



AUTHOR PROFILE

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## Twenty Two

Can a person live without ever knowing their father? I did.

Every time my mother told the story, she couldn't finish the sentence. But I always knew how it ended.

A man rushes out into the night. A woman waits through the pain of labor. A baby is born into the world — and that man never makes it there.

My father had already left this world by the time he was on his way to meet me. He never held me. Never took my hand or looked at my face. That was the first news of my life: I was someone's ending.

My mother never made it feel like a crime. But sometimes guilt lives in the silences we can't put into words. Our home had an extra empty cup and a sentence that was always left unfinished. We held onto each other — my mother and I — and as I grew, she seemed to grow smaller.

But I didn't grow up the way most children do.

I learned to walk, to read, to write far too quickly. By the time I was four, I could read the letters my mother kept hidden — but I never once felt like a child. I felt like an adult who had arrived too late. A soul born into the wrong body. Maybe the reason I felt that way was because my soul came into the world at the same moment another soul left it.

"Clara, are you alright?" My mother's voice scattered the low hum in my mind. I blinked and fixed my eyes on the plate in front of me, suddenly aware of where I was.

"I'm fine. Just drifted off," I said.

She held her gaze on me a moment too long — as if she already knew which thought I'd wandered into. The bittersweet curl at the corner of her lips gave everything away. She said nothing. But the silence she left behind held volumes.

"Come on, you haven't touched anything. Eat your breakfast," she said, her voice soft but steady.

"Okay," I said, nodding.

The sound of the fork against the plate echoed too loudly in the kitchen. We ate without speaking. The tick of the clock, the curl of steam from the tea, the pale morning light pressing against the window — everything was too sharp, too clear.

My mother stood, set her plate on the counter, and moved toward the door. "Clara, I'm heading out. Don't be late," she said, slipping on her shoes. The door closed behind her, and the apartment folded into silence.

I stayed seated, staring at the empty chair across from me. A moment ago, she had filled it. Now it was just space. I drew a slow breath, got up, and began clearing the kitchen — plates to the sink, water running, the sound of it blending with the low drone in my head. I moved quickly, grabbed my bag from the hook by the door, laced up my shoes, and stepped out into the street. Walking the same roads my brain had memorized long ago.

Then, around the corner — that sound.

"Clara."

My name. Threaded through the wind and into my ear, barely there. I kept walking as if I hadn't heard. But then it came again, sharper.

"Clara."

I stopped. I turned. Looked left, looked right. No one. But my name was there — hanging in the air. "Who's there?" I called out, my voice unsteady. The fear had taken hold of me, and I was just about to run when a voice came — not from outside, but from inside my head.

"Clara. I'm here."

Part of me wasn't afraid. Another part screamed at me to run. Fear won. My legs moved without my permission. I ran. When I turned onto the side street, school appeared ahead of me — still and quiet, as if nothing had happened. I slowed down and walked toward the front steps.

The courtyard was busy — students talking in clusters, others sitting on the stairs, laughter everywhere. Everything as it should be. The world was still standing. And so was I.

"Clara!" My name again — but this one belonged to Freya.

"Hey, I saw you sprinting just now. Are you training for a marathon or something?" she said, teasing. It almost made me smile.

"I thought I was going to be late," I said, dodging the truth. Freya kept looking at me, unconvinced

"Come on, if we stand here any longer, we actually will be late," I said, deflecting. She shook her head and headed toward class. I followed. The teacher came in right behind us, and everyone took their seats.

Notebooks opened. Pens hit paper. Chairs scraped.

I bent my head over my desk. The writing on the board looked faded — like the words were somewhere far away. The teacher's voice became background noise, a steady hum.

I took notes. Turned pages. Did everything I was supposed to. But none of it was real.

When the bell rang, the room came alive — chairs pushed back, laughter rising, the lesson was over.

"Clara." Freya appeared beside me. "There's a new café that opened nearby. Want to go?"

"Not today. I'm a bit tired," I said with a small smile.

"Come on, it'll be fun — and it'll help with the tired." She pressed.

"Pass me on this one," I said, letting the exhaustion color my voice. The girls didn't push anymore.

I picked up my bag and left school. The crowd scattered in different directions. I went the other way — the way my feet already knew from the many times I'd come here before, especially on days like this.

Stepping through the cemetery gates, a strange calm settled over me. Here, everything moved slowly. No one was rushing. No one was asking questions.

I stood before my father's grave.

Staring at the stone, something knotted in my chest. But I didn't cry. I didn't cry at graves anymore.

"I heard it again today," I said quietly. "My name."

My voice sounded like a stranger's — as if someone else were speaking.

"I thought that day had passed. I thought if I accepted that your death wasn't my fault, it would go quiet. I thought everything would stop."

I sank to my knees. Pressed my hand against the stone. It was cold — but real. At least this was real.

"Dad," I said, softer this time. "Am I actually okay?"

No answer came. It never would.

"I don't think I am. But I'm not going to run from that voice. I want you to know that."

I stood and turned away. Walked. Not with grief this time — with something more like waiting. Not waiting for what I'd lost. Waiting to understand what I'd lived through but still couldn't make sense of.

When I left the cemetery, the sky was caught between colors. Not quite evening, not quite day. That in-

between hour — when people look most like themselves.

I pulled the iron gate shut. Its creak was brief. The voice inside me went quiet too. At least for now.

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I unlocked the door and stepped inside. The apartment was exactly as I'd left it — my mother probably hadn't come home yet. I went to my room, changed, then drifted into the kitchen. Opened the fridge, heated up leftovers from the night before, set the plate on the table, and sat down.

The chair across from me was empty. But this time it was just empty — not missing anything.

I finished eating quickly, cleared the table, and went up to my room. I headed quietly to my desk. My notebook was open — I must have forgotten to close it. Just as I reached to shut it, I noticed a drawing.

A human head. And inside that head, another head. Two people inside one body.

I sat down and stared at it. When had I drawn this?

"Oh no. Not again..." I muttered.

This wasn't new. Sometimes I found notes — tucked between pages of a book, saved as a draft on my phone, half-finished paragraphs left floating. Things written in my handwriting. Things I had no memory of writing.

I pressed my face into my palms.

"Forgetfulness," I whispered to myself.

I didn't let myself dwell on it. I moved to the bed. It was still early evening, but I was exhausted. I let myself fall in and sank into a deep sleep.

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When I opened my eyes in the morning, the room was filled with a pale light. What had happened the day before felt like a dream lodged in the back of my mind. I sat up in bed. The apartment was too quiet. Normally by this hour there were sounds from the kitchen — a cup meeting its saucer, a cabinet opening and closing, the soft rhythm of my mother's cough.

None of it.

I threw off the covers and cracked open the door. The hallway was empty. The kitchen light was off — but breakfast was already laid out on the table, waiting. She must have left for work already. I walked to the cabinet and poured myself a glass of water.

The apartment carried that particular unfinished stillness of early morning. I sat and ate at the table.

When I caught the clock on the wall, I realized it was almost time. I went to my room, got dressed, brushed my hair, put on a little makeup, slung my bag over my shoulder, and pointed myself toward the door. One last look back before I locked up and left the building.

I knew the route to school by heart. Not just in my mind — in my body. I knew how many steps before each corner, which wall had the faded paint, which branch swayed in the wind. But today my steps felt weightless. Like they weren't entirely mine.

I turned the first corner. Then another. A little while later, I lifted my head.

This wasn't the way to school.

I stopped. Looked around. I was in a familiar but wrong street — there was no reason to come this way. "Distracted," I whispered to myself.

I turned back and walked deliberately this time — eyes open, mentally noting the directions like I was giving myself instructions. Right, then straight.

But a few minutes later, I looked up — and a quiet unease spread through my chest.

Same corner shop. Same cracked wall.

I had just been here. I slowed. "No," I said to myself. "I'm misremembering."

I didn't reach for my phone. I knew this neighborhood.

I changed direction again, certain I was heading toward school — but the streets seemed to shift in small ways. Corners a little narrower. Roads a little longer. Signs a little more faded. As if the city wasn't fixed. As if it rearranged itself while I walked.

My heart was picking up speed. I was beginning to be afraid. I stopped for a moment and closed my eyes, as if willing it all to be a dream. A slow breath. "School," I said silently. "I'm just going to school."

I opened my eyes. A long avenue stretched ahead — I recognized it, but school was not in this direction. Still, my feet began to move again. The further I walked, the heavier the unease. The street was silent. Not a single bird, even though morning had broken.

Then I noticed I had stopped. I looked up.

The cemetery.

I had no idea how I'd gotten here. It felt like my feet had brought me on purpose. Something lodged in my throat. I tried not to look inside, but my eyes slid there anyway — rows of stones, names, dates—

All of them born and died at twenty-two.

I lifted my head a little more. A sign hung on the iron gate: 'The Twenty-Second Cemetery.' My heart was going too fast.

"I was going to school," I whispered. "To school."

I stepped back. Pulled out my phone with shaking hands. Opened the map. The blue dot pulsed — it pointed

to the cemetery. The school marker was on the completely opposite side.

This time I walked with the map. Eyes down, turning wherever the arrow turned. With every step, the fear in me loosened a little. The streets started to look recognizable again. Human voices. A car passing. Life returning to normal.

One more corner — and the school's iron gate appeared in front of me. Real. Solid. Right where it should be.

I exhaled and glanced down at the map one more time. The cemetery I'd just been standing at looked impossibly far. There was no way I had walked there in that amount of time. I looked at the screen, then at the school, then back at the screen.

The blue dot flickered — and for just a second, it blinked back to the cemetery entrance.

"No," I murmured, lifting my head. I was at school. I really was at school. Students were filing in through the doors, voices drifting from the hallway. Everything was completely normal.

But something inside me wasn't.

I climbed the steps slowly. The unease was still there when I reached the door — the cemetery moment hung at the edge of my mind like a picture that wouldn't come down.

The corridors were crowded. Footsteps, locker doors clanging, laughter from somewhere — all of it as it should be. That helped, a little. I found my way to the classroom.

When I stepped inside, my eyes went to Freya's seat. Empty. No bag. No notebook. Her chair hadn't even been pulled out. She hadn't come in today. I didn't read too much into it — Freya skipped often.

I sat down. My hands were still trembling slightly. The teacher came in, and the lesson started. Things were written on the board, pages turned, and I heard almost none of it. My pen pressed against the paper but I didn't know what to write. My mind was still standing at that cemetery gate.

Then my eyes drifted to the classroom window. The tree branches outside swayed lightly in the wind — and then the wind stopped. The sounds from the courtyard cut off all at once, as if someone had flipped a switch.

And again — stone walls. Iron gate. That sign: Twenty-Two.

As if the school courtyard and the cemetery had been laid on top of each other. The same tree, but its shadow wrong. The same ground, but drained of color.

Then someone's chair grazed mine and I startled. Laughter and voices flooded back into my ears. The bell must have rung. I gathered my things slowly and left the school, heading home — but this time, I walked deliberately. Watching the street signs. Checking the corners. Noting the familiar buildings.

Everything was where it belonged. But I wasn't.

There was a tightness in my chest as I walked. Not like crying. Not quite like fear. More like dislocation — like someone nearing the edge of themselves.

"What if one day I can't find my way back at all," I thought. The thought pressed against my heart.

When I turned onto my street, I slowed. The familiar balcony. The familiar door.

I pulled out my key and unlocked it. There was one thing I wanted: for everything to be normal. The apartment smell hit me as I walked in.

I took off my shoes, set down my bag, looked at the living room. Sofa in its place. Table in its place. "Everything is in its place and you are home," I whispered — but my mother wasn't there. "I wish you were here right now," I thought, and the thought left behind something small but warm.

I moved toward my room and pushed the door open. It received me as it always did — the cluttered desk, the cardigan draped across the foot of the bed, the evening light filtering through the window. Everything is familiar. Everything exactly where it should be.

I came inside and closed the door softly behind me. Dropped my bag at the edge of the bed and sat down on it. Looked up at the ceiling for a moment and took a long breath. "I'm tired," I said — not just physically. Something deeper.

I lay back without even pulling up the covers. Just rolled onto my side and stayed with my thoughts — my mother. The version of her from when I was small, waiting for me in the kitchen. The version that stroked my

hair until I fell asleep.

My throat had already tightened. "Is this what growing up is?" Coming home to no one. Learning to live inside the silence.

I picked up my phone and texted her: "When are you coming home?" Then put it down. My eyes were growing heavy. From outside came the faint murmur of wind. The apartment was still very quiet — but this time the quiet felt a little softer.

The fear inside me hadn't left completely. But the longing was stronger. And as my thoughts began to blur and drift, my eyes finally closed.

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I close a door and believe I am stepping inside my home — but even though this place looks like a home, its proportions are wrong. The hallway is too long. The light is yellow, but the shadows are gray. I look at the framed photographs on the wall. The faces resemble mine, but none of them are quite me. I move closer expecting them to sharpen, but the nearer I get, the more they dissolve — as if trying to remember is the same as forgetting.

My eye catches a clock on the wall — wooden, clearly old. It reads 22.22 and has stopped. I barely register it and keep walking. As I move, the hardness leaves the floor beneath my feet. It feels less like tile and more like earth.

I stop at the door in front of me. Stare at it for a long moment. I push it open — and everything becomes the cemetery. The dark clouds, the stones gone almost black, that thick, close air — all of it. Fear seizes my whole body and I run.

At some point my feet begin to ache but I don't stop. Not until I fall. I hit something and crash to the ground, and when I lift my head in a cowardly look upward, I see my desk — just as I left it, notebook lying open. I lean in to read it and see only the number 22. The whole page filled with it. I turn and look at the graves around

me, and what I see terrifies me even more: every person buried here died at twenty-two.

But there is one stone that frightens me most. My stone. My name. My surname. My birthday. It is mine. I walk toward it slowly and stand before it — and from inside the stone, a spirit drifts out. Rippling, wavering, a near-perfect reflection of me. I should be afraid. Instead I feel peace.

The spirit moves toward me and places its hand over my heart. As if that touch awakens a second heartbeat inside me.

Then, slowly, it begins to feel wrong. I can't breathe. Something is blocking my throat — pressing against it, cutting off air. I stumble backward and fall, and somehow the fall lets air return. When I look up, the cemetery and the school have bled into each other. The cold iron gates stand where they stood, and suddenly children pour through them — running, laughing — but there is no sound, no color. Everything is black and white. Pale. Silent.

A girl who looks like me appears beside me. She watches my face for a long moment, then says: 'You're already late.' She says nothing more. I stare at her, confused. 'Late for what? What am I late for?' She doesn't answer. She only looks at me — with pity. And I can't understand why, so I start to shout at her face: 'Answer me. What am I late for?' Still nothing.

The ground lurches, and I am back in the cemetery. But this time the woman across from me is my mother. Behind her, the clock still reads 22.22. I turn to her: "Why are we here, Mom? Where is this?" — but before I can finish, she collapses. Blood runs from her mouth, from her eyes. "Mom!" I cry and hold her, pressing my hand to her heart, and it feels as though my own soul is being pulled out of me — as if she is drawing it in. The clock on the wall falls to the floor. The face reads 22.23. My mother returns to the living world. And I feel my own connection to it severing. But I hold onto one last sentence: "The exchange is complete."

I opened my eyes in a single instant.

The room was dark. Ceiling still. Walls in place. But my breathing was ragged, my heart slamming against the inside of my ribs. For several seconds I couldn't move. Where was I just now? Why am I here? I wasn't sure of anything.

I put my hand on my chest. One heartbeat. Fast, but real.

I pulled back the edge of the blanket and sat up. Reached for my phone and lit the screen. It was past midnight. But the numbers were normal. They weren't frozen.

I got out of bed and moved to the small armchair by the window. I didn't want to sleep. I was afraid of where the dream would take me if I went back. But my eyes surrendered before I could fight them.

The stiffness in my neck brought me awake. My room was filling with morning light. Dust particles drifted through the gap in the curtains, made visible by the sun.

I unfolded myself from the chair and moved slowly to the kitchen. No school today. I planned to use that as my reason for visiting my father. I ate breakfast quickly, went back to get ready, and left.

I didn't rush on the way there. My steps were measured. Every paving stone familiar, every corner known — but whatever was rising inside me wasn't familiar at all.

I always knew the way to my father's grave instinctively. It wasn't navigation — it was muscle memory. My body turned before I thought to.

When I reached the cemetery gates, something delicate shifted inside me. Not pain exactly — more the kind of quietness that makes people lower their voices out of respect.

The smell of the earth was damp and heavy, as always. Birdsong came from a distance. Time moved differently here — not fast, not slow. Just straight. As I walked I tried not to look too closely at the other stones. Every name was a life. Every date was an ending. Look too long at someone else's finish line and you start to notice your own grief.

Then I stood before his stone. I read the name, the same way I always do — as if for the first time. The letters familiar, the meaning still sharp. I placed my palm against the marble. Cold. That coldness no longer unsettled me the way it once had. Before, it made me shudder. Now it just reminded me: this is real.

"Day off today, Dad," I said, silently. My lips didn't move but the sentence still felt complete.

The strange thing is, I don't want to cry from missing him. Missing him doesn't feel like pain anymore — more like a limb. Something that should be there, something I've gotten used to being without.

My knees don't buckle. I'm not standing tall either. I'm just standing.

A person's absence doesn't lighten with time. It only changes shape. And I had grown alongside that shape. What used to be a sharp ache was now a quiet hollow.

"Dad, I miss you so much." Can you miss someone you never heard? Someone you never touched? I do.

"Is the cemetery calling me closer, Dad? Are you the meaning behind it?" I asked. No answer. There never would be. But I would keep asking.

"Dad, I miss Mom too. But she's only been going to work and coming home. I haven't really seen her in a week. She doesn't pick up when I call. She leaves in the night and comes home in the night. Dad — I think I have no one left."

I realized as I spoke that my eyes were wet. That I was crying. I never cried at his grave — because every time I did, he came into my dreams and got angry with me. So I never cried here. But today it felt like he was calling me close.

"Dad, why am I like this? Alone. Unloved. Pitiful." The words made me cry harder.

My knees had given way some time ago. I was sitting on the earth now, almost part of it.

"Is it beautiful there, Dad?" Another question with no answer. After a while, it felt like I had run out of tears. I was crying but nothing was falling. And I felt, more than I ever had, like I was home. Because the person lying beneath that ground could have been my home.

The thin line I'd felt at every school performance while everyone else had a father present. The way my mother sometimes went quieter at night. The absence of a voice that had never once lived inside these walls.

This grave wasn't a person's grave. It was the grave of a relationship that never began. And standing before it, I was face to face with myself.

Maybe the hardest thing isn't failing to remember someone. It's knowing you never will.

The wind moved lightly. Leaves stirred. Life continued — and I continued with it. But with an unnamed place

inside me.

I stood there a while longer. I wasn't searching for words anymore. Some bonds aren't made with language. Some goodbyes don't make a sound.

I traced the letters on the marble one final time with my eyes. Slowly withdrew my hand — but the cold stayed in my palm. I didn't say "goodbye." Because I had never arrived. Never been introduced. But something very quiet passed through me: "I am here." That felt like enough.

I turned and walked away. My steps were heavy, but I wasn't crying. Nothing was breaking open. I just understood the shape of that hollow inside me a little more clearly now.

Walking toward the exit, I realized: sometimes a person isn't visiting someone else. They're visiting the missing part of themselves.

When I stepped out through the cemetery gates, the sounds of the city came flooding back — cars, the murmur of distant conversation, the low rush of the wind. Life hadn't waited for me.

I started home. On the way, I took out my phone and checked the time. The day was calm. No school. Nowhere to be. And that faint ache inside me — it wasn't fear anymore. It was more like a quiet longing for someone I couldn't name.

When I reached the building and put my key in the lock, my mother's shoes weren't at the door. She was probably at work. I took off my own shoes and stepped inside. The hallway felt longer than usual today. Two people live in this apartment — but sometimes the silence has room for three.

I reached my bedroom door and went in. The light through the curtain had fallen across the bed. I hung my jacket on the chair and sat down on the edge of the mattress.

One slow breath. Just one. And for the first time, I thought: some people can leave enormous marks on your life without ever entering it. I lay back and stared at the ceiling. My soul felt like it had settled. Maybe it really had. And that settling showed itself in my eyes, which closed softly on their own.

The light pushing through the curtain woke me. Heavy steps brought me out into the hallway — just as my mother was putting on her coat. The sound of her keys. Her bag over her shoulder. She seemed rushed, even

though today was her day off. When she saw me, she paused briefly. "You're up. I have some things to take care of outside — I might be late," she said. Her voice was normal.

I just nodded.

Something small hollowed out inside me in that moment — not a great drama, but something left unfinished again. The feeling I'd had at the cemetery was taking a different shape inside these walls.

"Okay," was all I could say. We didn't even hug. The goodbye was too brief. I stood in the corridor for a few seconds, the hollow not growing — just echoing. I watched after her. Sometimes you're not left alone. You just get used to being alone.

I went to my room and sat on the edge of the bed. What I couldn't say to my father at the grave, I couldn't say to her either. In this house, feelings were always spoken at half volume. I took a deep breath, opened the wardrobe, and got out my clothes.

There was school today.

After getting ready, I went to the door — locked it three times — and set off. My feet knew the route.

When I walked into school, the hollow from this morning was still there. But it wasn't stone anymore. It was more like a stillness that had settled inside me.

I went to class and took my seat. Then the door opened: Freya.

She spotted me and came straight over. "Good morning, Freya."

"Morning, Clara." She smiled. "Hey — where were you yesterday?" I said, referencing her absence.

"I was sick. Had a fever."

"Are you okay now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just needed to get out of the house."

I nodded and pulled my notebooks from my bag. Everything moving along normally — as if I hadn't been the one crying at the cemetery yesterday. As if I hadn't been the one staring into the space my mother left behind.

After we both sat down, Freya opened her notebook and asked what we'd covered last. I started to explain — with the wrong words, managing it badly enough that we both ended up in a fit of laughter.

Life went on in spite of everything that was missing inside you.

When the bell rang, the teacher came in. The lesson began. I watched the board and took notes. Freya kept sliding me little scraps of paper with ridiculous drawings, waiting for me to laugh. I'd smile faintly and look back at my work.

When the bell rang again, everyone rose and started packing up — chairs scraped, bags zipped — and Freya turned to me: "Come in early tomorrow. There's a practice exam."

"Okay," I said, slinging my bag over my shoulder.

We walked to the door together. The hallway was packed. Shoulders bumping. The noise rising. But the hollow from this morning wasn't panicking anymore — it was just a quiet ache. Present, but not shouting.

At the school exit, Freya veered off in a different direction and waved.

I was on my own. The air was cool. My bag was on my shoulder. The street was ordinary. Cars moving. People talking. Life not slowing for anyone. And I kept walking — one steady step at a time.

By the time I got home, the sky was beginning to shift toward evening. When I pushed open the door, the apartment was as quiet as always. I took off my shoes and left my bag on the hallway chair.

The day had been long. But not dramatically so.

I went to my room and opened the curtains a crack. The last of the daylight fell across my desk. I unzipped my bag, set out my notebooks, put the math textbook in the middle, picked up a pen, and started working.

At first my mind wandered — I'd find myself thinking of something else halfway through a problem, then catch

myself and start over. Back to the beginning. Keep going.

After a while, I actually focused. The numbers sharpened. The steps grew cleaner. The noise inside me settled into something that felt almost like control.

My phone buzzed. Freya: "Are you actually studying?" The message pulled a small smile out of me.

"Unfortunately yes," I typed back.

A few more problems, then I closed the book and leaned back in my chair. Looked up at the ceiling.

Today hadn't been bad. It hadn't been good either. But it had been balanced.

I stacked my notebooks, put my pens away, and looked around the room. Quiet inside too. Sometimes life doesn't advance through major events. Just through evenings like this one.

I hadn't lain down yet. I was looking out the window — street lights on now. And for the first time today, what I felt wasn't emptiness. It was tiredness.

I think that's better.

After a while, my stomach rumbled faintly. The clock had moved on.

I went downstairs.

The kitchen light was on, but my mother still wasn't home. On the counter sat food prepared in the morning. I lifted the lid of the pot — the steam had long since escaped. I scooped some onto a plate, put it in the microwave, and while it warmed I stood listening to the kitchen's quiet.

The apartment felt bigger in the evenings. As if the walls move outward when the sound goes away. I carried my plate to the table and sat down. No TV. No phone. Just eating. The rhythm of the fork against the plate. My thoughts just as steady.

I let the day move through me without picking it apart — the cemetery a single image. My mother closing the door in the morning, a brief scene. School, an ordinary backdrop.

When I finished, I left the plate in the sink. One last look at the kitchen before turning off the light. I've grown used to this apartment's quiet — but sometimes it still feels unfamiliar.

In my room, the only light was the streetlamp's glow through the curtains. I changed and lay down. The weight of the day was real.

I closed my eyes. No great sorrow inside me. No great happiness. Just a calm exhaustion.

And sleep.

I woke a few minutes before my alarm. The room was a muted gray. Morning hadn't fully arrived. For a moment the day's weight announced itself: the practice exam.

I got up. From the kitchen came the faint sound of dishes — my mother must be home. When I came downstairs, she had set the table.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," she said back.

Our voices normal. Neither too warm nor too cool. A familiar distance hung between us — invisible but settled.

When I sat down, she was pouring tea. "Practice exam today, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good luck," she said, short and clean.

"Thanks," I answered.

The conversation ended there — but it wasn't uncomfortable. As if we'd both decided, without discussing it, to use fewer words in the mornings. I ate quickly. There was a light tightness in my stomach — not from hunger, but from anticipation.

She glanced at me now and then but said nothing. When she caught my eye, I responded with a small tilt of my head.

The clock moved.

I pushed back my chair. "I'm heading out."

"Okay. Take care of yourself."

I pulled on my coat and slung my bag over my shoulder. As I opened the door, I could see her still at the table, taking a sip of tea. That image, strangely, settled something inside me.

I closed the door and stepped outside. The morning air was cool. The street was just waking up. My steps were quick — today there was no room for wandering thoughts. Just questions, answer choices, time limits.

Walking toward school, I didn't feel yesterday's hollow. In its place was a light tension — but a live one, and I felt ready.

When I went through the school gates, the courtyard felt quieter than usual. On exam days, everyone turns inward — the groups were still there but the laughter was lower, the conversations shorter.

Freya caught me at the door. "Are you ready?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "You?"

"Not at all, but here we are." We both smiled at that.

We climbed to the room together. The hallway smelled different today — more serious, somehow. Inside, the desks had been rearranged, gaps between them. I took my seat by the window. Freya was diagonally across.

The proctor walked in. Papers were distributed. The hum of the room cut out completely. I looked down at the booklet in front of me and wrote my name. Gripped the pen a little harder. "You may begin."

I read the first question. The tension in my stomach surged for a second — then slowly eased. I read it again. I understood. I marked my answer.

Time began to flow.

Now and then I glanced up. Freya had tucked her hair behind her ear and was working hard. Watching her, I felt a strange kind of motivation.

As the questions progressed, my mind cleared. I stopped tracking the outside world. Home, the cemetery, the morning's quiet — all of it faded to background.

Just me, a pen, and paper.

When I reached the last page, there was a strange stillness inside me. I finished. Checked my work. Set down the pen with a few minutes still on the clock.

The bell rang.

Papers collected. Freya looked at me, eyes wide. "How'd it go?" she whispered.

"Not bad," I said.

"I tanked the math, I think," she said.

"You're exaggerating."

We filed out together. The hallway was filling with sound again — but this time it carried relief rather than tension.

Freya nudged my arm. "At least it's over." I nodded. "Yeah. At least it's over."

When we reached the school exit, Freya stopped suddenly. "Are you going home?"

"I don't know," I said, shrugging. And I really didn't.

"Come to that café nearby? Coffee. We can bury the exam properly."

I paused for a moment. Something small shifted inside me — a vague unease I couldn't name. Like I was supposed to be somewhere, like I was running late — but I didn't know where or for what.

"Sure," I said anyway.

We started walking. Freya was recounting the exam. "That paragraph question on the third page — it had to be a trap!" I nodded along, answering occasionally.

But that small shadow didn't leave me. We pushed open the café door. Inside was warm. The smell of coffee was thick. We sat by the window. Freya ordered two coffees. I didn't argue.

I rested my elbows on the table and looked outside. People passing. Cars stopping, starting. Everything normal.

"You're very quiet," Freya said after a while.

"Tired, I think," I said.

I don't actually know if I was tired. What I felt wasn't tiredness. More like... sensing something approaching. But there was nothing approaching. Everything was calm.

The coffees arrived. Freya held her cup in both hands. "Look — if the results are bad, we'll cry together, okay?" she said, half-serious. A faint laugh.

"Deal," I said.

We hadn't even noticed how much time had passed in the café. The sky was darkening. "We should head out — it's getting late," I said. Freya nodded and got up. I stood too. We said goodbye at the door with a quick hug and went our separate ways.

Alone now, the feeling came back. Walking along the street, for a moment my steps felt like they weren't mine. Like someone was walking alongside me — matching every footfall exactly. It was brief. I blinked. It was gone.

But sometimes — very rarely, just a second — I felt like I was looking from two places at once. Both the me

walking the pavement, and another me a few steps behind, watching. Then I was one person again.

My heart skipped what felt like a double beat. The rhythm faltered. Then corrected.

Street lights on. Getting close to home. Every building, every door, every sound familiar.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Only inside me — a hairline fracture I couldn't explain.

As if my soul hadn't split down the middle but had quietly shifted a few inches to one side.

I was still processing this thought when I realized I'd reached home. I went inside slowly. Set down my things.

When I sat down in the armchair, I noticed my phone — nine missed calls.

Same name, again and again. Someone from my mother's workplace. My heart began beating unevenly. That double-beat from before, but harder this time. More real.

"Why would they call so many times?" I said to myself. My throat was dry. My fingers cold.

I called back right away.

Ringling.

Once.

Twice.

Three —

"Clara?"

The voice on the other end was unsteady. Familiar but in a tone I didn't recognize.

"Yes... it's me. Is my mother alright? Why did you call?"

A short silence.

That second stretched. Something inside me was already sinking before any words came.

"Your mother... she was in a traffic accident." Just like my father. A traffic accident.

The world narrowed in that moment.

As if the air was being pulled from the room.

"What do you mean?" I said — but the voice didn't sound like mine. It was coming from very far away.

The voice on the other end explained. Ambulance. Hospital. An intersection. A collision.

Not word by word — in fragments. I heard it in pieces.

Then that sentence.

"I'm sorry. She didn't survive."

Phone in my hand.

But my hand didn't feel like mine anymore.

My knees unlocked — I grabbed for the armchair but realized I was already sitting. The room wasn't spinning. I almost wished it was. Everything was too sharp.

The wall the same.

The clock the same.

The curtain the same.

But nothing was the same.

"No," I said.

A breath.

I wanted to call again. Someone else. My mother. Myself. Anyone.

I wanted it to be the wrong number. The wrong person. The wrong life.

She was at the table this morning.

Drinking tea.

"Take care of yourself," she had said.

That's it?

Is a person's exit from this world really that short?

The phone still at my ear but no one speaking anymore. Neither of us.

There's no emptiness opening inside me. I'm not falling into a gap. I'm just — dropping. The floor beneath me gone.

As if that thing I felt earlier — being two souls at once — had come true and one half of me had snapped free with that sentence.

Mom.

She was home.

This morning.

And now she's not.

My mind won't accept that word.

Not.

The door is still closed.

The kitchen is still there.

But this apartment is no longer a home.

It's the echo of a last sentence spoken this morning.

I'm trying to breathe.

My chest is tightening.

The first second — I don't cry.

Because pain arrives before the tears.

Because shock holds crying back.

Then — suddenly —

The truth lands.

I didn't even hug her goodbye. I looked at her face, I spoke to her — but I never held her. Never breathed her in one last time. My mother was gone. Like my father.

The moment that became real, my knees dissolved. My hands, my feet, my mind — everything came undone. What replaced it was sobbing — heaving, gasping. She was dead. My only refuge in this world, my confidante, my everything. My mother was dead.

And she had died the same way as my father. In a traffic accident. The same love, the same fate, the same grief — carried now by the same girl.

Her fingers dialed the number again.

This time I needed the phone to answer. And it did.

"Where are you," I said. "My mother — where is she?"

They gave me the hospital name. Emergency. The morgue. Official procedures. Police report. Each word hit like cement dropping into my chest.

"Are you alone?" they asked. I didn't want to say yes. But yes. "Do I need to come in?" I asked. Childlike. As if I didn't already know the answer.

"Yes. You'll need to bring identification."

ID. Signature. Process. My mother used to sign things for me. Now I would sign for her.

When the call ended, the apartment grew even quieter.

For a moment I couldn't move. Then I got up, took my coat. My hand shook on the key. I locked the door — though I don't know why. There was no one left inside.

The hospital corridors were white.

So white.

Too bright.

People speaking in whispers.

They brought me to a room. Handed me a form. I wrote my name. The handwriting didn't look like mine.

Then —

A door.

Cold air.

A staff member.

And that moment came.

I saw her face.

The same face from this morning.

The same.

But not.

Lips pale. Skin drained. Eyes closed.

I don't say "Mom."

Because I knew she wouldn't answer.

I want to take her hand but I can't make myself touch it. If I do, it becomes entirely real.

My father had also died in a traffic accident. That fact crashed through me then. As if fate had written the same sentence twice. As if life had struck me twice in the same place.

I'm standing — but inside me I'm on my knees.

What came next was a blur.

Funeral arrangements.

Condolences.

Phone calls.

People.

A voice reciting prayers.

Soil.

Soil has a sound. I learned that that day.

The first shovelful of earth on a coffin sounds like the moment a heart breaks.

"Be strong," people said.

Such a weightless word. I stood at the graveside — near my father's. Both of them taken by traffic. Both suddenly. Both: "in an instant."

The sky was clear but I couldn't see it.

The earth was covered.

And once again, I was left without a family.

When I came home and opened the door, it was genuinely empty this time.

Her tea glass still in the sink from this morning.

One chair pushed slightly back.

Everything exactly as it was.

Except she wasn't.

This apartment had become a memory.

I leaned against the wall.

And I cried.

Not silently.

For the first time — out loud.

Because there was no one left to hold me together.

And that old feeling returned —

As if I held two souls.

One of me in this apartment.

The other left somewhere beneath the earth.

And for the first time I truly understood:

Some people don't simply leave when they die.

They take a little of you with them. My mother had taken a piece of me.

I drew a long breath. Inside me was a strange emptiness — no fear, no anger, no tears anymore. Just a dense absence.

The apartment had become entirely my space now, but even that space felt a little foreign. I set my hands on my knees, bowed my head, closed my eyes.

Still some warmth inside. Still some longing. A quiet grief — not dramatic. Just one of life's collisions.

I sat that way for a while. Thoughts, fragments of the past, memories and losses folded into one another. Then I moved toward the bed. Pulled the covers over me. Closed my eyes.

There was a deep silence inside me, but this time it didn't disturb me. Loneliness felt almost like company. A

few slow breaths, and my body loosened.

Sleep settled over me gently. Dreams began to come — not with deep dread, but with a slight tremor. The quiet echo of what had been and what was now. And the hollow that had been waiting inside me finally, for a while at least, went still.

\* \* \*

I found myself in a cemetery. The sky gray and close, no wind — but something trembling in the air. Grave number twenty-two. The stone held no name. Only a blank space. I stood beside it. It seemed to be watching me.

And then I noticed: behind the stone, a silhouette. It was me. But it wasn't me. My eyes, my lips, my posture — entirely recognizable, yet carrying a weight that didn't belong to me. A strange disruption moved through me — one part pulled by fear, another by wariness.

The silhouette moved toward me. The sound of my footsteps and its footsteps blended together. As if two souls were walking at the same moment, separately. A voice inside me whispered: "Is this you... or has a piece of you been lost?"

I stood before the gravestone. Placed my hands on it. Cold — but with a warmth inside it, like the echo of something unremembered. Watching myself, feeling my own shadow, it was as if my past and my future occupied the same moment.

Maybe both were the same. Maybe these two souls were the same — same step, same movement, same body, different soul.

When I opened my eyes, the gray morning light of the room fell across my face. The stillness of the bed, the settled air of the room still over me — but the dream's weight was still inside me. My heart was beating fast. A pressure in my chest — the same hollow my mother's absence had placed there.

I got up. As my feet met the floor, the world was still heavy. The quiet of the morning had woven itself with the dark echoes of the dream. My phone lay on the bag — yesterday's missed calls, messages, reminders — all of it reminding me again: my mother was no longer here.

My hands were trembling but I set them on my knees and breathed slowly. There was pain inside me — sharp and dramatic, a pit waiting for tears. But I wasn't crying yet. Because the pain was too large. Tears couldn't reach it.

I walked to the window. Outside was bright, but a hazy shadow still lived inside me. I looked at the breakfast table — the tea glass she used to set out every morning, an absent smile, now only a memory.

Every step, every movement — a weight on my shoulders. As if my mother's absence, the twenty-second cemetery from the dream, my father's traffic accident — all of it had gathered and become something heavy inside me.

I sat down in the chair. Pressed my face into my hands. The silence deepened, the sorrow thickened. The hollow inside me had blurred even the boundary between dream and waking.

I sat at the kitchen table and ate the last meal she had ever made for me. The last thing she did for me — that food. My hands shook as I ate it. Tears ran from my eyes.

When I finished, I couldn't get up from the table. I just stared at the empty chair across from me. The chair that had been filled until just days ago. The chair that used to bring me peace — now bringing only tears and grief.

\* \* \*

Two years later.

People think you heal in two years. That wounds scab over, names sting less, cemetery roads become memorized and you adjust. Adjust — what a strange word. As if a person can adjust to anything.

I didn't adjust.

I only went quiet.

The apartment talks to me less now. The walls no longer carry her voice. The sound of dishes in the kitchen isn't as sharp. But at night it's always the same. At night the apartment expands. The hallway grows longer. The shadows grow heavier. And walking through those shadows alone, I hear that second pulse inside me more clearly.

I used to be afraid of it.

Now I'm not.

Because it's no longer a stranger.

Sometimes I lie on my back in bed, watching the ceiling, listening to my own heartbeat. After a while the rhythm seems to shift. So slightly. As if another beat slips in between.

If I were a doctor I might have a name for it. But I'm not a doctor. I'm just a body that goes on living. And sometimes this body doesn't feel like mine.

I don't look in mirrors as much as I used to.

When I do, I don't see anything wrong. My face the same. My eyes the same. But my gaze — sometimes it doesn't belong to me. For a few seconds I become a stranger to myself. As if someone has pressed against the inside of the glass and is looking out through my eyes.

At first that feeling was panic.

Now it's just awareness.

I was never truly alone.

I don't remember the first day I accepted that. It wasn't a decision. I woke one morning and the thought no

longer frightened me. There was someone inside me. But that someone wasn't an "other." It was more like a missing piece. As if something had been placed in the wrong position at birth and I had lived all these years without noticing.

It was there before my mother died.

It was there even when I had no memory of my father.

Accidents happened, people left, graves multiplied —

But it was always here.

Sometimes I wonder:

Did she know?

When she held me, did she feel an extra weight?

When she looked into my eyes, did she only see me?

No answers to those questions. But every time I visit the cemetery, there's a strange warmth rising from beneath the earth, as if it recognizes me.

For two years my dreams have been ending in the same place.

The twenty-second cemetery.

Whether it exists in real life, I don't know. I've never counted. I couldn't bring myself to. But in the dream it's always the same place. The earth darker. The air denser. And each time, I step a little closer.

At first I would wake up trembling. Now I wake up and take a slow breath. Because I know that dream isn't a threat. It's a calling.

My twenty-second birthday is very close.

That number sits inside me like a stone. Every time I see it somewhere — a clock, a license plate, a page — my eye catches it. Coincidence? Maybe. But I don't believe in coincidences anymore.

Lately I've been calmer. People mistake it for maturity. But I've simply learned to listen to the voice inside me more closely. It doesn't speak. It doesn't even whisper. But it makes its presence known. Especially when I'm alone.

Last week I was making tea in the kitchen. I paused for a moment. Looked at the cup in my hand. And I asked myself:

"Right now — am I really me?"

The strange thing is, in that moment I wasn't afraid.

I just thought.

If sometimes I'm not — then who is?

But even that question has lost its edge. Two years ago it would have made my breath seize. Now it's just a wave that comes and passes.

Can a person split in two inside themselves?

Maybe I didn't split.

Maybe I was always two people.

And maybe the strange thing isn't that.

Maybe the strange thing is how normal it feels now.

My twenty-second birthday is very close.

And inside me, there's an anticipation I can't explain.

As if something will be completed.

As if something will fall into place.

Or as if something will come apart.

I don't know.

But I know that when that day comes —

I won't be alone.

Waiting is exhausting.

When you don't know what you're waiting for, even more so.

I wake early now. Before any alarm. When I open my eyes, for a few seconds I don't know where I am. Ceiling familiar, walls familiar, room the same. But every morning I look at myself from a slight distance. As if there's a thin pane of glass between me and the body lying in the bed.

Sometimes I press my hand to my chest. Feel my pulse. One rhythm. Steady. Normal. But if I stay very still for a few seconds, it seems like there's a second vibration woven in. Whether it's real, I don't know. Maybe when you listen long enough to anything, it multiplies.

I get up and go to the bathroom. Stand before the mirror. My hair falls to my shoulders. The shadows under my eyes are more defined than they were two years ago. My face has grown thinner.

People think you lose weight when you grieve. But I caved inward.

Sometimes when I look at myself in the mirror, I do this: I fix my gaze directly on my own eyes. A long time. Without blinking.

After a point, my face slips.

Not literally. But the focus changes. A feeling arrives that someone from the inside is looking outward from

the same place I'm looking. And in that moment, a sentence moves through me:

"I am here."

Whether I formed that sentence or it did — I can't tell them apart. But I'm not afraid. Because whatever this is, it's never hurt me.

At least not directly.

While making coffee in the kitchen, my eye falls on the calendar on the wall. Simple, hanging there. I've circled a date. Without realizing it. In red pen.

Twenty-two.

When did I mark this? I don't remember. Maybe weeks ago. Maybe yesterday. But the circle is very deliberate. The pen pressed hard. The paper slightly torn.

I pressed my fingertip to the date.

My twenty-second birthday was only a few weeks away.

Nothing tightens inside me. Most people wait for birthdays with excitement. Inside me there's no excitement. Only a sense of preparation. Like a test date approaching when I don't fully know the material.

I'd opened the window. Cold air poured in. For a moment my head swam slightly. In those moments the world slips a little. And in that slip there's a gap. Inside the gap my thoughts aren't clear.

Last week I found a notebook in my drawer. Black cover, thin. My handwriting, but the words feel distant. I turned the pages.

"Sometimes you need to let go of control."

"I need this in order to be complete."

"I can't protect her."

When did I write these? Protect who?

I studied the handwriting. The letters mine. But the tone — not mine. Quieter. More decided. I never speak with such certainty. I always doubt.

I closed the notebook. Didn't burn it. Didn't throw it away. Just put it back.

Because something inside me says: the part that wrote those sentences is not my enemy.

Around noon I went outside. Being among people sometimes helps. The noise pressed down on my thoughts. Walking, I caught my own reflection in a shop window. I stopped for a moment.

The reflection hesitated by just a fraction of a second.

I stopped. It stopped. But that tiny delay — maybe it was nothing. Maybe a trick of the light.

My heart sped up but it wasn't panic. More awareness.

"Is it you right now?" I thought silently.

No answer. But a faint warmth spread through me. Toward my shoulders. As if something inside had stretched.

When I got home toward evening, the sky was darkening. Passing through the hallway, I paused. The apartment was very quiet. That quiet doesn't frighten me anymore, but sometimes it gets too thick. I touch the walls sometimes. To remind myself they're real.

I opened my bedroom door. On the bed was a shirt. I was sure I'd folded it into the wardrobe this morning. A small detail. Maybe I'd forgotten. People forget.

But from inside me, a voice — very calm — seemed to say: "I took it out."

It wasn't a voice. More like a piece of information.

I sat on the bed. Placed my hands on my knees. Drew a long breath.

"If you're here," I said inwardly, "don't hurt me."

Those words didn't leave my mouth. I only thought them. And in that moment a clear feeling formed inside me.

It doesn't want to cause harm.

I don't know where that feeling came from. But I was certain.

I was never truly alone.

But I was never entirely under threat either.

Still — something is shifting lately.

The dreams last longer. The cemetery is darker. The earth wetter. And each time I look a little deeper into it. I haven't dug yet. Haven't touched it yet. But I'm getting closer.

The number twenty-two is no longer just a date. It's a threshold.

At night I lay down in bed and closed my eyes. Listened to my heart. Waited for that second tremor. A few seconds later — there it was.

Two rhythms. Very faint. Very woven together.

And in that moment, for the first time, I thought:

If one of us is lost —

Can the other survive?

That thought unsettled me.

Because I didn't know the answer.

And not knowing felt like something drawing closer.

\* \* \*

Lying in bed, I stared at the ceiling and listened to my breathing. Two tremors, faintly interwoven. After a while I noticed that some of the things in my room had shifted slightly. The book on the top shelf of the bookcase was tilted. The notebook on the corner of the desk wasn't where it had been this morning. I reached out, adjusted it, pulled my hand back. But for a moment, my hands seemed to move without my wanting them to.

I watched without blinking for a few seconds, searching for the source — but there was no one. As if it hadn't been me. From somewhere inside, a quiet voice seemed to say: "Don't worry. I'm here."

It wasn't a whisper. More like an awareness flooding my mind. Part of me was startled — but the other part... felt a strange comfort. As if it was leading me to touch a secret it had been holding for years. A small fear moved through me, then vanished. Only awareness remained: I understood that a part could move beyond me.

I got up and leaned over the desk to look at the notebook. The pages still in my handwriting but the sentences felt foreign. "Did you write this?" I thought to myself. No answer. But that faint, quiet presence seemed to be showing itself. A piece of me — but a different piece.

I lay back down. Set my hands on my knees. Listened to my breathing. After a while a slight warmth spread from the top of my head.

As if another version of me was standing beside me, tracking my breath. In that moment I thought: "If I can sense this part of me — how long will it stay?"

No answer. But in the dark room, inside the silence, I could feel it. The second soul inside me had come gently to the surface. I couldn't fully see it, but I knew it was there. This small shift reminded me of the hollow I'd felt for years: two souls in one body — but I didn't understand any of it completely.

I closed my eyes. My heart was still beating in double rhythm. Silently I thought: "You won't take full control of me, will you?" The presence inside me didn't answer. But it didn't disturb me either. It was simply there. Silent, patient, watchful.

And in that moment, for the first time, I recognized something: I was not alone. But the part of my loneliness I had thought still belonged to me had grown slightly smaller. And that missing piece... perhaps it was completing me.

Before long, that soul had fallen asleep too.

As always, I woke in the early hours of the morning. I rose from bed to do something I had been meaning to do for a long time. I went to my desk and took out the black-covered notebook.

"Don't be afraid. This is for your own good," I wrote.

And then quietly, I made my way toward Clara's mother's room. I started with the wardrobe — filling a bin bag with the clothes. Then I moved to everything she had held dear, breaking it.

I was doing this for Clara. This room, this woman, these clothes — all of it was hurting her. I had thought that if the primary source of her pain were removed, her troubles would disappear with it. But that wasn't what happened. Her grief only deepened.

And her grief meant that the soul exchange between her and me was growing more complete — but I didn't want that.

Until now, many people had died at the hands of this body, in secret. But the soul living inside had belonged to me. Clara's pure and unspoiled soul had been sleeping — yet now I want her to know. This is her body, after all. I don't want to keep trapping Clara inside myself any longer and causing her pain.

I think she would be happier and safer without me. That's why I've revealed myself to her — so she can find a

way to destroy me, and we can both be at peace.

While these thoughts ran through me, I had gathered all of Clara's mother's belongings. I picked up the bag, walked to the door, laced on my shoes, left the building, and went to the rubbish bin. Dropped everything inside.

The moment I did, that feeling returned. Clara won't grieve anymore. But now I had to go. Today was Clara's birthday. Her twenty-second birthday. I walked quickly back to the apartment, climbed into Clara's bed, and slept.

\* \* \*

I thought I had opened my eyes — but the room wasn't there. My bed, my ceiling, my walls — nothing. It was as if I stood in the center of a gray mist. There was a surface beneath my feet, but I couldn't see it. I breathed; my voice echoed into nothing. I stood without speaking for a while. Then I felt that familiar second rhythm inside me. The stranger who had lived alongside me for years.

"I know you're here," I said quietly.

A footstep came from inside the mist. A shadow slowly took shape and walked toward me. The walk was calm. Almost easy. I didn't need to see the face to know.

"Who are you," I said. The shadow stopped and smiled slightly. "You finally called for me, Clara," it said. "I didn't call for you," I said. "You did," it said, in a quiet voice. "For twenty-two years you've been calling for me."

My throat went dry. "You threw out my mother's things," I said. "Yes," it said, without hesitation. "You sabotaged my mother's brakes," I said. It tilted its head slightly. "Yes," it said again. Something cracked open in my chest. "Why?" I whispered. "Because she was hurting you," it said.

"What does that mean?" I said, sharp now. "People were always hurting you, Clara," it said gently. "Your father, your mother — everyone broke you."

"They were my family," I said. "They were your burden," it said.

I took a step back. "You killed them," I said.

"I protected you," said the spirit.

"Protection?" I said, my voice trembling. "This isn't protection."

"It's liberation," it said. "Without me, you'd still be living in their shadow."

I shook my head. "No," I said.

"Yes," it said.

"No," I said harder. "You are a parasite living inside me."

The smile on the spirit's face slowly faded. "I am your strength," it said.

"You are my curse," I said.

The spirit stepped closer. "I am your piece, Clara," it said.

"No," I said.

"I cannot exist without you," it said.

"And I don't want to live with you," I said.

The spirit's eyes darkened. "So you want to end it this way," it said.

"Yes," I said.

"By destroying me?" it asked. "Yes," I said.

"If you kill me, you'll have killed a part of yourself," it said.

"Maybe that part was never mine to begin with," I said.

The spirit was suddenly furious. "You cannot survive without me," it said.

"We'll see," I said.

The mist around us darkened. A pressure built inside my head. As if my mind were being split apart. "I was here to protect you," the spirit cried.

"I never asked to be protected," I cried back.

"They were hurting you," it said.

"But I loved them," I said.

The spirit's face tightened. "Love is weakness," it said.

"No," I said.

"I am you," it screamed.

"No," I said, jaw clenched. "I am me."

The spirit lunged at me. An explosion went off inside my head and I sank to my knees. I pressed my hands against my skull but I didn't pull back.

"I protected you," said. "You left me alone," I said.

"You cannot survive without me," it said.

"I want to survive alone now," I said.

There was a sudden silence.

The mist slowly thinned. The spirit's shadow cracked.

"You can't kill me," it said, one last time.

"You're not here anymore," I said.

The spirit's shadow shattered and vanished into the dark. The last thing I heard was its fading voice: "Clara... without me..." — but it couldn't finish the sentence.

I opened my eyes. I was in my bed. Morning light filled the room. I took a long breath. Inside me, for the first time, there was only a single heartbeat.

"It's over," I said.

One heart. One thought. No fear, no doubt, no split. I was clean now. I would stop questioning myself. I was free.

FREE.

THE END.