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Part I: What Comes After the Silence

*Dedicated to anyone who ever lost somebody. Or
themselves.*

Prologue: The Terminus

The timetable was a liar.

It had promised a bus at 23:55, and yet the time on the cracked clock suggested that particular promise had been broken.

Four people stood at the stop, each one pretending they weren't waiting.

The man in the suit checked his watch, even though he already knew what it would say. He wasn't a man accustomed to waiting. Trains ran on time. Meetings started when they were meant to. People had routines and those routines did not involve standing at a damp suburban bus stop long after they should have been home. He should have called a cab. He should have done a hundred other things. But instead, he was here. He tilted his head and cracked his neck. Not the first time today. Then he rolled his shoulders like that might somehow shake off the unease that had been sitting there all evening.

The woman near the bench exhaled slowly, watching the air cloud in front of her. Some nights didn't feel real. Like that book she read the other day, the one about a talking dog in a museum. It was something about the silence, the way the streetlights buzzed like they were trying to fill an absence. This place felt like an in-between. She had spent enough time in hospitals to recognise one. The spaces where people hovered waiting for the inevitable; to be told what happens next. She caught herself rubbing her side, a phantom ache where something had once grown, then shrunk, then won.

The biro girl had given up sketching. There was nothing to draw. Just an empty road, an empty shelter, an empty night. She tucked her hands into her sleeves, covered in red ink, but already dry now. She glanced up at the timetable again, as if maybe, this time, it would display some sort of revelation instead of just *Bus 42: Delayed*.

The last man was watching the road. Not out of hope. Just habit. He looked calm, but it was the kind of calm that came from being too tired to panic. His shoulders ached. His head throbbed. His brain was trying to come up with a reason for the delay. Probably roadworks. Something boring and fixable. But nothing about this felt fixable. And deep down, he knew this wasn't just a late bus. Just like he knew those headaches weren't just headaches.

Then, as if summoned by their collective impatience, the bus arrived.

No lights in the distance, no rumble of an engine approaching; just the soft exhale of brakes as it materialised at the stop. It looked old. Not vintage, not retro. Just *old*, in a way that suggested it had been around longer than it should.

The doors slid open. No driver spoke. No destination was displayed.

The four of them hesitated, just for a second. Then, without a word, they all stepped inside.

The doors shut, and the city outside faded into the night.

Chapter One: The Bus

The inside of the bus was exactly as expected. Which was to say, not at all.

It had the usual elements: rows of seats, metal poles, a faint smell of something industrial. But something was off. Not in an obvious way. No flickering lights, no ominous creaks. Just a quiet wrongness. Like a song played in the wrong key, an accent on the wrong syllable, or a dream that didn't know it was a dream yet.

The four passengers took their seats, instinctively spacing themselves apart like strangers do.

The man in the suit, who under normal circumstances, would have gone straight to the back to avoid conversation, chose a seat near the front instead. Closer to the driver. Closer to answers. Except the driver wasn't saying anything. They were barely visible. A figure behind a scratched perspex screen, hands on the wheel, face just out of reach of the light.

The woman near the bench earlier, now sitting by the window, glanced outside. The view was wrong. She couldn't put her finger on it yet, but something about the streets they were passing didn't sit right. Too empty? Too unfamiliar? Were they even going the right way?

The biro girl fidgeted, twirling the pen between her fingers. She had started counting the lampposts. Not because she expected to recognise one, but because it felt like something to hold onto. Something solid.

And the last man, the one who had been watching the road, hadn't stopped watching. Not outside, but inside. He wasn't looking for answers. He was looking for confirmation. Because some part of him, some deep and buried part, already knew.

The bus rolled on. The passengers did what all people do when they sense something is wrong but can't explain why: they sat in silence and pretended it wasn't happening.

Until the first stop came into view.

And then everything changed.

—

Chapter Two: The First Stop

The bus slowed.

It was the first sound beyond the low hum of the engine. The brakes exhaled, the lights inside flickered once, and the vehicle eased to a stop with the kind of precision that suggested this was exactly where it was meant to be.

Outside, there was nothing.

Not a road. Not a sign. Not even a pavement. Just a stretch of darkness so complete it looked like the world had given up existing beyond the glass.

The four passengers didn't move.

The woman by the window narrowed her eyes, trying to make sense of the view. Or the lack of it. It wasn't just night outside. It was absence. A space where things should have been but weren't. No streetlights. No reflections. No buildings, or cars, or any of the comforting, ordinary details of a city at rest.

The biro girl gripped her pen tighter, resisting the urge to scribble something, anything, on the back of her hand. It was a bad habit of documenting things she couldn't explain. But this was different. This wasn't the kind of thing you wanted proof of.

The man in the suit glanced at the driver, who remained still, hands on the wheel, eyes on the road. Not expectant. Not impatient. Just waiting.

Then, the doors slid open.

The noise of them cutting through the silence fractured the air, thin and uncertain. It felt like an invitation. Or a dare.

No one got up.

Seconds stretched. Then, from somewhere in the distance, or maybe just from the edges of perception, came the unmistakable sound of footsteps.

Slow. Measured. Getting closer.

The last man, the one who had been watching everything, clenched his jaw without meaning to. He didn't know how he knew but something about this stop felt wrong. Like whatever was approaching was not just another late-night commuter.

The footsteps reached the door.

A figure stepped on board.

And the journey continued.

—

Chapter Three: The New Passenger

The figure stepped onto the bus with the casual ease of someone boarding a ride they had taken a thousand times before.

They weren't old, but they weren't young either. Their face was the kind that resisted memory; neither striking nor forgettable, neither friendly nor hostile. Just a person.

They moved down the aisle without hesitation, without searching for a seat like most people would. Instead, they sat near the middle, hands resting neatly in their lap.

The doors slid shut.

The bus pulled away.

Nobody spoke.

The biro girl caught herself holding her breath. She exhaled slowly, quietly watching the new arrival through the reflection in the window. They didn't move. Didn't fidget. Didn't check a phone or glance outside. Just sat, as if the journey itself was the only thing that mattered.

The man in the suit adjusted his cuff again. A pointless gesture, but his hands needed something to do. His mind was calculating, assessing, trying to pin this moment down to something logical. He had taken countless late-night buses before. But never one that stopped for no one, in the middle of nowhere, and let something on.

The woman by the window kept her gaze steady on the darkness outside, resisting the urge to turn her head. She could feel it though. She could sense the slight shift in the atmosphere, the way the temperature had dropped just enough to be noticeable.

The last man, the one who had been watching, who had been waiting for something he didn't have the words for, finally moved. He turned his head, just slightly, just enough to see the new passenger properly.

The figure met his gaze in the reflection.

Not directly. Not with any expression that suggested they had been waiting for this moment. But with a kind of inevitability. Like this had happened before. Like it would happen again.

The bus rolled on.

And the night outside grew darker.

—

Chapter Four: The Route

The road stretched endlessly ahead, though none of them could quite recall when they had last seen a turn. Or a junction. Or a single landmark.

The city should have been behind them by now. Even the suburbs had a limit. Yet the bus just kept moving forward, following a road that looked the same every time they glanced out of the window.

None of them spoke, but the silence had changed. Before, it had been the kind of silence people use to avoid unnecessary small talk. Now, it was different. Heavier. Like speaking might break something they didn't want to break.

The biro girl was tracing invisible lines on the seat beside her, trying to work through the creeping sense of displacement. She knew how journeys worked. They had a start and an end. A place you left and a place you arrived. This? This felt like neither.

The man in the suit was doing the same calculations, but with different tools. His mind reached for logic, for something concrete. Maybe he had fallen asleep. Maybe this was a lucid dream, the kind where your brain throws scraps of reality together and tries to convince you they fit.

Maybe.

But if that were true, why could he feel the faint vibration of the engine through his shoes? Why could he hear the low, rhythmic clatter of the road beneath them?

The woman by the window inhaled slowly, pressing her fingers into her palms. She had spent enough time in places that existed outside of normal rules, like hospitals in the early hours, waiting rooms where time didn't move the way it should. This felt the same. A pause. A place in between.

The last man was no longer watching the driver. He had moved on from that. Instead, he was watching the new passenger.

The figure had not moved since sitting down. They were simply *there*, as if they always had been.

Then, without warning, the bus slowed again.

The engine softened. The headlights caught something in the distance. Another stop.

And waiting at the edge of the road was someone else.

Another passenger.

The biro girl's breath hitched slightly. She didn't know why. Maybe it was the way the figure at the stop stood so perfectly still. Maybe it was the fact that she had *no idea where they were*.

The man in the suit finally leaned forward, voice low. "*Where is this bus going?*"

No one answered. Not the driver. Not the new passenger. Not even the road ahead.

Chapter Five: The Request Stop

The old man with the loose tie took a step forward, his shoes shuffling on the worn pavement as he made his way toward the bus. His hands trembled slightly, a crumpled ticket clutched in one of them. The air was thick with the buzz of expectation, the kind that hums in the moments before something important happens.

He reached the bus door, his foot about to cross the threshold. But then, just as the first toe made contact, a sharp *zap* sliced through the air. Then another one, followed by a flicker of light so brief it could've been mistaken for an optical illusion. The old man froze. For a split second, the door seemed to shudder, like the bus itself had hesitated.

And then he was gone. No sound. No breath. Just the faintest whisper of light where he had stood.

No one on the bus said a word, but all of them felt it: the old man's departure wasn't an accident. It was as if he'd been gently plucked back from the edge, just before stepping into something he wasn't quite ready for.

For just a moment, it had looked like he might make it. But instead, he vanished, leaving only the quiet hum of the bus to fill the space where he had been.

And with that, the bus floated forward, a little quieter now, as if it, too, understood what had just happened.

Chapter Six: The Silent Hand

The driver did not move.

When the old man vanished, the bus shuddered and the silence thickened into something heavier than air, the driver's hands stayed on the wheel.

Steady. Unflinching.

They did not turn their head. Did not check the mirror. Did not speak.

The others shifted in their seats, questions clawing just behind their eyes, but the driver remained still.

Not indifferent. Not blind. Just... committed.

They had carried thousands like this. Some who begged. Some who fought. Some who wept, though the sound of it never quite reached through the perspex barrier.

The driver knew their role.

It was not to comfort. It was not to explain.

It was simply to drive.

The bus sighed against the road, taking the weight of the missing passenger into itself. And the driver's hands kept the bus moving forward, into the dark.

Chapter Seven: The Realisation

The bus rumbled forward, steady and indifferent.

The passengers were not so steady.

The biro girl had started tapping her pen against her knee, a quick, nervous rhythm that filled the silence. She had spent her life looking for patterns, for meaning in the details most people overlooked. But there was something about this moment, about this bus, that refused to be pinned down.

The woman by the window tried to remember the last time she had seen another car. A pedestrian. A single sign telling them where they were. But the road outside remained the same, an unbroken stretch of empty.

The man in the suit exhaled sharply, then stood up.

“I’m getting off at the next stop.”

No one replied.

Not the other passengers. Not the driver. Not even the new arrival.

He stepped forward, placing a hand on the perspex barrier that separated him from the driver. “Do you hear me?”

Nothing.

The last man, who had been watching, waiting, spoke for the first time. “There is no next stop.”

The suit turned, his patience snapping. “Excuse me?”

“There is no next stop,” the last man repeated. Not smug. Not cruel. Just tired of pretending there were better answers.

The bus continued its steady, endless route.

The biro girl finally spoke. “We’re not on a normal route, are we?”

The woman by the window looked up. She didn’t want to say it. But she had worked in hospitals. She had seen people step between two places before.

And this?

This was not a journey home.

The biro girl ran her thumb over the end of her pen, an old nervous habit. “So. If this isn’t a normal bus ride...”

She glanced around. Looked at the others, the driver and the new passenger, still sitting in silence.

“...then where exactly are we going?”

For the first time since boarding, the new passenger moved.

Slowly, deliberately, they turned their head.

And they smiled.

—

Chapter Eight: The Answer

The smile wasn't cruel. It wasn't warm, either. It sat in the space between, balanced on the knife-edge of knowing.

The biro girl tightened her grip on her pen. The woman by the window drew in a slow, careful breath. The man in the suit squared his shoulders, already preparing to argue against whatever was coming next. The last man? He simply watched. Waiting.

The new passenger held their silence a moment longer, as if tasting it before breaking it. Then, with the same easy certainty they had displayed since boarding, they spoke.

"You already know."

It wasn't an answer. Not really. It was an observation. A confirmation. A mirror held up to the thoughts they had all been avoiding.

The biro girl's pulse skipped. "That's not an answer."

The new passenger tilted their head slightly. "Isn't it?"

The man in the suit had enough. "Right. I don't know who you are, or what kind of sick joke this is, but I want off. Now." He turned sharply toward the driver and slammed a hand against the barrier. "Do you hear me? Stop the fucking bus."

The driver didn't move. Didn't flinch. Didn't even acknowledge the demand.

The new passenger's smile didn't waver. "You can't leave."

The suit let out a sharp laugh, entirely without humour. "The fuck I can't." He spun on his heel and marched down the aisle towards the back door, hands already reaching for the emergency release. He found it. Pulled it.

Nothing happened.

No alarm. No resistance. No click or clunk or satisfying hiss of disengaging hydraulics.

Just... nothing.

The biro girl swallowed hard. "Okay. Okay. Maybe we should all just..."

The bus shuddered.

Not a jolt. Not the kind of bump you get from hitting a pothole or an uneven stretch of road. It was deeper than that. Heavier. Like something vast had shifted around them, under them, through them.

Outside, the darkness seemed closer.

The woman by the window felt the press of it, the way the blackness almost seemed to lean in, as though it had weight, as though it had purpose. She had spent her life in the presence of thresholds; places between life and death, moments balanced on the edge of fate.

She knew what it felt like to be watched.

The biro girl licked her lips. “We’re not going anywhere, are we?”

The new passenger’s smile faded. Not entirely, but enough to shift the expression into something else. Not amusement. Not cruelty.

Understanding.

“We’re already there.”

The last man exhaled slowly, shoulders settling as if a weight had finally, truly, landed. His voice was quiet, but firm. “This isn’t a journey. It’s a decision.”

The biro girl’s breath hitched. “A decision?”

The new passenger nodded. “The last one you’ll ever make.”

Silence gripped the bus. It pressed into every corner, into every breath, thick with the weight of realisation.

The biro girl looked down at her pen, as if it might have the answer. The man in the suit flexed his hands, still standing near the back door, still not quite willing to accept what he already knew. The woman by the window finally let her gaze move, meeting the new passenger’s eyes directly.

“What happens if we choose?”

The new passenger smiled again, and this time, there was something different in it. Something like kindness.

“You get off.”

The bus rumbled on, endless, waiting.

And the road ahead stretched into the unknown.

—

Chapter Nine: The Fracture

The new passenger's gaze lingered a little too long on the biro girl's pen.

Just a second. Barely that. But long enough.

A flicker of something crossed their face. Not regret, not quite. Something quieter. The kind of ache that sat below language, too worn-out to name itself.

They turned their head away, covering the slip with a movement too smooth, too rehearsed.

But the last man saw it. He tilted his head slightly, the barest twitch of recognition passing between them.

The biro girl missed it, still caught in her own thundering pulse, her thumb running frantic circles over the cap of her pen. The man in the suit did not notice either, too busy cataloguing his anger.

Only the woman by the window, calm and deliberate, watched the new passenger's hands.

There was a tremor.

Tiny. So small it might have been imagined.

The new passenger folded their hands carefully into their lap, smoothing invisible creases from their coat as if stitching their composure back into place.

They had once sat where the others sat.

They had once been the one who chose.

And not all choices were easy.

—

Chapter Ten: The Weight

The bus held its breath.

It had no eyes, no mind as people understood it, but it knew waiting. It knew the heavy, aching gravity of almost-decisions. It felt it in the air, in the scuff of uncertain footsteps, in the hollow spaces left behind when a choice was made or refused.

It remembered them all.

The ones who stood too long at the threshold, until the doors creaked and the world outside peeled away.

The ones who leapt too fast, thinking themselves brave, only to find the path gave them no easy reward.

The ones who did not choose at all.

Every moment soaked into the seats, the poles, the floor beneath their feet. Every hesitation another quiet stone dropped into the river of memory the bus carried endlessly forward.

It would not hurry them.

It never did.

It would simply wait, and it would remember, and it would carry the weight until it could be set down again.

Chapter Eleven: The Choice

The bus rolled forward, steady as ever. The road outside bled outward into the unknown, shifting in a way that refused to be understood.

Inside, no one spoke.

The biro girl fiddled with the coins in her pocket, realising she didn't remember putting any there. The woman by the window kept her hands in her lap. The man in the suit hadn't moved from the back door, but his certainty was faltering.

The last man exhaled slowly. He wasn't watching the new passenger anymore. He was watching the others.

"We get off," the woman by the window repeated, her voice quiet. "And then what?"

The new passenger's smile softened, but they didn't answer.

The biro girl glanced at the others. "And if we don't?"

The last man's jaw tightened. "Then the bus keeps going."

No one needed to ask where it would take them. The answer was there, thick in the air between them.

The suit let out a slow breath, one that sounded dangerously close to a laugh. "This is insane."

The new passenger finally moved, shifting just enough to turn their attention fully toward him.

“You’ve already accepted that it isn’t.”

The biro girl’s grip tightened around her pen. “What does choosing even mean? Do we just, like, stand up and get off?”

The new passenger nodded once.

The biro girl looked at the others. The woman by the window was still calm, still watching, though something in her eyes had sharpened. The last man, too, had an air of quiet understanding. But the man in the suit? He was still fighting it, still trying to fit everything into a logical frame that had long since shattered.

“I’m not making a decision without knowing what I’m walking into,” the suit said.

The new passenger considered him for a moment. Then, for the first time since they boarded, they stood.

The movement was slow, deliberate, as though they were stretching into the space they occupied. They stepped forward, turning slightly toward the aisle.

“You can stay.” Their voice was steady, almost gentle. “Or you can leave.”

The words settled over them like a shadow.

The biro girl looked at the woman by the window. Looked at the last man. Looked at the suit, who was still standing by the emergency exit, as though it might unlock if he just willed it hard enough.

The bus hummed beneath them, waiting.

Outside, something in the darkness shifted.

And then, the new passenger took a step toward the doors.

They didn't push them open. Didn't even touch them. But the moment they reached the front, the bus shuddered to a stop.

The doors hissed apart.

Beyond them, there was light.

It wasn't bright. It wasn't golden or welcoming or anything that should have screamed salvation. It was just there. A path leading away from the bus. A way forward.

The new passenger turned, their eyes sweeping over the remaining four.

"I'll see you soon," they said.

They stepped off and the doors slid shut behind them.

For the first time since the journey had begun, they were alone. And the choice was theirs.

—

Chapter Twelve: The First Step

The bus didn't move. The engine was silent. No rumble beneath their feet, no rhythmic hum of tyres against an invisible road. Just stillness.

The biro girl let out a slow breath and stared at the closed doors. The light beyond them had vanished the second the new passenger stepped off, leaving only darkness outside once again. A thick, waiting kind of dark.

"So... what now?" she asked.

No one answered.

The man in the suit was still by the emergency exit, shoulders tense, jaw set. His eyes were locked on the front of the bus, but there was nothing left to glare at.

The woman by the window shifted slightly. "The choice is ours."

The biro girl nodded. "Right. Sure. Except we have no idea what we're choosing between."

"The bus," the last man said. "Or whatever's out there."

"Yeah, thanks for that, Captain Obvious." The biro girl tapped her pen against her knee, a staccato beat of nervous energy. "And you're all just... fine with that? No questions? No second thoughts?"

The last man exhaled through his nose, but didn't respond.

The woman by the window was silent, watching. The suit, however, turned sharply.

“This is ridiculous.” His voice was clipped, controlled, the tone of a man used to taking charge. “None of this makes sense. We don’t know where we are. We don’t know how we got here. And now we’re expected to step off into the unknown just because some stranger said it was an option?”

The biro girl shrugged. “Well, it’s a better option than sitting here forever, isn’t it?”

The suit laughed, short and humourless. “Is it? You don’t know that.”

“Neither do you.”

The words settled between them.

The woman by the window finally spoke, her voice quiet but firm. “The new passenger made their choice. And they weren’t afraid.”

The biro girl hesitated. She had noticed that too. The new passenger had walked off like it was the easiest thing in the world. No hesitation. No doubt.

She glanced at the last man. He hadn’t moved, but something in his posture had changed. He wasn’t tense. Wasn’t uncertain.

“You already know what you’re going to do, don’t you?” she asked him.

The last man met her gaze. “I think I knew before I even got on the bus.”

Then, without another word, he stood up.

The suit let out a sharp breath, exasperated. “Unbelievable.”

The biro girl’s pulse kicked up as she watched the last man walk to the front. The doors remained shut. The bus remained still. But he didn’t hesitate.

When he reached the front, he placed a hand lightly against the doors. They opened.

The biro girl’s breath caught in her throat.

This time, the darkness outside wasn’t complete. A shape had formed beyond the threshold. A path. A way forward.

The last man turned his head slightly, glancing back at them. His expression wasn’t smug. Wasn’t pleading. Just knowing.

Then, he stepped off.

The doors slid shut behind him.

The bus remained still.

Three passengers left.

Three choices to make.

Chapter Thirteen: The Divide

The biro girl kept her eyes on the doors. The last man was gone. No sound, no sign of what lay beyond. Just the knowledge that he had stepped into something none of them understood.

The man in the suit scoffed. “Idiotic.” He turned away, running a hand through his hair, trying to find some logic in a place that refused to offer any. “He just walked off into fucking nothing.”

The woman by the window tilted her head. “Then why are the doors still shut?”

The biro girl frowned. “What do you mean?”

The woman’s fingers traced invisible lines against the cold glass. “They opened for him. Only him. They shut the moment he left. And now?” She glanced towards the front. “They’re waiting again.”

Waiting.

Not for just anyone.

For the next decision.

The biro girl swallowed hard. She’d always thought of herself as an observer, someone who documented the world rather than acted on it. But this was different. There was no notebook big enough, no sketch detailed enough to make sense of this.

And yet, her fingers still itched for a pen.

The suit shook his head. “This is absurd.” His voice was sharp, strained at the edges. “There is no decision to make. There is no logic to this. If we stay here, the bus will eventually - ”

He stopped.

Because he had no end to that sentence.

Because the bus had not moved. Would not move.

Because the road outside did not stretch forward anymore.

The biro girl turned slowly, dread curling at the base of her spine.

She had expected the endless road, the nothingness beyond the glass. But now...

Now, there was nothing.

Not darkness. Not emptiness.

Nothing.

Like the world beyond the bus had simply... stopped.

The woman by the window let out a slow breath, like she had been expecting this. “We can’t stay here.”

The suit’s hands curled into fists. “You don’t know that.”

She met his gaze, calm. Certain. “Yes. I do.”

The biro girl shifted, biting her lip. “So, we’re meant to leave?”

The woman turned back to the window, her reflection barely visible against the void. “We’re meant to choose.”

The biro girl hesitated.

Then she stood.

Her legs were unsteady, she passed the rows of empty seats and reached the front.

She hesitated.

Then, hand trembling slightly, she reached for the door.

It opened.

She exhaled sharply, a mix of fear and relief knotting in her chest.

The woman by the window stood too. She walked with the same quiet certainty she had carried since the beginning.

They both stood at the threshold together.

The biro girl turned slightly. “You coming?”

The suit didn’t answer.

The woman by the window held his gaze for a long moment.

Then, she stepped off.

The biro girl took one last look at the bus, the empty seats, the driver who had never even once acknowledged them.

Then, she followed.

The doors slid shut.

—

Chapter Fourteen: The Left Behind

The man in the suit was alone.

The bus had not moved.

The nothingness outside pressed in closer.

He paced, his polished shoes tapping against the worn floor. His mind worked through every scenario, every rational explanation, every possible way out.

None of them held.

He glanced at the driver. Still there. Still silent.

His throat tightened. "What happens if I stay?"

The driver did not answer.

But the bus did.

It shuddered again, not from motion but from something deeper. Something inevitable.

The suit took a step back. Then another.

The bus was shrinking.

No.

Not shrinking.

Dissolving.

The edges blurred, the seats fading into the growing void, the floor beneath his feet thinning.

Panic clawed up his spine.

He lunged for the doors. "Open!"

Nothing.

He hammered his fists against the glass, harder, faster, shouting nonsense now: demands, bargains, promises he could not keep.

"I changed my mind!" he roared. "Someone's waiting home for me! I choose to leave!"

The world frayed at the edges.

The floor splintered under him, peeling away into the dark.

His hands scrabbled against the smooth glass, desperate for a hold, for a second chance.

"I choose to - "

The words tore off into nothing.

The world unravelled.

And the bus was gone.

Chapter Fifteen: The Beyond

The biro girl's feet hit solid ground.

Not road. Not pavement. Something else. Something steady.

She turned, expecting the woman by the window beside her.

But the woman was gone.

Instead, there was only the path.

It wound through a landscape that shifted like a memory; familiar and unfamiliar all at once. Light flickered at its edges, warm and quiet. Inviting.

The biro girl inhaled, feeling lighter than she had in years.

She took a step forward.

Somewhere else, the woman by the window found her own road.

Somewhere else, the last man walked his new path.

And somewhere else, beyond choice, beyond time, the man in the suit ceased to be.

—

Epilogue: The Conductor

A bus stop.

A cracked timetable.

A waiting silence.

The streetlight flickered, casting the kind of pale, thin glow that made everything beneath it look half-forgotten.

A lone figure stood by the shelter, hands tucked deep into their coat pockets, watching the road ahead. It shimmered like a reflection, stretching forever into the night.

They had been here before.

They would be here again.

The timetable on the post was still wrong. It always was. No one ever came here because they planned to. Not really. They came because something shifted, cracked, gave way under the quiet weight of things unsaid and undone.

The figure tilted their head slightly, listening.

There it was.

Not the rumble of an engine. Not the clatter of tyres on tarmac.

A soft exhale, like a sigh pressed into the fabric of the night.

The bus arrived.

The doors hissed open. The driver sat behind the scratched perspex, hands resting lightly on the wheel. Not looking out. Not rushing. Simply waiting.

The conductor stayed by the shelter. They had learned it was better to wait early, before the choice hardened.

Behind them, shapes gathered under the streetlight. Faces both sharp and blurred, some familiar, some not. People who had walked too far down one road, or not far enough down another.

The conductor smiled. Not cruelly. Not kindly. Just with the steady patience of someone who knew how all stories ended, eventually.

Some would board. Some would turn away. Some would freeze where they stood, tangled by the weight of their own choosing.

The bus would cradle their choices.

It always did.

The conductor nodded once to the driver; a signal, a courtesy, and stepped aside, letting the others pass.

The driver said nothing.

Hands rested on the wheel.

Eyes fixed ahead.

The driver had made a choice too.

Like everyone else who ever stepped aboard this vessel; even those who thought they had not.

The timetable was still a liar.

But the road ahead would keep unfolding, stop after stop, for as long as it needed to.

Because some journeys are not measured in time.

Only in choices made.

Part II: The Cost of Being Needed

Dedicated to the quiet ones, whose endings go unseen.

Chapter One: The Gesture

The midday sun streamed gently through the large windows of the office lobby as I hurried back inside, feeling slightly rushed but satisfied. I'd stepped out briefly for a coffee, a small attempt to clear my head before the afternoon's relentless schedule took hold. The warmth of the cup in my hand felt reassuring, the familiar scent soothing amidst the chaos of the workday.

Just ahead, a young girl struggled with her handbag and a familiar stack of notebooks, biro tucked absent-mindedly behind her ear as she fumbled in her purse, clearly searching for something important. A small rectangular card slipped unnoticed from her grasp, landing silently on the tiled floor.

Instinctively, I quickened my pace, bending swiftly to pick up the dropped bank card. "Excuse me," I called gently, holding out the card toward her. She turned, startled for a moment, then relief quickly replaced the worry on her face.

"Oh, thank you so much," she said earnestly, her eyes brightening with genuine gratitude. "I wouldn't have been able to buy lunch or get home today without that." She smiled warmly, the sincerity clear and unguarded.

"Glad to help," I replied, returning the smile easily, feeling a quiet warmth spreading through me. It was a small gesture, but the genuine appreciation in her voice made it feel significant, meaningful even.

As I watched her hurry away, the warmth of her reaction lingering with me, my gaze drifted briefly to the window.

I remembered the frail older nurse from the bus earlier, worn out not just from her shift but from something deeper, heavier. I'd offered her my seat, and she'd thanked me softly, her relief evident, even if she'd been too exhausted to say much else. I briefly wondered if small gestures like these added up to something bigger, something people might quietly remember. Probably not. I'd always just been someone in the background, quietly holding doors, quietly picking up cards; perhaps the last man anyone would notice. But today, strangely enough, it felt okay to be exactly that.

Back at my desk moments later, I placed the coffee carefully beside my keyboard, settling into my chair with a newfound optimism. The day felt suddenly manageable, even if only slightly, the previous weight momentarily lifted from my shoulders by those simple exchanges.

As I began reviewing my notes for the meeting ahead, I felt encouraged by the unexpected kindness I'd encountered.

I did not know it yet, but by midnight, there would be nothing left to hold onto.

—

Chapter Two: The Oversight

The meeting had ended exactly on schedule, a small miracle in itself, leaving me with a brief sense of accomplishment. I gathered my notes, neatly aligning papers before slipping them carefully back into the folder. Around me, chairs scraped lightly across the conference room floor as colleagues murmured to each other, already shifting focus to their next task.

As I stepped out into the corridor, I noticed him lingering by the doorway, engrossed in a stack of papers, a slight frown creasing his forehead. He glanced up briefly, offering me a fleeting smile before returning to his documents. I hesitated, feeling a brief tug of curiosity and concern, but the pressing reality of my overflowing inbox urged me onward.

Back at my desk, I settled heavily into my chair, the brief sense of achievement already fading as I scanned the unopened e-mails lining my screen. The office noise had quieted to its usual midday lull, punctuated occasionally by the distant ringing of phones.

The sandwich I'd hastily grabbed from the cafe earlier sat waiting, half-forgotten, wrapped in paper that had begun to soak through slightly with dressing. Hunger gnawed at the edges of my attention, reminding me I'd skipped breakfast in my rush to make the morning appointment.

Just as I started unwrapping lunch, I saw him pass by again, still carrying the bundle of papers, his posture tense, hurried. He looked preoccupied. I watched him briefly, wondering if he'd ask for help or simply try to power through alone.

I made a mental note to check in later, although deep down I knew I might forget. Days blurred into one another lately, each small concern swallowed up by the endless rhythm of tasks that always seemed to matter more.

With a resigned sigh, I turned back to my screen, lunch momentarily forgotten as I clicked open the first unread message, feeling the slow, familiar weight of responsibility settle over me once more.

—

Chapter Three: The Promise

Lunch had been quick, eaten hurriedly at my desk between answering e-mails and catching up on messages that had slipped through during the morning. I barely tasted the sandwich, the flavour lost amidst the flurry of tasks still awaiting attention.

I'd just cleared away the wrappers when my phone vibrated, jolting me from the monotony. It was a message from my buddy, brief and uncertain, asking if I had a moment later to help with some paperwork. The hesitation was clear in his words, the tentative politeness I'd come to recognise, like he feared imposing on my time. Without pausing to think, I quickly replied with an easy reassurance, telling him I'd be available whenever he needed.

Setting the phone down, I allowed myself a small, quiet sigh, leaning back in the chair and stretching slightly to relieve the stiffness in my back. The throbbing in my head pulsed gently, a constant background rhythm that had accompanied my entire day. It wasn't overwhelming, just persistently there.

I glanced around briefly, taking in the familiar sight of colleagues at their own desks, absorbed in screens, conversations muted to a soft hum. The office felt strangely distant today, disconnected, like everyone was operating on their own isolated wavelength.

A quick ping on my screen drew me back to reality, another e-mail demanding attention, pulling me swiftly back into the unending cycle of work.

I returned to the task, fingers tapping methodically, attention split between the current job and thoughts of the promised break later on.

Even amidst the relentless demands, I felt a subtle, cautious optimism at the prospect of stepping away, even briefly, to help. It was small, insignificant perhaps, but it was something. A break in the endless rhythm of tasks. A chance to feel useful in a different, more personal way.

For a moment, I let myself imagine we would laugh about it later over coffee, but the thought felt strangely out of place, as though even small hopes like that belonged to someone else.

Chapter Four: The Easy Yes

The afternoon had stretched on, minutes blending into an indistinct blur of tasks and unanswered e-mails. I'd been hunched over my desk, eyes tracing lines of text without truly seeing them, mind drifting elsewhere, caught somewhere between fatigue and distraction. The dull ache in my temples had been there for hours, a steady, quiet presence that I'd long since learned to ignore.

A soft knock on the edge of my cubicle pulled me sharply back into focus. He was standing there, offering a small wave, friendly but cautious, as if unsure whether he was intruding. He held a stack of folders, his expression somewhere between embarrassment and apology.

"Hey," he started softly, "I really hate to ask, but do you have a second to help me with this? I'm a bit lost."

"Of course," I replied, pushing back from the desk slightly, offering what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

He exhaled in relief, stepping into the small space and placing the folders on my desk. Together, we sorted through the confusion, numbers and words slowly beginning to make sense again under shared scrutiny. As we worked, he relaxed visibly, tension easing from his shoulders, gratitude evident in the occasional smiles he cast my way.

When we'd finally straightened everything out, he let out a relieved sigh, gathering the folders neatly back into his arms.

"Thank you so much," he said warmly. "You're a lifesaver!"

I waved off the praise, genuinely glad to have helped. He turned to leave, stopping briefly at the entrance to my cubicle. “Hey, maybe coffee later?” he asked.

“Sounds great,” I said, genuinely pleased.

He left with a wave, and I felt a quiet satisfaction settle in, a brief glow of having done something good, something appreciated. For a short while, the relentless pressure eased, replaced by a rare sense of accomplishment and connection.

I wondered if he would remember this moment next week, or if it would dissolve like all the others, leaving no trace except for the time I had quietly given away.

But as soon as I turned back to my screen, the familiar, overwhelming tide of responsibilities surged again. The inbox was fuller, demands were louder, and the quiet sense of satisfaction began to fade almost immediately, leaving only the same, familiar fatigue in its wake.

Yet, the thought of coffee lingered. Something small to look forward to amidst the relentless demands of the day.

—

Chapter Five: The Break

The sunlight had spilled generously through the office windows, casting warm pools of golden light across my desk. It had felt like a rare, gentle moment in an otherwise relentless day. I'd leaned back for a moment, eyes closed, letting the warmth wash over my face, imagining briefly that this was a brief pause, a small reward in the middle of chaos.

Then my phone vibrated. A message notification lit up the screen, and I felt a small lift in my chest when I saw who it was from. My buddy from accounting. A quick "coffee break?" followed by a friendly emoji. It felt unexpected, pleasant. A small, spontaneous kindness that made me smile, genuinely smile, for the first time in what felt like weeks.

I quickly replied yes, leaving my desk behind, the brief escape filling me with a cautious optimism. The kitchen area was quiet, the familiar scent of freshly brewed coffee comforting as I poured a cup and waited.

The air smelled faintly of burnt coffee and cheap disinfectant. It clung to the back of my throat, a bitter reminder that comfort here had always been a temporary illusion.

He arrived moments later, offering a genuine smile as he reached for a mug. For a few precious minutes, we talked about everything except work. It was refreshing, light, easy. My headache had faded slightly, and for a moment, it felt like I could breathe again.

But just as quickly as it had started, it shifted. His phone buzzed sharply on the countertop.

His face changed as he read the message, his smile slipping away, replaced by a tight expression. Apologising quickly, he grabbed his coffee, mumbled about having forgotten an important call, and hurried away without looking back.

I stood alone in the now-empty kitchen, holding a half-empty cup, the warmth suddenly feeling inadequate. My phone vibrated again. A message, urgent and demanding my attention. The momentary reprieve dissolved instantly, replaced by the familiar sinking feeling that this was all there ever was: brief moments of calm followed swiftly by reality's unforgiving pull.

I emptied the remains of my coffee down the sink, rinsed the mug mechanically, and returned to my desk. The golden sunlight now felt stark, overly bright, and the returning ache behind my eyes was sharper now, more insistent. The inbox blinked impatiently, filling rapidly with tasks that were never truly mine but always mine to manage.

I sighed, picking up where I'd left off, the fleeting moment of peace already fading into memory.

—

Chapter Six: The Default

I was rubbing my tired eyes with my thumbs, feeling the familiar stiffness settling into my shoulders. Around me, the office was still humming with subdued activity, the sounds of phones ringing, keyboards clicking, all blending together.

My inbox flashed quietly on the screen, messages piling up faster than I could clear them. Each new e-mail seemed like another pebble in an endless avalanche, small and seemingly insignificant, but together becoming something overwhelming. Most weren't even mine to handle; just problems passed along from someone who knew I'd know how to fix them.

A sudden knock on my cubicle wall snapped me from my thoughts. She stood there, clutching a stack of papers. Could I quickly check these documents? Just a glance, nothing too involved. I knew it wasn't quick or simple, but I found myself nodding anyway, reaching out for the papers as she slipped away with relieved thanks already fading behind her.

I told myself it did not matter. It was only a few more minutes, more favours, more pieces of myself slipped quietly into the cracks where nobody would ever notice.

The clock blinked silently from the corner of my monitor, reminding me of promises I'd made myself earlier in the day. I'd told myself I'd finish early today, leave the work behind.

But as I scanned through the pages she had left, realisation settled in like a stone in my stomach: there wouldn't be time for any of it.

Outside the window, the sky had started shifting, blues deepening toward early evening shades.

Another colleague passed through, tossing a quick "thanks for staying late again" over his shoulder. I remembered the first time someone had said that to me, years ago, when I thought it meant I mattered. Now it sounded more like a habit, a polite noise made without thinking.

I sighed, turning back to the paperwork. It was always easier to keep going, keep helping, keep saying yes, even when it meant sacrificing another piece of myself in the process.

I picked up a biro pen, beginning to mark corrections, already accepting the inevitability of another late night, another evening quietly sacrificed.

—

Chapter Seven: The Office

The office had emptied gradually around me, desks abandoned one by one as my colleagues drifted homeward. I was still at my desk, eyes fixed wearily on the screen, fingers tapping quietly across the keyboard. Another e-mail, another report, another task that had somehow landed on my shoulders. It wasn't urgent, wasn't even mine, but I'd nodded earlier without thinking, agreeing without hesitation, without considering why. Without considering me.

The fluorescent lights above buzzed faintly, casting stark shadows around the empty workspace. I'd caught glimpses of others leaving, their faces brightening as they stepped through the doors, laughter fading softly behind them. A quick wave here and there, fleeting smiles that didn't quite reach their eyes, polite gestures as automatic as breathing.

I checked the clock again, feeling the evening slip quietly away. I'd told myself I'd be done soon, that I'd make it home on time tonight, maybe even enjoy a peaceful evening for once. But as minutes ticked past, that promise felt less and less real, dissolving like sugar into warm tea.

Finally, I clicked send, the e-mail vanishing from my outbox, taking with it another small piece of my dwindling energy. I stood slowly, muscles stiff, feeling older than I should. The office was silent now, emptied of its usual hum and chatter.

As I stepped out onto the street, the cool evening air brushed past my face, carrying with it the sounds of a city winding down. Cars rushed quietly past, a gentle hum fading into the distance.

Waiting to cross the street, I caught sight of a suit speeding past in his polished car, oblivious to anyone around him. I hoped silently that his recklessness wouldn't lead to trouble; for him or anyone else.

Chapter Eight: The Call

The sky was turning from blue to a bruised purple as I stood at the kitchen counter, reheating leftovers in the microwave. The humming sound filled the small space, oddly comforting against the silence of the empty house. My phone vibrated sharply against the countertop, breaking through the quiet.

It was her name on the screen. I hesitated briefly, fingers hovering over the device. I knew answering meant leaving behind the warm meal, the quiet evening I'd planned, the few moments of peace I'd allowed myself. Still, I picked up, knowing the familiar tug of obligation would always win out.

Her voice sounded rushed, distracted, already moving onto another thought before finishing the first. Could I come over, quickly? Just a small favour, nothing too complicated. She was swamped, overwhelmed, couldn't figure things out on her own. It would only take a moment, she promised, not even waiting for my agreement before hanging up.

Just once, I had told myself, just once I would say no and stay where I was. But the words had never made it out of my mouth. Habit wore down willpower quicker than anything else.

I stood there for a moment longer, staring at my half-heated dinner through the microwave's glass door, feeling a sudden touch of resignation. It wasn't irritation or frustration. It was just a quiet, tired acceptance that this was how things always went. My plans pushed aside, my needs becoming background noise once again.

I barely put the phone down before it buzzed again. Different number this time. The voice on the other end was calm, practised. "We've booked a CT scan for next Tuesday. It's to follow up on the headaches you mentioned during your appointment this morning. Should only take half an hour."

I thanked them. Wrote nothing down. The microwave beeped. I didn't check the food. I just stood there for a while, listening to the line go dead.

I grabbed my coat, sliding my arms into the sleeves mechanically, switching off the kitchen lights as I left. The food remained in the microwave, forgotten. Spinning around like prime Kylie Minogue.

Stepping outside, I drew a deep breath, the cool evening air biting slightly at my lungs, waking me up. Streetlights flickered to life as I walked, casting pools of yellow light along the pavement. Each step felt heavier than the last, the beginning of the familiar dull ache pressing against my temples. I ignored it, focusing instead on the sound of my footsteps, steady and determined, leading me away from home and toward another evening spent fixing someone else's problems.

She didn't answer when I knocked, just shouted distractedly from somewhere inside. As I stepped through the door, I knew exactly what I was walking into, though it didn't make it any easier. But that's how it always was, wasn't it? Always easier for everyone else.

Chapter Nine: The Papers

I shifted uncomfortably in the worn chair at the kitchen table, paperwork scattered across the surface in messy piles, pens between pages. She'd asked for help, a quick look-over, a fresh pair of eyes. Simple enough. At least, it should've been.

She'd been pacing since I'd arrived, phone to her ear, one conversation ending only for another to begin moments later. I'd offered a greeting when I walked in, something casual and reassuring, but she'd barely registered my presence, gesturing vaguely towards the table as she continued her calls.

I sifted through the papers, trying to decipher the tangled web of forms and notes. Bills overdue, contracts unsigned, figures scribbled hastily in margins. It wasn't my job to solve this, yet here I was, doing exactly that. Again.

The headache had started as a whisper at the base of my skull, barely noticeable at first, like the distant hum of an appliance left running. Now it pulsed steadily, in time with the hollow thudding of my heart.

Every so often, I caught snippets of her conversations. Words like "urgent", "deadline", "can't right now" drifted into the kitchen, underscoring the chaos around me. I'd look up, hoping for a small sign she noticed I was still there, that she appreciated me dropping everything to help. But each time her eyes met mine, they flicked away quickly, distracted and distant.

The throbbing behind my temples had properly started around then, quietly at first but building steadily.

I rubbed my forehead, trying to ignore it, focusing instead on the mess in front of me. One paper at a time, sorting through her problems, neatly stacking them into something manageable. Something she could handle tomorrow, when her world felt less overwhelming.

When she finally returned to the kitchen, phone momentarily silent, I looked up expectantly. She barely glanced at the table, already halfway to another room, mumbling about needing a charger. The thanks I'd waited for didn't come, replaced instead by the soft click of another door closing.

I pushed the papers away gently, feeling oddly defeated. Gathering my things, I stood, chair scraping softly against the floor. I lingered for a moment, hoping she might reappear, hoping she'd realise I was leaving, hoping it might matter.

But the door stayed shut, and the house remained silent around me. I turned to go, closing the front door behind me as quietly as I could, knowing it made no difference.

Chapter Ten: The Goodbye

The front door clicked shut behind me, quieter than it should have been, the sound swallowed up by the thick silence of the evening. I paused for a moment, hand still gripping the handle, feeling the heaviness of another unfinished goodbye hanging in the air.

It had been a simple enough favour. Help with some paperwork, she'd said. A couple of forms she didn't understand. A quick look-over, nothing more. Of course, it had turned into something bigger. Of course, it had taken longer than expected. And as usual, by the time I was finished, I was already forgotten, my presence fading into the background noise of her life.

Outside, the air felt colder than it should have. I stepped onto the pavement, feeling smaller than when I'd arrived, the dull pounding behind my eyes growing sharper with each step.

Somewhere nearby, a burst of laughter spilled out from an open window, bright and careless. It felt like it belonged to another world, a world I had stopped being part of without realising.

Earlier, as I'd sat hunched over the documents, trying to untangle problems that weren't mine, she'd barely acknowledged my presence. She'd been distracted, moving from room to room, phone pressed to her ear, conversations half-whispered behind closed doors. Once, I'd glanced up, expecting a nod, a smile, some acknowledgment, but she'd simply passed by, eyes focused elsewhere, attention already beyond me. It hadn't mattered, not really. Except it did.

The ache intensified slightly as I rounded the corner onto my street. Home was close now, familiar yet strangely unwelcoming. The lights were off, waiting for me to fill the emptiness with noise, movement, anything to push back against the silence.

I climbed the steps slowly, keys rattling softly as I unlocked the door. Inside, the quiet was immediate, wrapping around me like a heavy blanket. I closed the door gently, locked it, and leaned back against the cool surface, eyes closed.

I didn't bother turning on the lights right away. There was something comforting about standing there in the dark, hidden from view, alone in a place that felt increasingly foreign.

Eventually, I pushed myself away from the door and moved deeper into the house, switching on lights as I went, trying to dispel the gloom, knowing it wouldn't make a difference.

Because it never did.

Chapter Eleven: The Cost

The living room was bathed in the pale blue flicker of the television, the volume almost muted, casting shifting patterns across the walls. I sat slumped on the sofa, staring blankly at the screen. I wasn't watching, not really. It was just something to fill the space, something to keep the quiet away.

When I blinked again, the channel had changed. I had no memory of picking up the remote or of the last hour slipping by. Time had folded itself neatly around me, leaving no sign of where it had gone.

The ache behind my eyes had grown stronger, steady but insistent, pressing down as though the bones of my skull were slowly being squeezed together. I pressed my fingers against my eyelids for a moment, trying to ease it, knowing it wouldn't help. Nothing did these days.

Earlier in the evening, the call had come. Short and clipped. A voice I knew too well, strained and distant. He'd been in trouble again, caught up in something I barely understood but felt responsible for anyway. A debt, a promise broken, a situation spiralling faster than either of us could handle. I'd offered help, a lifeline I didn't really have to give, and words had come out of my mouth before I realised their weight.

I'd transferred the money quickly, without hesitation.

It wasn't much, not life-changing, but enough to make things tight for a while. Enough to feel it. Enough to hurt. And it was done without a second thought, without expectation of thanks. Because that's how it always went.

But the emptiness I felt afterward was new. Or maybe it wasn't new; maybe it had always been there, growing quietly in the background. Only tonight, it felt sharper, clearer somehow, as though everything had narrowed to this single point of awareness.

I leaned back, eyes drawn upward to the ceiling, the flickering light of the television dancing in my peripheral vision. Another night, another favour, another sacrifice disappearing quietly into the ether. My head throbbed harder, the rhythm matching my heartbeat.

There was nothing left to do but sit and wait, letting the minutes slip by unnoticed. Waiting for something to change, knowing deep down that nothing ever would.

Chapter Twelve: The Signing

The house was dark except for the dim glow of the kitchen light, buzzing faintly like it resented being left on. I stood by the sink, staring at the single glass I'd set down minutes ago, watching condensation form and drip in slow, lazy streaks. My hands rested on the counter, steady but tense, as if holding myself in place. My head ached. A low, pulsing pressure at the base of my skull, spreading behind my eyes. It had been creeping up on me all evening, threading itself into every thought, dull but insistent.

I had done it. I had given up the last thing that was mine. The final thing I thought I could hold onto. And just like that, it was gone, handed over without a fight. I hadn't even been asked.

I caught the faint smell of the ink; sharp and chemical, nothing like the fresh promise it had once held when I was young. Back then, signing my name had felt like claiming a future. Now it only marked an ending nobody would bother to witness.

The will sat on the table, pages curled slightly at the edges where my fingers had gripped too hard. Just a few sheets of paper, a signature, and it was settled. Everything I had left to give, neatly listed and signed away. No ceremony. No dramatic finality. Just a quiet, practical erasure of my presence, done in under an hour.

I told myself that I had to do it. That it was the right thing to do, just in case. That I wouldn't need any of it anyway. I thought of doing it for a while and felt that now was the time.

The silence around me felt heavier now, pressing in from all sides. There was an emptiness curling at the edges of my thoughts, the kind that made it hard to swallow, like I'd just made myself smaller, like there was less of me now than there had been ever before.

I reached for my phone, out of habit more than hope. The screen lit up, harsh and cold against the darkness. No messages. No missed calls.

Not surprising.

The headache was worse. A tight, pulsing weight behind my eyes, a warning I didn't know how to interpret. I reached for my glass, took a sip, but the water was warm, stale. I set it down again and pressed my fingers to my temples, exhaling slowly. It didn't help.

I turned off the kitchen light. The darkness swallowed me whole.

Chapter Thirteen: The End

It was the moment my head exploded.

The pressure inside had been too much for my skull to hold, and it had given way like an overripe melon.

One second, I was standing there, putting the kettle on and thinking about needing to feed the cat, and the next, I wasn't. It wasn't dramatic. There was no gasp, no final plea, no hands reaching out in horror. A sudden and unexpected eruption of everything that had been simmering just below the surface. Just the sense that the universe had reached its tipping point, and there was nothing left to do but tip with it.

I'd felt it coming, but not in a way that mattered. Not like a warning, not like some final premonition of doom. It was quieter than that. A slow, creeping certainty, like when you know a glass is going to slip from the edge of a table, but you don't move fast enough to stop it. And then it shatters, and you wonder why you even thought you could catch it in the first place. You couldn't. You wouldn't.

But I'd learned by now not to trust my body when it's telling me things. I hadn't trusted it for a long time. Fuck, I did not trust anything anymore.

The room was silent. It had been silent for hours.

It wasn't the kind of silence that comes with peace, the soft hush of night settling in. It was the absence of something that should have been there.

The kind of silence that presses in on your ears, that makes you hyper-aware of every tiny sound: your own breathing, the creak of the floor, the distant hum of something electrical, even though you're not sure what.

I don't know why I expected anything else.

I'd been under a lot of pressure for the past few days, probably longer. I'm sure it had been building for a while. There's only so much of it a person can take before something gives, and in my case, it happened all at once. You've heard of "pushing someone's buttons"? This wasn't like that. It was more like someone had just cranked the dial up to a hundred, and I didn't realise until my skull was a ticking time bomb.

A drop of blood slipped over my lips. Warm, coppery. At first, I thought it was just a nosebleed. That wouldn't have been new. The headaches had started months ago, and lately, they had been bad enough to feel like my skull was trying to crush itself inward. But this was different. The pressure had reached its peak, like a balloon stretched too thin.

Then, pop. Not metaphorical. A real, actual pop, like a champagne cork bursting under pressure. A sharp, wet burst that sent a tremor through my entire body.

I stumbled back, my body no longer obeying the commands of my mind. I felt the room spin, like a record on its last loop before the needle jumps, and then the weight of it all crushed me. I tried reaching for something to steady myself, but my fingers only met air. The whole room tilted, the floor rising up too fast, and I hit it hard.

As I lay there, the weight of silence pressed harder than anything else.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought I heard my own voice, younger and steadier, calling out for help. But no one answered. Nobody ever had.

For a second, I thought maybe it wasn't real. Maybe this was just another dizzy spell, another restless night, another moment passing unnoticed. But then I felt it. The warmth spreading beneath me. Thick. Sticky. The unmistakable feeling of something draining out of me.

A small, bitter laugh bubbled up, but it died in my throat. I could barely move now. My limbs felt too heavy, my head too light. And for the first time, I couldn't tell if this loneliness was something I had done to myself, or if it had always been like this.

Part III: A Light Left On

*Dedicated to those who stood at the edge, and chose to
stay.*

Prologue: The Lost Man

You don't notice the moment you leave the world.

There's no flicker. No sound cue. No slow pan to white.

You just stop being part of the picture.

The day I stepped off the bus, I thought I'd find something waiting for me. A life paused, quietly holding its breath. I thought maybe this was what second chances looked like.

But the streets were too still. My old house stood like a replica built from memory. The door was the same colour. The cracks in the pavement were familiar. But the air didn't know me.

People walked past me without flinching. No nods. No strange looks. Not even a ghost of recognition. I wasn't invisible in the way films make it seem. I was just... skipped. Like a page stuck together in someone else's tale.

It took me a while to understand. I hadn't come back. Not really.

I hadn't moved on, either.

I'd stepped sideways.

Now I drift. Quietly. Unseen unless someone's standing where I once stood. Unless the weight gets too heavy and they start to tilt.

Sometimes they notice me. Sometimes they don't. Doesn't matter.

My job isn't to be noticed. But sometimes... they hear me anyway.

I can't change their path. But I can help them find it again.

Sometimes that's enough.

Sometimes, when the dark feels too loud, all someone needs...

Is a light left on.

—

Chapter One: The Survivor

The first time I found someone, I didn't even realise I was looking.

He was sat on a park bench too early in the morning for anyone to be doing it on purpose.

The bench was cold. The grass was wet. The coffee in his hand had long since lost its warmth. He wasn't drinking it. Just holding it. Like it gave him permission to sit still without explanation.

He wore a shirt that hadn't been ironed. Tie askew. Face drawn. One of those expressions that looked like he'd been crying recently but would rather you didn't mention it.

I stood a few feet away. Close enough to feel the weight that hung around him.

He didn't look up, but he spoke.

"They said I was lucky."

I waited.

"Heart stopped. Just like that. One minute I was asking for the bill, the next I was on the floor. They said it was the waiter who saved me. Knew CPR. Kept going until the ambulance arrived."

He rubbed a thumb along the side of the cup. His hands were shaking.

“Two zaps. That's what it took. Brought me back.”

I could feel the word that wanted to come next. *Why?*

“They keep saying how fortunate I am. My wife, the doctors, even my mates at work. Calling me Miracle Man.”

“The GP keeps telling me to talk to someone. I haven't. But there's this plant in the waiting room. Big leafy bastard, sits in the corner like it's been watching everyone come and go for years. Looks more present than I've felt lately, to be honest.”

He forced a smile that didn't stick. “But I don't feel lucky. I feel... borrowed. Like I'm on time I shouldn't have.”

The air had that strange morning stillness about it. The kind that comes just before the noise returns.

“I wasn't finished with anything. Wasn't halfway through writing a novel or changing the world. I was just... a bloke. Put the bins out. Paid my mortgage. Argued about the thermostat. I wasn't done, but I hadn't really started either.”

He paused.

“Now I get people saying I'm lucky.” He laughed once, short and sharp. “Like luck has anything to do with it.”

He fell quiet again. A breeze picked up. Leaves scattered past his shoes and didn't get a second glance.

“I keep thinking, what if they brought back the wrong man?”

That's when I spoke.

"Then do something with the second chance."

He didn't flinch. He didn't look at me. But he nodded. Just once. Like he heard it not with his ears, but somewhere deeper.

He stood up slowly, rubbing his palms against his trousers. Took a step forward. Stopped.

Turned his head a little. Not enough to look at me. Just enough to say, "I don't know where to start."

"You've already started," I said.

He didn't respond. But he didn't sit back down either.

He walked away. Not fast. Not sure. But forward.

Sometimes surviving doesn't feel like a miracle. Sometimes it feels like a mistake.

But survival is messy. It leaves questions behind. And guilt.

And sometimes, if you're lucky, it leaves you in just enough pieces to put yourself back together a better way.

—

Chapter Two: The Stand-In

She was folding napkins at a table no one had sat at all afternoon. It wasn't her job. She wasn't even on shift. But the habit of being useful is hard to shake.

The café was nearly empty, save for a teenager half-asleep behind the counter and a couple arguing in lowered voices near the window. She ignored them all with the kind of polite focus that comes from years of swallowing your own needs before they ever reach your throat.

I sat opposite her. She didn't blink. Didn't flinch. Just kept folding.

"Are you waiting for someone?" I asked.

"No," she said, without looking up. Then, a moment later, "Maybe."

The napkin in her hands was already folded. She started again.

"I used to think it mattered. Being there for everyone. Showing up. Remembering birthdays. Making tea. Listening. Always listening."

She pressed a crease flat with her thumb.

"But somewhere along the way, I forgot how to want anything for myself. It got easier to say yes than risk someone thinking I was difficult."

I waited.

“I said yes to everything. Extra shifts. Weekends. That thing where someone asks if you’re free and you say ‘of course’ even though you’re not. Because it’s easier. Because they expect it.”

She finally looked up. Her eyes were sharp, not soft. Tired in a way that went all the way down.

“Then one day you realise no one asks how you are unless you look like you’re about to snap. And by then it’s too late to say you’re not alright. Because they’ll say you should’ve said something. But you did. A hundred times. Just not out loud.”

The teenager behind the counter dropped something. She didn’t turn. Didn’t flinch.

“I had a panic attack in the toilet last week. Quiet one. Sat on the lid, breathing through it like I was counting sheep. Then I washed my face and went back out smiling. Carried on like it hadn’t happened.”

She looked at the folded napkin. Flattened it out again.

“I don’t even know what I like anymore. Favourite colour. Favourite food. If I had a day off, I wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

She paused, then added, “I think I miss myself.”

I didn’t speak. Just sat with her in the stillness.

“I’m scared,” she said. “That if I stop being useful, no one will know what I’m for.”

“You’re not a tool,” I said. “You’re a person.”

She breathed in, shallow but steady. The kind of breath people take when something finally lands.

She stood, brushing a crumb off her skirt.

“I think I’m going to leave the napkins,” she said. “Let someone else fold them badly for once.”

She walked out without rushing. No one stopped her. No one asked where she was going.

But I think for the first time in years, she wasn’t going anywhere for anyone else.

Just for herself.

And that was a start.

—

Chapter Three: The Father

He sat in the driver's seat long after the engine had gone quiet.

Keys still in the ignition. Wipers stopped mid-arc. A takeaway coffee untouched in the cup holder, gone cold a while ago.

He stared at the front door across the street like it might blink first.

I stood by the passenger side, just out of reach.

He hadn't rung the bell. Hadn't moved since parking. The house wasn't unfamiliar. That made it worse.

He reached into the glovebox, pulled out an envelope. It was crumpled, not from time, but from indecision. Probably the fifth one he'd written. Maybe the tenth.

He didn't open it. Just held it.

"He used to love dinosaurs," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "Could name every one. Used to line them up on the windowsill."

He paused.

"I got angry one night. Stood on a stegosaurus in the dark. You ever done that? Feels like a landmine. I yelled. He cried. We both said things too loud. He packed the whole set into a box and gave them away."

Silence hung in the car like breath on glass.

“We haven’t spoken in two years. Not properly. Messages here and there. Birthdays. The safe stuff.”

The coffee cup tipped slightly when he shifted, but he didn’t notice.

“I always thought I had time. That once work calmed down, once his teenage years blew over, once things settled... I’d fix it. We’d get back to something.”

He looked at the envelope again.

“Turns out life doesn’t send reminders. It just runs out of slots.”

He didn’t cry. He just looked tired of holding things back.

“I don’t even know if he lives here anymore. Might not answer. Might not care.”

“Write a new letter,” I said. “Or say nothing. Just show up.”

He glanced toward me. Not surprised. Not curious. Just... aware.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Then start with the truth.”

He took a deep breath. Not steady. Not heroic. Just enough.

Then he opened the car door and stepped out.

He didn't take the envelope. Left it on the dashboard like it had done its job by getting him this far.

He crossed the street. Raised his hand to knock.

And paused.

The pause lasted long enough to hold a lifetime's worth of regret.

Then his knuckles met wood.

I waited, watching. Not for the door to open, but for him to stay standing.

And he did.

Some gaps don't close cleanly. Some bridges get rebuilt slowly, plank by plank.

But they don't rebuild themselves.

—

Chapter Four: The Mourner

He found her sketchbook in a drawer she never finished closing.

Spine cracked. Corners chewed. Ink smudged where water had met paper, or tears had met both.

He sat on the floor beside her bed. Not because he meant to. Just because his legs gave up when he opened the cover.

She had drawn everything. Not in colour. Just biro. Always biro.

His face, from the side. Their old dog. A pair of scissors. A bus stop. A toaster. A fox. Their mother's hands. The back of a ticket.

Each page said something. But not clearly. That was the point.

I stood in the doorway. He knew I was there.

He turned the pages slowly, like they were fragile. They weren't. She had drawn with pressure. Deep lines. No sketchiness. Like she was always sure of what she was trying to say, even if no one else was listening.

"She used to sit here and draw for hours," he said.

"I'd knock. She'd grunt. I'd walk away. That was our thing. She didn't want to talk, and I didn't want to push."

He looked up at the ceiling. Took a breath like he was checking it still worked.

“I thought giving her space was being kind. Respectful. Letting her deal with things on her own.”

He turned to another page. A razor blade. Drawn clean. Framed in white.

“I didn’t know this was how she dealt...”

There wasn’t much to say to that. So I didn’t.

He rested the sketchbook on his knees. Fingers trembling, not dramatically. Just enough to betray him.

“She left a note. Said she loved us. Said not to blame ourselves.”

He let out a soft, bitter laugh.

“As if grief listens to logic.”

He didn’t cry. Grief doesn’t always look like crying. Sometimes it just sits there. Heavy. Silent.

“I don’t know how to forgive her,” he said. “And I don’t know how to forgive myself for needing to.”

I knelt beside him.

“You loved her,” I said.

He nodded. Slowly.

“And I think she knew. But it didn’t fix what was broken.”

“No,” I said. “It never does. But it mattered.”

He traced one of the sketches. Her name, scribbled in the corner like a whisper.

“She left so much of herself behind,” he said. “But I never saw it while she was here.”

“Now you do.”

He nodded again. Not certain. But trying.

He picked up the sketchbook. Held it to his chest like it was something sacred.

“I’m going to show people,” he said quietly. “Her drawings. Her words. I’m going to make sure someone else sees what I missed.”

“You don’t owe her a monument.”

“No,” he said. “But I owe her the truth. That she was worth hearing.”

He stood. Slower than he once would have. But taller than when he sat down.

Sometimes the only thing left to do is carry what can’t be fixed. And carry it carefully.

—

Chapter Five: The Carer

She was standing at a bus stop with no timetable.

Not waiting for anything. Just standing. Hoodie pulled tight. Bag slung low on one shoulder, heavy with things she shouldn't have to carry.

Schoolbooks. Prescriptions. Legal letters she couldn't open.

I sat on the bench beside her. She didn't look at me. Just stared straight ahead, eyes fixed on a lamppost with a torn flyer flapping in the wind.

"Mum's having one of her bad weeks," she said eventually. No greeting. No explanation. Just fact.

I nodded, even though she wasn't looking.

"I cleaned the bathroom before I left. She always cries more when the sink's grimy."

The wind tugged at her sleeve. She didn't move.

"I missed the exam this morning. Don't think anyone noticed."

Her voice didn't crack. She wasn't asking for sympathy. She was reciting a list she'd already said to herself a hundred times.

"I've got friends. Not real ones. But ones that like my posts and ask about shows I don't have time to watch."

Her hands were shoved deep in her pockets. Her trainers were scuffed. Her silence said more than anything else.

“Sometimes I wonder if I stopped showing up... would anything fall apart?”

“You would,” I said.

She turned her head slightly. First time she’d moved.

“Yeah,” she said. “Probably.”

We sat in quiet for a while. Not peaceful. Not tense. Just the kind of quiet you get when someone’s run out of fuel but not yet run out of road.

“I used to write stories,” she said. “Proper ones. With dragons and weird time machines and secret islands. Used to hide them under my bed.”

“You still do?”

She shook her head. “I stopped when Mum got sick again. Didn’t feel right making things up when real life needed me.”

She kicked a stone. Watched it roll out into the street.

“But now... I don’t know who I’d be if she ever got better. I don’t know if there’s anything left to go back to.”

“There is,” I said. “But you have to stop erasing yourself to keep others whole.”

She sniffed once, wiped her nose with her sleeve. No tears.
Just the edge of one.

“I’m tired,” she said. “And I don’t mean I need a nap. I mean I’m tired of being strong.”

“You don’t have to be. Not all the time.”

She didn’t reply. But her shoulders relaxed just enough to count.

A bus passed without stopping. She didn’t notice.

She pulled a battered notebook from her bag. Not for school.
Lined pages, corners folded.

She flipped to the last used page. Pulled out a pen.

“I don’t have dragons anymore,” she said, “but I think I’ve still got something to say.”

She sat. Opened the notebook.

And began to write.

—

Chapter Six: The Widower

He was washing a plate that didn't need washing.

One cup. One fork. A plate with a smudge that had been scrubbed off twice already. The kind of cleaning you do when the silence is too thick and the grief hasn't learned how to sit quietly yet.

The kitchen was neat. Not tidy, but *her* neat. Labels facing forward. Tea towels folded into triangles. A magnet on the fridge that read *Don't forget to forget sometimes*.

I stood in the doorway. He didn't look over. But I think he felt me.

He dried the plate. Placed it carefully on the rack like it might shatter from too much noise.

"She hated this plate," he said softly. "Said it looked like a satellite dish. But she always ate off it. Said it made her feel dramatic."

He smiled, just a flicker. The kind that showed up, then vanished before it could settle.

"She used to sit by the window with her peppermint tea. Always made it too hot. Never waited for it to cool. She said it kept her grounded."

He turned to the kettle, filled it again. Muscle memory.

“I keep making her tea,” he said. “Every morning. Can’t bring myself to stop. Some days I drink it. Most days I pour it down the sink and pretend she just forgot.”

The kettle clicked. Steam whispered. He didn’t move.

“She didn’t go fast. Not like the books say. There was no graceful fade. No dignified peace. She fought. Not the cancer. The *dying*. She fought that right to the end. You know she even went shopping on the day she... Took the bus like she always did.”

He rubbed his eyes, pressing hard. Like he was trying to push the images back behind his skull.

“People kept saying things like ‘at least she’s not suffering now’. As if that was ever the point. As if relief was supposed to be a comfort when love’s been torn out of you.”

He turned away from the kettle and sat at the small kitchen table.

“There was a moment. A week before she went. She sat me down. Said she didn’t want to be remembered for being ill.”

He tapped the table once, firmly.

“She said, *‘Don’t make shrines. Make lasagne. Don’t light candles. Light up someone’s day. Be bloody useful.’*”

He laughed. Genuinely this time. Brief. Beautiful.

“She always hated drama. Except for musicals. I’ve got three full boxes of *Wicked* merchandise in the attic.”

He looked at his hands. They were shaking now. Not from age. Not from nerves. Just the shockwave of a missing heartbeat that used to steady his own.

“I keep waiting for the moment I move on,” he said. “Like grief’s a place you leave with the right luggage. But I think it just becomes furniture. You stop bumping into it eventually.”

I nodded.

“What will you do now?” I asked.

He stood. Slowly. Purposefully.

“I’m going to volunteer at the hospice,” he said. “Not because I’m noble. Because she said people need less flowers and more cups of tea.”

He moved to the cupboard. Pulled out a pack of her favourite peppermint.

“I’ll drink it today,” he said. “Not because I want to. Because she hated waste.”

He poured the water. Watched the bag bloom.

“She was the kindest person I’ve ever known. Even when she was tired of everything, she kept giving. Quietly. Softly.”

He placed the cup by the window. Sat across from it.

“Just for a moment,” he said. “So it doesn’t feel like she left the room.”

And for a moment, she didn’t.

—

Chapter Seven: The Neighbour

The television was on, but the volume was low enough to make everything feel further away.

She sat in the armchair closest to the window, cardigan buttoned wrong, slippers faded at the toes. A cup of tea had gone cold on the table beside her.

Outside, the street was still. Rubbish bins tilted in the wind. Somewhere, a dog barked twice and gave up.

The living room smelled of old lavender and furniture polish. Curtains were drawn halfway, like the room couldn't decide whether it wanted to be seen or not.

She stared at the road, not looking for anything. Just making sure it was still there.

I sat opposite. The cushions sagged under the weight of time.

She glanced at me, briefly. Not surprised. Just curious, like someone noticing a new ornament they didn't remember buying.

"Used to be such a busy street," she said.

"Neighbours with too many kids. The lad with the drum kit. That couple that argued on bin day."

She smiled faintly.

“Now the bins go out, and I don’t recognise the hands that put them there.”

She reached for the remote. Pressed mute. Even silence can feel like company sometimes.

“I get postcards,” she said. “From people who moved away. Say things like ‘we must catch up soon’. Then nothing.”

She tapped the armrest twice. A little rhythm to fill the space.

“My knees are going. Hands too. Bit stiff in the mornings. Bit stiffer at night. Not enough to complain about. Just enough to be noticed when no one’s watching.”

She turned her head to the mantelpiece. Framed photos lined up like old awards.

“That one’s my late husband. Smelled like Old Spice and burnt toast. Loved football. Couldn’t kick a ball to save his life, but he’d shout at the telly like he managed these lads.”

She chuckled.

“We had a good run. No fireworks, no great drama. Just days that stitched together quietly until one of us didn’t wake up.”

Her smile faded a little.

“The trouble with living long,” she said, “is outlasting the people who remember who you were.”

She didn't cry. She didn't need to. The grief had settled in years ago and unpacked its suitcase.

She looked at me again.

"Do you think people fade when no one says their name?"

"No," I said. "But I think they stop feeling real."

She nodded.

"I used to make soup and leave it on people's steps. Nobody ever asked where it came from. They just called it lucky."

"You still do?"

"No," she said. "My hands shake too much now. And I think they've all gone gluten free."

She reached for her cup. Sipped the cold tea. Didn't flinch.

"I might start writing letters," she said. "Not to anyone in particular. Just to say things that shouldn't vanish with me."

She looked back at the window.

"If I send them to random addresses, maybe someone will read them. Maybe someone will say, 'that sounds like my Nan'. Maybe that's enough."

She sat quietly for a while. Then added, "I've still got paper. And stamps. The good ones. With birds on them."

I stood. She didn't say goodbye. Just gave a small wave, like I'd always been there.

The kind of wave you give to someone who remembers your name even when no one else does.

—

Chapter Eight: The Teen

They were sitting on the stairs, one step below the halfway point.

The kind of spot where you're not quite upstairs or downstairs. Not hiding. Not seen. Just there.

The front room was lit, voices spilling out. Laughter, clinking plates, someone talking too loud about something they didn't understand.

Their hoodie was zipped to the chin. Headphones in, but no music playing. Just the buffer of silence between them and everything else.

I sat two steps down. Close enough to feel the tension, not close enough to touch it.

They didn't look at me. But they didn't need to. Some people are too used to being watched without ever being seen.

"My mum still calls me by the old name," they said, voice steady, flat. "Says it's a habit. Says I need to give her time."

They twirled a ring around their finger. The only thing that looked like it belonged to them.

"It's been over a year."

A voice from the living room called out, laughing. Not at them. Never *to* them. Just around them. Through them.

“I came out last Christmas,” they said. “Wrote it on a card. Didn’t have the guts to say it out loud. Figured paper was safer.”

They looked up the stairs, then back down.

“She cried. Said she missed the person I used to be. Like I’d died and she hadn’t been warned.”

Their voice caught for a second, but they swallowed it down.

“I still live here. Still do the washing up. Still go to school. But it’s like I’m someone else’s ghost. Everyone sees the shadow. No one listens when I say I’m not haunting them.”

They hugged their knees.

“I used to love Harry Potter,” they said. “Knew every spell. Every character arc. Had the scarf and everything.”

A pause.

“Hard to think fondly about it now. Hard to separate the magic from the mouth it came out of.”

I nodded.

“She wrote stories that made me feel real once. Now she writes tweets that make me feel erased.”

They pulled the earphones out. Let them dangle.

“I keep wondering how long I can keep shrinking before I disappear.”

“You’re not disappearing,” I said. “You’re just waiting for the world to catch up.”

They turned their head slightly. Just enough to show the start of a tear they wouldn’t wipe.

“I don’t want to wait anymore.”

“Then don’t,” I said. “Start with one person who sees you properly. One space that fits.”

“I don’t know if that person exists.”

“They do,” I said. “And if they don’t yet, they’re looking for you too.”

They looked toward the door. The voices had faded. Someone changed the subject.

They stood up slowly, stretching limbs that had folded too small for too long.

“I think I’ll go out,” they said. “Just for a walk. Just to breathe air that hasn’t been pre-approved.”

They grabbed their coat from the rail. It was bright. Not the kind of thing you’d wear to hide.

As they stepped outside, they didn’t look back.

And for the first time in a long time, they weren't walking away from something.

They were walking *toward*.

—

Chapter Nine: The Old Friend

He was at the pub.

Not drunk. Not celebrating. Just there. Sitting at a corner table with two untouched pints and a phone he kept checking like someone might still call.

I hadn't seen him since before my head exploded. Not properly. Not since everything broke in half.

His face had aged. Not in the way skin does, but in the way *conscience* does.

He spotted me straight away. No slow realisation. No squinting or second guesses. Just eye contact that landed like a punch.

"You're not supposed to be here," he said.

I sat down across from him. The air between us was thick with old silences.

"I thought about your funeral," he said, not touching the pint.

"Was gonna go. Didn't. Couldn't. Didn't think I had the right."

"You didn't," I said.

He nodded. Like he agreed, but hoped I'd say something different.

“We were kids,” he started. “Stupid, cocky. You asked me for help. Just once. I still remember your face. You didn’t say much. But you didn’t have to.”

He looked away.

“And I didn’t show up.”

I didn’t answer. The pub’s low hum filled the gaps. Laughter from a table too far away to matter. Glasses clinking. A football match murmuring on a muted TV.

“I told myself I was busy,” he said. “But the truth is, I didn’t want to deal with your sadness. Didn’t want it rubbing off on me.”

He stared at the pint now, as if looking into it might give him the right words.

“You were the only one who showed up when my sister died. First one there. Last one to leave.”

He wiped at his face roughly. Not a dramatic gesture. Just a swipe.

“I didn’t return the favour. And now you’re sitting here, looking exactly how I remember you. Which is wrong. But it’s the only version I’ve got.”

“You’re carrying it,” I said.

“Yeah. Not well, though.”

“Good,” I said. “It shouldn’t be easy.”

He laughed, but it caught in his throat.

“You hated when I got away with things,” he said.

“No,” I replied. “I hated when you acted like they didn’t cost anything.”

He looked up again. Properly this time.

“I’ve tried to do better. Be better. I talk to people now. Ask twice when they say they’re fine. Started mentoring some lad at work. Quiet kid. Reminds me of you, actually.”

I didn’t smile. But I didn’t leave.

“I’m not looking for forgiveness,” he said.

“But I hope the next time someone like you sits across from me... I don’t choke.”

He picked up the pint. Didn’t drink. Just held it.

“Am I just talking to myself?” he asked quietly.

“Not today.”

He didn’t say goodbye. Didn’t need to.

Some debts don’t get repaid. But they can be carried properly. And he was trying.

Chapter Ten: The Child

He was sitting cross-legged on a patch of dry grass, building something out of sticks. Not a fort. Not a house. Just... shapes. Overlapping, lopsided, precise in a way only a child could understand.

His school bag was behind him, half-zipped. His lunchbox untouched. The playground was nearby, but he wasn't on it.

I sat a few feet away. Close enough not to be a stranger.

He didn't look at me, but he spoke.

"Mum cried last night in the kitchen. She didn't know I could hear."

He pressed a stick into the grass. Realigned it. Started again.

"She said she misses how things used to be. Dad said it's not my fault. But he said it after I asked."

He picked up a leaf. Ripped it slowly down the middle.

"They were happy before I started getting sent home for fighting."

He said it plainly. No shame. No anger. Just cause and effect, like maths homework.

"They argue less now that Dad's not in the house. That's good, isn't it? Means I fixed it."

He looked at the sticks. Looked at me.

“Do you think if I stopped being a problem, he’d come back?”

“No,” I said.

He blinked. “Why not?”

“Because their problems were grown-up problems. You just got stuck in the middle.”

He didn’t reply straight away. Just stared at the leaf halves in his hand.

“I told Mum I was fine,” he said. “Even smiled so she wouldn’t worry. But it hurt my face.”

He wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“Sometimes I think about getting really sick. Like hospital sick. Just so they’d have to be in the same room again.”

“That wouldn’t fix it either,” I said.

He nodded. Small. Quiet.

“But maybe they’d both visit,” he said.

He dropped the leaf. Went back to arranging his sticks.

“They said they still love me,” he added. “But it’s not the same. It’s like... two halves of a sandwich that keep falling apart when I try to hold them together.”

“You don’t have to hold them together,” I said. “That was never your job.”

He didn’t answer, but this time, he didn’t flinch either.

He reached for his lunchbox. Opened it. Took one bite.

“I think I’ll sit here a bit longer,” he said.

I nodded.

Sometimes the biggest weight a child can carry is that which nobody ever meant to give them.

And sometimes, it only takes a small truth to let them put it down.

—

Chapter Eleven: The Pretender

I found him in the garage.

Not fixing anything. Not even really moving. Just sitting on an upturned crate, staring at the sports car that had killed his husband.

The car was pristine. Repaired. Valeted. Gleaming like it hadn't torn through a bus stop shelter not long ago.

That was the thing about money. It could make a wreck look new.

He didn't hear me come in. Or maybe he did, and just didn't care.

He looked nothing like the man in the photographs on the wall: smiling, arms wrapped around a sharp-suited figure with a champagne glass and a five-year plan.

He looked like someone who had run out of maps.

"I used to joke he loved that car more than me," he said.
"Turns out he might have."

He didn't laugh. He just ran a hand through his hair, then let it fall back into his lap like even that had cost too much effort.

"I thought I knew him. The suit. That was what everyone called him. I never liked it, but he did. Said it made him feel bulletproof."

He stood slowly, walked over to the workbench, and picked up a stack of letters. The paper shook slightly as he held it.

“Turns out the only thing he was bulletproof against was telling the truth.”

He handed me the letters. Credit card debt. Overdrawn accounts. Missed payments. Loans against things I didn’t know you could loan against.

“He owed hundreds of thousands,” he said. “I don’t even know when it started. Or why. He had a good job. We lived well. Too well, probably.”

He sat back down.

“I thought we were solid. I thought he told me everything.”

He looked at the car again.

“He drove that thing like he was trying to outrun something. Maybe he was.”

Silence sat with us for a while. The kind that follows the type of loss that doesn't come with a clean explanation.

“I’m not angry he died,” he said. “I’m angry I’ve got no one left to ask *why*.”

He picked up a wrench and turned it in his hands. Not to fix anything. Just to feel something solid.

“I don’t think he meant to lie. I think he just got used to pretending. And when you do that long enough, you forget how to stop.”

He paused.

“I married a man who wanted the world to believe he had it all figured out. And now I’m stuck with the fallout of a life that was stitched together with smiles and silence.”

He looked at me again. Really looked.

“What do you do when the person you loved turns out to be a stranger?”

“You remember both versions,” I said. “And decide which one gets to stay.”

He nodded slowly.

“He wasn’t cruel,” he said. “He was scared. That’s what I keep coming back to. He was just scared. Of failing. Of disappointing me. Of looking like anything less than perfect.”

He reached into a drawer and pulled out a framed photo. The two of them, laughing in the sun. Not posed. Not perfect. Just real.

“I think this is the only honest picture I’ve got left.”

He set it down carefully.

“I’m selling the house. Selling the car. Maybe even the suit collection. Starting from scratch. Not because I want to... but because I have to.”

He looked around the garage like it was a museum to a life that never really existed. A museum of failures.

“I loved him,” he said. “God, I loved him. But I can’t live inside the image he left behind.”

He stood. Shoulders still heavy, but his legs were steady.

“I don’t know where I’m going,” he said.

“You’re already on your way,” I replied.

He walked out of the garage, past the gleaming car, into the evening light.

And for the first time in months, the man left the suit behind.

—

Chapter Twelve: The Winner

She stood at the kitchen counter, holding a coffee she had no intention of drinking.

Behind her, the city stretched out in all directions. Her flat was immaculate. Polished stone. Clean lines. Designer everything.

Nothing was out of place; except her.

I sat near the glass wall, in the shadow where the light from the skyline didn't quite reach.

She didn't look over. Just spoke, like she'd already been talking to herself for a while.

"I did everything they told me to," she said.

"Worked hard. Spoke up. Sat straighter. Took the pay cut, then asked for the raise like it was a favour. Bought the flat. Invested early. Jogged in Lycra. Smiled at people I didn't like and made small talk with their wives."

She set the cup down gently.

"And somewhere in all that... I lost the plot."

She walked to the window. Crossed her arms like she was bracing herself for an answer the city couldn't give.

"I hit every milestone. Career, money, body, partner. I built the life. Pinned it all in place like a bloody Pinterest board."

She turned slightly.

“And now I can’t feel a single thing.”

The flat was too quiet. The kind of silence that gets heavier the longer it lasts.

“I used to lie in bed at night and imagine what it’d feel like to finally arrive. To *make it*. Thought it’d feel like relief. Maybe pride. But it just feels like... nothing. Like I’m standing on the top floor of a life I don’t live in.”

She paused.

“I’m not ungrateful. I know how lucky I am. I just didn’t realise success could feel this lonely.”

I didn’t move. I didn’t need to.

She stared at her own reflection in the glass. Tilted her head slightly, as if trying to see through it.

“I went to lunch with a friend last week. She said she was jealous. Said she wished she had my freedom, my wardrobe, my holidays. I wanted to say, *take it*. Swap me. I’ll take your messy house and your loud toddler and your arguments over dinner. At least it’s real.”

She finally turned to face me.

“I think I spent so long chasing approval, I forgot how to be honest.”

She picked up her phone. Scrolled. Put it down.

“I haven’t called my mum in weeks. Haven’t written anything that wasn’t a pitch deck or a polite decline. Haven’t cried. Haven’t laughed. I just keep showing up in heels, pretending I’m fine.”

She walked to a drawer. Pulled out a photo. Her as a teenager. Gappy smile, trainers, holding a cheap camera in both hands.

“I used to take pictures. All the time. I liked how still the world got when you framed it just right.”

She set the photo on the counter, facing out.

“I think I’ll buy a film camera. One that doesn’t let you check the shot. Just take it and trust it captured something worth keeping.”

She didn’t ask for permission. She didn’t say goodbye.

She just picked up her keys, left the coffee on the counter, and walked out the door.

And for the first time in years, she wasn’t chasing anything.

She was choosing something.

—

Epilogue: A Light Left On

The sun rose slowly over the city.

Not with fanfare. Not in a way that demanded to be noticed.
Just steadily, quietly, like it always had.

I stood on the rooftop of a building I once walked past every morning on my way to a job that never remembered me when I left.

From up here, the streets were soft with fog. The windows of a hundred lives blinked into brightness, one by one. A toast burned. A door slammed. A cat curled up beside someone who never woke up. Someone ran for the bus.

The world is still turning.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt ready to let it.

I've seen them all now. The ones who were almost gone. The ones who didn't know how close they were to the edge. The ones who thought no one would miss them. The ones who believed their silence was the only way to be heard.

And the truth is, I couldn't save any of them.

But maybe that was never the point.

The suit, so desperate to stay polished, he drowned quietly under a debt he couldn't speak aloud.

The neighbour, fading in a house full of ghosts.

The biro girl, who drew her pain in pen because the pencil smudged too easily.

The child, who thought his parents' marriage was something he could glue back together with good behaviour.

The survivor, who woke up when he didn't want to and had to learn to want to live again anyway.

The teen, aching to be seen, rewriting themselves in a home that only remembered what they used to be.

The winner, who reached the top of the ladder and found the air too thin to breathe.

I didn't *fix* them.

But I was there.

And sometimes, that was enough.

I used to think my life didn't matter. That it had slipped through cracks no one noticed. That if I disappeared, the world would carry on exactly the same. And maybe it did.

But that didn't mean I didn't leave something behind.

Not a legacy. Not a monument. Just a trail of tiny, human moments.

A seat given up on a crowded bus. A hand on a shoulder. A quiet "I've got you" said with no expectation.

Back then, I thought all that meant nothing.

Now, I see it was everything.

Maybe that's why I'm still here. Not alive. Not gone. Just... present.

Not to rescue. Not to preach. Just to show up.

To be the moment someone realises they can still turn back.
To be the presence in the pause. The stillness before the choice.

A light left on.

I spent most of my life in the background, mistaking being needed for being loved, mistaking busyness for worth. I worked jobs that drained me dry, trying to make myself indispensable to people who didn't know my middle name.

And all the while, what I was good at... what I *was always meant to do*... was simply to listen. To see.

To stand beside people when the noise faded and they thought no one would.

I didn't know it then, but I was never meant to climb the corporate ladder. I was meant to sit on the steps beside the ones too tired to keep climbing.

And now, I do.

Sometimes, in train stations. Sometimes in hospital waiting rooms. Sometimes in kitchens lit by fridge light at three in the morning.

I leave no trace. No footprints. No shadows.

But they feel me.

In the moment they put the bottle down. In the moment they ring the doorbell instead of walking away. In the moment they say, *I need help* and finally mean it.

That's where I am.

Not saving them. Just standing close enough that they save themselves.

And that's enough.

The sun crests over the skyline now, spilling gold across the roofs and windows and pavements below.

Someone somewhere just turned on a light. Not because they were afraid of the dark, but because they were ready to see what was still possible.

And so was I.

Author's note

Thank you for reading *The Farewell Fare*.

Most journeys end without warning.

This story is for the ones who kept moving, even when they did not know where they were going.

If it stayed with you, I am glad.

Marcin Wojdyna

The last man returns in *Nocturne for Nine Lives*.

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