

The windows of the neighbourhood diner are open to the brisk morning and the quiet street of brown and red maples. The waitstaff glide between tables to refresh cold mugs, carefully preserving the moment. Occasionally a diner is coaxed from their reading, to adjust their blankets and happily survey the room. It is one of these diners who catches the cyclist in a corner window. He makes an irritated remark causing others to stir. The cyclist is indeed moving at a dangerous pace. In the middle of their intersection, perhaps realizing the missed Stop sign, the cyclist stops (with impressive ease, considering his pace) and turns to a row of men on a curbside bench, who have looked up from their books and papers. After giving an apologetic nod, he checks his watch and carries on slowly.

Their moment is disturbed by this cyclist. His suit floated so easily over his athletic frame. His bike was built for coastlines, misplaced on the cigarette-pavement. Where would he go? Their weary comforts faltered before the question; whether it was a skyscraper or an outskirt of the massive city, it made them small, forced them to evaluate their own Sunday activities. This blip of panic levels out over breakfast. His belongs are forgotten.

He is conscious of the suit and the attention it draws. It was a typical upgrade for any new partner. Comfortable... breathable too. A matter of practicality. He'd wear it 60 times this year. It would settle in like all the other new toys that busied him, that had become merely practical. Unfortunately, he'd neglected the bicycle amongst these distractions, leaving it chained up for the Summer. But today, in the grey outset of Fall, their reunion is perfectly natural; a privilege of old friends. He over-shifts the gears to feel the seamless transition, quick accelerations mimicking older moments, pulling ahead like it is the last leg of a race, like all of that was only yesterday.

He recalls the first night he'd seen it – the night of their fourth anniversary. She wobbled up to his seat at the patio they always went, horribly late, beaming, almost toppling over, her sandals slipping from the clips. He paid no attention to the bike then. Her excitement was a thousand bikes. But later, his closer inspection of the colouring, the custom drivetrain... she'd perfected it – all the specifics he recalled praising in the passion of his racing peak, while she read and presented to listen. Or, in hindsight, pretended to read and listened in full.

He recalls the maple leaves, the same beneath his tires today, scratching along their old window, constantly stirring them awake. It was never a bother. He never had anywhere to be. He recalls her in her throne against the noisy window, basking under the lazy light which flickered through the trees. The window converted it to a dusty spotlight over the bed for her, the pale trampoline to revive it, to make you forget about the dirty windows and the too-hot room. He recalls the endless nights there, her taunting whispers. 'How about that girl from the theatre.' Him saying 'No. No, I've never even liked anyone else, really, not even in a friendly way.' Her lifting her torso out from under the ratty brown duvet, sweating, propping her back into the body pillow, not lifting the sheets to cover up.

And oh, the bedsheets he has now! The floor-to-ceiling windows!

He arrives at the Neuro building and seizes his bike against the rack with four chains, pleased by how impossibly each one materializes from his tiny bag. Seat and helmet removed and stored by the pack, he sits on a bench and lets the wind cool him. He marvels at the pristine bike freshened by the journey, standing gracefully against the rack.

A young lady pushes a wheelchair carrying a sleeping, hairless toddler boy. She is underdressed for the cold, scowling and rushed. She veers the stroller to avoid his foot as he sprawls from the bench, causing the toddler's wide eyes to flick into half-awareness, then to shock. There is a momentary standoff, and before his apology is made, the woman pushes off, shaking her head. The boy's curious bald head pokes out, strangely horizontal, from the side of the wheelchair and peers back.

On the bench before the historic, brown-brick Neuro building, under surveillance of so many windows, he stays quite still. The wind pushes past his jacket and pants. He is stalling now. He brushes off his pant legs, glances briefly at his bike, and heads in. Disjointed moments pass without register. Lobby, sign-in, the main hall. Busier now in the corridors, faceless people in white. Signs and corridors. Signs towards room E51.

In the doorway he finds an empty bed in a private room. A sweater is strewn across the floor that he not only recognized but was once his, until it shrunk in the dryer and she claimed it triumphantly. Her same old perfume is newly sprayed, the scent punching through his gut and below, causing his eyes to roll back. Noises emerge from behind a door within the room, to his right. A door like that of an airplane bathroom. He backs into the hallway, still dazed from the scent.

Sounds of tap water under the airplane door. Then the clicking of that door open, without footsteps. A most familiar voice probes a Hello, which rounds the doorway and bounces along the bare hospital walls. Before recovering from her voice so available, so *there*, she appears in the hallway. There is a moment of shock which exists only as patchwork in his memory. He finds that she is in his arms, and his sack has fallen to the ground. He has forgotten strategy, tact, for the first time driven by impulse, for the first time maybe in years. When she pushes away, she stays within a forearm's reach.

"Jim called..."

"I know," she says, with a tone of brightness. She is not frightened. She nods and wipes her eyes, then beams. She is impossibly bright... "Still. Didn't expect it. I hoped. I'm so glad."

After leading the way into E51, she takes to bed. A mark from her nose is left on his shirt, and a sense of command develops as he busies his hands, helping her lift the blankets over her shoulders and pin them behind her back. He tucks the opposite side beneath her toes, tautening the blankets like a tent, and when she is properly cocooned, knees hugged into chest, spine against backboard, she speaks. "So they told you everything?"

“They told me what it was. And the surgery. They were very unsure.”

Her face sinks. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Oh. Well, there’s more... understanding now. About it.” She exhales and turns to the window.
“Fuck.”

She begins speaking in a rehearsed tone, without warning or build-up. “The tumour is really bad. We might not have known how bad, when my parents called you. Which means...” she loses her step. “Well, it means it’s bad, John. Brain cancer.” She nods, keeps nodding, a tiny twitch of a nod. “It’s really bad. I thought you might’ve been told that.”

“How bad.”

Her eyes keep him rooted; surely without them he’d run for the door. She watches him for a long time, with large tears rolling down her face, then shakes her head and faces the window, pressing her cheek to her thighs.

He palms her knee above the blanket and rocks it mildly, stupidly, feeling his own burden. “Tell me everything. What about the surgery. What about... other options. You’re 26.”

These were just words filling space. She unhides her face, betrays a slight humour in her eyes when she says, “I’m 27”, but otherwise dismisses the words with grace. He knows he could trust no person to better cling to life; she never compromised on any aspect of it. No doubt she’d exhausted even the most futile ideas – they’ve been tried or would be. No doubt she was tired of discussing it.

“It’s important you came,” she says, reaching for his forearm, tugging his coat, “look at you! Where did you come from?”

“Hold on. Have you talked to all the right – ”

“Yes,” she says, “I have.” She speaks softly and her voice is, somehow, playful. “I was hoping we could dismiss the important stuff.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint.” He is surprised to find his voice raised.

“I probably have a month or two to live.” In the brazenness of the announcement she meets his eyes as if challenging him. He collapses into the visitor’s chair. Discussions enter his mind, along with the knowledge that he is not part of them. The idea of being some kind of saviour was, of course, foolish. Pathetic. Courage is her kingdom. She watches him sadly, her mouth shut tight.

"I'm sorry, Bell." She takes his hand, which he'd forgotten about, from her knee.

They are quiet for a while, nervously searching the room, where the shock of their mutual presence still lingers.

"Only you could keep a schedule through all this." He points to the calendar on the bedside table, flipped open to October. It is the pocket calendar that Brella was never without, most of every box filled by lines of neat handwriting.

"Those are plans, *'for the rest of my days'*" she says, rolling her eyes. "You wouldn't believe how I got, all cooped up in here."

"I believe it."

She snatches the book into her lap, then pats the spot beside her in bed.

"I won't fit."

In the tiny bed their thighs are pushed together. It is too warm yet more comfortable than before, since he can stare at the wall across, or into his hands. She flips the book along. October through December, filled with ideas and plans, meandering thoughts, scribbles, and drawings. She pauses on January 1 of the following year. The paper is worn around this date, outlined several times in pen. A paragraph is written inside, not in her handwriting, but in the rough, block lettering that John recognizes as her father's. And he catches some words but cannot continue. That calendar once lived on their bedside table, or in her purse to class or the bar, in case anyone cared (or pretended, she was too enthusiastic for even the coldest to deny) to hear her ground-breaking plans. Without it, too many ideas in a brilliant, cluttered brain were lost. He is overcome with admiration for this bravery, this rejection of change. And the unfairness of it all. She ignores his tears quite well, busying herself with the written passages. When he is under control, she puts her head on his shoulder.

"I spent every moment wondering if I'd see you," she says in a distant voice, while still reading, as if speaking to the walls.

He chuckles, his voice hoarse. "I've been waiting four years." This small barter of truths causes a dizzying relief to wash over him. He feels drunk, giddy, and pathetic.

After four years, the shadows of a distant Fall his parasite, they lie again together, where, as he suspected, everything is different. But none of the different is better, or noticeably worse just yet, those expectations have fallen away. At one point she stands and closes the door. When she returns, they are no longer propped against the headboard but laid down side to side. They stare at the ceiling. They hold hands, but it never lasts. They discuss old thoughts. They bicker over what they'd once bickered over, her trying to organize life into schedules and lists, him trying to relinquish this need for control. The nostalgias are no longer discussed in longing, the

arguments are without irritation. They pace carefully through a garage they know, kicking up dust, disturbing little. John finds corners full of boxes he holds close, that are more familiar to him than to Brella, and vice versa. Some boxes they sit on either side of, cross-legged, exploring together, passing items back and forth, giggling or frowning before returning them to their place. It is a light, dreamy, probe of a past, carried on achy shoulders for too long, finally set down.

They conclude that it was a mistake, that decision four years ago. They could have seen it through. Brella dismissing it with a shrug, a frown... nothing really unchanged. Nothing unchanged but everything different.

She falls asleep gracefully, her head still on his shoulder, forcing him to write carefully the message along the margins of her calendar.

*I will not surpass you
I will walk in our tread
There is no individual progress,
against the universe*

If John is shocked to find the bike missing upon his return to the cold night, he shows no sign of it. Even under surveillance of all those windows, it was foolish to leave such a thing there for so many hours, in the college part of town, in the dark. Four chains lie on the ground, coiled in defeat but unbroken. The rack itself was the weak link, with thick lines hacked, separating the metal bars in two, thick enough for the chains to slip through. Metal residue sits on the ground, wet from the rain. It is cold. He is no longer dressed for the hour, he is off-schedule. He walks through the windy night without pause or direction, his shirt creasing in the damp, his shoes kicking up mud. His sack left behind in room E51, he is unhindered, unfettered, moving slower than any man, and unaware of all these little details.