

## Here

It's safe for Eliza's memorial to go ahead. The run director shares a screenshot of the weather forecast in the group and promises that the temperature won't go over 38 degrees. Her update causes the chat to explode with replies, photos and emojis popping up like bubbles, and Solomon, looking down at his screen, wants to cry. The thought of meeting so many strangers makes his bladder twist.

Nerves ping around his stomach with each photo from Eliza's friends: bright clothes and neon face paint. Someone is bringing their dog. He didn't think the memorial was going to happen. A red heat warning was supposed to last all weekend and, before he went to bed, the weeds in the garden were wilting. When he woke to grey skies and a breeze, he thought it was a nightmare.

He sits on the edge of the bed, eyes straining against the light from his phone. The living room is gloomy, the morning struggling to squeeze past the furniture against the front window; chairs, cabinets, and a sofa crushed together as if on a sinking ship. Eliza's bed was only supposed to be a temporary addition to the room—just while she recovered—but the imprints of the original furniture on the carpet have almost faded away.

'I don't think I can do this.'

There are decorations on the wall; a case of Eliza's medals, and a photo from her first day as an entrepreneur. The medals are mounted in a yellow frame, the total raised from her six marathons written beneath each one, while the picture is from the first Rubbish Runners meetup. She has wild eyes and in her hand is a litter picker raised to the sky like a spear. She was Boudica in athletic wear. It's been so long since Solomon did any exercise, not since she became ill, and his t-shirt clings to his body. He feels useless and fat.

'I'm sorry I'm letting you down.'

He is about to send his apologies to the group, a tired excuse about heatstroke, when a new message appears in the chat. It's from Eliza's mother.

*What a wonderful day to honour my daughter's memory. Looking forward to seeing everyone there.*

His shoulders slump. The message is meant for him.

#

The memorial run will follow the old railway line and a crowd waits at the ruins by the start of the route. A raised platform and two folly walls are all that remains of the station and the sight of dozens of brightly dressed runners by the stone crumbs is a relief. In a crowd, he can be anonymous. Sat in their car across the road, he cranes his neck looking for the run director; a woman called Jo who used to be Eliza's personal trainer. She'll be addressing the group before the memorial begins. That's when he'll make his way over.

The noise coming from the meetup surprises him: overlapping conversations; children shouting as they race around the folly; dogs at the hip barking impatiently. A lump catches in his throat. Eliza loved seeing all her friends together. This is a celebration. A way for them to remember her. It's not a place for Solomon and the stink of his grief.

He's about to start the engine when there's a crack of static, followed by a muffled sound of a voice through a megaphone. A woman in a pink tutu addresses the group from one

of the derelict platforms. Jo, he presumes. He's too far away to hear, but while the crowd gathers to listen, he feels a jolt of guilt as forceful as if the car had been rear-ended. It's violent enough for him to change his mind and reach for the handle of the door.

Despite the early start it's already warm and by the time Solomon reaches the ruins, sweat gathers under his arms. He avoids eye contact with the other runners, staring down at the bleached-yellow grass. On the platform, Jo explains how the memorial run will work.

'Don't worry if you've not come to a Rubbish Runners event before, it's super easy,' she says and points to three piles on the ground. 'Cardboard. Plastic. Non-recyclables. Choose a basket and put the straps on over your shoulders like a rucksack.'

He remembers when Eliza came home with the idea for Rubbish Runners. She burst into the living room, back when it still looked like a living room, face red and sweaty. In her hand was a plastic sack bulging with litter.

'All this from one run,' she said excitedly. 'This is the idea I've been searching for.'

It took two hard years organising litter-picks across the city until she was getting enough in sponsorship and grants to quit her job and run it as a business. By the time she became ill, there was a store of branded merch and a franchise that spanned the country.

A ripple of laughter pulls Solomon back to the speech. He can sense the nervous excitement, an eagerness to get started. Eliza would approve.

'Once you've paired up with someone, decide who does what. If you're not wearing one of these, then you're a picker. Your job is to collect rubbish and put it in the basket. Please remember your litter grabber before you set out. We don't want anyone using their paws and needing a tetanus jab.'

A chuckle washes through the crowd and Jo places her hands together as if in prayer.

'I know we're all raring to go,' she says with a shaky breath, 'but I want to take a minute to remember why we're all here. Eliza was the best bloody person and I know we're

all thinking of her and her family. I'm so glad we can honour her in such a positive way.'

Applause ripples through the meetup as Jo clambers down from the platform.

Solomon pulls his cap—stitched with a Rubbish Runners logo—down to cover the hurt on his face. Everyone here is so eager to move on. He should have stayed at home.

'Solomon,' calls a voice. 'Are you going to try and make my daughter proud?'

It's Eliza's mother. She makes her way towards him with a sneer, her version of a smile, and pulls him close for a starchy hug.

'I'm glad you could make it,' she says in his ear. 'It's important to keep yourself busy.'

Like him, she is wearing Rubbish Runners merchandise, but her t-shirt smells fresh from the packet, with factory folds across the material. Two women in the same clothes follow in her wake. Stood together, they look like a spandex coven.

'Did you come alone?' Eliza's mother asks, releasing him from her grip. Concern floods her face.

The crackle of the megaphone saves Solomon from a reply. Jo has started the countdown to the race and everyone turns to face the entrance to the railway path like a shoal of fish.

He points to the baskets on the ground. 'I have to get my stuff before we go.'

'But you don't have a partner,' Eliza's mother replies over the crack of a starter gun. The crowd surges forward. 'Why don't you walk with me and my friends? After all, you shouldn't look like a Billy No Mates on my daughter's special day.'

#

Eliza's mother is the run marshal, a title she has bestowed on herself and printed across a tabard. Her role, she explains to her friends, is to stay at the rear of the pack and make sure no one gets left behind.

‘Who wants to try and keep up with all these fitness fanatics?’ she says as they amble down the path.

Eliza regularly ran down the railway line, but this is the first time Solomon has been on the route. Despite the tall garden fences on either side, he’s surprised at how serene it is; dense thicket borders and thick trees with a sweet-smelling canopy that shields him from the sun. He tries to imagine Eliza here—feet bouncing on the concrete, strong arms propelling her body forward—but cannot. It’s hard to remember her as anything but ill.

‘You ok back there?’ asks Eliza’s mother.

He’s lingered behind the women to search the verges, although there’s not been a single piece of litter to collect. He’s praying for something to put in the basket and the prospect of finishing the run with nothing makes him feel as empty as the sack on his back.

‘No luck finding any rubbish?’ she says, breaking away from her friends to stand beside him, her jewellery glittering like a dragonfly. ‘I doubt you’ll find much. The better runners will have gobbled it all up. We’re just here for moral support.’

‘I’m still optimistic.’

‘Good for you,’ she says. ‘Keep your hopes up.’

He’s thankful when the path thins, forcing them all into single file, and squeezing out conversation. Above the tall graffitied fence, he sees the slate roofs of houses and, through the occasional gap, small gardens that look like they were added as an afterthought. There’s an unfamiliar smell from one of the homes, something from his childhood that it takes a few seconds to place.

‘Bacon?’ says Eliza’s mother from the front. ‘Someone’s got rich tastes. We could never afford it when she was growing up, and this was before it got scarce.’

One of the women’s perfume is burning Solomon’s nose. It makes him lightheaded and he puts out a hand to steady himself on the fence, the wood warped from decades of

record-breaking summers.

‘I’ve not heard from you since the funeral,’ she adds, almost as an afterthought. ‘Are you having a hard time at the moment?’

His heart sinks. He’s never sure of what people want to hear when they ask how he’s doing. ‘Fine, I suppose.’

‘You still haven’t been to visit my daughter.’ It’s not a question. She tidies the grave each week. ‘She wouldn’t want you live like this. We have to move on.’

Solomon doesn’t say anything, and Eliza’s mother shakes her head, but he can’t tell if she’s disappointed or just sad.

No one speaks to him for the rest of the journey and he’s relieved when they finally reach the end of the race, a small park just off the railway path. When they arrive at the finish line by the parking spaces, most of the other runners have already gone. Only Jo and two volunteers are there, guarding a pile of discarded baskets and litter pickers. Bags bulging with rubbish are heaped by a car, the sun’s beating down and there’s the smell of waste baking in the heat. One of the volunteers glances at their watch.

‘Welcome runners,’ says Jo cheerfully, although he recognises the exhaustion in her eyes. ‘Last but certainly not least. You can drop your rubbish off here. We’re going to take it to the recycling centre as soon as you’re all done.’

Eliza’s mother speaks first. ‘Only one of us was collecting,’ she says, pointing to Solomon. ‘Our man of the hour.’

He steps back. Under the basket, his t-shirt is damp with sweat. ‘There wasn’t much left to collect.’

‘Nonsense,’ says Jo. ‘Every little helps.’

‘Go on then,’ encourages Eliza’s mother. ‘Don’t keep everyone waiting.’

Reluctantly, Solomon makes his way to the car. All eyes are on him as he takes off his

basket and turns it upside down. A single plastic bottle misses the bag and falls to the ground. His face glows in shame as it rolls back towards the group.

Eliza's mother picks up the bottle with a sympathetic smile. 'Never mind,' she says. 'I'm sure Eliza would still be proud of your efforts.'

#

It's mid-afternoon by the time Solomon returns home. His house, built for a cooler climate, will be an oven inside, and so he waits in their car with the air conditioning on full blast. Sat in the driveway, he enviously eyes the aircon unit piped into the property next door. The house, identical to his own, used to be owned by a married couple when he was younger, a pair of women who passed him sweets over the fence.

Very little has been done to his own home since he was small, and nothing has been improved since his parents passed away. The brickwork is crumbling and paint flakes from the window frames. He and Eliza were saving up for renovations, replacing the single glazing, adding insulation, installing solar panels, but that money has gone. Everything went towards her care.

After sunset, he forces the front door open until there's a large enough gap for him to squeeze through. After she died, everything just seemed worth saving and the corridor is crammed with things he can't throw away—clothes, bags, and bric-a-brac—leaving only a slim passage through the hallway. In the kitchen, he steps over the takeaway boxes strewn on the floor and barely notices the smell as he puts the bottle from the railway path on a breakfast bar already crammed with litter. He hid the bottle in his pocket when no one was looking.

'I'm not going to forget,' he says. 'I promise.'

## There

Eliza pulls herself up from the ground. Everything hurts. Her skin is tender and her muscles ache, burning worse than after any marathon. She's cold, with a taste of salt on her tongue, and there's a gut-wrenching feeling in the pit of her stomach; a sickening sensation that she's lost something very important.

A shard of panic runs through her as she searches every pocket. First her jeans, stained black with smoke, and then her anorak, its material charred on one side. Frantically, she pulls out her belongings—phone, wallet, house keys—and lets them all fall to the ground. Whatever she's looking for is precious. She just doesn't remember what it is.

She stands on a shore that stretches for miles, every inch covered in waste; a thick blanket of plastic, metal, and rags that used to be fashion. The beach, cast in darkness beneath a featureless cliff the colour of old bones, is lifeless. The stench brings tears to her eyes, but whatever she's lost must be nearby and, carefully, she sifts through the nearest mound of rubbish with her trainer. There's an emptiness in her chest, a yearning that gnaws with long yellow teeth and, although she isn't sure what she's looking for, she'll know it when she sees it. She moves the loose skin of a deflated balloon and startles as the face of a ragged cuddly



toy smiles up at her. The scare nearly makes her stumble into the rancid water lapping against the shore.

Eliza's never been to Brazil—never been away from work for more than a few days—but the river running beside her is larger than any photograph she's seen of the Amazon. It stretches out, languid as a cat, and the cliff on the opposite bank is faint like an oil painting.

Terrible things float on the water.

She's never seen anything like it. Mounds of trash, some as big as icebergs, on the water; an endless flow of waste that cracks as it drifts in the current. It's difficult to identify the objects knitted together in the floating islands, but she recognises larger things clawing their way out of the clumps: shells of cars, stained furniture, rusted ovens. The rotten smell, sickly and sweet on her tongue, makes her nauseous.

Something catches her eye, a leviathan drifting too close to the bank: a train suspended above the waterline by the waste beneath it. It's vintage, the setting for an Agatha Christie novel, with foul-smelling chunks that leak from its chimney, and a driver's compartment packed with sediment. As it floats past, she notices it's dragging a passenger car, emerald beneath the water, in its wake.

Eliza doesn't want to find out how many more carriages might be snaking through the water like a serpent. She folds her arms across her chest and hurries down the bank. Her head is waterlogged, heavy on her shoulders. What she's seeing can't be real.

#

She follows the cliff wall until the shoreline becomes a shingled beach of plastic; small, clear pebbles that crunch beneath her trainers. The bank has curved and led her into an inlet, sheltered from the river's current, with waste festering in a lake of stagnant brown water. Rubbish, bike frames, and shopping carts rise from the sludge like the basin of a drained canal. Despite the eye-watering stench, there aren't flies. She hasn't seen anything living

since finding herself on the beach.

Towards the centre of the brown lake is a bed and, in spite of the smell, she steps to the water's edge. The bed is distinctive, a safety frame black with grime that juts into the air like a stern of a shipwreck. She recognises it from her stay in the hospital. A strange desire stirs in her chest, an urge to reach out for it and feel the mattress beneath her body. The yearning is like an itch; an insect bite after being scratched. As if she were dreaming, she slips off her shoes and takes a step forward, barely feeling the cold, fetid water between her toes.

'You there,' shouts an angry voice, 'what the hell do you think you're doing?'

She comes to her senses and falls away from the lake, her face crumpled in disgust. There's a figure marching towards her: a man dressed like a librarian, body rigid with anger. She's so horrified by the sight of her feet, muck clinging to them like paste, that she barely notices the stranger pushing a wheeled library cart ahead of him.

'Everyone knows this is my beach.'

Don't you dare cry, says a voice in her head that sounds suspiciously like her mother. 'No one wants to hear your tantrums.'

Eliza offers an uncertain smile as the man approaches. He's a stout figure, shorter than her (although mother always said she was a tall girl) and is breathing hard. The cart, stuffed with faded compost bags, crunches to a stop over the plastic rocks.

'Thieving are you?' he says with a wheeze. 'I won't have it.'

It's difficult to understand what he's accusing her of. Worthless flotsam laps at the shingle: rusted paint cans, wooden pallets, polyester takeaway boxes, lids sealed like clams.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I don't know what I've done wrong. I've not stolen anything. My name is —'

The man is old: a wrinkled face and wisps of grey hair. He gives her a look of paternal

disappointment.

‘No time for pleasantries. Not with so much work to be done.’ He looks to the loaded cart. Waste crawls out over the top of the plumpest sack. ‘Still lots to collect.’

The haul reminds her of a Rubbish Runners litter pick. The man’s gloves, the sort worn for falconry, are black with grot.

‘Are you cleaning the beach?’

He laughs. ‘I have more than enough on my plate without a Sisyphean folly,’ he says, and he looks around the inlet as if considering the scale of the task. ‘You should be truthful if you stole something. It’d be in your best interests.’

‘I swear,’ she says, holding out empty hands. ‘Have you lost something too? I could help you search for it.’

He looks sceptical. ‘What about your trousers? I can smell a liar.’

The only thing Eliza can smell is the river. Its stench is strong enough to slick across her skin and her hair feels greasy with it. She pats her pockets for the man’s benefit and gives him a sympathetic smile.

‘Sorry.’

His expression softens. ‘I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. But I’ll be keeping my eye on you.’

It’s an empty threat. He turns away and is immediately engrossed by the litter in the shallows, stooping to add something to his cart. No sooner has he walked back along the beach than Eliza feels the draw of the bed in the water.

‘Wait,’ she calls out. ‘What am I searching for?’

The old man turns and his face is full of pity. ‘Sehnsucht,’ he says.

‘What?’

‘Sehnsucht,’ he says, making his way back. ‘An unexplainable longing for something

unknown. Everyone here has it.'

Eliza looks at the bed and a shiver of pleasure runs through her as she imagines swimming towards it. 'It's like an addiction. A craving.'

The man's shoulders fall. 'You're after the past. You're looking for a memory.'

#

He leads her away from the river. A barren landscape stretches in front of them, desolate, rolling hills crushed under a grey and featureless sky. The slopes are still, sickly yellow but for the occasional outcrop of rock jutting from the ground like crooked teeth. Nothing here feels alive, a slumbering landscape with the stillness of a desert or a moon. It reminds her of Exmoor: the camping holidays her mother used to take her on to prepare her for success in the Duke of Edinburgh award.

The fallow hills are silent but for the rattling of the old man's cart on the trail. He's not said a word since they left the bank and Eliza's fine with that. She feels like she's coming down from a high, almost hungover. Her skin is painful and tender to the touch and the light, as weak as it is from the overcast sky, makes her eyes sting. She'd do anything for a fry up.

'If it's any consolation,' says the man, 'the first time you find something familiar is a rotter for everyone. It'll pass soon enough.' He dips into one of the cart's compost bags. 'Put this over your head. It'll help with the light.'

He gives her a damp-smelling mottled cloth, and Eliza follows his advice, wrapping the tattered material around her head. It blocks out the worst of the light, narrowing her vision like a blinkered horse, and she feels her mind sharpen.

'Thank you for your charity,' she says as the man continues onwards.

He doesn't look back. 'I can hear the embarrassment in your voice. There's nothing to be ashamed of. No one here can survive without souvenirs.' He clears his throat and puffs out his chest like a toad. 'Well, almost no one.'

‘Souvenirs?’

The man doesn’t answer the question. ‘We’re nearly there,’ he says, pointing to something on the horizon.

Eliza sees nothing but the valley, a dull painting of grey and brown brushstrokes. The ground is dry, cracked, and desperate for rain, while vegetation is threadbare, strands of grass combed over like an afterthought. Her gaze follows the river up the valley and towards a mountain range and snow-capped peaks in the distance.

‘I have to get back home. My husband needs me. Do you know how I can—’

He interrupts. ‘Wait until we get to the university. I’ll explain everything there.’

She steps in something on the ground before she can thank him. Her trainer is sunk into a lump rising from the earth, a mineral deposit that could be a cow pat but for the sparkle of quartz and sapphire.

‘Poor luck,’ the old man says, pointing out more piles scattered across the valley floor. ‘Bloody things are everywhere. Unseemly.’

Eliza pulls out her foot. Her trainers are covered in sparkling sand and her fingers turn numb when she tries to wipe it away. In the distance, there are the silhouettes of thick-bodied cattle walking single-file up a scree-stained ridge.

‘From the cows?’

‘Not quite.’

She squints. Something doesn’t look right with the herd. The animals move awkwardly—stiff and slow—walking as if in pain.

‘Are they ill?’ she asks as they start to disappear over the crest of the hill.

The man clears his throat as if she’d said something inappropriate. ‘Those aren’t cows.’

He’s right. The proportions of the creatures are all wrong: weak, spindly legs braced

against fat torsos. Large lumps, callouses on skin, grow from the hide of each animal, making them bulge in the wrong places, and the weather is calm enough to hear them bellow. They almost sound like they're talking. One of the animals rears up on its hind legs like an act of defiance and moans in pain and frustration. The old man watches it stagger over the crest of the slope, struggling against the weight on its back, and then turns to Eliza.

‘As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you must be.’

‘Where are we?’ she asks, panic in her voice.

He sighs. ‘My dear, I couldn’t tell you if I wanted to.’

## Here

A few days after the run there's a knock at the door. Solomon hasn't left the house since Eliza's memorial and he's still wearing his Rubbish Runners t-shirt when he finds a slender man stood in the dusk. The caller shows no interest in the neon top or the stains across it. He stares down at a screen in his hand, its light illuminating his sharp cheekbones.

'Are you Solomon?' he asks in a European accent. 'I'm here to oversee your installation.'

Solomon, dumbfounded by the visitor, is silent. The man is dressed for a funeral, a pressed suit and a thin black tie, and his grey hair is neatly slicked back with gel. A weathered brown satchel and a white box the size of a jigsaw are set at his feet.

'I'm from EverLife.'

The name of the company awakens Solomon from his stupor. 'I think you've got the wrong address,' he says with a shake of the head. He gestures to the crumbling brickwork at the front of the house. 'I can't afford what you're selling.'

A flicker of exasperation crosses the man's face. 'I'm a technician, not a salesman. This visit has been scheduled for some time.' He taps on his screen. 'I have the right address.'

Did you not receive our correspondence?’

‘Correspondence?’ Solomon looks at the mass of letters and flyers crunched against the skirting board behind the door. He stopped checking the mail when Eliza went to the hospice. ‘I must have missed it. What was it about?’

The technician frowns. ‘You’re booked in for an installation this evening,’ he says, offering his screen. ‘Here’s the work order.’

Solomon takes the device. The document looks legitimate: his name and address are listed at the top, although there are no details about the product or its price. One of the few things he knows about EverLife is that if you have to ask the price, you can’t afford it.

‘There must be some mistake,’ he says, hurriedly passing back the screen, an edge of fear in his voice. ‘I haven’t bought anything.’

‘You misunderstand me,’ says the man. ‘There’s no cost. It’s all been paid for.’ He picks up his things, putting the white box under his arm and taking the handle of the briefcase. ‘May we discuss it inside?’

Solomon glances to the clutter in the corridor, the things stacked against both walls. ‘Can’t we talk here? I wasn’t expecting visitors.’

The technician grimaces. ‘My things are heavier than they look. If there has been a misunderstanding it won’t take long to rectify.’

Solomon sighs and reluctantly he steps aside, pressing himself against the wall to allow the man to pass.

‘Sorry about the mess,’ he mumbles. ‘It’s been—’

He trails off, unsure how to finish the sentence.

The technician seems unfazed. He turns sideways to squeeze through the corridor without comment and reaches for the handle of the first door; the living room with Eliza’s old bed inside.



‘That one’s private,’ Solomon says, darting towards him. ‘We can speak in the kitchen.’

The man shrugs. ‘You should be careful,’ he says, continuing down the hall. ‘All this clutter is a fire hazard.’

#

Solomon clears a space at the breakfast bar, scooping up the rubbish on the table to make room for the visitor. The smell of sour milk from one of the plastic bags makes his nostrils flare.

‘Do you need more room?’ he asks as the technician climbs into the stool like a stick insect crawling up a branch.

The man shakes his head and places his box and satchel on the table, handling both objects as if they were made of crystal. ‘This is satisfactory.’

‘I’m sorry I can’t offer you anything to drink,’ Solomon says, placing the rubbish on the linoleum floor beside an overflowing bin. He gestures to the fridge, its door covered in photographs and holiday magnets. ‘I’ve not had the chance to go shopping.’

‘It’s not a problem,’ says the technician, his eyes darting towards the takeaway packets stagnating in the sink. ‘We’re not having that sort of meeting.’ He takes out his device and taps on the screen. ‘I’ve asked for clarification about your order. It won’t take long.’

‘Good,’ Solomon replies.

While they wait, he stares out at the yard through the window over the sink; concrete slabs and pots of dry soil beneath the dimming sky. In the reflection of the glass, he sees the man pull something from his satchel, a pair of white cotton gloves, the sort historians wear in documentaries.

‘I suppose you’re used to going to much fancier houses for your work.’

The technician shrugs while slipping on the gloves. ‘I never notice. All the homes feel the same after a death.’

Solomon’s chest tightens. ‘What’s your name?’

‘It has too many vowels for your language. My colleagues just call me the Observer.’

‘Why?’

‘They say I’m very observant.’

There’s a beep from the technician’s device and the man’s back straightens. ‘It’s been confirmed by customer services,’ he says, starting to empty his bag, setting instruments out on the breakfast bar. ‘I’ll be installing your therapist today.’

‘My what?’ Solomon says, raising his hands in protest.

‘Your therapist,’ the Observer replies. He picks up a scalpel and slices away the clear sheath wrapped around the white box. When he prises open the lid, the smell of new plastic fills the air. ‘I assume you’re familiar with the concept of avatars?’

Solomon stands over the table and stares into the box. The equipment inside looks so expensive, each piece nestled in a compartment lined with red velvet. ‘Of course I know what an avatar is. I’ve seen the viral videos.’

The Observer carefully plucks the items from the box and sets them down on a small cloth he has laid on the breakfast bar. ‘Well, this one belongs to you,’ he says, reaching for a pair of tweezers. ‘She’s your own virtual therapist. Part of our wellbeing portfolio.’

Carefully, he pulls back the protective film coating the first object—a transparent pebble—before doing the same to the lenses of a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. ‘Do not worry,’ he adds. ‘She’ll give you a tutorial once she is awake.’

Solomon doesn’t understand why the man won’t stop working. ‘I can’t afford this,’ he says in a panic.

The Observer strokes the glass pebble with a finger and a blue light glows from inside

the device. 'You're a lucky man. All of this has been paid for: the installation, the service fees, the monthly subscription. It's all free for you.'

'Is this a scam?' Solomon asks. Something is lodged in his throat. Maybe one of his prescription pills from earlier. 'Who's paid for this? I don't want anyone's charity.'

'I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to say,' the man replies. He pulls a wire as thin as silk from his device and connects it to a minuscule port in the pebble. 'You should be grateful. Not many people get this sort of help.'

'But I didn't ask for it.' He reaches out, intent on putting the technology back into the box. 'Tell them "Thanks, but no thanks".'

'Wait,' says the man without raising his voice. 'It's dangerous to interrupt the installation.'

Solomon's hand hovers over the stone. The light inside pulses white, steady like a breath. 'Is it alive?'

The Observer taps on his device. Green light from the screen illuminates the kitchen. 'It will be,' he says.

#

Solomon sits on Eliza's bed in the darkness of the living room. The house has thin walls and, in the kitchen, the Observer is humming a tuneless melody that makes it difficult to think. Solomon swears and instantly feels guilty about it. This is her space, the smell of her still on the bedsheets, and he shouldn't be disrespecting her memory. It's only the third time he has been here since her death. The second occasion was prior to her memorial run. The time before, he was wearing a suit and, clutching a hand-written eulogy, had begged for things to go back to normal.

The Observer stops humming and Solomon puts his fingers to his neck as if trying to loosen the knot of an invisible tie.

‘I’m sorry for coming here,’ he says. ‘I needed some space.’

Eliza’s mother recently told him that the dead always know when you’re trying your best. He thinks back to his wife’s final months: quitting his job to take care of her, withdrawing all their savings for experimental treatments, visiting church for the first time since school. And how all that trying was for nothing. He hates the idea of having a virtual therapist; he thought the whole point of therapy was to try and forget things, and Solomon doesn’t want to forget. The best thing he can do for Eliza now is try to keep her memory alive. As soon as the Observer has finished his work, he’ll tell him to leave and take the avatar away.

There’s a conversation happening in the kitchen, the Observer’s voice through the wall, and Solomon realises the man is talking to the avatar. He’s only ever seen videos of them online—a dead pop star in concert, a deceased politician speaking at a fundraiser—and how someone can communicate with one is a mystery. As abhorrent as the idea of having a virtual therapist is, he can’t help but eavesdrop.

‘What’s your name?’ asks the Observer, his voice muffled through the wall.

Solomon doesn’t hear the reply.

‘That’s correct,’ the technician says. ‘Gold star.’

After a few minutes, there’s a stern knock on the door. A splinter of light carves through the darkness and the technician speaks before Solomon can protest about him coming into the room.

‘She’s ready to say hello,’ he says, his tall frame silhouetted against the light from the corridor. ‘Please come with me.’

The man goes without waiting for an answer and, with a sigh, Solomon stands and smoothes down any trace of his presence from the duvet. When he walks into the kitchen though, he’s surprised to see no one there but the Observer. He’s packed away his tools and,

but for the glasses and pebble on the table, nothing is different.

‘These are for you,’ the technician says, gesturing to the technology. ‘They’re under warranty for twelve months.’

Solomon takes a breath and broadens his shoulders. ‘I won’t need it. Please go and take everything with you.’

The man straightens his back to full height. ‘I would not be so quick to make your decision,’ he says, towering over Solomon. ‘You have been given a gift.’

‘I don’t care,’ Solomon says. He suddenly feels very tired. Tonight’s been the most social interaction he’s had since the memorial. ‘Aren’t you supposed to keep the customer happy?’

The Observer ignores his question. ‘It’s dark. Let her stay the night. If you do not get along, I can come and collect her tomorrow.’ He takes a business card from his pocket and places it on the table. ‘Call me whenever. We’re always available for clients.’

Solomon just wants the man to leave and his resolve crumbles. ‘If I say yes, will you get out our house?’

The man offers a small bow and picks up his satchel.

‘Just so you know, I have no intention of switching it on,’ says Solomon, following the Observer towards the front door.

He smiles. ‘We’ll see about that,’ he says as he opens the front door. ‘Whoever’s subscribed you knows it will do some good.’

#

It’s late—nearly midnight—and Solomon, who’s been sat at the kitchen table overthinking the Observer’s final words, finally reaches out for the pebble. It’d be good to know who has subscribed him a therapist: he can assure them he doesn’t need help, but still thank them for the gift. It’s what Eliza would want him to do. His fingers wrap around the stone and he’s

surprised that it's warm to the touch. It feels organic despite its laser-cut shape, and staring at its kaleidoscopic core is bewitching, like looking into the heart of a galaxy. When he places his thumb on the indent in the glass to activate the device, the spectrum of colours at the centre of the stone turns a brilliant white.

'Please put on your augmented reality glasses to engage with your avatar' says an artificial voice from inside the pebble.

'Who paid for you?' he says, bringing the stone close to his mouth.

The emotionless command repeats itself and reluctantly, Solomon picks up the thick frames. He's surprised to see his hands are shaking.

'One conversation isn't going to hurt,' he mutters, sliding the lenses onto his face. 'It's nothing to be afraid of.'

He cries out in shock as a figure appears on the other side of the breakfast bar. The Observer said his avatar would be a woman, but the thing sat on the chair in front of him has no eyes or mouth. It's a life-sized mannequin—wooden—a thing from an art studio, except its chest moves up and down like it's drawing breath. He knows the avatar is being projected onto the inside of the lenses, but it looks real enough to be there in the room, and he glances over the top of the frames just to be sure. After a moment, and not knowing what else to do, he offers the avatar an awkward wave.

'Are you my therapist?' he asks.

'Welcome to your EverLife tutorial,' says the same voice as before, but now it's coming from the speaker embedded into the side of the glasses. 'Please look at the totem. This is for calibration purposes.'

He winces in fear as the mannequin moves, pointing to the pebble on the table. When Solomon lowers his gaze, the avatar raises its thumb in acknowledgement.

'This is your totem. Your avatar lives in here. Always keep it within the recommended

range of the glasses,’ says the voice. ‘Now, stare to the ceiling.’

The avatar’s head, an oval wooden block, nods in pleasure as Solomon follows the instruction. When he looks back down, the figure has gone from its seat.

‘Have I broken it?’ he asks.

‘Now turn right.’

Solomon does as he’s told and nearly falls off the stool in fright as the mannequin appears in his vision, stood towering over him by his side.

‘The glasses and the totem are equipped with tiny cameras that allow your avatar to create a virtual map of the environment,’ explains the voice. ‘Your avatar can independently move where it pleases within this range of vision.’

‘Thanks for the warning,’ he says, heart hammering in his chest.

The mannequin’s shoulders slump as if it were a scolded pet and it slopes back around the table, dragging its feet.

‘The glasses include speech-recognition software and biosensors that allow your avatar to respond to you and your emotions in real-time. We apologise for frightening you.’

Solomon glares at the figure across the table and he swears it gives him a nonchalant shrug.

‘This concludes the tutorial. Would you like to meet your avatar now?’

‘Sure. Just don’t put it on the ceiling or under the table or anything.’

There is a beep and he sighs in relief as the mannequin vanishes. A moment passes. There comes the sound of soft breathing from behind his shoulder.

‘I can’t go full exorcist. We have to obey the laws of gravity,’ says a familiar voice.

A coldness runs the length of Solomon’s body, and he clenches his jaw as the avatar moves around the breakfast bar and into his field of vision. Delicately, it takes a seat in the chair opposite and folds its hands on the table. There, sat in front of him, is Eliza, his dead

wife.

‘Hello,’ she says cheerfully. ‘I’m your therapist and I’m here to help.’ She smiles in the way only his wife could. ‘It’s so nice to meet you. My name’s Eliza. What’s yours?’



There

The university has too many spires. It's a great gothic building sat awkwardly on the valley floor, its design stolen from Oxford or Cambridge; intricate statues carved into the stone, and narrow windows that reflect the grey featureless sky. The beauty of it, defiant against the barren landscape, makes the hairs on Eliza's arms rise.

'What's it doing here?' she asks as they pass beneath the entrance, a deep archway cut in the red-brick wall. She cranes her neck to read the Latin chiselled into the vaulted roof.

'Order in chaos,' says the old man, although she isn't sure if he's translating the words or answering her question. As they enter a vast courtyard, a hollow surrounded by the walls of the building, he affectionately pats the stone.

'Welcome to my home.'

Eliza's never been to university—her mother wanted her to start working with her immediately after school—but the campus is nothing like she imagined. There are no students, no bicycles, no benches. The place is a building site. Piles of construction materials are strewn across the ground and scaffolding is haphazardly stacked against a wall. It's not safe for them to be here without a helmet.

‘Is it being renovated?’

The man, still pushing the cart in front of him, laughs. He stops next to a wheelbarrow besides a large heap of rotten wood and starts to pull compost bags from the trolley onto the cobbled ground.

‘The attainment of perfection is a life’s work,’ he says, grunting with effort. ‘Can you help? Everything in the bags needs to go into the wheelbarrow. The quicker we can sort this, the sooner we can talk.’

She looks into one bag. It’s the first chance she’s had to inspect the salvage from the beach. Old strips of rubber, clumps of brick, the occasional shard of crockery. All junk. The man reaches into one bag and pulls out a pile of rags that smell like blocked drains.

‘Come on,’ he says, handing her a pair of gloves. ‘There are only two things that’ll kill you in this place, and you won’t find either of them here.’

She puts on the gloves and starts to toss things into the wheelbarrow, turning her head to avoid the worst of the stench. They work in silence but for the clang of things landing into the wheelbarrow.

‘I don’t see any builders,’ she says after a while.

He chuckles, a noise like something caught in his throat. ‘You’re looking at them. This is where a career in academia will get you.’

‘You did all this?’ she asks, gazing up at the turrets towering over them.

The man, ham-cheeked, puts his hands on his hips and stares out across the quad. His velvet waistcoat strains around the middle as he struggles to catch his breath.

‘An endless chore. Believe me, I’d much rather be focusing on other things, but if you can’t find a place where you belong, you have to build it yourself.’

Once the work is done, he offers to give her a tour of his university. A large door is propped against an entrance to the building, thick wood made from an old oak tree that

couples might carve their names into. It's not attached to the wall, too large and more suited to a castle, and they slip behind into a dimly lit corridor.

'I can't find a door that'll fit,' the man explains. 'The river can be a fickle mistress sometimes, but we must make do with what it gives us.'

Inside, the air tastes like rotten books and the stone walls are the colour of the sludge in the inlet. Eliza steps forward and a waterlogged carpet squelches beneath her trainers.

'I don't believe it,' she says as he leads her down the corridor. There are rooms on either side, lecture halls with wooden pews and stained chalkboards. Maps on the walls show countries that no longer exist. 'No one could have made all this from scrap.'

The man doesn't seem offended by her scepticism. He smiles and taps the breast pocket of his jacket.

'It's taken many years of trial and error,' he says, pulling out a small notebook, spine as creased as tissue paper. He stops to show her a page from the journal, faint pencil diagrams and unreadable scrawl. 'All my own designs and techniques. Some of my construction methods are more successful than others, but it's perfectly safe.'

Eliza looks up. Flakes of grey plaster peel from the ceiling above her head.

'I don't suppose you taught structural engineering?'

The old man thinks for a moment. 'Philosophy,' he answers.

At the end of the corridor, a stone staircase curls up to the next floor. Here, the bare wooden boards are buckled and uneven, spongy beneath Eliza's feet, and the smell of the river is overwhelming, hanging off the walls like drapes. She covers her nose and lets her eyes adjust to the gloom. Podiums run down the length of the hallway, and she recoils at the sight of the crumbling stone bust on each of the plinths.

'I used to tell my students not to be intimidated by these great men,' he says, oblivious to her disgust. He affectionately rests a hand on the closest statue. 'Great

accomplishments take time and effort.'

The busts look like they're decomposing, stained black with chunks chewed from their cheeks and noses. She can barely stand to look at them.

'A miracle I saw them on the beach, really,' he adds, gesturing for her to follow. 'They're the same statues from my old college. Astronomically unlikely I'd find them.'

He sighs as they reach a door at the end of the corridor. It's large and ceremonial, detailed with carvings of vines and animals, and the mechanism inside the wood makes a heavy clunk as he unlocks the door with a thick iron key.

'I don't think there will be a statue honouring the work I do in this humble office though,' he says.

There's nothing humble about the man's office. She finds herself in a great hall, huge stained-glass windows, with wooden rafters that arch over the ceiling like swan's necks.

'Be careful not to knock anything over,' he says.

Eliza can barely see the floor. The hall is full of apparatus, scientific instruments stacked on top of each other. The mess would drive Solomon mad. The man leads her down a narrow gap, past giant globes supported by intricate golden struts, and microscopes of various sizes. The smell of polished metal and old oil is overpowering and, as they approach the front of the hall, there are tables of glassware, beakers, funnels, and flasks all connected by thin tubes. Stacks of books, each bound with leather, stretch towards the ceiling like stalagmites.

'This is my favourite room in the university,' says the man. He gestures to a balcony where an organ grasps at the wall, its metal fingers rigid against the wood, and mimics the toss of a graduation cap.

'The proudest moments of my previous employment were watching students graduate. I wanted to design a space that reminded me of home.'

'You're a professor?'

‘I was.’

He’s certainly made himself comfortable. The professor has colonised a stage at the front of the hall. A sturdy wooden desk is set in the centre of the space with a chair, clearly ceremonial, drawn towards it. A blackboard, double Eliza’s arm span, is nearby, illegible chalk writing filling every corner, while an elaborate grandfather clock stands tall to the side.

‘Please,’ says the old man, inviting her to sit in one of the armchairs at the far end of the stage. ‘Make yourself at home.’

The two chairs are old and ragged, and stuffing blooms from cuts in the upholstery. It looks like a cat has got to it.

‘Do you have pets?’ Eliza asks, lowering herself into a seat. She has a niggling feeling she should be more tired. Or hungry. She can’t remember when she last ate.

The professor searches for something on his desk, scrabbling through the disorganised heap of newspapers, notebooks, and scraps of paper. He reminds her of a squirrel.

‘Sadly no,’ he says, distracted. ‘It’s just me.’

Eliza says nothing. Her gaze lingers on a glass decanter and two tumblers on a small round table between the chairs. There’s a skinny suit jacket, too small for the professor, folded neatly on the back of the other seat.

‘I did have cats when I lived in Norfolk,’ he continues. ‘Two Siamese: Grazie and Prego. They were little horrors that would never let me finish a sentence.’

He finds whatever he’s searching for and, with a tube of paper in his hand, settles down in the armchair beside Eliza. Removing the tumblers from the table between them, he unfurls the roll, flattening it out on the surface, and invites her to take a closer look.

The paper is old and yellow, torn at the corners, and smells like the chemicals the porters used to clean the floors in the hospital. She draws her hand around her neck as if to protect her throat from its burn, but the professor misreads the gesture.

‘Yes, it is rather a sight to look at, isn’t it? I’m afraid you’ve found yourself in quite a strange place.’

The map is incredibly detailed, drawn in light pencil and filled with cursive annotations that are too small for her to read. He puts a finger down on an illustration in the middle of the paper.

‘This is us,’ he says, before tracing a line to a dark rubbing of carbon. ‘And this is the river where we met.’

Eliza leans over the table, studying the map for roads or buildings that might mark out a village or town, although there are neither. Only a small portion of the valley has been documented; the rest of the paper is blank and awaiting cartography.

‘I don’t recognise this place,’ she says. ‘Which way will get me out of the valley? I need to get back to my husband.’

The old man shakes his head. ‘I’m afraid my knowledge is limited to what you see here. There’s very little need for me to venture too far from the university.’

‘Have you not met other people?’

He nods. ‘Dozens, all sharing your desire to return home. Sadly, I never see them again.’

‘And the animals?’ Across the paper, the professor has drawn illustrations to mark herds of the cow-like creatures she saw on the ridge. Bright arrows mark several migrations across the map. ‘They must be going somewhere.’

He shrugs. ‘I’ve never felt the need to find out.’

There’s another symbol on the map, a drawing resembling the eyes of a spider that appears on the boundaries. Eliza, unsettled by the picture, shivers. ‘What stopped you from exploring further?’

The man smiles and reaches for the edges of the paper. ‘It’s of no interest,’ he says,

rolling up the map. ‘We’re safe if we stay close to the university.’

‘How do you—’

They both startle at the sound of a crack, the noise of something hitting the small window at the rear of the stage. The professor clutches at his chest as Eliza jumps out her chair and hurries towards the round pane of glass. She pushes open the window and a stone, thrown from the quad, narrowly misses her as it flies into the hall.

Below, stood beside the old man’s wheelbarrow, is a young boy. Eliza barely registers him winding up his arm to throw another rock at the window. Her attention is fixed on the thing behind him; a creature from the slope. Its body is made from sparkling lumps of sapphire and white crystal, but its face, staring at her with large, sad eyes, is that of a woman. She turns back to the professor, but he has already gone, hurrying out the hall and towards the steps leading to the courtyard.

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