

# **Off 33<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>**

Eliott Moreau

For editing purposes only

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Written by Elliott Moreau

Preface:

I wrote this novel right out of Architecture school in the Netherlands. It took me a couple months, but I am quite happy with how it came out, something creative and engaging. The story is very much inspired by my Thesis as part of the Berlage Generation 33, along with Nicolaos Charalambous, Chaomin Chen, Sneha Gireesh, Thomas Gkikas, Ujal Gorchu, Ana Nuño de Buen, Kelly Olinger, Lenneke Slangen, Maria Stergiou, Yuhe Tan, Felix Verheyden, Han Yang, Nien Yang.

Some of the characters are based off A Journey Through One Hotel, a short choose your own adventure novel written by Maria Stergiou and myself for the Berlage Thesis exhibition 'The Hotel'.

The book follows the building through its residents, its activity, its life and death. The story of the city, through the story of the building, through the story of the people of the building. This book is in process and will be used to review the current material and decide on how to continue moving forward. It is still unedited, raw, with many pieces left to be refined. I am hoping to draw inspiration and feedback with a printed copy, and further develop the story.

I would like to thank everyone at the Berlage, my colleagues and professors, for the inspiration and the great work we did for our thesis project. I would also like to thank my brother and sister for helping me write. I would like to thank le sang, Paris gang (they know who they are), who kept me motivated to continue the project.

I hope you enjoy the read. Cheers.

## *Part one*

Behind the red velvet curtains laced with floral trims, the bed is empty. A candle on the nightstand flickers, casting shadows over an unopened bottle of red wine, but no glasses. Miss Holly Wood walks in through a door hidden behind the patterned leather wall padding on the back wall. She is wearing a long black dress and a slim purple shawl. She is holding a large wine glass in one hand, and her left boot in the other. It's the end of her shift. Knowing she was making love to a middle-aged woman just fifteen minutes before, Holly takes a seat on the sofa for a minute. She likes her job, she really does. She is tired though, tired of ending her long nights mentally and emotionally exhausted. She takes a moment to gather herself, gets up, and leaves the room. A cleaning service will be here in the next hour to prepare the room for the next day.

The room has two entrances, one in front for guests, and another hidden within the padded walls for the staff. The service corridor is large, well lit, with a soft green hue longing the floorboards. The floors give in a little, a linoleum material that softens each movement, absorbing the footsteps into silence. She glides through the hallway, feeling light on her feet, but heavy on her shoulders. At the end of the corridor, a revolving door leads her into a small living room. The soft green from the previous room dissipates into the furniture, the couches and the counters. She slumps down on the couch and turns on the wall mounted TV. Nothing interesting is on, but she needs the distraction to wind down.

Holly works four days a week, with usually two to three appointments a day. She is relatively new in the Love Hotel compared to some of her coworkers. She has settled well into her new life. The Love Hotel comes with all the amenities of One Hotel. Every day, she can maintain a routine of going to the gym, the spa, and eating at whichever restaurant she chooses.

Her room is located three floors above the Love Hotel, on the staff accommodation floor. Her room, small but functional, has a luxurious view over the city. She painted her walls lavender, with a darker trim on the top and bottom. In front of her bed is a dresser with her two water lilies, Beatrice and Geraldina, she brought with her from London. She doesn't have a dresser, but instead a couple of cabinets tucked under her bed. For some, it may seem inconvenient, but Holly welcomes the minimalism.

When she arrived in New York, she didn't have very much, leaving her things back in London. She moved here without a plan, nothing to rely on but some money saved up from her previous work in adult films. The work was fine, her life was fine, the people around her too, but something didn't feel right to her. Bumbling around for a while, she was not satisfied but didn't know why. Eventually, she came to the conclusion that she needed to leave. She got the first flight out of London, packed a suitcase, and left without a warning.

Arriving in New York, she didn't expect much but was immediately struck with a feeling of comfort. Nothing in this city really felt close to her, nothing familiar or nobody to rely on, but she felt like herself again. There was an air of excitement in the air.

This honeymoon period was short lived. The bills started adding up, unable to find a steady job that pleased her. Despite her usual laid-back attitude, Holly hated working for other people. She tried a barista job, another at a diner, another as a bank teller, but they all led her to feel frustrated and bored. It took three months for her to stumble onto the Love Hotel. One day working at the diner, she overheard a group of guys talking about the night they had there, the experience feeling wrong and amazing at the same time. Back home, she looked it up and found that New York City indeed had a legit Love Hotel. It was not a brothel, not a rundown underground thing, but more like an in house escort business.

Holly wakes up from a knock on the door. She slumbers to the door, and opens it to find Mike, her neighbor. "What's up? We were going to have breakfast today." Holly looks at her phone and sees it is now 11am. She overslept by three hours.

"Shit, sorry Mike, I was so tired I didn't even hear my alarm."

"No problem. But get dressed, I still want that breakfast."

Holly closes the door, puts on her Beatles t-shirt, a pair of ripped jeans, and a tweed jacket. As she locks her door, Mike looks at her with a big smile. Mike, one of the few male sex workers at the Love Hotel, was always nice to her. Together, they went down the residence hall, past the front door, and found a local elevator. The elevator lobby was light and simple. White doors with a soft aluminum trim made it seem almost a little futuristic. There were three large plants that Holly still could not identify. She had asked a maintenance worker,

who told her he would look into it, but never got back to her. They make their way down to Sky Lobby Two, where they find the Migrant run restaurant 'Zapos'. It's a mixed Mediterranean place, but their breakfast bowls are to kill for. They sit down at the bar and find Max, who greets them with a warm welcome. "My friends! How are you? The same for you?" he asks with a big smile.

"Yes please Max, but could you add a few extra peach slices this time? Thanks!" says Holly.

The restaurant is bright, a splash of pastel colors lining the walls with a warm nurturing feeling. The ceiling is intentionally unfinished, some exposed beams and pipes are painted the same color as the walls. On the ducts, some fishing lines hook up small decorative plants, swinging lightly whenever the door opened and let in a breeze. The restaurant is not big, only seating about twenty five people, mostly at the bar. Most of it's orders were deliveries, allowing a smaller dine-in space. The regulars here were all staff living in the tower.

As Mike recounts his days and what his new aspirations are, Holly's mind travels elsewhere. She thinks about the few times she has felt good in the city. Once, she was having dinner in the Greenwich at a famous pizzeria when the owner began singing in the middle of restaurant. His voice belted Italian folklore songs out into the small restaurant, carrying even into the street where curious bystanders crowded around the windows to watch the performance. There was no particular reason for this show, but it was nice, and made Holly feel like everyone could do something so spectacular and unexpected, even her.

They finish their breakfasts and pay with their One Hotel voucher card. When Holly first arrived, she was given a little card, like a credit card, with the initials 'O T' written in gold letters. With this card, she could get a free meal at certain restaurants in the Metropolitan, as well as access to all the amenities offered around the building. This allowed her to go to the gym, the library, cafeterias, service floors, and anywhere else she might need. The One Hotel group made things relatively simple for her. She could spend her whole time in the building and find everything she needs. The one part that is not included in her employment is laundry, but the Love Hotel has its own machines that only they have access to.

Mike leaves Holly in Sky Lobby Two to attend a glass blowing class, his new passion of the moment. She wanders through the lobby, passing by the barbershop. It was opened recently by a couple who had invested in the Metropolitan's renovations and were allocated a small retail space. The shop was run by three Puerto Ricans living in the Migrant Hotel. On a busy day, they could do almost fifty haircuts, always with a smile and a welcoming nature that puts guests at ease. Holly waves at them through the glass, and in return, each blows a kiss and performs a deep bow. They call her the princess, someone who is rather well kept, but still appreciates the company of the local jokers. Her next stop is the photo shop. Her friend Alice runs the store, a graduate from Parsons art school and local photographer. The shop is barely big enough to fit her large photo printer, but it runs rather well. Tourists find the analog formats quite amusing for their trips, and often come to her to develop photos of their trip. She walks a little further towards the balcony. It's a large open space, like a lawn of sorts, with lounge chairs laid out looking onto the Hudson River. Two women are sunbathing on the lounge chairs, mimosas in hand, living their best life.

Holly finally returns up to her room, avoiding the guest elevators and instead using dedicated service elevators for the staff. In appearance, they are the same, both with elegant oak interiors and a soft golden light from above. Unlike the guest elevators, the staff cabins require a pass to access, and distributes to all the service floors throughout the tower, the Love Hotel accommodation included. She sits down on her bed, letting the springs bounce her softly, and picks up her tablet. Above her bed, on the hanging shelf, she has set up a projector to watch films on the blank wall opposite. The rest of the room is covered in posters and various artworks, except for the rectangle where she could watch her favorite shows on a big screen.

Her cinema session is interrupted by a knock on the window. She pulls up the blinds to find a pigeon perched on the sill, huddled in its feathers ready to take a nap. She slowly puts the blinds back down to avoid startling the slumbering bird, and returns to her movie. Slowly, she falls asleep, following the pigeon outside in the mid day nap.

Later at night, she prepares for her evening appointments. Two middle aged men booked the room together. She usually doesn't do threesomes, but they are regulars at the Love Hotel, trusted customers, so she felt safe to accept. They booked the large jacuzzi room with champagne, the 'bubbly' package. Holly doesn't like drinking at work and asks for an additional glass of nonalcoholic sparkling wine to accompany her clients. She lays down four pink towels, two for her, and two for her clients. The room is dimly lit, with red streaks of led lights hidden

in the ceiling panels. She checks the water temperature and turns on the stereo to put on the Love Hotel's usual playlist, with smooth and lo-fi jazz hits.

Before returning to the dressing room, Holly prepares for the room for the second appointment. She will be with a woman called Patti Janssen, age forty-three, from the Netherlands. It's her first time in the United States, and she is here with her family. It's not the first unhappy couple she has had as a client and does not judge marital problems. For her, a client is a client, and her job is to make them as comfortable and happy as possible.

Holly opens a trap door in the floor to reveal a small mini fridge with glasses and bottles. This is a feature of every show room in the Love Hotel, but only staff can open them with their One Hotel cards. She takes out a bottle of Veuve Cliquot and two glasses. Again, she rarely drinks on the job, but she feels that given the delicate nature of her visit, Patti will need some company.

Her first appointment is in twenty minutes. She goes back to the dressing room to get her swimsuit on and apply waterproof makeup. Today, she will go with a green eyeshadow and orange highlights around her cheeks and eyes. As she leaves the dressing room, Lea is standing next to the door with makeup streaking down her cheeks.

"Lea! What happened? Are you ok?" asks Holly.

"What? Oh yeah, I'm fine. Just some rough play." Lea responds as she enters the dressing room.

Holly walks down the hallway towards her appointment room and stops before just the door. For a moment, she feels like she is standing on a diving board on top of the tower, overlooking the city from above, ready to dive. The rush and excitement from the leap keep her motivated, but the risk and unknown waiting for her at the bottom holds her back. She feels these contradictory emotions, a comfort she has felt nowhere else, but a deep loneliness and solitude that makes her yearn for home. The city could offer everything, but it would never be everything for her, she will always have to compromise something to make it out in one piece. Inside the Metropolitan, the same rules apply. A whirlwind of people and sights keep her entertained, but amidst the chaotic energy, she can only find herself within the four walls of her solitary apartment. She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes for a moment, and walks in.

Beneath the Metropolitan's glowing glass facade, a line stretches onto the bustling street. The chill of Friday night air weaves through the crowd, with women in miniskirts clutching their coats against the breeze, and guys in button-down shirts adopting a stoic pose, braving the biting winds. The usual commotion paints the scene of a typical club night – A drunk locked in a standoff with the bouncer. The bouncer, a towering figure marked a thick bomber jacket and inked skin, denies entry to a group of fuckboys dressed in the uniform of youth: ripped jeans, polo shirts, and white vans.

The scene, momentarily calm, erupts as one makes a bold dash for the elevator, igniting a fight. Chaos kicks off, the situation quickly spirals out of control. The bouncer is put to the ground with a cheap shot to the leg from one of the boys, who yells in his face as they pummel him with kicks. As the bouncer is momentarily overwhelmed, Goldy rushes in. With ease, he separates the kids and helps the fallen bouncer back on his feet. Facing Goldy's six-foot seven frame, the trio retreats, hurling drunken insults over their shoulders as they go. Goldy shrugs and returns to his post a couple of meters further towards the entrance.

A veteran of four years at One Hotel, Goldy moves on to report the incident to an NYPD officer stationed outside, providing a detailed account and description of the troublemakers. Ordinarily, he wouldn't escalate such matters, but Goldy does not tolerate any violence towards his colleagues.

The night cools after the earlier dispute. He observes the flow of people each absorbed in their own narratives. A woman, clearly puzzled and carrying a backpack, steps inside. He quickly guides her to the hidden check-in terminal of the Capsule Hotel by the elevators. Beyond this brief encounter, he stays quiet, letting the city's lively night unfold before him. His thoughts drift to Lionel, his son, sleeping thirty floors up. Lionel, full of energy and defiance, is difficult to parent, especially since Goldy's wife passed. Raising Lionel alone, with night shifts slicing through their evenings together, proves tough.

Goldy's job is rather simple, but taxing. His role demands vigilance and warmth, a balance he maintains well despite the solitude it brings. His large stature contrasts a gentle nature that makes him one of the most loved at One Hotel. Roberta, the hotel manager, often checks on him, once saying he reminded her of her brother—a comment he keeps close to his heart. Most days, Goldy's in the lobby, except for his Monday night shift in the Love Hotel Segment.

At 6am, his shift over, Goldy drags himself to his apartment on the staff floor. He shuffles down the hall, passing Manuel, his neighbor, on the way out.

"Hey Manu, what's on the menu today?" Goldy calls out. Manuel often shares restaurant leftovers with Goldy and Lionel. They've grown close, sometimes grabbing drinks together.

"Lamb today. I'll drop some off tonight. Have a good one," Manuel replies, locking up and heading out. Goldy steps into his quiet home, hangs up his coat, and brews coffee before waking Lionel for school. Thanks to Roberta's connections, Lionel attends a Manhattan charter school. It's a privilege, but Lionel feels alienated there, one of the few Black students among rich white kids. It's a hard social life for Lionel, but Goldy believes the educational benefits are worth the struggle.

At half past six, Goldy heads to Lionel's room, tucked away at the back of the apartment. The space is tight, fitting a twin bed, a study desk, and shelves covered with baseball memorabilia. On his desk, there are a couple of school notebooks, an old gaming laptop, a small aluminum lamp, a sports calendar and several baseball cards laid out on a binder used to store the precious treasures. The centerpiece of the collection is a framed jersey of New York Mets player José Reyes, Lionel's hero, casting an inspiring glow from above the bed. Goldy steps in, the sound of Lionel's alarm barely interrupting to the boy's deep sleep.

Their morning ritual unfolds with a predictable, lighthearted attitude. Lionel, reluctant to leave his bed, needs several nudges from his father before finally getting up. He drags his feet along the hardwood floor to the living room and sits on the island counter. Breakfast is simple: cereal and a glass of orange juice. Today, the air is filled with the sounds of Japanese jazz, something bright and elegant with complex phrases to wake them up. The playful piano melodies dance through the apartment, a soundtrack to their morning, as Goldy hums along, his spirits lifted by the music.

By quarter past seven, Lionel is ready, backpack slung over one shoulder, jacket zipped and sneakers tied. They make their way to the subway together. Lionel is old enough to go by himself, but the routine is more about

companionship than necessity. All in all, he does not spend much time alone with his son, so he will use any excuse to be around him. Their descent in the Metro Elevator is when they have their first conversation of the day. Goldy listens to Lionel's plans for the day, a basketball game after school then maybe some pizza. He nods quietly, too tired to respond, but happy to listen, nonetheless. Lionel exits the elevator waving goodbye and quickly disappears into the crowd towards the subway platform. Goldy heads back home, the silence of their apartment a welcome embrace after his long night of work.

Goldy's sleep is interrupted by an insistent knocking. Groggy, he shuffles to the door, stifling a yawn, and swings it open. A woman stands there, dwarfed by a suitcase and an absurdly large bag, her expression a mix of confusion and irritation.

"Hi, I booked this room," she announces.

Goldy, still in his boxers and fogged by sleep, blinks at her blankly. "Sorry, can I help you?" he manages, voice laced with politeness.

"Yes, I booked this room. Who are you?"

"I live here. This is not the right room. Let me see your reservation."

The woman fumbles with her bag, finally pulling out her phone to display her reservation. It's for a room in the Residence Hotel Segment, a few floors up. Goldy gently informs her of her mistake and guides her towards the elevators, advising her to check with reception for the correct floor. With a flush of embarrassment, she mumbles an apology and mutters about the building's perplexing elevator layout. Goldy offers no reply. She rushes off, leaving Goldy to ponder how she accessed a staff-only floor. Shrugging off the bizarre encounter, he collapses back onto the couch, eager to reclaim his moment of peaceful sleep.

He wakes up gently to the sound of his alarm around 3:00pm. With Lionel still at school, he sets about tidying the apartment, sweeping through the kitchen, living room, and bathroom. He spends most of his time in the living room, on the couch watching a tv show or whatever sports channel is on. His afternoons are dedicated to this routine of cleanliness and meal prep, a calming ritual before the evening's departure for work. Turning on the gas stove, he begins heating a pan, the butter melting and sizzling as it warms. He takes out a pack of chicken breasts and some pre-sliced vegetables from the fridge and sets them on the counter. As he cooks, the room fills with the vibrant sounds of jazz-fusion guitar melodies.

Lionel storms into the apartment at 4 p.m., his school bag hitting the floor by the entrance as he makes a beeline for his room, the door slamming behind him. Goldy, sensing his son's distress, quietly makes his way to Lionel's door. With a soft touch, he listens for any sound from within and hears the faint sobbing of his son. Gently, he opens the door and finds Lionel curled up beneath his blankets.

"Hey there. You ok? What happened?"

Goldy's question hangs in the air, met with silence. Lionel often keeps his troubles to himself, a barrier Goldy has learned to navigate with patience. They sit together in a comforting silence until Goldy, seeking to lighten the mood, picks up a baseball card from Lionel's collection—a signed Derek Jeter card, a relic from the former New York Yankees legend.

"I still don't know why you keep this. This was the enemy. Do you know how many years of pain he caused us?"

"It's valuable," Lionel murmurs from his cocoon.

"Well, when you decide to sell it, just make sure to wash your hands off of that Yankee vibe," Goldy teases, a hint of playfulness in his voice.

A soft chuckle escapes Lionel, a brief respite from his earlier sorrow. Standing, Goldy extends an offer to share ice cream and watch a movie together in the living room. Goldy respects Lionel's space to navigate his feelings, offering support without pressure. Their relationship, strengthened in the wake of tragedy, is built on mutual respect and an unspoken promise to be there for each other, no matter the circumstances.

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That evening, Goldy is on duty at the Jukebox, a venue that never fails to draw a crowd, and with the crowd, invariably, comes a bit of disorder. He leans against one of the venue's large banners, observing a peculiar sight: a crowd of guests dancing with large headphones on, moving in silence to music only they can hear. The spectacle is amusing—under the vibrant strobe lights, amidst artificial fog and the twinkling reflections from a giant disco ball, the dance floor is alive with color and movement, silent as a mouse. Instead of music, Goldy hears only the rustle of sneakers against wood.

Glancing towards the bar, he watches as dancers take brief pauses from their muted revelry to down shots before plunging back into the silent disco. Amidst this, he notices a young woman reaching for headphones dangling from the ceiling, capturing his attention just as a waiter rushes over with urgency.

“Goldy, we need you here.”

With swift calmness, Goldy approaches the source of the disturbance. Two men, their argument piercing the quiet atmosphere, are reminded of their manners under Goldy's stern gaze. His towering presence is enough to quell the dispute, earning apologies from the men before they rejoin the dance floor. This method of gentle intervention by Goldy, backed by his formidable stature, typically restores peace.

As the event winds down around 4 a.m., Goldy, wearied, spots a familiar figure: a woman in a red suit, suspiciously scouring the room. Upon closer inspection, he recognizes her as the same individual who had previously attempted to enter his apartment. As he moves to approach her, she slips into the elevator and vanishes. Goldy is left questioning whether his tired eyes deceived him. As his shift concludes, he heads back to his apartment to begin his morning routine, the evening's strange encounter lingering in his thoughts.

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Doni walks into the lobby of the Metropolitan. Fit in a three-piece white suit, they casually stroll down towards the escalators, hands in pockets, with a toothpick swirling around in their mouth. They go up two floors and reach the One Casino entrance. They present their ID and loyalty card at the door and enter the large gaming floor.

“Here we go.” they say to themselves. “Let’s make some money tonight.”

Doni is a gambler. They have been in the New York City poker circles for many years now, experiencing the rise and fall of underground gaming in the city. Growing up in Queens, Doni is familiar with all the cool joints around town and have a rather complete network of where one can go for a good card game in the city. Since One Casino opened, things have changed in the city. Underground games are not as common, and if they do take place, they are usually high stakes. Back in the day, Doni would go to the Upper East Side, to a place called “Miller’s”.

Miller’s was a somewhat dingy dive bar, with worn out wooden panels lining the walls, rusty tables, and crooked bar stools. The ceiling was coated in black mat paint covering a floral pattern embossed. The whole décor of the establishment was the definition of informal, with random pieces of furniture, art and various decorations throughout probably sourced from the cheapest places available. On either side of the long wood stained bar, two TVs showed reruns of the past week’s sporting events. Apart from the slightly static screens, the only source of lighting came from three large flood lights behind the bar, all set on a dim yellow color. Doni remembers one night when the lights broke, Steve, the bartender at the time, went to change the lightbulb, but did not realize it would reset the light settings. The whole bar was blinded with a bright light that made everyone jump. Behind the bar, a green velvet curtain hid a shelf with whisky bottles and a small trap door that led down to the cellar. Down the steep crooked staircase, past the bottles and crates lying around, a metal door would open to a back room about the size of a shoebox apartment. Inside, one large round table and a single overhead light made it the coziest, and perhaps most private gambling room in the city. In one corner, a small wooden bar shelved an assortment of random bottles left over by various players over time.

Doni learned everything about poker and gambling here. Every Tuesday evening, players from around the city would come to Miller’s to try their luck. Each game would last a maximum of two hours to allow for the rotation of players. At first, Doni would only watch. Usually, Steve and Jemma, the two bartenders and game masters would not let anyone watch, but they could see in Doni’s eyes the excitement for the game. They did not have a lot of money and wanted to learn before risking their whole life at the table. Jemma took a special liking to Doni, often treating them to a drink and a conversation after closing hours. The relationship was casual and familiar, like an aunt looking out for her nephew who is still trying to discover the world. For six years, Doni learned the art of bluffing, the thrill of the win and most importantly, how to take a loss.

Following the awarding of casino licenses by New York State, the fate of Miller’s hung in the balance, teetering on the edge of oblivion. Patrons like Doni, deeply connected to the establishment, vowed to continue their support, hoping to keep its legacy alive. Despite their efforts, the advent of One Casino marked the beginning of the end for Miller’s, which eventually ceased its underground operations. What remains of Miller’s now just a bar, its once thrilling heart reduced to cold storage behind a metal door that once promised countless unforgettable moments.

Doni carries a deep, simmering hatred towards casinos, seeing them as soulless machines that strip people of their vitality, dreams, and aspirations, trapping them in an unrelenting cycle of loss and despair. To Doni, these glittering establishments represent something far more insidious—a place designed to manipulate, to drain not only wallets but the spirit itself.

In contrast, the beauty of gambling to them lies in the thrill—the rush that comes from taking risks, from the unpredictability of winning or losing. It’s not the money, though that’s a tempting lure, but the shared experience with those seated around the table. The real joy comes from the players, from the connection that forms in the moments of tension and release. The casino, in Doni’s eyes, is a hollow imitation, a carefully constructed environment meant to mimic that thrill, to lure people into believing they are chasing something real, when in fact they are merely being tricked into spending.

For Doni, gambling is about the people—the faces across the table, the glances exchanged, the communal risk of putting everything on the line. The casino, however, cheapens that experience, turning it into a mechanical amusement park that appropriates the love of the game. It’s a place where the authenticity of gambling is

replaced with spectacle and deceit, and Doni can't help but feel disgusted by it. To them, the casino isn't a place of excitement but a predator, masking its true nature behind flashing lights and false promises.

A few years ago, they were invited to Las Vegas for a weekend. They remember walking through the strip, from one casino to another, all with the same shallow extravagance. The smell of alcohol intoxicated the air, while the bright LED lights from billboards and entrance signs blinded them. Caesar's Palace, the crown jewel of the strip, was the worst by far. Displaying ancient statues to sell glamor, the casino reduced one of the most significant ancient empires in western civilization to a clown show. Doni thinks of their visit to the Cromwell, the only decent casino left in Vegas. A small space, with an elegant look invited players to hold themselves to a high standard, understanding that gambling was something to take seriously and prepare for, a commitment of the game and the risks involved.

The One Casino in New York is not the worst, but far from the best. Like Vegas or Atlantic City, One Casino's guests are mostly ignorant tourists looking for a weekend thrill. On one of their visits, a young girl won a couple grand from a slot machine. Her excitement made the whole place erupt. Strangers came up to her to give her a high five or ask how she was feeling. None of them understood that the money she made came straight from their losses and represented only a couple of minutes of gambling in the casino.

Yet, despite their disgust, Doni couldn't deny that the layout of One Casino had a certain appeal. The space was expansive and well-organized, offering a clear view of everything from the moment they stepped inside. It felt deliberate, as though the casino wasn't trying to dazzle with cheap tricks or flashy distractions, but rather to overwhelm through its sheer openness—its unvarnished identity as a place built solely to generate profit.

The design was brutally honest, a factory for money, laid bare for all to see. There was no room for hesitation, no place for second thoughts. The stakes were clear the moment you entered, every corner of the space whispering of risk and reward, of fortunes made or lost in an instant. Doni sensed it immediately as they ascended the escalators and emerged into the Ballroom, the imposing name given to the casino's first floor.

Here, the architecture seemed to embrace its purpose—a vast expanse where players could instantly feel the weight of the stakes they were about to face. The space didn't need the usual gimmicks to pull people in; its power came from the unspoken truth embedded in its design: this was a place where doubt had no place, where money flowed in one direction, and everyone knew it.

Doni looks around the bright vast room. The space is surprisingly large for New York City. The gaming area is full of machines and tables spread over the large floor space. Without interior walls, the space feels like a maze chiming with the symphony of slots ringing out the rolls. Between tight clusters, the space is demarcated by a yellowish ochre carpet with a brush like pattern of deeper reddish tones. Overhead, a lattice of drapery ceilings adorned with white and gold trims stretches across the space. Here and there, small black domes—security cameras—peer out from the fabric canopy. Within the large open space, two Encasing the casino, a curtain of glass blocks climbs seven stories, transforming the city's neon hues and lights into a soft blur from within. Venturing further, Doni encounters dense gatherings of slots, gaming tables, and assorted attractions, haphazardly clustered atop the red carpet, like breadcrumbs scattered across a lavish spread. The atmosphere buzzes with the constant flux of people, weaving through the casino's games like water coursing through a stony creek. Doni notices a couple embroiled in a dispute beside a lineup of slot machines.

"Stop it! This machine is cursed! Let's go back to where we won last time. You know? The one upstairs next to the bar!"

"No! We need to believe in it, give it a little more time we will win!" One of the biggest factors to a casino's success is word of mouth, or superstition. Sticking to one table, as they say, infuses the table with the hopes of its players, which eventually would pay out. Moving on too early is a gamble, the next roll could be the winner.

Doni navigates through several machines to a cluster of five tables. They pause, observing. A big crowd encircles the roulette tables, all poised for a significant win, waiting for their moment to jump in. The scene reminds them of an image of seals frolicking in a zoo lake, or pigeons around a leftover piece of bread in a city park. The table's surface is a mosaic of chips in varied colors, marking different players and stakes. Looking up, Doni notes the display indicating a minimum bet of ten dollars. A quick estimation suggests the table hosts over \$1000 in play. They watch as four yellow chips nestled between numbers thirty-two and thirty-five triple in value, while the rest are cleared from the board like specks of dust from an office desk.

They navigate through serpentine paths towards the poker area. The casino's carpets, tacky as ever, serve as a visual guide for patrons to find their way through the labyrinth of play. The gaming zones are marked by vivid yellow and red circles, contrasting with the worn maroon pathways. In a secluded corner, they spot four sparse tables, each hosting eight players—Doni's starting point. Circling the tables, they inspect the players to select their target. The first table hosts four elderly Asian men, a young man in a cap, a middle-aged man in a striking blue blazer, and two older women in matching pink dresses, likely celebrating a bachelorette. The second table, with three vacant seats and a cohesive group of friends, doesn't appeal. The third table, balancing four men and two women with two spots open, draws Doni's attention. The atmosphere feels right for an opener. Settling in, Doni exchanges \$300 for chips. Here we go.

The game is Texas Hold'em. The dealer, a young woman with vivid red hair and a nose ring, takes Doni's money, counts it, and hands back thirty chips, each valued at ten dollars. Despite the casino's expectation of professionalism and decorum, it's a mix of drunk revelers and older couples risking their pensions. She's clad in a white shirt under a purple vest, an outfit hiding her personal style with a hint of a dragon tattoo peeking from her collar. She deals two cards to each player—Doni receives a king of spades and a seven of clubs. On the table, she lays three cards face up: four of hearts, seven of hearts, and queen of diamonds. Doni bets two chips, watching as three opponents fold. The next card is a queen of hearts; Doni ups the ante with four more chips, leading to another fold. The last card, a seven of diamonds, prompts Doni to bet three chips, matched by the last standing player. The reveal favors Doni with a full house. A few rounds later, Doni's winnings exceed their initial stake by \$400.

"It's time to move up," Doni murmurs, leaving the table. The top floor of One Casino hosts the high-stakes tables, Doni's ultimate target. However, with a \$1000 minimum buy-in, they decide to bide their time for a better bankroll. Wandering across the casino, Doni steadily accumulates winnings. Two hours later, with over \$4000 in hand, they're ready for the high-stakes challenge.

Navigating to the elevators within the Golden Egg at One Hotel, Doni contemplates its grand, golden exterior. This multifaceted venue, housing a theater and nightclub, has become a hotspot for stand-up comedy and small theater productions. The performance hall is known for its intimate shows—comedy, magic, the kind of entertainment that thrives in close quarters. Yet for all its attempts at grandeur, Doni has always found the opulence of the Egg to be excessive, even off-putting. To them, the structure felt like a distorted golden mirror, revealing everything around it with unsettling clarity.

It resembles the famous bean in Chicago, something almost alien, though not quite extraterrestrial—more like an attempt at otherworldliness that didn't fully land. The surface, polished to a gleaming brightness, didn't blind but instead reflected with an eerie calm. It reminds Doni of the way water distorts a reflection in a pond, turning familiar shapes into a whirlpool of twisted lines and angles.

For Doni, the Egg was more than just an architectural oddity; it felt invasive, as if the reflections it cast were more than just visual distortions. It was as though the structure itself was watching, observing them from every angle. The warped reflections made it impossible to escape its gaze, leaving Doni unsettled, as if trapped in an ever-watching eye that revealed more than they were comfortable with.

Arriving on the seventh floor, they head to a booth in the far corner of the gaming area to meet with the pit boss for access to the high-stakes games. To participate, they must show financial eligibility, Doni presents two bundles of \$100 bills. The pit boss verifies a single bill for authenticity with a scanner embedded in the table. With a green light, Doni is cleared to join the high-stakes arena.

They're led to a smaller table with five players, all in suits except one older man in a leather jacket and aviator sunglasses. Doni joins, putting down \$5000 for chips—fifty at \$100 each. Two hours later, Doni heads to the bar, sitting quietly, contemplating their game.

"Gin and tonic please. Actually, double, no triple the gin... And add a lemon. No ice. Thanks."

In a somber turn of events, they lost the initial \$5000 and an additional grand. Reflecting on a two-year winless streak, Doni wonders about the persistent bad luck, even with strong hands. Tonight, a flush from seven to jack was outdone by a royal flush. How can that be possible?

They spend some time at the bar, drinking a twenty-five-dollar beverage and occasionally watching a baseball game on the screen, where the SF Giants lead by eight points in the sixth inning—a crushing performance. Feeling sympathetic towards the losing team, they raise their glass and take a final swig of their drink. They navigate through the casino's array of slots and tables to find the elevators towards the exit. The exit is always the hardest part. Each machine seems to call out, tempting with the promise of one last win. The tables become more inviting with every step toward the door, the games suddenly appearing simpler, the odds clearer. It's as if the entire floor shifts in tone, as though everything finally makes sense when Doni is down to nothing. Only when they're bone dry, pockets emptied, does the full picture come into focus—a landscape of false hope, masked by the lure of just one more chance.

Doni leaves the casino at around one in the morning and heads to the subway. On the train, a homeless man sleeps across a row of seats with a bottle, presumably liquor. Riding home, Doni thinks over their next steps. To go back to One Casino, they realize the need for a solid plan and maybe some assistance. They get off at Hoyt Street in Brooklyn and walk seven minutes to their place. The street buzzes with noise—bars overflowing with laughter, slurred voices drifting out into the night, the clinking of glasses punctuating the air. But Doni moves through it all without a glance, barely registering the chaotic revelry around them. Their mind is fixed on one thing: making their money back. The rest of the world feels distant, a blur of sound and motion that doesn't touch them.

Despite their skill at the tables, Doni has dug themselves into a deep hole, owing more than they'd like to a local loan shark with a reputation for being merciless when payments are late. The weight of that debt presses against their thoughts, sharp and insistent. Time is running thin, and they know they'll need to come up with a plan—and fast. The laughter and drunken cheers that echo through the street feel like a taunt, a reminder of how far they've fallen, and how much is left to lose.

The next day, Doni gets up early. They have no time to lose. The clock is ticking on their impending debt, and they need to find a good strategy to make their money back. They immediately go to their phone to call an old friend group of theirs, The Crows.

Years before adopting a new name and pronouns, Doni (then known as Andre) met a group of amateur gamblers in a Queens pub. United by their shared ambitions and the thrill of New York's underground gambling scene, they formed a close-knit crew – The Crows. Alongside Carl, Jeremy, Vic, Ivanna, and Ja, Doni found themselves happy, surrounded by like-minded gamblers. It was not about the wins, not about the money or losses, what they all had in common was an obsession with the game. They honed their skills weekly, strategizing to take on the city's clandestine clubs without drawing suspicion by rotating only two members at the tables each time. They made good money and spent it recklessly. However, their rising fame soon led to their downfall; clubs began to deny them entry, accusing them of collusion and cheating. Although they were not technically cheating, a group of players is always bound to rise suspicion. Soon enough, they were exiled from the underground circuit. The fallout was bitter, leading to the end of "The Crows." Doni, in a rather selfish way, swore off any contact with the rest of the crew to preserve their poker career. To them, their playing time outweighed the friendship they had built. Following Doni's rash exit, the rest of the group left one by one, marking the end of an era.

It was a long time ago, and they were still young. Doni learned a lot from their mistakes. Unsure of how to rekindle their friendship, they had never contacted any of the group, afraid of what to say. Their selfishness hurt them, Doni knows that, but they could not think of another way to make the money back.

Doni opens their desk drawer and takes out an old worn-out notebook. Written on the front cover 'The Crows – Crew income'. This was their operating book, with each transaction, winning, and expense meticulously kept track of over their short career. Doni was a genius accountant and could keep everybody in check while making them all feel involved and part of the collective. On the first page, each member's name, address and phone numbers were written in blood red, the theme color of The Crows. The first name was Ja. Doni picks up their phone and dials the number. It has been years since they have talked, and Doni is nervous about bringing up old history, especially in this case to help them get out of trouble.

"Hello?" Ja asks.

"Hey, Ja, this is Doni-sorry. Andre. From Queens. I go by Doni now."

“Wow, Andre, been a while. What’s up with you? You good?”

“I wish I were calling just to check up and all, but no. I’m not good. I’m in serious debt, and I need help.”

“Help? With what?”

“I want to bring the crew back together, just one night, help me get even, and maybe a little more.”

The two stay silent for a moment. Doni can hear Ja breath on the end of the line.

“Bring the crew back? What do you mean? You left us remember?” Doni can feel the lingering hurt in Ja’s voice. “I heard you were still in the game. How much debt are we talking exactly?”

“Seventy-five grand.” Doni responds in a dry, almost commanding tone.

“Fuck man, that’s bad. What the fuck did you do Andre? Sorry Doni. I don’t know. What do you even need us for?”

“I want to come up with a plan, play like we used to, and make some money at the One Casino.”

Ja takes a moment before responding. With Doni calling out the blue like this, this plan, he can feel the desperation, but also considers the risk.

“That place is serious. We can’t just run the same plays we used to. They are legit, but like seriously legit. They have so much security I’m pretty sure that place is safer than the White House. They will see it from mile away.”

“Not if we’re smart about it. I’ve already got ideas. All I ask is that you hear me out. Just come with me for a drink, with the others, and I’ll show you all.”

After another long silence, Ja finally responds “Fine. Just tell me when and where. I’d like to see everyone again anyways.”

After a first successful call, Doni follows up with the other members. They are all in, except for Ivanna, who left the city and is now in New Orleans working for a large hotel company. They set up a meeting at 7pm the next evening at Mad Donkey, a bar they used to go to together in Queens. Doni arrives early to go over their speech. They really need to convince the others on this, it’s their only play left to making back the money they owe.

They sit quietly, the weight of their thoughts pressing down, unsure of what to say. Doni is afraid of how the group will react—whether they’ll be met with anger, disappointment, or worse, cold indifference. It wouldn’t surprise them if the others harbored resentment after what had happened. The betrayal was impulsive, childish even, but it had left its mark. Two years spent building trust, only to throw it all away for the fleeting thrill of a few more games—it seemed almost pathetic in hindsight.

A small, embarrassed grin tugs at the corners of Doni’s mouth, the kind that comes with recognizing their own foolishness. They know full well this reunion won’t be easy. The air feels heavy with unspoken tension, the kind that lingers between people who once shared something meaningful. Forgiveness, if it ever comes, won’t be immediate. Doni understands that much. They sit there, bracing for the weight of what’s to follow.

Vic walks in first. She is a tall blond with dark green eyes and a neck tattoo that covers her throat. She is wearing a large black trench coat with red pants and a pair of docs. Vic always had the build of a model, someone who could easily have made it on a runway or two, but never really took interest. She spots Doni sitting at their usual booth and runs over to them.

“Andre! Holy shit it’s been so long! How are you?” she says as she hugs her old friend.

“Hey Vic, it’s Doni now, and they, but I’m doing ok. I could really use your help though like I said on the phone.”

“And I told you, Doni, I’m down. I’m so happy to see you guys again, and whatever I can do to help!”.

Doni sits back down, feeling heavy and embarrassed. With how things ended with the group, they could not help but feel deep regret. Nervous, they look up at Vic’s big smile, which immediately puts them at ease, as though

all the previous drama had been washed away with a simple sign of affection. They chat for a while before the others start coming in. Ja is first, with a big gray puffer coat and baggy blue jeans. Then Jeremy with a black leather jacket, followed by Carl wearing a pink sweater with a tracksuit bottom. The cast could all together look like something out of a sitcom, each with their style and distinctive personalities, but nonetheless close knit. They all chat for a while about life and how they have been before Doni finally stands up.

“Alright friends, I’m so glad we could all meet again, but I would be lying if I said this was just a friendly reunion. I have told you all about my situation, and I really need your help. I have a plan, one night, One Casino. We could do it one last time, take down the house like we used to.”

“Yeah ok Doni, but this is the biggest house. This is One Casino. You can’t fuck with these guys.” Replies Ja.

“Yes Ja you are right. This is not like our previous runs. This one is big, the biggest. But like I said, I have a plan. We can run things like we used to, but just a few adjustments. I don’t know if you are all familiar with One Casino, but they have a pretty intense layout. The high rollers are up top. That’s our goal, but we need to make our way up there separately, except for a couple of us who will be there from the start. Carl and Jeremy you can be a couple like we used to do it. Vic, I need you on blackjack. The rest of us are on Poker. We will have enough diversity to make it all go smoothly. Every hour, we need to meet in smaller groups to update. No repeating though. I have the list of shifts here already, look it over, tell me what you think. I will call back each of you tomorrow for your answer. If this goes down, we will do it on Friday evening, the busiest night at One Casino. For now though, let’s just have drinks, talk, and have fun!”

“Cheers!” they all say in unison as they continue their night.

The next morning, Doni receives confirmation from everyone, the plan is a go. Despite the past drama, their friends were still there to help out, making Doni feel a profound respect and love for them. They are all to meet Friday evening at the dollar pizza joint next to Moynihan Hall, a couple blocks away from the Metropolitan. They pace around their apartment, going over every detail they could gather from One Casino, their staff, their shifts, and any other observations from their time there.

The Metropolitan was built after the Port Authority won a bid to include a casino, leading to the creation of One Casino at the base, in partnership with One Hotel. Together, they launched One Casino. Doni, already knowledgeable about the layout and the various staff areas, has a detailed understanding of the casino's layout, including tables and pit bosses, almost as if planning a heist of sorts. Doni reflects on the transactions and the many visitors who have come through with high spirits and a pocket full of cash, leaving desperate and broke into bustling nightlife of Midtown.

The afternoon of The Crows’ reunion, Doni treats themselves to a large sushi platter, a final expense before their big win. They eat alone in their apartment, watching the latest rerun of Friends on TV. Tonight, they need a sharp look. They find a blazer with black and grey pinstripes and match a pair of black trousers, and a black button down embroidered with deep blue lilies. As a final touch, they put on their lucky pink tie. It was given to them in Las Vegas by a stranger, who wished them luck. That weekend, armed with the tie, Doni made thirty-five grand. They hope that the magic of Vegas and the tie could help them out tonight.

They make their way to train to 23<sup>rd</sup> street and decide to walk the rest of the way. Here, they see Vic and Jeremy arguing over a slice of pizza.

“No! I swear the pepperoni is the best here, no question. Everybody knows it to. I swear sometimes I question if you are even from this city.”

“Don’t question me! I know this city and I know that garden is the best. Don’t even start on this. Half the time, the pepperoni is frozen!”

Doni steps in quietly and says “I prefer plain. What’s up y’all. How are you feeling.”

“Doni!” says Vic enthusiastically.

The three make small talk while waiting for the rest of the crew to show up. At 7:15, the crew is complete. The first to make their way to One Casino are Doni and Vic. They will split up on the second floor, each playing their way through smaller bets. Following them fifteen minutes later, Jeremy and Carl will go straight to the

high rollers with six grand Doni gave them. Finally, Ja will compete at the poker tables on the fourth floor. Each have their tasks and separate meeting points. The first meeting will be Doni and Ja at the sports bar at the back of the fourth floor. Doni starts strong with a couple wins in a row. Meanwhile, Vic is struggling to find her flow at the Blackjack tables. She was assigned this game because out of the five, she was the best and in order not to draw attention, splitting the games was a smart decision from Doni. Everyone trusted their judgement; they were always in charge of making plans for everyone to avoid suspicion. They were caught because of Ivanna's inability to stay discreet, revealing one day in a popular gambling bar that they were a crew working together. After an hour, Doni meets Ja at the bar.

"How's it going man?" asks Ja.

"Good so far. Up two grand. Making good progress here. What about you?"

"Good too, up a grand and a half." replies Ja.

"Alright, time for step two. You move up to the high rollers. Here's the extra cash I made, use it in the buy in, but keep one grand in reserve." Doni discreetly passes a roll of cash to his colleague under the bar, hidden from all security cameras. "You go on, I'll meet you up there in a while. Any word from Vic?"

"Last I heard she was down. But give her time, she will pull through, she was always better under pressure."

The two finish their drinks and split up. Doni returns to the tables on the same floor while Ja makes his way up the elevator to the seventh floor to meet Carl and Jeremy at the high roller's tables. Doni finds a corner table with an interesting bunch. This is not the time to experiment with their game, but their curiosity takes the better of them. They sit down next to a woman wearing a fully purple outfit. From her shoes to her hat, every article of clothing is a deep royal purple. Even her on her finger, a large stone sits atop a golden brace, reflecting a deep purple hue, a stone Doni has never seen before. Next to her, a man with a Hawaiian shirt and slim jeans is frowning. Doni sits down and places down a \$200 buy in. They feel good about this table, something about their competitors gives them the confidence to place high bets. Luckily for Doni, they are winning. About forty-five minutes later, Doni walks away with four grand in pocket. They walk around the floor, looking for Vic, but does not find her. They go down to the third floor, then the fifth floor, but still no luck. They assume that Vic has made her money back and made her way to the high rollers like previously planned. They have a quick bite at the bar before making their way up to the seventh floor to join the others. They walk in, head to the back of the room like earlier that week, and find a seat at a table after the usual check in. Thankfully, they are not with any of their crew members. Doni takes a quick look around the room to find Carl and Victor, still playing strong as a duo, and Vic over at the Blackjack area, clearly establishing her dominance. But no sign of Ja. They can't worry about details right now. They have just over five grand to play, and they need to make at least twenty-five more for this night to be a success. Doni plays a buy in of \$1500 to start.

About an hour later, Doni takes a break to go to the VIP bar. Every high roller patron has access to this area, regardless of their loyalty status to One Casino. Doni has been here many times, but always refused to make an account due to the logistical problems that come with a registered account. In the end, it was a good decision because of their plan with The Crows. Doni starts their game slowly, betting low and carefully watching their opponents. The biggest difference between low betting and high roller tables are the time people spend on a game. It is typical for a high rolling game to last an hour with the same players, while low betting will rotate around every fifteen to twenty minutes. From what Doni has learned, this allows the casino to monitor the game and the players more closely. It is common for those who win big on smaller bets to try their luck at high rollers, so it is not suspicious of him or Ja, but the way they play has to match what they were doing on the floors below. Starting slow, making careful adjustments is the sign of a pro, so Doni has to make a big move to trick the pit boss. Suddenly, on a good but not amazing hand, Doni places a \$350 bet. Two follow the bet, and Doni loses to a straight. This was expected. The attitude of the player is as important as the amount they win. For Doni, their game needs to be a convincing amateur win, same for Ja and Vic. Carl and Jeremy established themselves as professionals from the start, so they can afford some more time.

As Doni continues playing their stable style, Ja walks back onto the floor. Doni hears a brief argument between the pit boss and Ja, picking out the words "insufficient" and "trust". The last thing they need is an altercation with the casino staff and security. After a couple of minutes, they see the Ja was able to make it through onto a table, proving the plan is still in motion. One of the particularities of high rolling tables is confiscation of any communication devices. Doni had to surrender their phone with the pit boss upon entrance. Although, as a



measure of comfort, One Casino provides each player with an iPod connected to a closed network and a full Spotify catalogue of music. Doni picks up their lent device and scroll through the vast library of music it provides. After scrolling for a minute, they find the perfect soundtrack, 'N.Y. State of Mind' by NAS. It's time for them to lock in and win back the money.

An hour later, Doni is allowed to take a fifteen-minute break to keep their place at the table. They are up a total of twelve grand. They make their way over to the bar to find Vic sipping on a Cosmopolitan. A little-known fact at One Casino, only the high roller area does cocktails, while the rest serve beers and simple mixed drinks.

"Hey there, how's it going?" asks Doni. They are playing their usual ruse of flirting with the pretty girl at the bar.

"Hi, I'm good thanks! I just won a ton. I'm super happy right now but need a break before I get back to it."

"What's your poison of choice?"

"Blackjack, you?"

"Poker. Seems like we have some good vibes around then. What's your average?" This is code for them to assess how much they have made and how much more they need to play. The close to one, the better.

"About 0.7, what about you?" asks Vic.

"0.83 I think, might be a bit higher. It's been a good night. How is your family?" Another code to assess how well the whole group is doing.

"Well, my parents are well, but are having some health problems. But my brother just got into med school, so he is soaring."

"That's great to hear! I hope the best for all of them."

Doni makes their way back to the table with a good understanding of how their crew is doing. Carl and Jeremy are struggling, but Vic, Ja, and themselves are in a good position to make the quota. They sit at their seat and resume their game quietly. Next to them, a woman has arrived with an incredible buy in of thirty grand. She plays quickly and with a determination that throws off Doni. They decide to follow, calling a bluff, but soon find out they are dealing with a real player. The woman, cloaked in a long Yves Saint Laurent trench coat and Alexandre McQueen boots does not seem bothered by anything around her. Doni assesses that she is now the biggest threat to their redemption and breaking even. After a long war, Doni leaves the table once again, up twenty-one grand. As they walk to the bar, they look down in frustration as their nemesis made over forty grand profits over her short time at the table.

"God damn it." Doni says as they sit down at the bar.

"What's up mate? You doing ok?" asks the bartender as they fill up a glass with tonic water. He is a tall man with a strong Australian accent, or perhaps New Zealand, Doni isn't sure.

"Yeah I'm alright, Mate." they respond with some irony.

"What can I get you? Actually wait, you look like you could use a bit of liquid luck. Let me surprise you."

Doni, not paying attention to the overly joyous bartender, nods their head and looks around to find their crew. Before they can finish their assessment, the woman sits down next to them.

"Hey there, you are quite good! I'm Laura, what's your name?"

Doni looks at her in surprise. They are not used to speaking to complete strangers like this. Even in their underground games, everyone had complicity. In this case, they are staring at the woman who is hindering their possibility of breaking even.

"Doni, nice to meet you. You are really killing it. Not your first time I gather."

"No, I'm quite good at poker, I think. I am just in New York for the week, and I heard a lot about this place. Not quite the casino I was promised."

Laura is surprisingly open about her experiences, which Doni finds refreshing and welcome. They converse for some time, discussing their respective triumphs and tribulations. Doni is careful not to expose themselves and their plan for the evening, allowing Laura to recount her epic tales in Singapore and Macau. Finally, Laura gets up and invites Doni to return with her to the table.

They sit and begin playing again. Suddenly, Doni is filled with confidence. Laura is a good player, but too eager to reveal herself. Presented with a worthy opponent, Doni snaps back into the zone, ready to make back all their money and beat Laura. Soon enough, Doni climbs back, constantly calling her bluffs and slowly draining her winnings. Another hour, and Doni has made sixty-five grand, while Laura is now down to a mere ten.

Laura rises from the table, a mix of defeat and quiet contentment on her face. With a respectful nod to Doni, she excuses herself. Following the fierce competition, Doni feels a swell of pride—there’s something satisfying about facing a worthy opponent, and even more so about coming out on top. As they step away from the table, triumph washes over them, a sudden rush of relief followed by a wave of euphoria. The weight of their debt, the ever-present burden that had been gnawing at them for weeks, is gone. They can finally breathe easy. Winning always feels good, but outsmarting a rival? That’s something else entirely.

Keeping their composure, Doni heads toward the tellers with a steady, measured pace. No need to draw attention. The casino floor seems to shift around them—where once it felt gaudy, now it seems grand. The golden egg gleams with brilliance, its reflective surface no longer imposing but almost regal. The chimes of the slot machines blend into a delicate symphony, and the plush red carpet beneath their feet feels like the pathway to a castle, with Doni as its rightful heir.

But the high is short-lived. As they reach the fourth floor, the sight of Vic, Carl, and Jeremy being escorted by security toward a back room snaps them out of their reverie. A cold, creeping sensation crawls up Doni’s spine. The euphoria curdles into something darker—paranoia. They pick up the pace, moving with purpose, scanning the casino for a discreet exit. The bag full of cash in their hand feels heavier now, like it’s dragging them down.

Circling around the grand egg, Doni makes their way to a service elevator, slipping through the labyrinthine paths of the casino until they finally reach a teller’s station. Keeping their voice calm and casual, they approach.

“Hi there, could you please escort me to the taxi service? I’m carrying quite a bit of cash and would prefer to stay discreet,” Doni says, forcing a smile.

The teller glances at them briefly, then nods, pointing toward the staff office. Doni waits there, each second stretching painfully, until a security officer emerges to greet them. The situation is precarious—too risky. Involving security when their friends are being detained just floors away is a gamble, one that might turn against them in moments. Sweat beads on Doni’s forehead, dampening the collar of their suit. The officer looks them over, then finally smiles.

“Right this way. We’ve called a cab for you.”

Doni follows the guard through the service elevator, heart pounding with every step. They cling to the bag of cash, their grip tightening as they make their way through the lobby and into the waiting cab. It’s not until they’ve crossed the river into Brooklyn, safely inside the walls of their apartment, that they finally exhale.

They’d made it out.

...

The morning rush begins, and the large glass cabins zoom with energy as they glide up and down the tower. Visitors and residents pack themselves into the elevators, filling the air with a quiet murmur of anticipation. The cabins, sleek and spacious, stretch fifteen feet long and ten feet wide, their design effortlessly modern. So long as there are people, the cabins remain in perpetual motion, shuttling between Sky Lobbies, from the basement level that connects to Penn Station all the way to the highest floors. Each trip is brief, no more than three minutes from top to bottom, but there's a rhythm to it—a subtle choreography of movement that Ms. Blue knows all too well.

She has an uncanny knack for anticipating the flow of people, sensing when to keep the doors open for a few extra seconds to allow a last-minute straggler to slip inside. The elevator feels like a world unto itself, detached from the chaos outside. Like a double-decker bus, it spans two floors. The upper level, favored by tourists and visitors, offers sweeping views of the tower's massive atriums, where sunlight filters down in silver streams. Down below, the lower deck is usually full of residents and staff, a quiet, more practical space. An unintended hierarchy emerges in the cabin, the top filled with those eager to take in the spectacle of the city, the bottom reserved for those simply moving through their day.

Ms. Blue counts the passengers, an unconscious habit. Twenty-three people on the lower level, thirteen above. On the upper deck, two well-dressed children sit with wide, drooling eyes, their gazes locked on the towering glass walls as they rise between the second and third Sky Lobbies. A woman, polished and distant, sits next to them, absorbed in her phone, practically ignoring the children that are clearly hers. Nearby, an older couple sits quietly, resting on the white leather cushions, their faces still carrying traces of confusion from what must have been a difficult journey. Seven more passengers observe the space with quiet fascination, though most are drawn to the striking figure standing in the center of the cabin—a woman draped in a magnificent Burkinabe dress, her orange and blue patterns glowing against the pristine white of the elevator. Her presence commands the room, the intricate headpiece giving her an air of dignity, even as she gazes into the distance, her thoughts elsewhere.

The elevator itself is pristine, a marvel of modern design. Its back wall is smooth, gleaming white, like the inside of a photography studio, and the glass panels enclosing the space are so clear they sometimes startle the passengers as the city blurs past. The floors are a shiny imitation of marble, synthetic but no less striking, with bold streaks of China Ink Black snaking through the white tiles. It's so clean, so untouched, that Ms. Blue often jokes to herself that passengers should wear plastic shoe covers, like detectives at a crime scene, to preserve its perfection.

On the lower level, the scene is more grounded, more every day. There are always a few suits down here—men and women in tailored business attire, likely receptionists or administrators, their movements precise and automatic. They are always the first to sit, no matter how crowded the cabin is. They never look up from their phones, never hesitate, and almost always let out a long sigh when they exit—though Ms. Blue can never quite tell if it's a sigh of frustration or relief. One particular morning stands out in her memory, at exactly 8:43 AM, when a suit casually did a line in the middle of a crowded cabin, an act so blatant that it lingered in her thoughts for days.

Security officers are a regular sight as well, their towering frames making the sleek, streamlined space feel cramped. They stand by the back doors, leaning on the glass, their posture always slightly slouched due to the cabin's design, which wasn't made for those over six foot five.

When the elevator reaches a Sky Lobby, a soft chime echoes through the speakers, signaling their arrival. Ms. Blue takes quiet pride in that sound—her voice, perfectly calibrated, welcoming and smooth. It was a simple task, recording the chimes and greetings, but she had poured care into it, crafting a voice that felt human, real. In English, Mandarin, Spanish, French, and Japanese, she speaks with a warmth that cuts through the sterile environment. Her Japanese voice is a personal favorite, a little sassy, with just enough personality to make each passenger feel seen.

Among the regulars, the most intriguing is an old man who seems to ride the elevator for the simple joy of it. He drifts between the floors, never in a rush, always standing in his usual spot by the stairs. His jean jacket is worn, and he's missing a few teeth, likely from years of smoking. Yet there's always a smile on his face, his hands trembling slightly as he leans against the glass, watching the world go by. Occasionally, he steps off at the ground floor for a quick cigarette before returning to his spot, a creature of habit. When he feels inclined, he strikes up conversations with fellow passengers, rambling on about whatever caught his attention in the news

that day. Over time, Ms. Blue has pieced together fragments of his life. He was once a communist, working in the city in a blue-collar job, but now, in his retirement, he spends his days observing the city, the Metropolitan becoming his favorite haunt. His stories are endless, but fortunately—or perhaps, unfortunately—the three-minute trips are too short for him to truly dig in.

Day after day, Ms. Blue carries out her task, guiding the elevator up and down, up and down, never tiring of the passengers she encounters. The endless flow of people keeps her engaged, their stories flickering in and out like flashes of light through the cabin's glass walls. Sometimes, she'll linger a bit longer at a Sky Lobby, just to take in the scene, to watch the tower breathe with life. She's a part of the system, integral to its function, yet there are moments when she feels a strange sense of detachment, as if she's observing the tower from a distance. If only she could step out of the elevator, just for a moment, to feel the energy of the building firsthand, she would be completely content.

The pot is simmering. A high-pitched hiss signals that the soup is ready. Manuel lifts the lid to let a cloud of vapor suffocate him with the sweet scent of bell peppers and thyme. He takes a ladle and carefully stirs the mixture before placing the lid back on the pot. As the soup simmers, Manuel takes his knife and carefully carves a squash.

At five in the morning, the kitchen still echoes in silence, Manuel's staff hours away from starting their day. He strides to his office, nestled within the expansive kitchen, and pulls out a binder to review the week's delivery schedule, anticipating a significant shipment of lamb. Manuel works as the head chef for the Resort Segment's Restaurants. He is tasked with preparing menus and overseeing all activities in the various kitchens. He spends most of his time on the Third Service Floor, managing the combined kitchens. The Metropolitan organizes its kitchens in a rather unorthodox way. Both restaurants on the Sky Lobby above are served from the large central kitchen below in an H shape. The space is separated with temporary walls to create various stations and allow the cooking crews to operate their separate menus without getting in each other's ways. In the central branch, a large dishwashing station and two offices connect the two kitchen spaces.

Before his day officially begins, Manuel retreats to his small apartment on the staff accommodation floor. Despite his high salary, he chose convenience over city living, a small space just steps away from his kitchen. His apartment, functional yet cozy, features a queen-sized bed, a small desk with a lamp for late-night reading, and a chest of drawers. His desk is always cluttered with invoices and various documents which he brings back from his office each night. He would sometimes work in the evenings after his shift with a warm cup of tea which he would set on a bright blue coaster on the desk. The kitchenette is a testament to his culinary experiments, currently housing attempts at a new sauce blending red curry paste, lemongrass, and herbs for an upcoming chicken dish—promising, yet still a work in progress.

Beside his bed stands a beautiful classical guitar, a cherished trophy from his grandmother. Half a century ago, she was a celebrated classical guitarist in Spain. Despite his attempts to honor her legacy, he has no musical talent whatsoever, and the guitar now serves more as a decorative piece. Manuel's cooking journey began in a small town outside Sevilla, venturing into the city's kitchens as a teenager, fueled by passion and ambition. His culinary ascent led him to a Michelin-starred kitchen in Paris where the cuisine was exceptional, but the atmosphere almost broke him. Seeking solace and a fresh start, he moved to Bangkok, rekindling his love for cooking amidst the flavors of a new cuisine. After honing his skills, he returned to Sevilla, distinguishing himself in one of the city's premier restaurants. It was there that Roberta Menounos of One Hotel found him, offering the chance to lead the Resort Segments' newly renovated kitchens—a role he's held for four years, steering his team in New York.

The kitchen's pulse quickens as the day advances. A symphony of simmering pots, clanging dishes, and shouted orders fills the air, a controlled chaos. Manuel navigates this lively scene, pausing at each station for inspection. At the grills, he finds Gen, his most trusted cook, hailing from Baltimore. Having left college to chase her culinary dreams, Gen lacks the experience of her peers but compensates with unmatched zeal and an innate sense of timing and flavor. She expertly juggles scallops on the grill with a pot of boiling crawfish.

"Behind," warns Manuel, moving past her.

"Manu, can you taste these scallops? They don't seem right to me," Gen calls out, concerned.

Manuel retrieves a fork and samples a scallop, confirming Gen's suspicion—they're subpar. "No good. Let's ditch these and focus on the crawfish. We've got plenty of prawns; we'll work with that instead."

As Gen discards the scallops, Manuel heads to his office, where he keeps meticulous records of deliveries and suppliers. He plans to alert the market about the faulty scallops—a grave error in a business reliant on quality. Next, he ventures through the prep area into the cold room, searching for leftover shrimp to assess its sufficiency for the evening's service.

Despite the restaurant's esteemed status as a high-end venue, this kind of hiccup happens more often than Manuel would like to admit. The key to survival is being adapt in changing the menu at the last minute, offering a variation of a dish or an entirely new one. This evening, in place of scallops, a shrimp ceviche adorned with mango sauce, thyme, and lemongrass takes the spotlight. It only takes Manuel about thirty minutes to create the dish, and another to guide Gen through the preparation. She's tasked with managing the seafood, while another cook handles the sauce and garnishing duties.

Averting this crisis, Manuel retreats to his office in the center of the combined kitchens, with large glass panes to isolate from sound all the while keeping an eye to monitor his kitchen. He sits back in his chair and picks up a binder. Inside, all the orders for the week are diligently noted. This week, the restaurant will need twenty pounds of pork, thirty of chicken and another twenty of beef.

Manuel returns to the kitchen to continue his rounds. Through the metal waiter doors, a tall woman in a three piece suit walks in. Her high heels resonate on the tiled floors, imposing her stride down the kitchen towards Manuel. The sheer confidence of her pace makes the cooks look up from their stations.

“Hola Manu, como estas?” The woman asks.

“Hola Roberta, bien. Estamos bien. Necesitas algo?”

“Yes, I need to talk to you about an event. Can we go to your office?”

Roberta steps into Manuel's office, quietly shutting the door behind her. As the general manager of One Hotel, her role encompasses the supervision of the entire hotel's operations, spanning all segments within the towering building. Though her office is stationed on the second floor, Roberta is seldom found there. Her days are mostly spent navigating the floors, engaging with both staff and guests, the first Sky Lobby becoming her frequent spot of late.

The ongoing dispute between the city's maintenance team and the Jukebox staff has forced her into a continuous role as mediator. The core of the conflict lies in the management of this public area; the city's Parks and Recreation department claims responsibility for its upkeep, while the Jukebox team demands autonomy over the layout and usage, often rearranging furniture at will. A recent episode involving an interactive art show — where attendees were encouraged to tag the walls with permanent paint, sharing their hopes and dreams — escalated tensions. The city, outraged by the mess that took a week to clear, slapped a fine on the hotel for creating a public nuisance. Roberta champions the belief that such spaces should be inhabited without restraint, a testament to the Metropolitan's essence of public ownership and accessibility. She envisions these areas as vibrant hubs for interaction, gatherings, and demonstrations. In her eyes, if the city balks at artistic endeavors in these spaces, it's on them to change their perspective. Meanwhile, One Hotel should persist in challenging and redefining the role of public spaces in urban life, fostering a community spirit and a canvas for diverse social expression.

Manuel watches nervously as Roberta picks up a binder with some of his future orders. She skims through the logs quietly, then finally sets down the binder.

“I have a job for you Manu, an important one. Next week, One Hotel is hosting a Gala for investors, public officials, and patrons alike. I need you to make the menu and prepare the catering. I am thinking of a Mexican theme, it will fall on the Mexican independence day. I am counting on you for this, it's going to be really important. Not to scare you with anything, but this needs to be a success.”

“No problem. Let's make a menu then. I need full control though. Not like last time with the invited chefs. I need to be able to appoint staff my own way.”

Roberta nods, offering a handshake to seal their understanding. With the deal made, she exits Manuel's office, her steps echoing with purpose as she navigates through the kitchen, undeterred by the bustling activity around her. Manuel remains seated for a moment longer, contemplating his latest responsibility. Though not his first time leading a catering event, past experiences of delays, demanding guests, and disorganized planners have left him wary. However, this time feels different. Confident in Roberta's capability to oversee the event's logistics, he's free to focus on crafting the menu and refining the catering service. Ideas for dishes begin to take shape in his mind as he returns to the rhythm of the lunch service.

That evening, after concluding his shift at midnight, Manuel finds a moment of peace at the Cloud Lobby bar, where he's arranged to meet an old friend. The bar, a tranquil oasis, hosts a blend of locals and visitors against the backdrop of the city's nighttime skyline. Seated outdoors, he enjoys the crisp air with a cigarette and a Negroni in hand, his thoughts once again wandering to the gala preparations. Noticing Ruby, the head bartender, behind the bar, he considers her skill and composure perfect for the event's bar service. He starts to jot down drink ideas to present to her, but his friend's arrival interrupts his planning.

"Hey Manu, how's it going? Sorry for being late. Bit of a hold on the A train."

Nico, an architect working at a small firm in Lower Manhattan, joins him. Their friendship, sparked at a restaurant opening Nico had redesigned, was cemented over a shared love for cinema. They're planning to watch "Rear Window" at an auteur cinema in Harlem, a choice inspired by Nico's fascination with its portrayal of urban life. As Nico delves into an analysis of the film's depiction of New York's diverse narratives, Manuel listens. While Nico sees a vibrant tapestry of intersecting stories, Manuel, seasoned by his experiences, appreciates the beauty in these narratives but also recognizes the misrepresentation of chaos and the focus on extraordinary moments over the mundane rhythm of city life.

By 2 a.m., the night finally winds down for Manuel, and he makes his way back to his apartment housed within the hotel's staff accommodation wing. Pausing briefly outside his door, he fulfills a small, yet meaningful task—delivering two leftover meals from the evening's service to his neighbors. Entrusted with their key, he quietly enters their kitchen, placing the food in the refrigerator with reheating and seasoning instructions. Crossing the threshold of his own apartment, exhaustion overtakes him, and he collapses into bed, quickly falling into a deep, albeit brief, sleep.

The relentless buzz of his alarm at 5 a.m. marks the beginning of another day. Manuel dives into his morning routine, brushing his teeth, combing his hair back, taking a quick cold shower, and putting on his work outfit. The whole process takes no more than ten minutes, and he is out the door. Down in the kitchen, he meticulously inspects the day's deliveries, prepares his signature sauces, and sets the workstations in order, all before the day's hustle begins. Despite operating on a mere three hours of sleep, his expertise shines through in the precision of his preparations—the sauces are impeccable, the seasoning spot on, and the service runs without a hitch.

As the evening's service concludes, Manuel delegates the cleanup tasks to his team, allowing himself the luxury of an early night. Yet, instead of catching up on much needed sleep, he dedicates time to finalizing the Gala menu. He reaches out to Ruby, the competent bartender from the Cloud Lobby, he sends an email inviting her to lead the bar service for the event. In his message, he extends the same level of trust and autonomy that Roberta has placed in him, entrusting Ruby with complete control over the bar's menu and staffing. This gesture of confidence not only mirrors the trust Roberta has in Manuel but also fosters a deeper sense of mutual reliance and respect among the team.

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Manuel is awoken from his sleep late one night by a persistent knocking. Groggily, he makes his way to the door, only to be greeted by a woman burdened with a hefty suitcase, insisting that she's booked his room. Baffled, Manuel points her in the direction of the elevators, suggesting she seeks the reception desk in the Sky Lobby for clarification. The woman, clearly agitated by the mix-up, heads off towards the elevators, allowing Manuel to return to his much-needed slumber.

That same evening, his neighbor Goldy, enjoying a rare night off from his duties as a security guard at One Hotel, invites Manuel out for a drink. They head to a local pub on 33rd street, eager for a change of scenery. Over pints, they exchange stories about their day and upcoming events, during which Manuel recounts the odd encounter with the woman at his door.

"What? You had her too? She showed up at my place yesterday, in the middle of the day."

Manuel looks at him in disbelief. Who was she? More importantly, how did she manage to access their floor on two separate occasions without a staff badge. Their conversation veers into speculation about the eerie encounters, wondering if they should bring it to Roberta's attention. They've never seen this woman around, confirming she isn't a new staff member, as they would have been notified via a memo, something they haven't received since a family moved in last winter. She could be a ghost, forever entangled in a cycle of mistaken hotel bookings. They share a laugh at the absurdity of the idea before moving on to other topics, the mystery of the woman momentarily pushed aside.

Upon their return to the Metropolitan, Manuel and Goldy encounter Roberta manning the front desk of the lobby. Seizing the opportunity, they share the curious tale of their phantom visitor. Roberta's reaction is unexpectedly concerning, as she asks about the woman's attire, any discernible accent, and any other memorable

details. Manuel had initially dismissed the incident as a mere case of a lost visitor, yet Roberta's response suggests a deeper issue.

"We don't have to worry, I think she just got lost," Manuel offers, hoping to calm Roberta.

"No, this is serious. If someone could breach the staff quarters, it compromises the security of all our staff areas. The tech team was just here for checks last week and reported no issues. We need to enhance our security measures and identify this vulnerability. Goldy, could you stay put while I get in touch with our engineer?"

Goldy nods, somewhat resigned to the unexpected responsibility, though he takes solace in the thought of logging some overtime. Manuel chooses to remain as well, his interest now fully captured by Roberta's urgency. As Roberta steps away to make her call, Manuel, Goldy, and the receptionist delve into the gravity of the situation. Manuel suggests it might be a minor technical glitch, but the receptionist quickly counters.

"If our security system has flaws, it doesn't just affect us—it places One Casino at risk too. Our hotel and casino security systems are interconnected."

As the conversation unfolds, Manuel begins to grasp the magnitude of the situation. The primary revenue stream for One Hotel flows from One Casino, which houses millions in its vault. The staff security passes, particularly for those residing on the accommodation floor, grant extensive access, including entry into certain areas of One Casino. This design is strategic, facilitating the hiring of additional staff for the casino on moment's notice without the need for extensive background checks. While numerous security measures are in place to protect the vault, the potential breach highlighted by the mysterious woman's presence underscores a significant security concern that had been underestimated initially.

Roberta reenters the scene with updates: an engineer, accompanied by a technical team, is en-route to investigate the security lapse. In addition, she's taken the precaution of notifying both the NYPD and the Port Authority, ensuring that every base is covered. One Hotel is set to navigate a challenging period as they work diligently to identify and rectify the security flaw.

With the evening drawing to a close, Manuel and Goldy head back to their respective apartments, their vigilance heightened by the day's revelations. They double-check their locks before settling in for the night. Manuel sits on the edge of his bed, quietly mulling over the absurdity of it all. The woman, a stranger he'd never seen before, had somehow made her way inside, knocking on doors with the same bewildering story at each one. There was something almost convincing in her confusion, an earnestness that made her tale feel believable. But despite her apparent sincerity, a nagging feeling tugged at the back of Manuel's mind.

He couldn't shake the sense that her presence wasn't as innocent as it seemed. Her wandering, her questions—it felt too deliberate. The idea crept in slowly, unsettling him: maybe she wasn't lost at all. Maybe she was here for something else, scouting the place, probing for any weakness in the otherwise impenetrable walls of the Metropolitan. The thought lingered, heavy and uninvited, as if her visit had left behind an invisible crack in the fortress he'd once thought unbreachable.

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In the lively rumble of Cloud Bar, Ruby carefully garnishes a coupe with a delicate lemon crane, meticulously crafted by her skilled hands. She strains a beautiful light pink concoction into the glass and sets it on the counter.

"Cosmopolitan. Thank you."

Despite the evening's rush, Ruby, a seasoned bartender with unmatched seniority, handles every order with grace. Her journey to mixology began far from the bar scene, in the high fashion industry of New York. Although she enjoyed her initial career, the art of drink-making captivated her, leading her to share her innovative cocktails on Instagram, where she explored her passion with the world. She quickly gained an audience and decided to launch herself into the bartending scene. Her fame allowed her to quickly find high profile gigs, first working at the Marriott Hotel in Times Square, followed by her score at One Hotel in Manhattan.

Behind the bar, glass shelves display an artful arrangement of bottles, sorted by type, size, color, and price. Ruby, with this arsenal at hand, can mix up any creation. Her carefully crafted menu, a collection designed to offer high-end drinks at inviting prices, makes luxury accessible atop the city's finest rooftop. Prices range from eight to twenty dollars, rivaling any esteemed New York cocktail bar. Her signature twist on the classic Corpse Reviver No. 2 is a standout. This variation merges floral gin with a hint of citrus and a drop of Anis, crafting a drink both complex and smooth. Named "Rigor Mortis," it's a creation born from her days of Instagram fame, a recipe she's proudly carried into her menus ever since.

At 1:45, she announces last calls, signaling the bar's impending closure. A young man, with a sleek perfect leather jacket and bold red jeans, approaches. He picks up a menu, scanning the list to decide on his nightcap.

"What would you recommend?" he asks Ruby with a cool attitude, something a bit more pretentious than she would like.

"Rigor Mortis is my go-to, but it's all about your palate. What's your preference?"

He hesitates, scanning the menu. "Not keen on Anis, but I'll give it a shot."

Ruby lights up, eager to sway his opinion. Despite his subtle attempts to flirt, she can't pass up the opportunity to make her favorite drink. She reaches for Roku gin, Cointreau, and St Germain, her movements precise. As she concocts the drink, he shares tales of his business travels and his experiences in the city. Ruby, half-listening, focuses intently on her craft. She executes her signature shake, tight and aggressive, ensuring a perfect blend. From the freezer, she selects a glass, strains the mixture into it, and crowns the drink with a few drops of lavender bitters.

"Try this, hope you enjoy."

He sips, a look of astonishment crossing his face. "Wow," he declares, taking another sip. "This might be one of the best drinks I've ever had."

"Happy to hear it," Ruby responds, a hint of pride in her voice.

With the night winding down, Ruby begins her cleanup ritual. She ensures her station is spotless, double-checking that every bottle is securely sealed, sparing no drop.

Ruby polishes the bar's white marble countertops, their pristine surfaces gleaming under her touch. Along the back edge, a slender strip of rose gold serves as both ornament and illumination, casting a warm, golden light over the area. Beneath the marble, an LED strip emits a cozy pink glow, accentuating the cool stone above. The bar die is clad with a light gray concrete finish that continues seamlessly into the industrial-style flooring.

The creators of Cloud Bar wanted a different feel from the usual dark, upscale bars of the city. They chose a simple, industrial look. This straightforward style helps guests appreciate the amazing city views around them with wide windows to show off the busy nightlife. Tonight, the Empire State Building shines in red, white, and blue.

Noticing the gin supply dwindling, Ruby grabs her notebook and jots down a note to order two more bottles each of Beefeater and Roku. The Cloud Bar sources its premium spirits from a boutique liquor store in

Brooklyn, benefiting from a reserved stock and industry discounts. One day, the expected delivery never arrived, forcing Ruby and a colleague to trek to the store at the last minute. They returned with twelve bottles each of tequila and rum, attracting curious looks as they navigated the 34th Street subway station, lugging the boxes of spirits up the stairs. That experience taught her to schedule deliveries a day early, just to be on the safe side.

Ruby locks up the bar at 2:30 and heads to the subway via the Metro Elevators. She shares a cozy two-bedroom apartment on the Lower East Side with her roommate, Daisy. Her black cat, Fifi, always waits for her by the window. Following each shift, Ruby has a tradition: she picks up Chinese takeout, savoring the comfort of fried rice and chicken, the perfect close to her hectic day.

The following morning, Ruby starts her day with a hearty breakfast of eggs, grits, and bacon. At her desk, she dives into brainstorming for her next cocktail. It's time to inject new life into the menu. Amid her research, an email catches her eye. It's from Manuel, the lead chef at One Hotel's Resort restaurants, extending an invitation for her to bartend at an event next week. The theme is Mexican, and Ruby would be responsible for curating the drink selection for the evening. Though the event is in the same building, it's an external assignment, offering her the chance to work as a freelance bartender. She's granted the liberty to pick her team for the bar, with the option to expand her crew courtesy of One Hotel if necessary.

Ruby's day unfolds quietly—she tidies her apartment, relaxes, and by 5pm, she's off to her shift at Cloud Bar. She always opts to stand on the subway. To her, the yellow plastic seats are most certainly breeding grounds for germs and the poles potential carriers of the next virus. To stay steady, she's mastered a technique: leaning against the shut doors with her legs slightly apart to evenly distribute her weight and maintain balance. The subway car is not too busy today. A family consults a map and the train's route. She pauses her music for a second and notices they are speaking French and trying to reach the Met. Ruby lived for a year in Paris and has a decent grasp of the language. She briefly turns off her music, steps in, and advises them to catch the A train from Penn Station, explaining it'll leave them near Central Park's 86th Street. A short walk through the park, she assures, will lead them straight to the Met. Grateful, the parents thank her, and their kids marvel at the American woman fluently guiding them in French. Ruby smiles, resumes her music, and feels a surge of pride. Her French might be rusty, but it still serves well in moments of need. At Herald Square, she exits for the Metro elevators via Gimbel's Passage, heading back to Cloud Bar.

It is a quiet night for Ruby and her team. The rainy weather has deterred tourists and locals alike from making the trip over for an evening. Skulking around the bar, doing some routine work, Ruby decides to start preparing her menu for the event. She mulls over who to bring on board for the event, her mind flicking through her contacts for the right mix of vibe and expertise. She scribbles down a few names, ready to hit them up with personal invites for this one-time gig. Then, Martin pops into her head. She met him on a night out in Brooklyn, blown away by his bar's menu—every drink was a classic, but with a twist, all infused with bold flavors. Martin wasn't from Mexico, but after living there for years with his girlfriend, he'd picked up a knack for blending just the right spices and tastes. She scrolls through her phone and realizes she doesn't have his number, just an Instagram follow. No worries, she'll just drop by his bar tomorrow and ask him in person. It feels more genuine that way, anyway.

She comes home after her shift and collapses into bed, the weight of the day pressing down on her like a heavy blanket. Lately, the days have stretched on endlessly, the nights thick with an ugly feeling she can't quite shake. She's still doing what she loves, but there's a slow exhaustion creeping in, inching closer with each passing day. It clings to her, dragging her down, making it harder to move, harder to focus, harder to enjoy even the things that used to bring her so much energy.

Ruby was never one to chase ambition or seek out the best opportunities. She had always let life come at her, nonchalantly, like a cat lazily basking in the moment. But now, something feels off. It's not the world around her that's slowing—it's something inside her, a gradual slowing of her own rhythm. Regret, hesitation, confusion—they all start to creep in, casting shadows over the once carefree attitude she carried. She still brushes it off most days, throwing herself into more work, taking on new projects, finding distractions in the constant circuits of the city. But when the day ends and she's lying alone in bed, there's no escaping her thoughts.

The stillness of the night leaves her feeling anxious, uneasy, as if something has shifted and she can't quite place it. The city hums just outside her window, but inside, she drifts to sleep slowly, her mind clouded by a quiet, nagging unhappiness.

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The following evening is Ruby's night off. Normally, she'd be all about some chill time at home, maybe getting some more sleep. But not today. She's got a mission—finding the right team for her upcoming gig. It's a beautiful day, so she decides to hoof it from the Lower East Side over to Brooklyn, aiming for Martin's bar. Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge with her headphones on, she watches Manhattan light up as evening takes over, the city starting to sparkle.

As she weaves through the streets, dodging vendors peddling their wares, Ruby's mind is on her menu. She's set on blending those rich Mexican flavors with her own twist. She imagines cocktails brimming with tequila, mezcal, fresh fruits, and just the right amount of spice to give it that authentic zing. She's already brainstorming—a smoky mezcal margarita with a chili salt rim and a splash of lime stands out as a showstopper. Then there's the idea of an agua fresca cocktail, something refreshing with seasonal fruits and a sprinkle of cilantro for a bit of surprise.

She exits the bridge on the first staircase, close to the waterfront, weaving through streets and paths toward Brooklyn Heights. This isn't her usual stomping ground, even though it's filled with notable bars, including The Pelican, Martin's castle. The bar's storefront shows an aged, oxidized copper trim that gives off a vibe of an old 19th-century establishment, reminiscent of a bank or post office. Its door, made of dark, sturdy wood, features a bold golden handle. Inside, The Pelican carries a vintage, speakeasy feel that Ruby finds genuine, unlike the forced exclusivity of other New York bars that often feel uninspired. The ceiling, painted black, contrasts with the subtle sheen of snaking copper pipes. Dark turquoise tiles climb the walls up to bar height, transitioning to green and brown wallpaper patterned with faded golden flowers in an art deco design. This mix of textures and patterns is complimented with an old school New York rap playlist humming in the air, creating a dark yet welcoming vibe. The crowd is mostly young with a sprinkle of older patrons. Ruby wanders, eyeing the drinks that showcase Martin's mixology skills. Their colors and textures demonstrate his expert craft. Nearing the bar, a familiar voice catches her ear.

"Is that Ruby? What brings you here? Come on, take a seat! What can I whip up for you?" Martin's voice rings out, brimming with cheer.

"Hey, Martin! It's great to see you." Ruby replies, scanning the drink menu. She considers requesting a Mezcal cocktail but opts for a menu selection, respecting the menu as a reflection of the bartender's character and creativity.

"I'll go with the Kinky Paloma," she decides, smiling.

"Got it. One Kinky Paloma, coming right up!" Martin springs into action, his flair bartending skills on display as he mixes the drink. Though his showmanship catches the eye, Ruby is more interested in his mixology. She watches, impressed by his precise measurements and intrigued by his unexpected choice of ingredients.

"Here you go. Cheers," Martin announces, presenting a striking light pink drink, topped with a slender dried lime wedge for garnish. Ruby tastes it, her approval immediately visible. The drink—a balanced blend of Mezcal and Tequila—confirms Martin's skill, making him the perfect pick for her event. It strikes just the right touch, showcasing both spirits without overpowering them.

"Martin, what are your plans next Saturday?" Ruby inquires, setting down her glass.

Surprised, he grins. "Not sure, why? You asking me out?"

Ruby chuckles. "No, I've got a big event, Mexican-themed. We've got freedom over the menu and staff, and so far, it's just me. I'd love to have you on board. Plus, it pays well."

"Where's it at?" Martin asks.

"One Hotel. It's for some corporate event. The head chef's cool, so it's all legit."

Martin's smile widens. "I'm in!"

After trying a few more of Martin's creations, Ruby decides to walk back to her apartment. It's still early, so she enjoys the evening stroll, crossing the bridge into lower Manhattan and through Chinatown.

Ruby's job at One Hotel's Cloud Bar comes with perks, like access to the staff lounge beneath Sky Lobby Three. Swiping her employee card at the ground floor, she catches the service express elevator on the side core of the building. Inside, she heads straight for the lounge. There, she spots a group of engineers in blue vests, deep in conversation over coffee about the latest buzz: New York City's ambitious plan to extend train services to New Jersey, adding routes from both Penn and Columbia Stations. The project would introduce a new station and possibly a bridge or tunnel under the Hudson, sparking debates over its impact on local commutes. Ruby listens in, intrigued, before pulling out her laptop to focus on her own tasks.

In preparation for the big event, she arranges a tasting session with Manuel and the One Hotel crew to finalize the cocktail lineup, ensuring each drink enhances the menu. She lists Martin as co-host and starts a shared document for brainstorming ingredients and ideas. Next, she's on her favorite liquor supply site, comparing prices. Ruby's knack for snagging the best deals, a trait of her meticulous nature, comes in handy for managing event costs.

Her phone vibrates—a call from Manuel. He's confirming Martin's involvement and has a special request: a champagne-topped cocktail, similar to a popular concoction from the Cloud Lobby he admires. While it strays from the Mexican theme, Ruby sees it as a welcome addition to diversify the menu.

She feels the familiar feeling of exhaustion settling over her, but her resolve remains intact. Much of her life in New York has been like this—pushing through the fatigue, fueled by a sense of purpose that keeps her moving. The rhythm of her days is steady, predictable. She has her job, her routine, but beyond that, there isn't much. Any form of social life seems to slip through her fingers, an afterthought to the city she had always dreamed of.

New York was more than a place for her—it was an obsession, a living, breathing entity she couldn't imagine leaving. Nothing in the world could make her move away. Yet, for all her devotion, most nights are spent alone. When she's not working behind the bar, she's at home, her only company the soft presence of her cat curled up beside her. The city outside overflows with life, but inside, there's a stillness, a space filled with both her love for the place and the quiet acknowledgment that it hasn't quite filled her in return.

After dedicating a few solid hours to her work, Ruby feels the need for a break and decides to explore the tower's offerings. Heading towards the elevators, she realizes that she's never set foot in the first Sky Lobby. Despite her year at the Metropolitan, she has yet to discover numerous corners of the building. She selects Sky Lobby One and steps out into an unexpectedly distinct ambiance. The space is vast, adorned with floating banners reminding her of an art gallery. As she wanders, soaking in the unique atmosphere, a security guard approaches her.

"Can I help you ma'am?" he asks. He noticed her gently floating around and wondered whether she was lost.

"Hey, no thanks I'm good. I work upstairs, but I've never been on this floor. Strange, no?" she responds.

"Actually, I get that. I've been working here for four years, and I still have not been everywhere. I'm usually stationed here or on the ground floor, so I rarely go up to the top. I'm Goldy by the way." he says, extending his hand out.

Ruby accepts the invitation for a handshake and replies "Hi Goldy, I'm Ruby, I work up in the Cloud Bar, you should come by some time, I'll offer you a drink."

Goldy smiles and Ruby continues her stroll, happy with her little interaction. She sometimes feels crushed by the constant life of the city, a never-ending chaos. But this is also why she wanted to be in New York, the 24-7 frenetic energy, the bustling street, the complete strangers who live lives parallel to her own. There is always something new to discover, and something to forget. She wonders how many people work in this building, and how many of them feel the same way.

She approaches the Jukebox, and notices the curtains pulled to create a small room inside the performance space. She peaks in to see a group of elderly people in the middle of a ballroom dance class. She walks to the

bar and sits down to watch the cute scene, smiling. The Jukebox has various activities all week. She looks at the printed program on the bar and sees a drawing class on Wednesday. Ruby always wanted to learn to draw, and perhaps this is the best opportunity for her to get started. After a little while, it's time for her to go up to the Cloud Bar to prepare her long shift.

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Ruby's shift is nothing short of chaotic. With a no-show coworker, she's left to pick up the slack, seamlessly mixing and serving drinks, gliding between tables in a relentless rhythm. Hours fly by as she operates on autopilot, churning out cocktails with mechanical efficiency. Even after the rush subsides, her adrenaline surges, propelling her towards the Jukebox for a post-shift unwind.

Recently, the days had blurred into an exhausting, endless stretch—the constant press of crowds, the relentless pace of the city, the work that never seemed to end. Everything felt overwhelming. In this moment, she didn't just need a break; she wanted it all to stop. The noise, the people, the cocktails, her job, her entire life—none of it mattered right now. She had no one to turn to, no friends, no partner to lean on. It was just her, utterly alone, and in some strange way, she wanted it that way.

But as the thought settled in, so did a flood of emotions. They came crashing over her, all at once, wrapping her in a suffocating blanket of anxiety. Her chest tightened, her heart pounding with a force that made her feel dizzy. A cold shiver ran through her, leaving her body trembling, her skin clammy. She stood there, frozen, caught in the storm of it all, unsure of how to move, how to breathe, how to escape the sudden, crushing weight that had enveloped her.

Entering the performance hall, she's met with a physical representation of her inner dialogue. Strobe lights flicker and disco balls scatter beams across the room, while the air vibrates with the thud of bass-heavy electro music. Caught between annoyance and exhilaration, Ruby jumps into the dance floor, letting the rhythm guide her movements, seeking to just be in the moment, anonymous and free. Suddenly, emotions swell, and tears begin to fall.

Retreating to the bar, she orders a double whisky and downs it. Right now, she could not care less about its quality. Staring at her black cowboy boots, she's unable to stop the flow of tears. Alone and unnoticed at first, her solitude is eventually pierced by a bartender's concern—a young woman with dirty blond hair dressed in a flowery pink shirt. Circling the bar to Ruby's side, she recognizes not intoxication but sheer overwhelm in Ruby's eyes.

"Jake, I'm taking five, cover me." the woman yells across the bar over the blaring music. "Come with me." She grabs Ruby's hand and guides her through the crowd to the balcony of Sky Lobby One. Ruby lets herself follow the stranger, and watches as she lights a thin cigarette.

"Tough night I'm guessing. Same here. Just found out I'm losing my job here. These morons at the Jukebox can't keep an employee for more than a month."

Ruby keeps watching her in silence. Her tears have stopped, and she is now looking attentively as the young woman leans over the balcony rail mildly staring into the skyline.

"What's your name honey?" she asks.

"Ruby, you?"

"I'm Hailey. Nice to meet you, Ruby. What happened today to put you in such a state?"

Ruby is not one to easily open up about her personal feelings and inner turmoil, yet with Hailey, it feels different. Hailey exudes a genuine warmth and attentiveness that makes Ruby feel heard and understood. She shares the chaos of her evening and the mounting stress of her upcoming gig. Suddenly a moment of clarity washes over Ruby. She gazes into Hailey's eyes, a mix of curiosity and vulnerability in her voice, and ventures, "How do you find the drinks, honestly?"

Hailey's expression turns to one of mild confusion. "I'd say they're pretty good. I'm no expert, but my Margaritas are killer."

Ruby can't help but smile. In another life, she would never bring on a novice for a high-stakes gig, but something about Hailey feels right. There's a gut instinct telling Ruby that she would mesh well with the team. Together, they weave through the pulsating energy of the Jukebox, making their way back to the bar. Ruby requests Hailey's signature Margarita—a test of her potential. The drink, while not the finest Ruby has ever tasted, holds its own, especially under the night's chaotic conditions. Hailey's ability to focus and craft a commendable cocktail in such an environment impresses Ruby. They exchange contact information and social media, and with that, Ruby sets off for home, the subway ride feeling particularly lonely after the evening's unexpected connections.

A dark brown Sudan pulls into the motor lobby of the Metropolitan. The wheels are muddy, side covered in dust, and roof full of camping gear. As soon as the car stops, the doors open to reveal Raphael and Leonard running out, jumping on the tiled concrete, calling their mother to hurry and come out. From the passenger seat, Patti, a tall woman with a green scarf and long coat stretches her legs before heading to the trunk to unpack. She is met by a young man wearing a suit dragging a luggage cart. From the driver's seat, George slowly exits the vehicle, stretching after his long drive. Luggage packed neatly on the cart, they make their way to the Metropolitan entrance. George finds a valet to entrust the keys of the car, which will be parked in a nearby parking lot, as One Hotel does not offer any parking services. The kids run in first, with eyes sparkling with anticipation at their first visit to the Big Apple.

Leonard is thirteen years old. This family trip was in a way for him. He spent the last year recovering from leukemia, following several rounds of chemotherapy and various treatments. His brother, Raphael, is two years younger, but visited every day to tell him about school, his friends, and his crush Elga. Every night, Raphael and Leonard would watch an episode of Friends together, dreaming about life in New York City. Their English was not perfect, but the characters of the show would help them develop a vocabulary to fall in love with the city. A couple months ago, Leonard was given the good news that his treatment worked. After a long year, he could finally start to live his life again. His brother was happy to finally see him outside of the hospital again, and his parents full of relief, decided it was time they take a trip together. There was no question about the destination, New York City. Although, George, Leonard's father, took the opportunity to propose a road trip in the United States, culminating in New York as the final stop.

Here he was, in the heart of the world, walking up to the building lobby, Leonard was suddenly struck with an overwhelming feeling of relief. He did not pay much attention to his medical condition during his treatments as to not worry his parents, but he did face death in the face. Now, he was finally free. Raphael takes his hand.

"Come on, there's a hot dog stand! Like the ones Monica go to!"

The two run towards the kiosk and can smell the grill cooking the typical New York hot dogs. For most, these are a cheap, mediocre meal between business meetings, but for Raphael and Leonard, it is a quintessential cornerstone of American culture. The hot dog stand, the pretzel vendor, Central Park, the subway. In the boys' eyes, these are foundational pillars of this city and this country. Raphael pulls out his wallet and takes out his three dollars, a treasured prize for his behavior on this trip.

"Two hot dogs please." he asks the vendor, reaching out his three dollars high above his head.  
"Hi there mister, that's not enough for two. It's four dollars per hot dog."

Raphael looks at Leonard with a confused face. He has never known the disappointments of financial insufficiencies and does not understand why his hard earned money can't get him what he wants. Leonard shuffles his pockets, looking for any scraps to reach their price. Unfortunately, they do not have enough. Raphael without hesitation runs back towards his father, who is speaking to the lobby staff for their luggage delivery.

"Dad! Could we get a hot dog? We don't have enough! It's four dollars!"

George looks at him with tired eyes, acknowledging that they were promised this prize for their good behavior on the road trip. He gives Patti all their documents and forms, printed out for safety, and walks with Raphael back to the hot dog stand, where Leonard has kept their spot in the front of the line.

"Three hot dogs please." George asks the vendor.

"Coming right up," says the old man as he reaches into the cart's cupboard, retrieving a sausage that's been simmering. With ease, he dresses the hot dog in mustard and ketchup, crafting a classic New York treat. Leonard, Raphael, and George find a bench nearby and savor the snack while watching the bustling crowd weaving through the Ground Floor lobby. This space, vast as a plaza, stretches out towards the streets, its interior walls made of slim glass panes that blur the line between inside and out. On this comfortable autumn day, the glass panels are open, inviting a cool breeze through the lobby. Leonard notices the finer points that lend the Lobby an air of an urban square: the pavement beneath them mirrors the outdoor tiles, trees line the route just as they do on 7th Avenue, extending their green embrace within. Everything here echoes the vibrancy of the cityscape, yet carries a smooth, sanitized varnish—a polished version of the street's lively chaos.

Patti spots the boys on the bench, lost in the cityscape. Together, they head to the Metro Elevator, as directed, to reach Sky Lobby Two for the Family Hotel Segment's reception—Campgrounds. A crowd has already formed, waiting for the elevator, whose doors are notably wider than usual, with an LED panel ticking down from two minutes. Leonard's attention drifts to a pair of businessmen nearby, their suits and briefcases setting them apart. He catches snippets of their conversation about some deal, punctuated by hearty laughter that seems to echo with the sound of money. Then, with a gentle chime, the elevator doors slide open. A voice announces, "Ground Floor Lobby, heading to the Cloud Lobby. Next stop, Sky Lobby One. Please stand clear of the closing doors."

The elevator is both roomy and well-lit, its interior framed by glass that offers a glimpse of the vast atrium as it rises. The ceiling, adorned with a hint of copper, is illuminated by a sleek LED strip that casts the space in a clean, white light. Beneath their feet, marble tiles spread out, seamlessly transitioning onto the elevator's solid walls, infusing the area with a touch of luxury. Yet, it retains an unmistakable subway vibe—handrails show signs of heavy use, the seats are too cramped, and it's often as packed as a morning commute.

Leonard grabs Raphael's hand and leads him up to the second level inside the elevator. They find a seat and watch the world go by as the elevator goes up, taking them higher than they've ever been. The seats are comfy, with white leather and a hint of pink around the edges. Overhead, some smooth jazz plays through the intercom, adding to the vibe, except for the occasional train operator announcement interrupting the saxophone solos.

As the doors open to Sky Lobby Two, they step out into another curious scene of the city. Like the Ground Floor, a crowd of people move around in all directions, creating a sort of pattern like ants around an ant hill. George notices the signs for Campground's reception and navigates through the crowd to reach their check in point. The desk is large, made of a heavy timber, and sits in the center of the space much like a tourist information kiosk in a train terminal. Seven employees are working behind the desk, on their computers typing away amidst the loud streetscape around them. While George and Patti deal with the check in process, Leonard is once again lost in the alien-like scenes of the city. He has never experienced such visible chaos. In the Netherlands, people have a tendency to be orderly, organized by the design principles of public spaces and following the suggested paths to a tee. Here, it was the opposite. Nobody followed anything, yet everyone knew where they were going. Fascinated by the scene, he felt strangely at home.

George and Patti return with the room keys and a map to their designated elevators and rooms on the 42<sup>nd</sup> floor. They have booked a small family room package where Raphael and Leonard will have to share a room with bunk beds. They find the elevator lobby next to the Metro Elevators and make their ways towards their room. Immediately, they notice the 42<sup>nd</sup> floor is nothing like they have ever seen in a hotel. The rooms are irregular, with chairs, benches, and tables scattered in open spaces. They see a couple of families picnicking next to what they assume to be a playground extending into the atrium of the building. Upon entering the room, the space feels more like an apartment than a hotel. Next to the entrance, a small kitchenette with orange counters opens the foyer to the living room, with a small white couch, coffee table, and a couple of dining chairs surrounding it. Leonard walks around as Raphael immediately jumps on the couch.

"Where's the TV?" Raphael asks looking around. They notice that in fact, none of the rooms have a TV. To develop a stronger family bond, the digital displays have all been replaced with board games and various activities. The apartment has two rooms, one with a large king size bed and adjoining bathroom, and the other with bunk beds that the boys will share. Raphael immediately claims the top bunk while Leonard quietly unpacks his suitcase on his bed. Next to the bed, a small desk displays a map of the Family Hotel Segment showing all the activities and amenities available to them. The two boys huddle over the piece of paper to decide what their first activity will be. After careful consideration, they decide to first check out the playground.

Usually, Leonard would not be let out of George and Patti's sight, but the security of the Hotel Segment gives them some trust in letting the boys go out alone. The two run down the hall, past the elevators, to the center of the Atrium, where a winding multi-level playground snakes across several floors. They immediately go to the Jungle Gym, a typical American playground style that is not familiar to them. Leonard is still timid and prefers to observe his brother and the other kids on the playground first. He feels a little old for such infantile infrastructures, but secretly loves playgrounds, as he lost a year of his childhood to a hospital bed.

They wander the vast playground for a while, occasionally trying a slide or a swing before Leonard asks to go back to the room. On their way back, they notice another family playing a board game in the communal space, laughing loudly in a cheerful and rather wholesome way. Once in the room, Patti suggests they get some rest and get ready for their evening in Times Square. They spend the evening going from shop to shop, bewildered



by the explosion of LED panels and neon lights all around them. They return to the hotel around 9pm, calling it a night.

Leonard drifts into a dream about his stay in the hospital. He's lying on a bed, a blue blanket pulled up to his chin, while a sterile light flickers overhead. His head sinks into a pillow that's too soft, thoughts wandering to dinner. Hospital food has lost its appeal, and now, the only meals he looks forward to are those brought by his parents or Raphael, carrying a taste of home. He scans his room: a small empty desk, an armchair, and a dreary plant sulking in the corner. Imagining the chairs around him sparking up a conversation, Leonard recounts his epic tales of middle school life. Such company, he muses, would make his hospital stay not just more bearable, but a little less lonely too.

The next morning, Leonard finds his parents together on the living room couch, huddled over a laptop computer. They're planning their activities for the day, trying to fit in as much as possible without exhausting themselves. The Janssens like their trips full of exploration, without wasting a single day. They choose to visit the Met first thing in the morning, then stroll through Central Park. After that, they'll think about heading downtown to see the One Trade Center or just stay in the Midtown area.

The city unfolds before them, turning the day into a whirlwind of discoveries. To the boys, the metropolis seems to stretch infinitely upwards, a forest of concrete and steel where the sky is a mosaic of shimmering windows rather than a canvas of blue. In a clearing of Central Park, atop a cluster of boulders, Leonard is greeted by Midtown's skyline piercing through the foliage. These towers, slim as reeds, seem to act as colossal pillars that support the very sky. To Leonard, they appear so fragile, as if a mere breath could scatter them like wishes from a dandelion's pappus. He imagines a cityscape filled with these ethereal spires, wondering whether such a realm would resemble a bustling metropolis or a mystical cavern, with icy pinnacles emerging from the earth.

Later that evening, after their stressful family outing, George's plans a special date in the city just for him and Patti. While the road trip primarily catered to Leonard, it was also a chance for Patti to break away from the growing weariness and discontent shadowing her life. As they prepare to step out, George sets up the boys with pizza and his iPad. He made sure to download a couple of episodes of Friends before the trip. Raphael pleads to let them go to the playground, but Patti insists they are not to leave the room by themselves while herself and George are away. With the pizza quickly devoured amidst the laughter from the show, George and Patti set off, leaving behind a scene of cozy domesticity.

"Do you think we have to stay here?" Raphael asks.

"Yes, Mom and Dad specifically said we should not go out by ourselves. You've seen this place, we would get lost."

"I won't get lost!" Raphael protests. "I have already memorized the whole map of the hotel."

Leonard looks at his brother with doubtful eyes. "Really? The whole thing?"

"Yes! Let's go explore the Sky Lobby Three, I think they have a full garden!" Leonard thinks for a few seconds. He does not want to get in trouble, but he can't pass up the opportunity for an adventure.

"Ok, but we have to be back in thirty minutes. If they catch us, we will be in a lot of trouble." The two make their way to a local elevator to reach Sky Lobby Two.

Before leaving the room, Leonard makes sure he has a key with him. The key looks like a regular house key, with a large pendant in a hexagonal shape with the room number embedded in a golden font. It feels more like a key from a highway motel than a hotel in the center of Manhattan. They step out, heading towards the elevator lobby, the thrill of their rule-breaking adventure sending a mix of excitement and nerves racing through Leonard's heart. Once they reach Sky Lobby Three, Raphael and Leonard find themselves amidst the gardens. Here, a winding lush path wraps around the floor, momentarily transporting them to a South American rainforest in the heart of the city. Leonard is confused by the sounds of birds and parrots, looking around, only to discover speakers cleverly hidden among the ferns, recreating the vibrant calls of the wild. Despite the gardens' intricate beauty, the boys' interest quickly wanes, pulling them back to the elevators.

"Let's keep exploring!" Raphael says with a burst of enthusiasm. Before Leonard can object, Raphael darts toward the elevators, slipping into the first one that opens. Leonard hurries after him, barely making it as the

doors snap shut. The elevator begins its ascent, but soon pauses, entering an elderly man who leans on his walking stick. He asks if the boys are heading down. "No, we go up!" Raphael declares in a poor but confident English. The old man chuckles and advises them to exit here and head for the elevators at the hall's end.

Following his advice, the boys dash out, running to the hallway's end, only to find themselves at a dead end. Surveying the area, they spot an open door, presumably leading to another set of elevators. They tread lightly towards it, discovering a new pair of elevator doors. These ones lack the ornate decoration of the others; its cold aluminum frame and stained carpet suggest a utility passage. "We shouldn't go here," Leonard cautions, but Raphael, driven by curiosity, presses on, calling the elevator. Inside, they're greeted by a number pad and a single button labeled "SEF3." Raphael, without hesitation, presses it, and the elevator begins its journey upward.

The doors open to a world apart from any other floor they've seen, a maze of ducts and vents suspended above, and an array of metal trays, towels, sheets, and cleaning supplies scattered around. They silently step into the hallway, their nerves briefly interrupted with intrigue.

"Where are we?" Leonard whispers, a mix of apprehension and awe in his voice.

"I don't know, but it looks fun," Raphael answers, his eyes lighting up with the thrill of the unknown as he leads the way deeper into their unexpected adventure.

Silently stepping out of the elevator, they turn left, sneaking as pint-sized spies on a secret mission down the hall. The first door looks bland—a closet perhaps. Peeking inside, they observe an orderly row of white linens arranged on shelves like books in a library. The rooms' pristine cleanliness reminds Leonard of the dreaded hospital, except for the occasional pile of untidy sheets and towels. At the heart of this linen sanctuary sits a large desk, housing a computer, a lamp, and some scattered books. He can't quite make out their titles but deduces from their similar color and size that they are all part of a single series. Seated at the desk was a housekeeper, peacefully asleep in her chair, seemingly undisturbed by the surrounding activity.

As they venture further, a loud crash echoes through the hallway, signaling their approach to the kitchen. They hear the sharp commands of a woman's voice, her tone as authoritative as a drill sergeant's. "Behind! I need two steaks out now! Where is the dressing for twelve? I asked three minutes ago! Focus! Come on! Let's pick it up, people!"

Leonard tugs at Raphael's arm, his voice barely a whisper, "We really should not be here, let's go back to the room. Please." Raphael pauses, considering Leonard's plea, yet curiosity propels him forward. In that moment of hesitation, the kitchen's revolving doors burst open. A woman, wearing a red apron and carrying two hefty trash bags, stands before them.

"What are you kids doing here? Are you lost?" She asks.

Leonard freezes in panic. Before he could mutter any sort of response, Raphael steps in and announces that they are waiting for their father in the lounge. The woman looks at them with suspicion but lets them continue on their way. Raphael's ability to make up stories and excuses on the spot is truly a skill to behold. He has gotten out of trouble from his parents, teachers, and others with his gift of lying and storytelling. The boys quickly walk down the hall and find shelter in a small room, out of the sight of the kitchen doors. They wait in silence and darkness for the cook to finish her rounds, and when they no longer hear the sounds of swinging doors and crashing pots, they are safe. Raphael finds the light switch. A beam of bright white light blinds them momentarily, revealing a small utility room. It is a mechanical space of sorts, with various pipes and valves randomly traversing the space. In between the pipes, a couple of shelves hold what looks like more linens and various cleaning supplies. Raphael picks up a small bottle of shampoo. He recognizes the label as the same salmon pink color as the buttons in the elevator and the various logos he has seen around the building. It reads "One Hotel – Shampoo". Raphael puts the bottle in his pocket, a trophy of their exploration. The two boys quietly open the door and dash for the elevators from which they came. The door is open, waiting for them, as if it was complicit in their mission. They arrive back at Sky Lobby Three and slip away in the crowd.

Under the quiet night, Patti and George return to the room. Their turn on the lights and quietly tip toe through the living room to the bedroom in the back as to not wake up the boys. They do not know about their adventure, and will never find out. Leonard lays in bed quietly, listening to his parents whisper as they prepare a some hot drink, the kettle hissing on the stovetop. He closes his eyes and pictures the service floor. The eerie hallway, it's simple light wood doors, and tiled floors, all remind him of the hospital. It is strange to him how many places

give him this feeling of anxiety, a service corridor, a restaurant kitchen, a utility room, an airport. He pictures the cool white walls falling crumbling down on him. He thinks about how clouds must feel the same, seemingly weightless, but with a fierce density that can crush the soul, sparking a torrential flood or lightning strike. Leonard falls asleep picturing the apocalypse, with great waves crashing onto the pencil towers, making them fall like dominos across the cityscape.

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Located on the eighth floor, the ballroom faces east towards Seventh Avenue. Here, the Jansen family sits at a central table, enjoying a peaceful breakfast. Their stay includes a morning buffet from seven to eleven, offering scrambled eggs, bacon, pancakes, waffles, and muffins - all the American breakfast classics. Leonard and Raphael are busy eating, while Patti and George make plans for the day. They want to visit new parts of the city today: the West Village, Downtown, and Brooklyn. Using Patti's phone, they map out a route that will take them on a long walk through the city.

As they're finishing up, Raphael spots a grand baby piano in a corner. Lacquered in a green coat to match the room's wallpaper and carpet, the piano could serve as decoration as well as an instrument for entertainment. He goes over, plays a few notes to test it, then starts into a classical piece. The room's chatter quiets, everyone's attention placed towards the boy. As he finishes his piece, a moment of complete silence is finally broken by an eruption of cheer and applause. Raphael joins his family again to finish his orange juice. Though he can be a bit troublesome, Raphael has a real talent for music. At just eight years old, he knows many classical pieces by heart and has even played with orchestras in the Netherlands.

Leonard and Raphael start their day by carefully selecting essentials for their adventure: a disposable camera to capture fleeting moments, a cereal bar for quick energy, a scrapbook and pens for memories, a phone charger and a large, intricately folded city map they picked up from the hotel's little shop. As they step outside, they're greeted by sunshine and a soft breeze, a nice change from the city smells of asphalt and hot dogs.

Their day is filled with endless walking and discovering new sights, leaving them both exhilarated and exhausted. Returning to their temporary haven, the hotel room offers a brief moment of rest before they dive into the evening's busy agenda: a live basketball game followed by a pizza dinner on the vibrant streets of Broadway. Madison Square Garden, just a short walk from their hotel, is lit up in brown and blue under the night sky, announcing a New York Knicks game night.

Entering the arena, they're immediately enveloped in an electric sea of anticipation. Fans around them are a whirlwind of energy, chanting and buzzing for the upcoming clash against the formidable Los Angeles Clippers. Leonard, following in his parents closely, initially feels out of his element amidst the boisterous crowd, their cheers deafening in the cavernous space. Yet, their seats, high in the bleachers, offer a surprisingly clear view of the basketball court below. Overhead, the arena's banners display legends of the team, next to which the largest TV screen Leonard's has ever seen flashes vibrant highlights from the Knicks' previous showdowns, each basket and dunk accentuated with dramatic sound effects.

As the game starts, Leonard begins to enjoy the lively, infectious atmosphere. Though the Knicks don't clinch a victory, the thrill of the game and the collective spirit of the fans leave the family with a memorable imprint of their first experience into the heart of American sports culture.

After leaving the stadium, they walk through Midtown Manhattan to reach Times Square and Broadway. Amongst the multiple theaters, they find the restaurant "John's Pizza", their stop for the evening. The entrance is small, with a busy bar and several seats for those waiting for a table. They wait in this space for about 20 minutes before their buzzer rings, announcing their table is ready. Crossing the threshold into the restaurant, the space is vastly different, a massive room, a former theater, with tables scattered across. On the former stage, a large piece of cloth hangs from the rafter, depicting a drawn panorama of the city. Leonard notices that the drawing is old, with the Metropolitan missing, and the twin towers still standing tall Downtown. Before the pizzas arrive, Leonard takes the time to explore the whole restaurant, going upstairs to find a beautifully adorned space with red carpet and gold handrailing. It is hard to imagine such a space behind the dingy bar they waited in.

They spend the rest of the evening strolling around Time Square. On the main plaza, a crowd is gathered around a group of street performers. Flipping over spectators and dancing energetically, the group attracts loud cheers and applause. A little further down towards the M&M's store, a Spiderman and Mickey Mouse are arguing over

the busy street corner. Between them, on the street, a sewer vent is fuming white smoke that slowly creeps into the nightscape. In the distance, Leonard can hear the slow melody of Frank Sinatra's New York New York play, adding a slightly cheesy vibe to the already absurd scene. Leonard admires the drama unfold, smiling.

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Maria walks into the Boutique Hotel room to find an abomination. The floor is littered with purple sheets, a drawer is flipped over spilling complimentary water bottles all over the carpet. The curtains, torn from their rails, are conspicuously stained. In the bathroom, the horrors continue, an empty shampoo bottle abandoned in the sink, a toilet clogged and brimming with vomit, and a bathtub overflowing, water seeping across the tiles. Without hesitation, Maria steps back and promptly informs the head housekeeper. Such extreme situations call for a specialized deep cleaning team and an assessment of the damage. The guests responsible for this disarray will face a significant fine from the Boutique Hotel Segment.

Resuming her duties, Maria moves on to her standard routine, attending to a dozen rooms per shift, allocating roughly twenty minutes to each. Her work spans across both the Boutique and Chain segments, and occasionally, she's assigned to the Day Hotel segment, where rooms require cleaning twice daily. Her cart, a mobile supply station, carries a laundry basket, a trash can, a couple pairs fresh sets of sheets, towels, and an assortment of room and bathroom amenities. Among these essentials, Maria includes a unique touch: a small dish towel folded into the shape of a dragonfly. This gesture, purely voluntary and not officially part of her duties, brings a special charm to each room. While it's a small addition, feedback from guests suggests it's a delightful detail that adds warmth and welcome to their stay.

After her day's work, Maria heads to the service floor to organize her supplies for the next day. The storage area is meticulously divided by type, each condiment and linen in its designated place. She begins by placing the used sheets in a large basket outside the storage room. Inside, she navigates through shelves packed with fresh linens, selecting enough for her next shift, and laying them carefully on the cart. She repeats this process with the towels, arranging a few beneath the linens. The next task is restocking condiments. While most segments opt for the One Hotel brand for shampoo, soap, and other accessories, some, like the Boutique Segment reserve their own supply. With her cart fully prepared and distinguishable by a small red ribbon tied to its side, she leaves it in the hallway among others.

The process of setting up a housekeeping cart is a personal ritual, distinct for every housekeeper. From a distance, these carts might appear identical, but a closer look reveals subtle differences that reflect the preferences and habits of their preparers. On one cart, shampoos might be placed on the left side of the tray, while on another, linens are placed beneath the towels instead of above. Each cart bears a unique marker, a signature of sorts, allowing housekeepers to swiftly recognize their own amid the sea of similar-looking carts, like a piece of luggage on a bustling airport carousel, with a ribbon, sticker, or unique tag.

Maria then proceeds to the locker rooms to change out of her uniform. The space is surprisingly elegant, reminiscent of a luxurious bathhouse in Eastern Europe. Turquoise tiles grace the floors, complemented by darker blue-green lockers, each bearing a golden plaque with an employee's name. Maria's locker is towards the back, close to the showers, which feature sleek silver finishes and dark green curtains. Despite the inviting space, she prefers the comfort of her own home for showers.

Her journey home takes her to the Bronx, the northernmost borough in New York City. The commute, averaging an hour each way, is surprisingly enjoyable for Maria. She values the subway ride, observing the transient population of the city, each absorbed in their unique realities. The subway's route, an intricate route through the city's skeleton, offers new discoveries daily, from fleeting expressions of commuters to the minutiae of urban decay. Maria once encountered a description of the subway as a time machine, a concept that resonated deeply with her. It described the journey as a passage through a time portal, where senses are muted and distances scrambled. In the subway, as opposed to a car or bus, orientation and place become a puzzle, only solvable by the station's signs. When the subway emerges above ground, it transforms into a panoramic voyage over the city's vast landscape. For Maria, the subway isn't just a means of transport; it's a point of transition, a moment of disconnect from the mundane, offering a perspective of the city that continually captivates and renews her spirit.

She arrives at her apartment in the Bronx as the evening settles in. She shares a modest two-bedroom flat with her sister Angela, who is employed at a boutique store in Downtown Manhattan. Ascending to the sixteenth floor by elevator, she steps into their home and places her bag aside. Angela is in the kitchen, busy preparing the evening's meal.

“Hola, I’m making pesto pasta.”

Exhausted, Maria collapses onto the couch and reaches for the stereo. Despite their tight budget, the sisters had pooled their resources to invest in a quality sound system. They share a love for music, though their musical preferences often clash. Maria is a fan of hip hop, while Angela is a devotee of classical music. This difference in taste has been a point of contention since their childhood, escalating now that they live under the same roof. Today, Maria opts for an MF Doom CD, letting the apartment resonate with the artist's iconic beats and ingenious lyrics—the old-school hip hop scene of New York. The CD player was a strategic decision, making sure they would not monopolize the music from a single streaming account. The analogue method required diplomacy.

Angela continues to focus on the pasta, silently protesting Maria's music selection, while Maria sets the table. In the midst of their busy lives, they make it a priority to share at least one meal together daily, a practice that grounds them amidst the fast-paced rhythm of city life. They sit down, say Grace, and begin to eat.

"How was the shift?" Angela asks as they begin their meal.

"Dreadful. Worst looking room I have ever seen today. They might need to power wash it or something," Maria replies, the fatigue and frustration evident in her voice.

"Gosh, that sounds awful. My day was pretty decent, thankfully. It wasn't slow, and thankfully, no difficult customers. Oh, and guess what? I met this woman who actually works in fashion. Like, the real deal. I asked her so many questions. I thought I would scare her off, but she didn't mind. We chatted for quite a bit. Paul wasn't thrilled since he had to cover the store mostly by himself, but he'll survive. Honestly, I'd kill to work in a place like Soho, surrounded by all the big names like Louis Vuitton, Prada, Fendi..."

Angela was a sort of diva, the type to obsess over the latest trends, albeit without the means or the drive to truly pursue them. She once fancied herself a stylist, claiming she had the knack to transform anyone's wardrobe. Her ambitions led her to Parsons Fashion School on a scholarship, but she left after just one semester, finding it hard to mesh with her peers. Maria, for her part, feels a mix of frustration and envy towards Angela. She knows her sister as smart and ambitious, yet consistently throwing away opportunities if they fell out of her comfort zone.

Maria's academic journey was fraught with challenges, notably her struggle with dyslexia—a condition that, in Harlem at the time, was not yet recognized as a learning disability. This led to her repeating grades and lagging behind. Beyond her impairment, Maria lacked motivation in general. Her teenage years were spent in solitude, either nose deep in novels, glued to the television, or lost in music within the confines of her room.

On occasion, Maria ventured out into the city alone, wandering aimlessly. She found a peculiar liking to observing the flow of city life from a bench on 130th street, amidst the hum of delis and markets. She was drawn to the mundane rhythms of urbanites. A woman anxiously waiting at a red light, only to dash across the street as soon as it turned green, and then pausing to catch her breath before moving on—a vignette of city life that held no significance yet captivated Maria completely.

On pleasant days, her explorations took her to Central Park. There, perched on a boulder, she would lose herself in the contrast of the city's skyline against the natural backdrop, a sight less cluttered with skinny glass skyscrapers back then. Accompanied by her Walkman and a notebook, she wrote her observations and thoughts.

"A boy slipped and fell. He got hurt and started to cry in a language I don't understand. His parents ran over to him to get him up. They picked him up, yelled at him for climbing and pulled his arm to drag him off into the park. I don't want to be that parent."

After dinner, Maria heads to her room to spend some time reading before she decides it's time to sleep.

...

The following morning, Maria and Angela share a walk to the subway, grabbing a bagel and coffee along the way—the quintessential New York breakfast of a toasted everything bagel with cream cheese and onions. They step onto a subway car, sharing the space with a group of lively schoolchildren. While the kids' boisterous excitement seems to irritate some of the morning commuters, Angela and Maria can't help but smile at their innocence. Maria parts ways with Angela at Penn Station after a quick hug, then navigates through the maze of tunnels to catch the staff elevator from the underground Gimbel's Passage, taking her directly to the third service floor. Changing into her uniform, she spots a familiar pile of clothes on the bench.

“Hey Ines,” Maria calls out.

Ines emerges from behind the changing curtains, dressed in a white button-down shirt and black tie, her hair neatly concealed under a burka that blends into her collar.

“Hey Maria, haven’t seen you in a while. Morning shift?”

“Yeah, but I’ll be out by four.”

“That sounds great! We should grab dinner sometime soon and catch up,” Ines suggests as she stores her things in her locker and leaves for her shift. Ines works as a server in the Boutique Hotel Segment’s specialty restaurant. As the only Muslim woman on the staff at One Hotel, she sometimes encounters difficulties with both patrons and co-workers. New York is celebrated for its diversity, yet it stills has ways to go before truly embracing inclusivity across all religions and communities. Maria, too, understands the immigrant experience firsthand. She moved to New York from Guatemala with her parents when she was very young, retaining little memory of her life before the city. She only became an American citizen the previous year, whereas her sister, born in the U.S., was an automatic citizen. At home, the sisters communicate in a blend of Spanish and English, a unique dialect that confuse visitors.

Maria’s shift today returns her to the Boutique Hotel Segment, and she braces herself, still rattled by yesterday’s disarray. To her relief, the first room she enters is in impeccable order: the bed is made, and the guest’s belongings are tidily arranged in the cabinet. The king-sized bed dominates the room, complemented by a small marble-top table beside it. Built-in cabinets merge seamlessly with the walls, adorned in sleek blue wallpaper. The following room presents a mild disorder, nothing Maria hasn’t handled before. She efficiently remakes the bed, refreshes the linens, and replenishes the toiletries, not forgetting to leave her customary dragonfly towel. The subsequent rooms are all reasonably tidy and well-kept.

Upon entering the seventh room, however, Maria stumbles upon another spill—a bottle of liquor has been knocked over onto the floor. While not nearly as daunting as the chaos she faced the day before, the mess still exceeds her capacity for a quick cleanup. She reaches out to the head housekeeper to report the situation. Encountering such issues twice prompts Maria to recommend that the Boutique Hotel Manager consider stricter guest policies. For a hotel of this caliber, maintaining high standards of cleanliness and order is not just expected—it’s essential, and to Maria, anything less is simply not acceptable.

Maria’s favorite spot in the tower is a unique room on the seventy-sixth floor, tucked away in the northeast corner with an unparalleled view, directly facing the Empire State Building. This room isn’t just like any other; it curves outward, offering a bit more space and presenting a breathtaking panorama that stretches towards the iconic Art Deco monument, encouraging guests to peer out into the urban landscape. Unlike the standard rooms, this special space features a glass façade that juts out slightly, forming a transparent nook over the city. While guests delight in this architectural quirk, it proves a challenge for the maintenance team, who must dangle precariously to clean the underside of this glass ledge. Beyond the already opulent space, Maria knows the secret that makes this room even more extraordinary. Hidden within the built-in closet, a discreet light switch transforms the atmosphere into something out of a spy movie: the lights dim to a soft purple glow, and a jazzy tune emanates from concealed speakers in the ceiling.

After her shift, Maria silently returns her supplies, meticulously readying her cart for the following day. Exiting the building, she offers a respectful nod to Roberta, the hotel manager stationed at the front entrance. It astonishes Maria that Roberta, overseeing such a vast establishment, takes a moment to acknowledge even the housekeeping staff. Roberta’s thoughtful gesture of gifting Maria flowers on her birthday is a testament to the warmth and appreciation she extends to her team. For many, the role of a housekeeper might not carry the allure of luxury or prestige, but for Maria, it’s a position of silent significance. Housekeepers stand as silent witnesses to the diverse tapestry of life within the city’s walls, their observant and gentle nature allowing them a unique insight into the personal lives of the guests. They are the unseen caretakers, guardians, piecing together the story of each guest’s stay, all while maintaining a level of anonymity that Maria values deeply. This invisibility, a stark reminder of the social divide, does not deter her; rather, she embraces the opportunity to blend into the background, a silent guardian navigating the corridors of the tower.

...

A brisk wind tumbles from the east. On deck, Marcus looks onto the city lights ahead, glimmering between silk like clouds. New York City at night is an iconic vision of human engineering. The representation of a civilization, millions of people over the span of hundreds of years building up this small piece of bedrock. As the ship docks into the yard in Staten Island, Marcus prepares his bag for his two-night stay in the city.

Enlisting in the Navy a year previous, Marcus is tired of being at seas. He is not a maritime soul, nor does he have any interest in the military. This path was the only way for him to fund his future in engineering school. He was good in school, but not spectacular enough to merit a scholarship, and had to defer for his military service, which would in two years cover his tuition fees. Many amongst his crewmates had similar fates, enlisting for a chance for superior education, bidding their time in the army for a chance at a better education.

As the USS Normandy reaches the docks, Marcus leans over the port side railing, looking onto Downtown Manhattan. This is not his first time in New York City, but he cannot get enough of the view. Originating from a small town in Pennsylvania, the Metropolis looks like a scene from a sci-fi movie, like *Bladerunner* or *Akira*. The ship slowly backs into the dock, dredging through the calm harbor, ripping its waters apart as it settles into its bay.

“Docking complete. Have a good weekend y’all.”

Marcus and a couple other sailors walk off the boat and find the nearest bus stop. The boat sits still behind them, a true maritime building standing tall above the Staten Island suburbs. Still in uniform, they stand out like a Jean Paul Gautier commercial. Waiting for the bus, they discuss their plans for the weekend. With their Navy budget, they cannot afford much in the city and decide to focus on one stand out activity.

“How about a Mets game? I think they are playing tomorrow.” asks one of the sailors, Jared. He is a tall man with an impressive beard for his age. His mature appearance often gets him mistaken for the captain, awarding him the nickname ‘Cap. Jared is in fact one of the youngest of the group, still finding himself. His latest experiment in self-expression is through an old pocket watch which he pulls out on any occasion.

“It’s 8:20, we should make it to the Boarding House by 9pm.”

The bus cruises along, its wheels steadily rumbling against the cracked concrete, carrying only a few passengers. Among them are a few older souls, making their way back to the city. As the landscape shifts from the suburban stretches of Staten Island to the urban blocks of Brooklyn, Marcus immerses himself in the dissonance. He contemplates his tangled relationship with this city, a colossal, bustling metropolis that is as daunting as it is magnetic. Its streets, alive with chaos and charm, have never particularly attracted him up to now. Yet, despite its enormity, its exorbitant cost of living, the lurking dangers, and the grime that adorns its face like battle scars, there's an indefinable allure that tugs at him with the gravitational pull of a star, drawing him in, closer with each visit. It's a city that seduces, luring the hearts of young and innocent wanderers on their quest of self-discovery.

As they reach the Brooklyn Subway, Marcus and his crew find themselves in a car teeming with life, a microcosm of the city itself. Their military uniforms set them apart, their posture as steadfast and unyielding as marble caryatids, amidst a sea of faces. Among the throng, a little girl's curiosity is piqued by the sight of Marcus, her gaze fixed on his pristine white coat and the golden belt tightly fastened around his waist. With a gentle smile, Marcus reaches into his pocket, drawing out a small, golden pin shaped like the USS Normandy. It's a token he carries with fervor, a nod to the vessel that's been both home and hearth. Offering it to the little girl, he shares a piece of his world, a world of isolation and fraternity.

As the sun dimmed below the skyline, the crew approached the grand entrance of the Metropolitan, marking their arrival just 9pm. With their luggage in tow, they moved as one, a unified front stepping into the building to the rhythm of their shared purpose. Upon entering, they made their way straight to the Navy Center, nestled on the ground floor, to complete their check-in process.

The routine is mundane, IDs presented, detailed information shared, and ship logs handed over, all part of the ritual that welcomed them back to civilization. After the formalities, they ascended to the barracks 12th floor, their steps echoing in a hallway bathed in the soft glow of lights that seeped through a glass wall adorned with the hollow stares of empty busts. The Boarding House, with its insistence on displaying uniforms on this trophy



wall, rarely saw the collection of white coats it so desired, given the daily necessity of washing and ironing them. Instead, the busts stand naked and cold, representing sailors of a bygone era.

Marcus, upon finding his room to be shared with three others, quickly claimed a top bunk by the window, granting him a night-time view of Madison Square Garden, a sight that offered a silent promise of adventure. Once settled, he changed out of his uniform and ventured back to Sky Lobby One, eager to reunite with his friends over dinner.

“We should just go to the cafeteria, it’s cheap, but it closes in thirty minutes, so we have to hurry.”

Their voices mingled with the buzz of conversations as they joined the rest of the boat’s crew, sharing stories and plans for the upcoming weekend. Marcus found himself momentarily adrift in thought, his gaze fixed on a lone pea on his plate as if it held the secrets of the cosmos. After a quiet meal, he made his way to the front desk, fetching a copy of the New York Times to catch up on the world. The headlines spoke of inflation spikes, tech scandals, celebrity weddings – the usual fare. On page eight, he finds an article about the city’s newest park development, opening in Queens. Adjacent to the Brooklyn Museum, the park boasted of its new features, including a fountain, outdoor gym, and curiously, a statue of Michael Jordan.

His reading was cut short by Jaden’s call to adventure. Together, they stepped out into the vibrant streets of Manhattan, a band of sailors in search of nightlife. Despite being underage, they knew of pubs that turned a blind eye, welcoming them as an act of patriotic fraternity. Their laughter and chatter filled 9th Avenue, a testament to their youthful spirit and the fleeting freedom they savored on dry land.

...

The next morning, Marcus finds himself waking up to the heat of a fever. While his friends set off to immerse themselves in the city’s pulse, he’s left behind, isolated in his room, with only his thoughts and a view of the street for company. Propped up on his bed, he tries to find interest in the world outside his window like a modern Jeff Jeffreys, but the fog of illness blurs everything into a distant haze.

Across the street, on the plaza, a woman sits with her legs crossed, her frustration palpable even from afar as she navigates through a heated phone call. Nearby, a young boy, oblivious to her irritation, delights in the simple joy of running circles around a small olive tree laughing. She casts annoyed glances at the boy, who remains blissfully unaware of her displeasure. Not far from this scene, a street vendor’s stall sends up a plume of smoke, and even through his clouded senses, Marcus imagines he can smell the savory scent of doner kebab wafting through the air.

Seeking some form of connection, Marcus reaches for his backpack and pulls out a pocket notebook. With a pen in hand, he begins to pen a message to his late father, a man who once shared with him a fondness for the city’s endless stories.

*Hey Dad,*

*I’m in New York today, thought you might like that. You always had a thing for this city. Shame I’m down with a fever, and we’re setting sail tomorrow. It feels the same around here, though. The same faces, the same smells, the same things. Yesterday, I saw someone walking with a slice from Joey’s, and it made me think of you. But you know, I think I’ve had enough. I don’t see myself coming back here. I...*

The shrill cry of the fire alarm pierces the night, slicing through the calm like a sharp blade. In the confusion that follows, Marcus finds himself swept up in a current of people, all moving aggressively towards the exit. Still in his pajamas, he joins the exodus, navigating the staff staircase that snakes down from the heights of the tower. They emerge onto 7th Avenue, a river of bodies spilling into the streets, their faces upturned in a collective gaze of horror.

Above them, a few floors up, a monstrous inferno rages. A beast of flame and smoke with roars echoing off the surrounding buildings as it devours the structure. The black smoke billows from its spout, a dark cloud that swallows the glass façade in a cloak of annihilation. Marcus stands amidst the chaos, the heat of the blaze caressing his face. He watches the carnage, a silent witness to the fury unleashed.

The wail of sirens soon breaks the spell, a crescendo that grows with each passing second until the street is lined with a fleet of fire trucks. Twenty or so, they converge on the scene, their crews armored in iconic black and yellow, ready to battle the giant. As they rush into the riot, the crowd is ushered back, a mass of civilians caught between awe and fear. Fever clouding his mind, Marcus observes with a detached calmness. He looks over the crowd and sees that there are surprisingly few people, making them seem even smaller next to the burning tower.

The Metropolitan, with four refuge floors strategically placed for such crises, now faces a test of its very design. From an open window, desperate shouts for help break through the chaos, a group of people signaling their desperation and fear. Then, as if angered by their defiance, the fire surges with newfound vigor, a volcanic explosion of flame that races upwards. Fueled by the wind, the flames ascend the building's exterior, glass windows shattering under the assault. The skyscrapers that line the streets, majestic in their stature, now seem to funnel the wind, aiding the fire's rampage. In this moment, the city's skyline, usually a symbol of human achievement, appears almost complicit in the devastation unfolding at the Metropolitan.

Shortly after, another group bursts out onto the street, their faces hidden behind hands and cloths, scarred by their encounter with the raging inferno. Emerging into the night, they cough and cry, a desperate scramble for safety. Goldy, Lionel, and Manuel arrive at 7th Avenue in unity. Exhausted, Goldy falls to the ground. Amidst the chaos, he had dashed to his apartment in a valiant effort to rescue his son, with Manuel's assistance. There on the sidewalk, warmed by the heat of the fire, they share a tight embrace, a small moment of solace amidst despair.

Holly spots Goldy and runs to him, her tears flowing freely as she collapses into his embrace. She had escaped from the Love Hotel section just in time but found herself utterly alone, her coworkers nowhere in sight, navigating the perilous escape on her own.

"We need to get underground. It's the safest place right now," Manuel declares. With determined steps, he guides them into the LIRR (Long Island Railroad) tunnel beneath Penn Station, leading towards Moynihan Hall. Marcus, gripped by an unfamiliar surge of fear, tags along with this band of survivors, seeking refuge from the unfolding disaster.

The night is draped in an eerie glow, resembling a Californian sunset, as orange hues paint the sky. The distant sound of sirens fades into the background, dwarfed by the roar of the flames. The fire climbs higher, devouring the building's structure, its glass and steel melting under the intense heat. A large shard of glass plunges from above, striking a firetruck with such force it's left in ruins. Inside the lobby, amidst the turmoil, a receptionist frantically gathers files, fiercely guarding the hotel's records, even as firefighters attempt to pull her to safety. The fire burns into the dawn, inching its way up the building's exterior. With the arrival of morning, a thick cloud of ash and despair blankets the city, casting a shadow over the day's first light.

...

In the early quiet of the morning, Marcus finds himself seated on a bench within the vast expanse of Moynihan Hall. He's surrounded by those touched by the tragedy—victims nursing their wounds and first responders attending to them. Despite the lingering chaos, a hushed solemnity pervades the station, a collective pause as the city reflects on the ordeal. For the first time since welcoming its first travelers in the early twentieth century, the station halts all movement, standing still, silently mourning the Metropolitan and the city's shared grief. Outside, a lone figure finds solace on a pillar, his gaze fixed on the dwindling flames that now inhale the tower's crown. In a moment of homage, he plays MF Doom's "Doomsday" from a small speaker, a tribute to New York and its fallen icon.

*When I was led to you. I knew you were the one for me. I swear the whole world could feel you, MC.*

Marcus's illness has faded away, leaving in its stead reflection and regret. As a member of the navy, he was helpless during the evacuation, scared and confused like every other civilian. His solitude is abruptly ended by Jared's arrival, who rushes in with open arms and a flood of relief.

"Marcus! Thank God you're safe. We were worried sick. We could see the fire from the Lower East Side. The city is completely shut down, so we had to walk back. We tried reaching you, but couldn't get through."

Jared's words reveal sincere concern and relief. Nearby, their crewmate Matt is in a tense exchange with an NYPD officer, eager to reclaim his belongings from the now-scarred building. The officer stands firm, stressing the danger still posed by the fire.

"That's ridiculous! We're due back for duty tomorrow! We're Navy—surely we should be allowed in. The fire has moved past our floor!"

Marcus intervenes, guiding Matt away with a firm hand and a stern reminder of the gravity of their situation and the sacrifices made by the first responders.

"Enough, Matt. You're out of line. We owe these people our lives. Our stuff is gone, we'll have to accept it. Let's just get in touch with the base and see what comes next."

The officer nods acknowledging Marcus's intervention, then returns to his duties, while the crew deliberates on their next steps. Jared's phone, the last lifeline to the outside world, clings to a precious fifteen percent battery life. They first try to contact one of the fleet officers, then the first mate, but with no luck. All communication lines are severed, a security measure across all of Midtown.

Amidst their debate, Kilian, another crewmate, offers Marcus a small rag. Marcus's face, unbeknownst to him, is streaked with the remnants of the night's terror, a mix of soot and dust. Cleaning his face, he looks at the blackened rag, confronting the residue of his escape.

Resolved to find their way back, the crew set their sights on Brooklyn, hopeful for a ferry that might carry them to their naval base. A long journey on foot awaits them...

...

As the sun rises through the concrete foliage of the city's skyscrapers, Ruby is sitting on the curb off 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 37<sup>th</sup> Street. Her palms are raw, her clothing covered in black soot, as she looks down at her leather shoes, she lets out a harsh sigh. The air feels heavy, pressing down on her with an invisible force, pinning her to the asphalt as if denying her the strength to get up.

In the wake of the fire's fury, Ruby, alongside her staff and a hoard of guests, was ushered to a refuge floor beneath the Cloud Lobby. For hours, they remained trapped, the dread of the encroaching flames growing with each passing moment as the fire climbed higher. Just before dawn, firefighters carved a path through the inferno for their escape. Amidst the desperate descent, humanity was lost to panic; the mass of people became a relentless tide, overwhelming any semblance of order in their frantic escape.

She is held momentarily on the third refuge floor, a brief respite in the chaos, yet one that exposed her to the depth of despair as some chose the void over the relentless advance of the flames.

Finally, outside, Ruby and Gen, a cook and her sole remaining companion from the staff, found themselves adrift a few blocks from the catastrophe, enveloped in a silence heavy with unspeakable truths. Gen, with a phone in hand, its screen shattered like their reality, attempts to call Manuel, to piece together their scattered team. Ruby can only watch as Gen's efforts to reach out fail.

"Let's get out of here. I can't just sit here," Ruby finally breaks the silence, a decisive edge to her voice. Genevieve reminds her of the instructions they were given, to wait for an officer. But Ruby's resolve is unshaken. "I don't care. I need to get away. You can stay, but I'm leaving." With that, she stands and strides with determination towards the line of NYPD cars cordoning off the street. A brief exchange with an officer later, and they're allowed to pass, moving northward towards Times Square.

"Where are we headed?" Gen's asks with uncertainty.

"Central Park. I just... I need some fresh air," Ruby replies, her voice flat, almost without emotion, as they journey in silence. Their path takes them past landmarks that feel both familiar and alien—Radio City, the vibrant lights of Times Square, and the theaters of Broadway. They weave through the early suits of office workers on Fifth Avenue, polished and tailored unlike their soot covered faces from their harrowing escape. The city around them carries on, oblivious to their pain, a routine morning unfolding as they tread through streets that will forever hold a different meaning.

Reaching Central Park, they notice a crowd forming on the tall boulders, watching the distant fire's last stand atop the tower—a solemn witness to the Metropolitan's fall. Deeper into the park, they find a wide, open space, and finally collapse onto the cool grass. Lying there, they gaze up at a sky painted with the hues of dawn, orange and red clouds drifting above. A gentle rain of soot descends, covering the green in an amber blanket. Overwhelmed, but unable to express it, tears begin to stream down their eyes as they drift into a fitful sleep, the events of the night weighing heavily on their hearts.

...

Ruby wakes up to find Gen on her phone again, this time on a call with Manuel. He and a few others had managed an early escape and were now regrouping in Central Park. As Ruby acclimates to the morning light, she observes that their solitary spot has transformed overnight. New faces have emerged in the clearing, carving out makeshift camps with whatever belongings they managed to salvage—blankets, baskets, and an assortment of personal items.

The park, now a canvas of survival stories, witnesses the arrival of NYPD trucks, cops flooding the space with a semblance of order amidst the aftermath. Officers step onto the grass, weaving through the groups with an air of shared fatigue. As the encampment swells with survivors and police officers, news vans skirt the perimeter, capturing the breadth of the tragedy. Though neither Ruby nor Genevieve were residents of the Metropolitan, they choose to stay. Bonded by the trauma, leaving their newfound companions behind felt like abandoning their beliefs, their values. Ruby, seeking some sort of comfort, lets her hair down, discards her blazer for a seat on the ground.

Their contemplation is gently interrupted by the arrival of Manuel, Goldy, Lionel, and Holly. Greetings are exchanged in the form of tight, meaningful hugs. Goldy then recounts their escape, his voice a steady narrative amidst the chaos that had ensued.

"I was on the Ground Floor when the fire broke out. From what I understood, it started in the Casino. I don't know how, but it trapped a lot of people in there. Everyone was evacuated, but I had to get Lionel, so I found a way up through the service stairs. By the time I got there, they had already evacuated our floor, so I went down to the refuge floor. There, I found Lionel with Manuel. He woke up Lionel and got him out, stayed with him the whole time. I will always be in his debt for that. When we finally got to exit, I told Lionel to get between me and Manuel and hold on to us both. I had to bulldoze my way through the crowd, it was insane. We got out, and Holly found us. She was alone so I told her to come with us. Another kid came with us, I think a military guy, but we lost him in Moynihan Hall. We were kept there for a couple of hours, then we finally were able to leave. Holly had the idea to go to the piers for cell service, and that's when your friend finally got hold of us."

As Ruby absorbs Goldy's recounting, she notices a prominent gash marking his arm.

"How did this happen? Have you had someone look at it?" His nonchalance is almost surprising, attributing the wound to a shard of glass from an exploding window, a minor detail in the night's chaos.

Their exchange is abruptly overshadowed by the thrum of a helicopter descending upon them, stirring up the dust and soot into a blinding storm. It lands with authority in the clearing, discharging men in suits, surrounded by police, into the brightening day. Among them, Ruby spots a familiar figure—a Senator of New York, moving with purpose towards the assembled news crews, ready to frame the narrative of the night's terror.

The media's lenses turn towards the survivors, casting them as the backdrop to a story being recounted by someone who was not there. Ruby's heart races, indignation boiling over at the thought of their ordeal being packaged for casual entertainment. She's on the brink of confrontation when Manuel's grasp anchors her.

"It's not worth it. I feel the same way, but they are going to make this coverage anyways. Let's forget about them and focus on us." His words are a gentle reminder of their shared frustration but urging focus on their own circle rather than the circus unfolding.

"Here, eat. I doubt you have eaten anything since last night." He rips a piece for Ruby and Gen, then one more for Lionel. As the adults are talking, Lionel remains silent, a young soul overwhelmed by the events, his gaze lost to the lingering smoke above.

As the day matures, aid arrives in the form of trucks laden with food, blankets, and necessities. A taco truck rolls up, its operator offering them a free meal, a small comfort in the wake of upheaval. As they navigate their next steps over this unexpected meal, plans begin to form. Goldy intends to take Lionel to family in the Bronx, a temporary refuge while they assess their losses. Ruby and Genevieve offer to host Manuel and Holly, respectively, their bonds forged not by time but by shared adversity, a commitment to support each other through the days of recovery ahead.

As the day unfolds, the scent and sight of smoke linger in the air, a ghostly reminder of the fire that raged through the city. The Metropolitan, once a beacon of hospitality, now stands silent, its guests scattered in search of refuge.

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Goldy, Lionel, and Manuel step cautiously into the remnants of what was once Goldy's apartment. The walls, once painted in warm tones, are now blackened with soot, their surfaces cracked and peeling. The air is thick with the scent of smoke and dampness, a reminder of the fire that ravaged this place. They move through the space like explorers in a ruined city, each footstep kicking up small clouds of ash. A lampshade, oddly untouched, stands amidst the wreckage, a fragile survivor in the sea of destruction.

Lionel's breath catches as he enters his bedroom. The space is unrecognizable, his prized collection of sports memorabilia reduced to charred fragments. A baseball glove, once supple and worn from use, now sits rigid and brittle, its leather cracked like parched earth. The posters hang limply, the edges curled and blackened. Overwhelmed, Lionel turns away, the pain too fresh, too raw. He exits silently, the heavy door creaking as it closes behind him, leaving Goldy alone in the ruins.

Manuel's room is just as bad, though different in its particulars. The once-vibrant walls are stained with smoke, the patterns of the wallpaper barely visible through the layers of grime. Amidst the rubble, Manuel finds his guitar, its body scorched and strings broken, yet still recognizable as the instrument he once cherished. He picks it up painfully, the wood rough and splintered beneath his fingers. It's the only item that feels personal, a connection to the life that was abruptly cut short. With a heavy heart, they leave the apartments, escorted by the somber figures of NYPD officers, their footsteps echoing in the hollowed-out corridors.

Descending to the ground floor, the stark contrast of what the Metropolitan once was and what it has become hits them. The lobby, once a place of warmth with its plush carpets and gleaming chandeliers, is now a scene of discord. The air is filled with the sharp voices of disgruntled guests, their demands for refunds and explanations ricocheting off the marble walls. The grand desk, which once welcomed visitors with smiles and helpful hands, is now a battleground. Roberta, the manager, usually poised and composed, slips away unnoticed, leaving behind a trail of unanswered questions and disappointed stares.

The lobby, which had once been a sanctuary for weary travelers, now feels like a purgatory, a place where the community that briefly flourished has disintegrated into chaos. Guests mill around, their faces a mix of anger and confusion, their voices rising in frustration as they clamor for attention. The air, once perfumed with the scent of fresh flowers from the nearby arrangements, is now thick with the acidic smell of smoke and sweat. The high ceiling, adorned with intricate molding, seems to loom lower, pressing down on the gathered crowd.

As they cross the lobby, a couple stops Manuel, their frustration palpable. "Hey you! You work here, right? What's going on with our stuff? We have a flight this afternoon, and we haven't been compensated. What the hell is happening?"

Manuel meets their gaze, weariness weighing down his response. "Look around. We've lost everything. Can't you give us a moment to sort things out?"

The couple's impatience flares. "We don't have time to wait. This is absurd. How can this even be called a hotel?" The man steps forward, his posture hinting at confrontation.

Manuel inhales deeply, steadying himself before speaking. "See those staff members at the desk? They came back as soon as they were allowed. They didn't have to—they could have stayed away—but they returned because they care. And now, all they're getting in return is hostility. It's sickening. I wish you safe travels, but I have nothing more to say to you." With that, he turns away, his words lingering in the air. The man seems ready to argue, but Goldy's quiet, imposing presence stops him cold.

Outside, they find Lionel sitting on a bench, lost in thought. "To them, we're nothing. All they care about are their Louis Vuitton and Chanel."

Goldy, trying to stay positive, suggests they leave. "Ruby invited us over for a meal on the Lower East Side. Let's go." Together, they head towards Herald Square, seeking the subway's shelter from the darkness above.

When they arrive at Ruby's place, Gen and Holly are already there, each holding a glass of wine. The apartment is filled with the soothing scents of lavender and mint, a gentle breeze from an open window carrying the freshness of spring. Ruby's black cat perches on a small mantelpiece, its eyes watching the newcomers with curiosity. Ruby greets the boys with warm hugs, leading Lionel into the kitchen to help with lunch. Goldy and Manuel feel like they breathe again, letting out all the air from their lungs as if they had been holding it in since the fire.

They settle into the living room, recounting their recent experiences at the Metropolitan. They describe the unrecognizable apartments, the hollow corridors, the cold stairwells. They explain the chaos on the ground floor, advising the others to stay clear of the building for a few days, until the anger and frustration simmer down.

The day passes in a comforting haze of shared stories and tentative plans for the future. The atmosphere is surprisingly peaceful, filled with the genuine warmth of friendship. Later, Manuel suggests they head to a well-known bar on the Lower East Side, assuring Goldy that it's family-friendly, with a good selection of non-alcoholic drinks.

The bar, tucked away beneath the city's busy streets, is a hidden gem. Its entrance is almost unnoticeable, a simple door leading down a narrow staircase. Inside, the space is well lit, the walls covered in random memorabilia describing the history of the city. The ceiling is low, the air thick with the scent of beer and old wood. A couple of scarlet red booths are arranged around a small pool table, where a band of girls are deep in a competitive game. Overhead, a couple speakers quietly revisit classic rock tracks. The music is soothing, though not particularly memorable. Manuel leans back, his eyes half-closed, listening to the quiet mumble of conversation around him. As they settle, Ruby spots a familiar face.

"Hailey?" Ruby calls out, recognizing the bartender she met at the Jukebox. Hailey's surprise quickly turns to recognition, and she rushes from behind the bar to embrace Ruby.

"Hey! Oh my God, are you okay? Were you there during the fire? I can't believe it. And is that Goldy? How are you all holding up?"

"We're okay now. We all made it out. It's been a tough day, but we'll manage," Goldy replies with a faint smile.

Hailey takes a break and joins the group at a booth in the corner. They order a round of beers and an apple juice for Lionel. As they settle in, Hailey eagerly asks about their experiences. With each retelling, the events of the night grow more vivid—the fire more intense, the destruction more absolute.

Ruby changes the subject, turning to Hailey. "How have you been? How did you land this gig?"

Hailey shares her story, her voice a mix of relief and nostalgia. "I know Jake, the owner. He offered me a job after I left the Jukebox. It's different here, but honestly, I prefer the bar scene to the Metropolitan, rest in peace. Do you think it will ever recover?"

Goldy exhales, uncertainty clouding his gaze. "I don't know," he murmurs. The full extent of the fire's damage is still unknown, pending a structural analysis that none of them have seen. Despite this, a heavy sense of despair hangs over them; the once-vibrant tower of the Metropolitan now looms like a ghost, its shadow marking the city with the scars of catastrophe.

As evening falls, Goldy and Lionel decide to head back to the Bronx, leaving the others to lose themselves in the city's nightlife. Ruby, Manuel, and Gen, not ready to end the night, wander through the streets until they're drawn to a jazz bar in the West Village by the soulful strains of a saxophone and the mellow thump of a bass.

They descend into the bar, a hidden retreat beneath the bustling streets, its walls painted black and covered in graffiti-like slogans. The space, reminiscent of a beer garden, is filled with long tables and benches surrounding a small stage where a live band plays generic yet comforting jazz tunes. The clack of pool balls and the shouts from foosball tables create a lively backdrop.

The trio settles at the edge of a bench, content to blend into the scene, letting the music wash over them. The weight of the day's events leaves them too drained for deep conversation, seeking solace in the simplicity of the music and each other's quiet company.

"They're not really that good, are they?" Manuel remarks.

"I guess we were spoiled at the Metropolitan," Ruby replies, more drawn into the conversation by Gen's gentle prodding than the music.

Gen laughs softly. "Yeah, Roberta was always hustling, meeting artists and making sure the Metropolitan had the best events. How she managed all that, I'll never know. She's amazing..."

Their conversation fades as they listen to the band, their minds drifting back to the day's intense experiences. There is nothing they can do to dull the pain and dread they feel. They all act as though the evening getaway will help them cope, but each is lost in thought, replaying the fire, the sadness and desperation. The lull is unexpectedly broken when the pianist steps up to the microphone.

"Thanks for being here tonight. I want to dedicate these next songs to the people of the Metropolitan. It's been a rough day for everyone in the city, and we hope you're all okay."

He begins to play, the notes gentle and filled with emotion. The song, a slow ballad, transforms the room. It's a simple melody, but it carries a weight that resonates beyond the earlier tranquility. The bar falls into a hush, the usual clatter and chatter giving way to the music. Ruby, Manuel, and Gen sit in silence, the song stirring emotions they'd been trying to suppress all day.

When the music ends, the bar erupts in applause, but the trio remains quiet. The tribute, while beautiful, feels too close, too raw. They step outside, lighting cigarettes from Ruby's pack. None of them feel the courage to say anything.

The rest of the night passes in a somber quiet, the weight of the day hanging heavily around them. They walk the streets of the Lower East Side, the city's lights casting long shadows. The earlier banter between them is gone, replaced by solemn companionship. Once home, there are no words of "goodnight." They retreat into their own spaces, eager to close the chapter on a day that has stretched them to their emotional limits. As they settle into the quiet of the night, they hope to leave behind the harshness of the day and find some peace in sleep.

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At the Metropolitan, the air still lingers with the smell of burnt furniture, broken glass and lost memories. The whole block is closed off from public access, rerouting any connections between Hareld Square and Penn Station to alternative stations. The night sky is lit with the blue and red of sirens, above sitting the dark tower, covered in darkness like a tower of Mordor. Inside, Roberta is patiently watching as engineers and police officers evaluate the state of the building. Clipboard in hand, her eyes reveal a deep exhaustion. She has not left the site since the incident, refusing to return home before a diagnosis has been established for the Metropolitan's future. Amongst the rubble, she notices a small flyer tugging away underneath a overturned chair. She picks it up and reads,

"Find more information about our Spa program on Sky Lobby Three."

She crumbles the paper and puts it in her pocket, afraid it might be the last remnant of the tower she will possess. Underneath Sky Lobby Two, the kitchens are unrecognizable. The fryers have been blasted out into the atrium underneath, plates smashed across the floors, pots turned over with the remnants of a soup spoiled onto the cracked tiles. None of the sprinkler systems worked during the fire. All security measures that would have prevented the travesty failed, leaving the Metropolitan with no shield or armor to defend itself from the red giant. Roberta does not understand how such a monumental mistake could happen, not only on one floor, but throughout the entire tower. Fires have broken out in the past but were quickly dealt with. This time, nothing responded, letting the flame slowly spread upwards with nothing to stop them.

Her mind is full of questions, concerns, and regrets. Her responsibility was not only towards her guests, but towards the iconic skyscraper. She has failed the tower, failed to answer its cries for help, failed to save it from the ravaging chaos. As the ashes spread throughout the city, they announced her incompetence. On the loud speakers, they announced a day of mourning for the tower. As the city listened to a heartfelt tribute, she heard the voice of disappointment and defeat.

Walking out of the kitchen, she looks down the hall of the service floor, similarly decimated. The ceiling panels are all but gone, some doors blown out, others charred so deeply they look like the gates to a dark dimension. Next to the hallway, the staff cafeteria paints a chilling image of an apocalypse. The windows have blown out, and covered in a large blue tarp. The light penetrates through the gaps between tarps, highlighting a few solitary chairs that still remain. She was here yesterday, speaking to the engineers, but now finds the space unrecognizable, unable to form a clear picture of what it looked like before the fire.

She exits the building solemnly. At the front door waiting for her, Lea Fucci, the president of Port Authority New York, is conversing with a couple of NYPD officers. Roberta approaches them with caution, understanding the following conversation will neither be pleasant nor amicable.

"Roberta, we need to talk. I have been trying to reach you all day." Lea claims with vigor in her voice.

"Hey Lea, I'm sorry. My phone broke during the evacuation, I have not left the tower since." Roberta does not show any signs of fear or regret. She must remain stoic and professional, believing in herself and her management. Port Authority is her boss, but she banks on their good relationship and success with the Metropolitan for the past ten years of her management. Roberta always hated the politics involved with the tower, but understood it was necessary for a public building of the sort.

Roberta and Lea make their way inside the building to find some privacy, away from the noisy streets. They discuss the fate of the tower, and the results of the initial investigations. Lea questions Roberta about the failing security measures, and blames her for the subsequent tragedy. Meanwhile, Roberta tries to keep a professional approach to discuss the details, including the previous day's security incidents. As they debate the potential reasons, a tall man enters and greets them. Frank, the manager of One Casino, was invited to the conversation, as the fate of the building heavily depends on the state of the casino. He pulls up a chair and sits down to anchor himself before the delivering the news.

"Hey Lea, Roberta. I just got off the phone with our partners in Vegas. They want a casino back up and running as soon as possible. We technically still own the casino license for another five years before the review period. They want to find a solution fast, if not in this building, it will be somewhere else in the city."

Frank delivers the news with an air of regret. What he admits is the potential death of the tower. Without the casino as a foundation, the building will never be able to recover. The prospect of One Casino relocating puts

everything in jeopardy. Frank was a New Yorker his entire life and has been an advocator for the Metropolitan and its identity as a pillar of hospitality. This news could potentially reverse everything they have been working on, returning the casino to private ownership, removing the core identity of welcoming, hosting, and a city of pluralist publicism.

Roberta leaves their meeting with a ball in her stomach. She has not left the tower, partially to refuse that it is dead. This discussion with Lea and Frank confirms the worst. The city will not fulfill their promise, take the easy way out, and disinvest in the Metropolitan and its ideas. She finally leaves the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup>, walking west towards the West Side piers. She looks up at the commercial complexes that have redefined this part of the cityscape, turning it from a vibrant area to a soulless corporate district. The Metropolitan was the final beacon of life, resisting the claws of a capitalist greed, valuing the people of the city over their money. She imagines that the new casino will be here. As she reaches the pier, she takes a pause looking over the Hudson over to New Jersey. At no point has she contemplated that she no longer has a job or a home. Although her primary residence is in the West Village, she kept a room in the Metropolitan, and rarely left the building.

She strolls down the waterfront, stopping occasionally to look at the scenes of city. She finds her way back to her apartment, unable to open the door for a moment. As soon as she walks in, her current life would be over. This would mark the end of her chapter at the tower. She slowly turns the key and pushes open the door. Walking through the threshold, she feels a sudden wave of extreme fatigue, crashing on the couch, marking the end of her long, tiresome day.

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On a warm August morning, the city throbbed with the warm pulse of summer. The streets buzzed with the routine hustle of daily life, as if the city itself had shrugged off the shadows of the past months and moved forward. The early morning light revealed the Metropolitan in a stark new form, its once gleaming facade now marred by the scars of the recent fire. The damage reached deep into the structure's bones, prompting urgent discussions about its future. The street was barricaded, keeping the curious at bay, while workers in hard hats moved purposefully through the makeshift entrances, their silhouettes stark against the bright tarps covering the scaffolding.

Inside the command center, a hastily converted conference room on the ground floor, Roberta presides over a grim meeting. The air is tense, thick with the dust of demolition and the weight of decisions yet to be made. At the forefront is the unsettling news that the One Casino would not be renewing their lease, opting instead to relocate, a decision driven by cold fiscal calculations and a diminishing timeline for repairs.

"The casino's exit is not just a financial blow; it's symbolic," Roberta explained, her voice betraying a rare hint of despondency. "Their departure could trigger a domino effect. Without their anchor, securing funding for the rebuild just got significantly harder."

Around her, the faces of her team reflect a mix of resignation and resolve. They are a microcosm of the building itself—shaken, but standing. Among them is Marcus, who had recently transitioned from Navy life to civilian, finding a role in the hotel's security team thanks to his military discipline and calm under pressure. The catastrophic events of May 24th had transformed his initial anxiety about city life into a profound sense of responsibility and guardianship. The fire that had ravaged the building also ignited a resolve within him. That night, as he returned to his ship, Marcus made a pivotal decision. Leaving the Navy was no easy choice; it risked his scholarship and his planned future as an engineer. Yet, those concerns now seemed secondary to his newfound purpose of leaving a lasting impact on the city. This choice, he knew, was not only for himself but was also a tribute to his father, who would have undoubtedly given him a supportive nod of approval.

Outside the conference room, the employees mull over their options. Conversations buzz with a blend of rumors and plans. Maria, leaning against the cool marble of the lobby, listens to her colleagues speculate about job prospects elsewhere.

"I heard they're hiring at the new boutique hotel across town," one of her colleagues mentions, snapping her from her reverie.

Maria nods. "I might check it out," she replies noncommittally.

She wasn't particularly interested in yet another luxury hotel, but a job was a job. The Metropolitan had been good to her—well-paid, decent benefits—but it never stirred any deep connection. As she stands back, watching former employees gather to mourn the tower, she feels strangely detached. For them, this place seemed to mean something more, a piece of their lives they weren't ready to let go of. But to her, it was just another gig, another place where she clocked in and out, doing what was needed and moving on.

Inside, Roberta stands at the head of the conference room, her posture commanding despite the wear evident on her face. A projector illuminates the wall behind her, displaying the bold title, "Metropolitan Revival Initiative." Around the table, key members of the Metropolitan staff and selected community leaders are gathered, their expressions a mix of resolve and anxiety.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we're at a pivotal moment," Roberta begins, her voice firm. "The departure of the casino has left a gaping hole, not just in our finances but in our spirit. Today, we turn that around. Today, we come together, not just as colleagues, but as a community committed to reviving this landmark."

A palpable hush filled the room, tinged with skepticism and doubt. The gathered crowd was hesitant, not yet convinced to support what many viewed as a lost cause.

"Let me share a pivotal moment in the history of the Metropolitan. It's a story some of you might know, but I suspect many do not. About six years ago, we faced a crisis that nearly ended us. At that time, we didn't have the boutique segment or the boarding house. The migrant segment was rapidly expanding, and our resources were stretched thin. I found myself in a meeting with the governor, who presented a stark ultimatum: dismantle the migrant segment, which was draining our finances, or face bankruptcy. This is the sort of decision politicians push for—sacrificing identity for the sake of financial stability.

Yes, we are a hotel, and profitability is essential to sustain our operations. However, we cannot let financial imperatives erode our foundational principle: hospitality. The migrant segment was among the first we established in this tower; it brought vibrant diversity and joy into our lives here. I chose to stand by it, seeking new partnerships to launch the boutique segment instead of cutting ties with our core values. And we prevailed.

That decision reinforced the essence of who we are. I wouldn't exchange the community we've built for anything—it's the heartbeat of our city. Today, I urge everyone to embrace that spirit. Let's view each other not just as colleagues or clients, but as people united in a common goal. Together, we can rebuild not just a building, but the soul of our community. Let's reach out, extend our hands to others, and rebuild our city together."

As Roberta's words faded, a solitary, loud clap echoed from the back of the large conference room, slicing through the heavy silence. Goldy, his gaze fixed intently on Roberta, showed his staunch support for the initiative. Known for embodying the very essence of the hospitality Roberta had championed, Goldy's presence was pivotal. Despite a lucrative job offer from a security firm, the deep connections he felt to the Metropolitan pulled at him. As he had been clearing out his locker, every memento stirred a flood of memories, making the decision to leave all the more difficult. Lionel, watching his father's struggle, voiced the uncertainty hanging between them, "Dad, it's okay if we need to move on, right?"

Goldy met his son's eyes, his resolve firming. "We'll see it through here, for as long as we can," he affirmed. "This place means more than just a paycheck to us."

As the assembly dispersed, the daunting path ahead was clear to all. However, bolstered by Roberta's rallying cry and Goldy's visible commitment, a unified determination filled the air. They shared not just a task but a mission—to revive the Metropolitan not as a mere venue but as a pillar of hope and community spirit in the city's heart.

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## *Part two*

Joycelyn settles on the fire escape outside her bedroom window, its metal grate cool under her feet, shaded by the building's shadow. She leans back against the brick wall and sips her morning coffee, listening to the bar owners downstairs talking with a delivery driver about stocking up for the evening ahead. Across the alley, she peers into her neighbor's apartment: an older woman living alone with a clutter of mid-century furniture. Joycelyn can see into her living room, where a maroon sofa and a couple of armchairs circle an old, faded brown carpet. Everything is quiet—her neighbor won't be up for another few hours. A pigeon lands on the window awning, pauses for a minute, then flaps away into the distance.

Today marks another year in this New York City apartment. In the Bronx, a year can feel like the blink of an eye, with the constant hum of street noise and the busyness of people all around. The city can feel exhausting, always chasing a story, always making assumptions about the state of the world caught in a vacuum of never-ending drama. Joycelyn heads back inside to get dressed. She chooses a yellow floral dress with a matching blazer and grabs her boots from the shoe rack near the entrance before stepping out of her apartment.

Her first stop is the market. Every Sunday morning, a farmers' market fills up 125th Street. She strolls through the stalls, picking up a few fruits and vegetables. This week's market is smaller than usual with many vendors away on vacation. Before heading home, she stops at her favorite coffee shop—a small, rundown building with a hand-drawn sign and vines creeping up the brickwork. Joycelyn only drinks espressos, preferring the real taste of morning over watered-down coffees. This shop is too small and noisy for work, so she chooses another spot further uptown on 128th Street when she needs to focus. Her most recent gig was a columnist for a lifestyle magazine that focused on the city's contemporary trends. Nobody followed the news anymore, her core audience being middle aged white women in the upper east side with too much time on their hands. Her last piece was on the return of adidas track suits, a real page turner...

Joycelyn returns home to drop off her groceries but feels the city calling her. She makes her way to the subway and rides south to Central Park. The day is sunny, too hot for her liking, and the humid air clings to her like a damp blanket. The sun's rays pierce the tree canopy, but she finds shelter under a large oak tree and settles down on a rock cooled by the shade. Gradually, she dozes off.

A rattling trolley cart wakes her up. The sound ripples through the trees, echoing off the surrounding foliage. Jolted from her nap, Joycelyn blinks and sits up, squinting through the sunlit branches until she spots a young boy, no older than fifteen, tugging a cart full of electronics and appliances. He glances back, scanning the park for anyone watching him before trudging ahead, the cart's wheels clattering loudly over the uneven pavement.

Intrigued, she decides to follow him, curious about where he's taking all these things. She brushes leaves from her dress and slips on her boots before weaving through the park, careful to keep her distance. The trolley's rhythmic clattering guides her down meandering pathways, through playgrounds filled with children and joggers navigating the shady trails. Every now and then, she catches the boy turning his head as if sensing eyes on him, and Joycelyn ducks behind trees or pretends to tie her bootlaces.

As he exits Central Park, the city swallows him up, and Joycelyn hesitates momentarily, taking a deep breath before plunging into Midtown's chaos. The trolley's clattering is increasingly drowned out by honking taxis and impatient pedestrians, and she loses sight of him at several intersections. She finally catches a glimpse of his blue baseball cap bobbing through the crowd near Times Square, only for the sea of people to swallow him again. The pursuit feels more urgent now, like she's unraveling a mystery she can't quite articulate. She spots the boy's trolley on 37th Street but loses him once more as the crowd thickens. A street performer juggling fire slows her down, while a group of tourists with selfie sticks blocks the crosswalk, forcing her to push her way through.

Finally, she spots the trolley again on 36th Street, still heading down Eighth Avenue. Sweat trickles down her neck as she abandons stealth, determined not to lose him again. She darts across the street, narrowly avoiding a delivery cyclist, and races to catch up. But just as suddenly as she found him, he disappeared. At the corner of 33rd Street and Seventh Avenue, she pauses, breathless and bewildered, scanning the intersection for any sign of the boy or the trolley. She listens intently for the faintest clink of metal against asphalt, but all she hears are the murmurs of commuters and the steady hum of traffic.

Looking up, she sees the charcoal-black monolith of a skyscraper looming before her, its walls scarred and broken from the fire months ago. The remnants stand tall and grim, casting long shadows over the bustling city streets. Was the boy here? Did he vanish into the labyrinthine alleys around the base of the tower, slipping into

one of the many gaps and shadows the city holds? She stands at the intersection, staring into the silence. There's a faint buzzing in her ears, and she feels the building's gaze on her, like it's watching and waiting. The absence of answers only deepens her intrigue, and she makes a mental note to return another day, driven by a need to untangle the mysteries hidden within the emptiness.

She hurries back home. The usual subway entrance at 7th and 33rd is cordoned off, so she diverts to Penn Station to catch the train back to the Bronx. As the subway clatters northward, her mind buzzes with unanswered questions. She recalls the day the tower burned, realizing she never truly grasped why it remained abandoned. Her sole visit to the Metropolitan had been to the Jukebox, a venue known for hosting eclectic events. It was a fashion show she'd been asked to cover. The event left her underwhelmed; the clothing was interesting enough, but the setup was peculiar. Random banners dangled from the ceiling, serving as makeshift partitions, and the catwalk was laid out in a convoluted zigzag that often hid the models from view behind swathes of white cloth. Overwhelming techno music blared through the speakers, confusing most of the audience, though a handful of art enthusiasts at the front appeared to revel in the disorientation. As the show morphed into a rave, Jocelyn decided to leave, uninterested and slightly irritated.

Despite her lukewarm experience, she knew the Jukebox was a hot spot in the city's contemporary arts scene. Reflecting on her visit, she recalled an odd detail—the elevator felt more like a vertical subway. It was a bizarre moment, standing in that glass cube as it descended the tower's heights. Although she was inside, she felt like she could see every shape of life in the city underneath her.

She's jolted from her thoughts as the train screeches to a halt at 125th Street. She quickly gathers herself, weaving through the exiting passengers with urgency. The cool night air greets her as she steps onto the platform, but it does little to quell the restless energy surging through her. By the time she reaches her apartment, she's nearly breathless, her mind still racing with the images of the tower and the boy with the trolley.

Jocelyn bursts through the door, the sound of it slamming shut behind her echoing through the small space. She doesn't bother with the lights, her path illuminated by the faint glow of streetlamps filtering through the curtains. Tossing her bag onto the couch, she dives straight for her laptop, her fingers trembling as she powers it on. The screen flickers to life, and she plunges headfirst into a frenzy of research. Hours pass in a blur of articles, forums, and obscure news clippings. The room fills with the soft clatter of keys as she searches for anything that could provide a clue, a connection, something to explain the strange boy and the way he seemed to disappear into the city's shadows. She digs deep, her concentration unbroken, even as the night grows darker and the city outside begins to quiet.

But it's not just excitement that fuels her—it's a nagging sense of something unfinished. She isn't ready to call it a night, not yet. The tower, the boy, the strange allure of the building's ruins—all of it has hooked into her, pulling her deeper into obsession. Her eyes dart across the screen, catching on a snippet of text here, a faded image there, but nothing significant enough.

As the hours tick by, the buzzing in her mind grows louder, more insistent. She tries to focus, to keep pushing forward, but the information she finds only raises more questions, more possibilities that swirl around in her thoughts, making it impossible to settle on any one idea. She rubs her eyes, but the weariness that usually accompanies these late-night sessions is absent, replaced instead by pure adrenaline.

Finally, she leans back in her chair, her heart still racing. The research has given her some leads, some threads to follow, but it's not enough. The only way to calm the storm inside her is to face it head-on—to go back to the tower, to see it for herself, and to find out what's really hidden within those charred walls. She glances at the clock—it's late, but not too late. The city is still alive, and so is she. Without another moment of hesitation, she grabs her coat, her camera, and her keys, and heads for the door. Whatever she's looking for, it's waiting for her in the shadows of that building.

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The floor is eerily empty. Golden light from 7th Avenue bleed through gaps in the graffiti-covered glass façade. The carpet underfoot is blackened and torn in places. In the center, tiles had been removed to access the cables underneath—copper wires, the first to go in abandoned buildings, stolen for their resale value. A few machines remain, too damaged to repair and too heavy to remove. Among them, a slot machine blinks with a red light inside its broken LED screen, its lonely SOS message echoing through the hall of the once-great gaming space. The scene is almost too perfectly creepy, like something from a horror show, waiting for a gambler's ghost to appear for one last thrill on the machines.

Jocelyn looks up at the ripped draped ceilings. Once white like Olympus linens, they were now riddled with holes, as if the gods had rejected them. Through the gaps, she could see the hidden structure and pipes that once fed the space. A sulfuric, rotten egg smell wafts through the room. She scans the area before approaching the windows facing 7th Avenue, finding a small cluster unobstructed by tags. The glass blocks, though cracked, had mostly withstood the fire. The material's thickness still allows some light inside, but their haziness keep her hidden from the gaze of passing pedestrians. The space is utterly abandoned. Whoever occupied the building now avoided the former casino area. Its emptiness and vast damage resemble a 19th-century factory more than a luxurious gaming establishment.

As she walks through the remnants of the casino, she photographs intriguing details. A flyer for a fried chicken restaurant on 9th Avenue lay crumpled, as if it had been carried in someone's pocket for a long time before being discarded. Nearby, needles were scattered around a large metal drum, likely a bin. It was inevitable that users would squat in the tower, seeking refuge from judgmental gazes. But this wasn't the story Jocelyn was after. She wanted to go deeper, to understand the resilience of those living outside societal norms.

Retreating to the old entrance of the casino, Jocelyn discovers the Golden Egg, a theater and nightclub nestled within the building like an alien spaceship. The curving walls, once plated with golden panels that reflected the casino's bustling ambiance, were now stripped bare, either destroyed in the fire or scavenged by looters. The exposed structure reveals a complex steel frame, about a meter thick, threaded with cables and pipes that run through the theater's hidden skeleton.

Jocelyn pushes open the heavy oak doors, left in place due to their abnormal weight, and steps into an even eerier scene. Most of the seats were gone, either ripped or toppled over. The stage, however, seemed almost polished, as if it had been actively used since the fire covered it in soot and grime. The remaining curtains, tattered and ghostly, cling to the last vestiges of the theater's presence, evoking the essence of a phantom of the opera. Near the stage, piles of large steel crates and sandbags block the service doors.

As she approaches the stage, a faint voice reaches her ears. Instinctively, Jocelyn jumps behind a couple of chairs, hiding as the voices draw closer. She watches as two men emerge onto the stage from a trapdoor. One carries a bag, the other a large instrument. In the dim light, she can't clearly see what it was but waits patiently as one of the men sets up and begins playing. The soft, smooth harmonies of a saxophone fill the space, transforming it.

Jocelyn realizes she is witnessing a saxophone lesson. The young man practices a ballad, the melodies igniting the space, while the other offers notes between pieces. For a while, she forgets she was a reporter hiding in the dilapidated theater of an abandoned casino. She forgets she was there illegally, along with the two musicians. She forgets she had quit her job to pursue this story. Lost in the music, she lets go of all her worries and simply listens.

After about an hour, the pair wrap up their session and leave the way they came. Jocelyn waits a few more minutes to ensure the coast was clear before approaching the trapdoor entrance. It was an old theater trick to allow actors to access the stage directly from the passage underneath. She descends the staircase, finding a series of tunnel-like passages. The eeriness they emit stop Jocelyn in her tracks. On another day, she would have jumped in head first to discover where the tunnels lead, but something here feels just too creepy for her to continue. Instead, she walks around the theater, admiring the high ceilings and impressive structures that once held the set pieces. She finds a ladder that leads up to nowhere, and naturally decides to climb it. At the top, she meanders through a dingy set of catwalks, surprisingly sturdy, but still not quite as pleasant to walk across as she would have liked. She finds another ladder that leads her up again, this time to a chamber with some left-over equipment. She looks around to find yet another ladder leading to a trap door. She jiggles the lock until it comes loose and finds herself in a completely new room that reads "eighth floor service room".



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On the eighth floor, a service entrance is left slightly opened. Through it, a small lobby with a couple elevators and mechanical rooms formed the service quarters of this floor. Jocelyn tries a couple handles, all locked, except for one, which leads her into a small storage closet. Most of the shelves had been cleared of any remaining linens, pillows, and other condiments to freshen the rooms. On a lower shelf, a badge reads "Antoine Druly", a former employee who had abandoned their key within the remnants of the ghost tower. She prys another door open to find a strangely winding hallway. With a cautious step, she wanders down, paying attention with each step to avoid making a sound. She stops at a door on her left, with streamers left hanging from the peephole. The door reads "853". She slowly turns the brass

knob and pushes the door open with a horrible screeching sound, as if she had just opened an old wound the door had meant to kept shut. Inside, the room was tidy. The bed was still in place, in the corner of the space by the boarded-up window. A small beam of light crept in from the top left corner, not completely covered by the thick one-inch MDF board. On the bed, the sheets revealed their wear, a discolored purple shade bleeding off onto the green carpet flooring. Next to the bed, a dark nightstand with a lamp stood waiting for their next night reader to trust them with their book while they drifted asleep.

The wardrobe is closed, with a light green ribbon tied around the handles, still guarding the privacy of its guests after all this time. Jocelyn carefully removes the ribbon, places it on the nightstand and opens the wardrobe. Inside, she finds a series of strange costumes hanging on brass-colored hangers. She brushes her hand through and picks up a white blazer vest. It reminds her of a wedding she went to in the Hamptons, when she was younger. The groom was wearing an all-white suit, decorated with a yellow flower in place of a hankchief. The wedding was full of roses and sunflowers. It was a summer wedding. During the reception in the evening, it had started pouring rain, a typical summer storm in the Northeast. She remembers the white suit becoming almost see through, revealing the groom's t-shirt, a Hawaiian themed flower pattern on a soft pink backdrop. She can almost smell the rain, a fresh breeze and the sweet smell of white wine. She stares at the blazer for a moment before placing it back carefully in its nest.

She closes the closet and sits down on a lounge chair by the kitchenette. For a moment, she imagines the last tenants of this room. Were they also going to a wedding? What were all the costumes for if not for that? She pictures a couple, laying down their suitcase on the bed. The husband opens the window and peers up towards the Empire State building. His wife lays for a second on the bed before opening the wardrobe.

"Honey put your suit away, we don't want it to get wrinkled." She asks with a soft tone.

While her husband delicately hangs his suit, she empties the suitcase, a silk scarf, a couple of wool coats, and a parrot dress. It's a themed party, every night a different ensemble for a week. The first night is gastby themed, so she brought a little skirt with hanging beads and a matching headband. He will wear the white ensemble, resembling more a boat captain than a New York upperclassman of the twenties. Another cocktail dress and farmer overalls later, they have unpacked everything. The lay in bed for a couple minutes before making plans to go out. Before they do though, they decide to order a bottle of sparkling wine from room service. They are cheap but want to feel luxurious for a couple of nights. A couple minutes later, a ding resonates from the kitchenette. The husband goes to collect the bottle from a neatly hidden dumbwaiter serving from the kitchens above. He carefully pops the bottle and fills two glasses, accidentally spilling some on the purple sheets. As they cheer to a beautiful week, the alarms ring and they must leave everything. Now, she finds the room, the memory of what could have been a beautiful week, glasses half emptied on the kitchenette counter, an empty suitcase by the bed, and a wardrobe full of disguises. Jocelyn likes her story. She gets up from the seat and leaves the room, carefully closing it behind her to preserve the treasures inside.

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In the days that followed, Jocelyn's cozy apartment morphed into a detective's den. Her living room became a command center, dominated by a pinboard bristling with articles about the tower and the mysterious fire that gutted it. Most news outlets had churned out sensational 'breaking news' stories in the aftermath, but none delved into the underlying causes or specifics of the blaze. Jocelyn's curiosity bloomed into an obsession as she

scoured city archives, her determination to uncover the hidden truths behind the Metropolitan's fiery demise growing with each unanswered question.

Her investigation initially focused on a thread about a malfunction in the sprinkler system, attributed to a technological failure. The hotel's emergency network followed two main arteries—one for the casino and another for the rest of the tower. When the casino locked down, the entire hotel's security system followed suit, and vice versa. Certain elements, like security feeds and exits, were local to each section, yet there was a centralized system that controlled everything. The casino, however, required a more robust system with separate software. Despite this, the tower operated as a single entity, drawing electricity from a common source. This meant that theoretically, one could breach the main security system and access multiple areas before the backup generators kicked in. One theory suggested that during a power shutdown and subsequent reboot, the sprinklers failed to activate—a hypothesis neither confirmed nor denied by the hotel or the city.

Another intriguing theory pointed to foul play. Someone might have ignited a fire in the casino, intentionally disabled the sprinklers, and then watched as the tower burned. This theory was even more speculative, riddled with gaps and unanswered questions, yet it was an entertaining thought. She wasn't particularly concerned with why the tower burned; she was more intrigued by the aftermath. Why was the tower never rebuilt? Why was it left to stand as a charred husk?

Her journalism training at NYU had taught her that to understand the present, one must examine the chain of cause and effect. The fire was the catalyst, but the ensuing legal battles were equally significant. The Port Authority, who owned the tower, had initially assessed the damages to determine the cost of rebuilding. According to some sources, the estimate was around two billion dollars—an exorbitant sum. Jocelyn delved into the realities of renovation costs in New York, noting that while the initial construction of the tower was around one and a half billion, rebuilding would be even costlier in the long run.

What had she discovered so far? The tower burned due to a sprinkler malfunction. Rebuilding was deemed too expensive. But another crucial question emerged: why didn't they sell the air rights to the plot? Historically, the city often sold air rights, allowing private companies to build above while maintaining underground functions for transit or infrastructure. The Metropolitan's prime location at 33rd and 7th Avenue, near Penn Station and Hudson Yards, made it an ideal spot for a new office building. Jocelyn uncovered another interesting fact: a few years earlier, the Metropolitan had been granted historical landmark status. Its unique architecture and significant position in the city's history made it the most contemporary building in New York to receive this honor, but this came with stringent legal restrictions. The building could neither be demolished nor repurposed.

The realization hits her: the building couldn't be renovated, demolished, or sold. Jocelyn steps back and surveys her bulletin board, taking a deep breath before reaching for her phone to call her editor.

"Hi Jocy, what's up?" answers Dylan, his deep voice roughened by years of smoking.

"Hey Dylan. I think I have a story you'll like," Jocelyn begins. Dylan wasn't her direct editor—he handled the "Stories of the City" column, a section Jocelyn had aspired to work in but had been relegated to fashion and celebrity gossip.

"Okay, shoot," Dylan says, always eager for a good story. Though he lacked the authority to transfer Jocelyn to his team, he appreciated her tenacity. Dylan had started his career in fiction, yearning for a breakthrough original novel but never finding success.

"Let me start from the beginning," Jocelyn says, recounting her pursuit of the man with the cap, the tower's background, the financial intricacies, and most importantly, what she found in her brief exploration. After her detailed monologue, Dylan interrupts.

"Okay, get to the point. What's the story here?"

Jocelyn takes a deep breath. "I want to write about those who live in the tower now."

A long silence followed, Jocelyn's heart pounding. She really wants this story. Finally, Dylan speaks.

"Brilliant. This could be good."

Overjoyed but unable to express it, Jocelyn starts jumping in place.

"We need a good angle. This isn't a one-off piece, you understand that, right? Let's make a proposal. Can you come to 10th and 77th?"

Jocelyn packs her clippings and reports, heading out with a hasty step. This was the story she had been seeking—provocative, insightful, and true. The next day, Jocelyn and Dylan present their proposal to the editor-in-chief.

"No. I don't see it. Nobody wants to know what some bums are doing in an abandoned building next to their offices. Really Jocy you need to focus on your own panels. You're already late with the crop top story, when will it be done?"

Jocelyn stares blankly at her editor's uninterested eyes. She didn't expect such harsh rejection. For her, this was a story of a lifetime, but seeing it dismissed so easily shocked her. Dylan and Jocelyn leave the office quietly.

"Well, we tried. We'll find something else, don't worry," Dylan says, heading back to his desk.

Jocelyn stands there, paralyzed by frustration. She realized she couldn't continue writing superficial stories about celebrities and fashion. Before Dylan could get out of sight, she turns back, enters the office, and with calm determination, says, "I quit."

...

Jocelyn first met Paule in a small café near Penn Station, a place where the rage of the city seemed to fade into the background, leaving only the low murmur of conversation and the clinking of cups. She had reached out to Paule, an immigration lawyer with rumored ties to the elusive inhabitants of the tower, hoping to gain insight into their world. But their first meeting was far from successful. Jocelyn, eager and somewhat naïve in her approach, came on too strong, laying out her ideas with a confidence that Paule immediately found off-putting. The lawyer's response was swift and cutting, making it clear that the people of the tower would not be pawns in anyone's story. Stunned by the rejection, Jocelyn left the café with a heavy heart, her integrity as a journalist called into question for the first time. For weeks, the sting of that meeting lingered, a bruise to her pride that she couldn't shake.

It took two months of persistence before Paule agreed to meet again. This time, Jocelyn was better prepared, armed with meticulous research and a clearer sense of purpose. She laid out her case with care, showing Paule that her intentions were genuine, her desire to tell the residents' stories born out of respect, not exploitation. Reluctantly, Paule agreed to introduce her to some of the tower's residents, but only under strict conditions—no recording devices, and only after Jocelyn signed a confidentiality agreement. Paule's protectiveness was palpable; her clients, some undocumented, were vulnerable to any kind of exposure.

It was a crisp Tuesday morning when Jocelyn first met Martina, a meeting she recalls with vivid clarity. Standing outside Penn Station's 7th Avenue entrance, Jocelyn spotted her immediately—a woman in a green skirt and a faded blue flannel, a large handbag slung over her shoulder, stuffed with notebooks and binders. Martina moved with a hurried grace, her worn-out heels clacking against the pavement as she crossed the street. She embraced Paule with warmth, a genuine smile lighting up her face before turning to Jocelyn, greeting her with an openness that caught her off guard.

They found a bench near Hudson Yards, a quiet almost haunting space with virtually no presence of life, as Martina began to share her story. Paule sat beside them, ever the vigilant observer, her eyes flicking between them as Martina spoke. Jocelyn listened intently as Martina recounted her journey from Guatemala, where she had left behind her parents and brothers.

Four years after arriving in New York, Martina had finally found refuge in the tower, after moving from one group home to another, always on the brink of uncertainty. She had carved out a life for herself in the city, working long hours at various small jobs—cleaning, handyman tasks, dog walking—anything that paid enough. With Paule's help, she had set up a bank account and found the means for medical insurance. Despite the exhaustion of her days, which began at seven in the morning and often didn't end until nine at night, Martina seemed to find joy anywhere she went, with a puppy on the sidewalk, a street vendor's laugh, blooming flowers in a planter outside a window. Jocelyn could tell, from the way she spoke, that Martina was someone who bore no malice, a person whose kindness seemed boundless despite the hardships she had faced. It was almost overwhelming, like a mother whose love extended to anyone who was around.

The next resident Jocelyn met was Boris, a Ukrainian migrant with a calm demeanor that belied the challenges he had endured. Despite his refugee status, Boris had slipped through the cracks of the housing system early on, forced to find shelter wherever he could. By chance, he stumbled upon the tower and quickly became an integral part of its community. With his legal status secure, Boris held a nine-to-five job at a quirky bike repair shop in Greenwich, one of those places that also served coffee to the neighborhood's hipsters. He worked as both a mechanic and a barista, making just above minimum wage while serving lattes to a constant stream of customers. Boris liked his job, it was steady and safe, but he did not fit in with the biking community.

His English was good, and for a while, he even had a boyfriend, though their relationship eventually ended under the weight of their differing lifestyles. The first time his boyfriend visited the tower, he was shocked by the living conditions, unable to understand or appreciate what Boris and the others had built for themselves. He didn't blame him; their worlds were too different, and he knew then that their relationship couldn't last. His loyalty to the residents, his deep connection to the community they had forged, was something he couldn't compromise.

After meeting several more residents, Jocelyn began to understand that the tower was far more than the squat she had imagined. It was a community—a diverse, complex network of individuals bound together by circumstance, but united by a shared purpose. Each resident had their own story, their own reasons for choosing this life, whether out of necessity or a desire for something different. Some had the option of a traditional life

but opted for the collective strength of the tower. Others had no choice but to make the best of their situation. The breadth of diversity within the tower was striking, but what stood out even more was the sense of co-dependence, the trust and engagement that held them together. Jocelyn felt a deep responsibility to represent these people with the respect they deserved, to gain their trust and tell their stories with the care and nuance they required.

Two months after that initial meeting with Paule, Jocelyn finally got the chance to visit the tower. Despite her best efforts to maintain a professional demeanor, she was burning with anticipation. She was scheduled to meet Boris at 2:30 p.m. near the coffee truck by Penn Station's 33rd Street exit. Arriving twenty minutes early, Jocelyn sat down on a bench by the information desk, her notebook in hand. To pass the time, she began writing, sketching out descriptions of the people passing by.

First, a young couple holding hands, their large backpacks marking them as tourists, most likely on their way to catch a train. Next, a middle-aged man with a skateboard, sprinting down the hall, clearly late for something. She observed these strangers, each with their own destination, soon to disperse across thousands of miles. Train stations are strange like that, she thought—a brief convergence of people, all bound for different places but sharing the same itinerary for just a moment. Some arrived by car, others by metro, bus, or on foot, but for a short time, they all gathered around the same displays, waiting for their platform to appear. And then, as quickly as they came together, they scattered again, each continuing their journey.

Around 2:35, Boris arrives with a big smile. On this hot October day, he is wearing a vintage looking sweater vest with cargo shorts. He could have fit in quite nicely with the crowd in the Lower East side. He gets a black coffee from the stand and sits down next to Jocelyn. She is a little confused, as Boris is just watching the crowd sipping on his coffee. A couple moments later, he turns to her.

"Ready?" he asks.

Jocelyn nods, trying to stay professional, but letting a little smile evade her. They head up to the street, out of the station. They walk for a couple minutes away from the tower. Along the way, Boris explains that there are multiple entries, but the group has agreed to show her through one of the more secretive ones to avoid others following. They arrive in front of the Manhattan Mall, a historical landmark for the Penn District, recently renovated into a state-of-the-art commercial strip. They enter the mall and head down the escalators into the crowded space. They head to the back of the building, to a hat shop. Jocelyn advances cautiously, unsure what they were doing in this place. Boris greets the clerk, an older man with thick glasses. The store resembles a bazaar of hats. Full of color and shapes, there seems to be no organization, just stacks upon stacks of hats. Fedoras, caps, beach hats, and other strange items line the store's shelves. Jocelyn notices that despite the chaotic assortment, the store seems extremely clean. He brings Jocelyn to the back of the shop where they reach a metal door. Boris unlocks the door and lets Jocelyn through into a dim lit hallway. He locks the door behind her and they make their way down the tunnel.

"What is this place?" Jocelyn asks.

"We call this way 'Manhattan'. This was a service tunnel for the businesses in the Gimbel's Passage. It was built to serve those stores when they opened them around the same time as the Metropolitan. Now its been locked off from the outside. George holds the hat store, he was a resident here for a while, and found this entrance which saved us a lot of time and trouble. Now he still lets us use it, all residents have a key."

As they travers the hallway, Jocelyn notices that the walls are all full of graffiti, tags and stickers. She quietly observes these until they finally make it to another door. On the other side, a large space with old machinery greets them, marking them underneath the tower. They find a staircase and walk up for what seems like forever. Finally exiting the staircase, Jocelyn catches her breath for a moment before walking into a giant luminous cavern, the first Sky Lobby.

A great hall with bare concrete flooring stretches out before her, bathed in sunlight that pours in through the tall, expansive windows. The space has the airy, open feel of a fancy Chelsea loft apartment, but it's much larger, dwarfing any living space she has seen in the city. The high ceiling reveals exposed rafters, remnants of the former hotel's grandeur, now repurposed. Lines of linens hang between the rafters, their whites and pastels fluttering gently in the warm air, drying in the soft glow of the afternoon sun. The linens, some neatly pressed

and others slightly rumpled, add a domestic touch to the otherwise industrial environment, a testament to the daily lives being lived here.

She feels a slight breeze brush against her skin and turns towards a balcony that juts out from the hall. It is open to the city skyline, offering a breathtaking view of the Empire State Building, which looms majestically in the near distance. The balcony, though simple, is adorned with a few potted plants—lavender, rosemary, and a small lemon tree—that thrive in the direct sunlight.

The smell of fresh linens mingles with the faint, sweet scent of jasmine, which wafts through the air from a small, makeshift altar in the corner of the hall where someone has placed a bundle of flowers in an old ceramic vase. The combination of fragrances gives the vast space a surprisingly intimate and homely atmosphere, a stark contrast to the rawness of the concrete floor and the steel beams that frame the room.

Boris leads Jocelyn towards a couple of long, wooden tables near the balcony. The tables, though mismatched in style and size, are arranged with care, each covered with colorful, hand-sewn tablecloths and topped with vases of wildflowers. The chairs around them are an eclectic mix, some sturdy and others slightly wobbly, collected from different parts of the city. The sunlight dances across the surfaces, casting a mosaic of shadows that shift as the linens above sway in the breeze.

Leaning against the windows on the far side of the room, a mountain of chairs is stacked haphazardly, their legs sticking out at odd angles, waiting to be brought down for the next communal gathering. The chairs, like much of the furniture here, bear the marks of their previous lives—scratches, faded paint, and reupholstered cushions—each one telling a story of where it has come from before finding its place in this makeshift home.

“This is where we hold our general meetings,” Boris explains, his voice echoing slightly in the vast, open space of the hall. “Once a month, everyone gathers here to discuss the state of the building and any initiatives we want to push forward. We live mostly month to month, though we have some longer-term goals in mind. It’s a way to sustain our lives without getting too bogged down by the future. Besides, most residents only stay a month or two.”

“How many residents are here now?” Jocelyn asks, her curiosity piqued.

“Today, there are 135 of us, but we expect a few more to join next week.”

Jocelyn is stunned by the number, by the sheer organization of it all. She hadn’t realized how structured this makeshift community was. As they walk through the hall, she notices a few residents glancing at her with wary eyes. She knows, of course, that they don’t trust her yet. Boris had mentioned that everyone was informed of her visit—a decision they had debated and voted on at their last meeting. It was a significant moment for them; she was the first reporter allowed inside the tower. Others had come before, but none with the intention of telling their story. As they approach the elevator bay, Boris pauses and turns to her with a gleam in his eye.

“Want to see something cool?”

He presses the elevator button, and to her complete surprise, it lights up. The elevator is functional.

“What the hell? How can that still work?” she asks, astonished.

Boris grins, a proud and slightly victorious expression on his face. The elevator dings softly, and they step inside the cabin. The interior is a mix of restored elegance and creative improvisation. The wood paneling has been polished, the lights are warm and inviting, and in one corner stands a tall stool. The original gold-plated keypad, however, has been replaced by a piece of MDF board. Each floor number is marked with a bottle cap, varying in color and size, with the numbers scrawled in black marker.

As the elevator ascends, Boris begins to recount the story of its restoration. One of the earliest residents, a Syrian refugee with a background in electrical engineering, had taken on the challenge. After assembling a few generators, he managed to power the elevator’s mechanical box, ensuring a steady flow of electricity. Not only did he bring the elevator back to life, but he also fixed the circuit board, enabling it to serve specific floors. Meanwhile, other residents scavenged materials to refurbish the interior, transforming the once derelict cabin into a functional and essential part of their vertical community. Without the elevator, Boris explains, it would

have been nearly impossible to inhabit the higher floors. Its revival allowed the community to expand upwards, growing both in size and ambition.

When they reach the second Sky Lobby on the thirty-fifth floor, Jocelyn is immediately taken aback by the change in atmosphere. While the first Sky Lobby had retained the hollow, echoing feel of a vacant warehouse, this space is alive with activity, transformed into a vibrant communal hub. Children chase a football across the tiled floor, their laughter ringing through the air, while a group of adults gather around a large kitchen space, chatting and preparing food. Others sit at long, communal tables, engrossed in card games and conversation. The floor is a patchwork of linoleum, ceramic tiles, and other colorful materials scavenged from the tower and the city beyond. The windows are a mosaic of glass, plywood boards, and tarps, yet enough panes remain intact to flood the room with light, creating a warm, inviting glow.

The space reminds Jocelyn of a bustling market, with makeshift stalls and structures scattered throughout, each exuding its own unique character. In a sort of strange coincidence, Boris tells her they call this space ‘The Market’. On one side, a cluster of stalls constructed from scrap wood forms a storage area. Inside, shelves are lined with crates filled with cooking utensils and condiments, while behind the structure, a small alcove houses a couple of burners, two ovens, and a large prep area. Next to it, two full-sized barbecues stand ready, hooked up to gas canisters. The storage stall is whimsically decorated with fake foliage and a bright yellow banner that reads, “Let’s Cook.” The ground around the kitchen is immaculate, the mosaic tiles gleaming as if freshly polished. Jocelyn notices vent ducts snaking up from the kitchen alcove to the ceiling, where they twist around the building’s structural supports before disappearing through a boarded-up window.

Boris explains that the kitchen operates on a strict schedule. To avoid drawing unwanted attention from the surrounding buildings, none of the appliances are used during the day. Instead, the space comes alive in the early morning and late evening, with residents taking turns to cook communal meals. Participation is voluntary, so not everyone joins the dinners, but those who do find a great banquet await them every night.

Next to the kitchen alcove, a range of tables and chairs is set up in a cafeteria-style dining area. The tables, large and round like those found in banquet halls, are covered with colorful pieces of cloth, each one different, adding a bright and cheerful atmosphere to the space. The chairs, a motley collection of metal and wood, have been salvaged from around the city, each one carrying its own history. During the day, this area also serves as a daycare for the children of the tower, their playful shouts and laughter blending with the hum of daily life.

At one of the long, weathered tables, Martina catches their eye and waves them over with a broad smile. “Boris, Jocelyn, welcome!” she calls out, her voice cutting through the low hum of conversation that fills the space.

“Hola Martina” Boris replies, his grin infectious as they make their way toward the group gathered at the tables.

They join the small crowd seated around Martina, a mix of residents engaged in quiet activities—some chatting, others absorbed in their tasks. Next to Martina sits an elderly man, bent over the day’s crossword puzzle. His attire immediately draws Jocelyn’s attention: a long trench coat drapes over his thin frame, and a black fedora rests neatly atop his head. His mustache, pristinely white, curves down to his lips in a perfect, sharp line, stopping just short of being too long. The glasses perched on his nose are large and round, the kind you might find in a photograph from the 1970s. He looks up briefly, nodding politely at the newcomers before returning to his puzzle, his concentration unbroken. She can’t help but wonder what stories this man, who seems to carry the weight of the city’s history in his posture, might hold within him.

After a brief conversation with Martina, Boris and Jocelyn continue their tour of the tower. They walk past the elevator bay and opt for a staircase instead, ascending carefully. The stairwell is dim, lit only by the occasional shaft of light leaking through gaps in the walls. After climbing a few flights, they step out into a hallway that feels distinctly different from the rest of the building. The air is cooler here, carrying with it the faint scent of damp wood and old plaster. The corridor is dimly lit, with patches of light filtering in from partially broken windows at the far end. The walls are lined with remnants of the hotel rooms, their doors hanging ajar, revealing glimpses of faded wallpaper and discarded furniture.

“These floors are too damaged to live in,” Boris explains quietly, his voice echoing slightly in the hollow space. “Most of them are sealed off or used for storage now. We hope to restore them eventually, make them habitable again.”

As they make their way down the hallway, Jocelyn's attention is drawn to an extraordinary sight ahead. The tower splits in two, revealing a massive atrium that stretches between the north and south sides of the building. Suspended in this space, as if hanging on by sheer willpower, is a strange, floating structure. It looks like the skeleton of an old rollercoaster, with various platforms and beams jutting out at odd angles. The ground beneath it is covered in what used to be turf, now ragged and worn, but still retaining a hint of the playful energy it once held. A swing set sways slightly, though one of the swings is missing. Monkey bars crisscross above, their metal frames rusted and bent. Other features—a slide, a climbing frame—fit together like pieces of a puzzle, forming a surreal, ghostly version of an amusement park. Jocelyn can almost hear the echoes of children's voices, the faint sounds of their play, as she gazes at the playground. The sight is both eerie and oddly nostalgic. Though its appearance now is haunting, there's a strange beauty in the way it stands.

They continue down the hallway, moving cautiously to avoid the debris and scattered furniture that litters the path. The floorplan is unusual—rather than straight, the hallway juts back and forth, creating small alcoves that lead into what remains of the rooms. The wallpaper, though mostly burnt and peeling, still hints at its original design: a bright green stripe zigzagging along the walls, an almost gaudy pattern that seems out of place in the dim, damaged corridor. Above, the ceiling is lined with old light fixtures, each one encased in a lampshade designed to look like a tree. The artificial foliage winds across the ceiling, creating a canopy effect that would have once felt whimsical, but now feels like a cage of sorts.

"This floor was part of a hotel called 'Campsite,'" Boris tells her as they walk.

Jocelyn nods, taking in the details. The name fits. The entire floor feels like an attempt to bring the outdoors inside, a curated wilderness designed for those who wanted the feel of camping without sacrificing the comforts of a hotel. The rooms, which Boris refers to as 'tents,' are oriented towards each other, forming small clusters that share common spaces. In place of a campfire, there's a large picnic table in one of the alcoves, still equipped with games and activities, though the pieces are scattered and the table itself is covered in dust. Despite the kitschy design, Jocelyn finds the idea innovative—a luxury camping experience in the middle of the city, complete with all the quirks and charm of a real campsite.

As they walk, Jocelyn feels a wave of nostalgia wash over her. Even in its current state, the floor evokes memories of her time in the Girl Scouts, camping in the woods and gathering around the fire with friends. The feeling is strange—simultaneously comforting and unsettling, as though the space itself knows her past.

Reaching the end of the hallway, they retrace their steps back towards the Market. As they walk, Jocelyn's mind is busy, replaying the sights she's seen—the zigzagging hallway, the eerie playground, the remnants of the once-luxurious rooms. There's so much potential in this place, she thinks. Though she's less interested in what it used to be and more fascinated by what it could become.

Jocelyn and Boris turn back towards the Market and make their way to a smaller set of tables along the back wall. They settle down and Jocelyn takes out her notebook ready to start a more in-depth conversation. A million questions are running through her head, but she decides to focus and take it one step at a time. She first turns to Boris.

"Can you tell me about how long you have been here, and what the challenges have been for you as a squatter in New York City?"

"We are not squatters." Boris replies in a rather sharp tone.

Jocelyn looks up from her notepad. "You are not squatters?" she repeats.

"No, legally, we are not squatters. We don't have that right."

"Why not? Isn't New York City a rather progressive place for squatters?"

"You would think so, but it's very hard for collectives. Squatters in New York City have independent rights, that is to say that a squatter individually can be protected by law. A family or a young person can submit their rights to squat openly, but this does not apply to a collective. Without legal bonds between us, we cannot claim to be squatters. In the beginning, I was a squatter, in an apartment building a couple blocks away. I wanted to help others, and was able to move in another family with me, but as soon as I revealed to the owners that others had moved in with me, they took me to court. We lost the court case, as one of the status requirements for a squatter



is that it is not communal. The city is afraid that it will create mass movements and organizations for squatters. The most dangerous for them is the ability to assemble.”

“I see. So what do you consider your living situation.”

“We are a commune of sorts. I don’t like that word, but it is what resonates best with Americans. In essence, we are a collective of individuals, living together with the common goal of enrichment and betterment. We choose to live alternatively. Most of us have been hurt by individual property or real estate battles. We realize that we have more power together, and as long as our values align, we can become a productive group.”

“What are you hoping for with the residents?” She asks.

Boris looks at Jocelyn with a contemplative face, unsure of what to answer. The question was loaded and his answer could mean something he doesn’t want it to.

“That’s a hard question. I don’t know if I can answer it completely. I am not in charge here. Nobody is. We just want to live I guess, live well and comfortably.”

“Sure, but you must have some goals or aspirations. Isn’t there some bigger picture.”

Boris’ face turns from contemplative to irritated.

“No. It’s not that. We just want to have our own lives. We aren’t looking for some bigger meaning.”

Jocelyn can’t hide her disappointment, sensing that Boris is holding something back. She feels there’s more beneath the surface, a larger vision he’s reluctant to reveal. The word “commune” suggests a deeper, more political undercurrent, but Boris is unwilling to explore it with her. Why? she wonders. If it weren’t something significant, he wouldn’t have spoken about it with such precision. She decides to push a little further, to see if she can get him to open up.

“So if you consider yourselves a commune, what...”

“Let’s move somewhere else,” he interrupts, his voice tight. “I’ll show you a couple more places before we finish.” He leads the way with brisk steps, leaving Jocelyn to follow in silence, her own unease growing as she wonders if she’s pushed too hard.

They return to the elevator bay, the silence between them thick with discomfort. Boris guides her through the tower, navigating the labyrinth of elevators and staircases with the practiced ease of someone who knows every corner of this place. Finally, after climbing the last flight of stairs, Boris stops in front of a heavy timber door. He pushes it open, revealing a breathtaking view of the city skyline. The former Cloud Lobby and Cloud Bar stretch out before them, offering an unparalleled panorama of the city.

Jocelyn is momentarily breathless, captivated by the endless beauty of the view laid out before her. But before she can take it in, Boris is already moving back toward the door, his impatience clear. She follows him without a word, skipping the communal spaces as they make their way back down toward the entrance tunnel. The tour ends abruptly, with Boris locking the hat shop behind her without so much as a goodbye.

Outside, Jocelyn finds a bench in Herald Square and sinks into it, her mind racing. She flips through her notebook, the twelve pages filled with hurried notes, snippets of conversation, and half-formed thoughts. Boris’s reluctance to share more gnaws at her, the unanswered questions swirling in her mind. She knows there’s more to uncover, but the walls he has built around himself seem impenetrable.

What now? she wonders. The story she had envisioned—a tale of struggle, of squatting in an iconic landmark—feels inadequate, shallow compared to the complex reality she has witnessed inside the tower. Despite Boris’ cold goodbye, she feels more determined to dig deeper, to understand the true story behind the residents and their enigmatic home.

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Boris lays in his bed on the 37<sup>th</sup> floor. His apartment is still a work in progress. The window is covered with a blue tarp, spreading a cool light through the fabric. Inside, a simple bed with a nightstand make all the furniture in the room. The rest of the space is covered in books and magazines, organized by author and by date. The evening breeze brushes against the tarps, rustling like waves crashing along the shore. He thinks about Jocelyn and her visit. At first, he was hopeful, and confident in her ability to write their story. Now, he has doubts, but is unsure of why. The process went well, she was engaged, showed genuine interest in the residents, but was almost too confident for him. Her assurances left him with a taste of distrust. She does not know them, yet acts as she does already, completely absorbing the tower as her own personal playground. He gets up and reaches for his phone. In the index, he finds Paule's number, who is available for him day and night. He calls and asks for a meeting as soon as possible. An hour later, the two sit at a diner off of 9<sup>th</sup> avenue with a black coffee.

"So tell me about the reporter? How was the visit today?" Paule asks sipping on her hot coffee.

"I have doubts." Boris answers without hesitation. "She is very smart and perceptive. She has done her research, and by all means can write a great story..."

"So what is the problem?"

Boris hesitates for a moment. "She is too confident. She knows so much, and I am afraid it will cloud her judgement. I think she was expecting something of a politically active, engaged force of counterculture. We are not that, nor do we want to be. I am afraid the story will be twisted and get involved with the wrong crowds."

Paule looks at him with a stare so intense it sent shivers down Boris' spine.

"You need to step up." She finally says in a commanding tone. Boris remains silent, unsure of what Paule means. "Boris you are a college graduate. You are smarter and more educated than anyone I know, let alone in the tower. If you want to maintain what you have, you can no longer hide. Maybe she is right to push you to think about forming an organization, to engage with your neighbors, and to finally reveal the residents to the world."

Boris is in shock. Paule was the most trusted and most protective of the outsiders. In the past, she had often suggested laying low, to hide themselves, and to avoid any attention at all. She was the first person to tell Maria and Boris that meeting Jocelyn was dangerous. Why the sudden change?

"What are you talking about Paule? You always told us to hide."

"You are not the first clandestine group I have worked with, nor will you be the last. The reason I have kept supporting you, free of charge, is because I believe you can and have built something good, something that will make people's lives better, something that will support those in need. Yes, I told you to hide, to lay low, but only until you had the stability to keep going on your own. Do you know how squatter's movements die? By premature exposure and publicity. You are not that. You have built a solid foundation for yourselves, a sustainable community. Now it is time to show people that they can live alternatively in the city."

"Who said we wanted to be an example?" Boris responds with agitation.

"This is not the time to be selfish Boris. Since you arrived, you have done nothing but help people. Are you really going to stop with the people that I bring to you? Have you ever thought about how I find new residents? Do you think they are random? Not at all. I took the time to find the best combination for your system to work."

Paule's revelation angers Boris. If she had been picking the residents from the beginning, all for her plan to work, then Boris was essentially a puppet. Here he thought he was building genuine connections, all to find out it was organized all along from a distance. He clenches his fist visibly on the table for Paule to notice his anger.

"Oh, don't start whining about being manipulated or whatever. Were you really so blind? Maria knew from the first new residents. You know, she was in the streets for years before she came here. When the Iranian family came, you remember, the one with the sick daughter? She asked me how I found them all. Why do you think there are no druggies, no anarchists, no extremists? I am building a community here. If you were so naïve to think that this was life of squatters, then you really have not experienced anything at all."

Following Paule's harsh words, Boris shoots up from his seat, his hands trembling with a mix of disbelief and fury. His mind races, replaying the conversation in fragments that only seem to stoke the fire inside him.

Betrayal cuts deep, and the sting of being misled gnaws at his insides, twisting his thoughts into dark, tangled knots. He feels the familiar heat rising in his chest, his heart pounding against his ribs as if it's trying to escape the fury building within him.

Without a word, he storms out, the door slamming shut behind him with a force that rattles the frame. His feet move with purpose, almost of their own accord, as he makes his way west towards the Hudson River piers. The cool evening air hits his face, but it does nothing to calm the heat of his anger. His breath comes in short, sharp bursts, each exhale laced with the bitter taste of disappointment.

Boris has never been so angry in his life. His fists clench and unclench at his sides, his nails digging into his palms until they leave crescent-shaped imprints. His thoughts are a chaotic swirl—how could he have been so foolish, so blind? The weight of Paule's words hangs over him like a heavy shroud, suffocating and inescapable. The betrayal is like a poison, spreading through his veins, clouding his vision with a red haze. As he strides towards the piers, the city around him blurs into an indistinct backdrop. The usual hum of traffic, the chatter of pedestrians, and the distant wail of sirens all fade into a dull roar, drowned out by the pounding of blood in his ears. Each step he takes is hard, deliberate, as if he's trying to stamp out the rage coursing through him.

Reaching the edge of the pier, he stares out at the dark waters of the Hudson, the lights of New Jersey flickering on the opposite shore. The river, usually a source of calm, now reflects the turmoil inside him—its surface choppy, restless, mirroring the storm in his soul. Boris paces back and forth along the weathered wooden boards, his movements sharp and erratic. He feels the splinters under his shoes, the creaking of the old wood beneath his weight, but he doesn't care. All he can think about is the injustice of it all.

He curses under his breath, his voice low and guttural, barely audible above the sound of the river lapping against the pier. He wants to scream, to unleash the torrent of rage that's threatening to consume him, but he holds it in, jaw clenched so tightly that it aches.

Boris stops at the end of the pier, gripping the railing with both hands. The metal is cold against his skin, but it's the only thing grounding him in this moment of raw, unchecked emotion. He breathes heavily, his breath misting in the cool night air, eyes locked on the distant horizon as if searching for answers he knows he won't find.

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Paule sits in the diner, alone but unfazed. Boris's sudden eruption had turned heads, leaving a ripple of curiosity around them. A few customers still glance over their shoulders, wondering if they had just witnessed a lover's quarrel. Paule, however, remains composed, her demeanor unshaken as she finishes her coffee. She savors the last warm sip, letting the cup linger at her lips for a moment before setting it down with a soft clink on the saucer.

The server, an older woman with a thick New York accent, approaches her table with a practiced ease, her years of dealing with the city's dramas evident in the gentle concern etched across her face.

"Everything alright, love?" she asks, her voice a mix of sympathy and understanding, as if she's ready to step into the role of an impromptu therapist if needed.

Paule offers a reassuring smile. "Yeah, yeah, it's no problem. Just a bit of a reality check, that's all. Keep the change," she replies, sliding a ten-dollar bill across the table.

The server nods as she pockets the tip with a knowing look. Paule gathers her things and steps out into the cool embrace of the evening. The door swings shut behind her with a soft jingle of the bell, and she pauses on the sidewalk, inhaling deeply as the fresh breeze greets her.

The night air is crisp, carrying with it the familiar scent of the city—a mix of distant food carts, exhaust, and something faintly floral that always seems to linger just beyond reach. The streets hum with life, but it's a gentle, rhythmic hum, like the city is settling into a comfortable groove. Sirens wail faintly in the distance, blending seamlessly with the steady cadence of footsteps on the pavement. There's a kind of harmony in it all, a balanced symphony of urban sounds that feels both timeless and reassuring.

Paule smiles to herself, feeling a deep sense of belonging as she gazes at the night lights that twinkle in the steel and glass of Manhattan. The city, bathed in the soft glow of streetlights and neon signs, feels nostalgic tonight, like an old friend wrapping her in a warm embrace. She takes her time strolling down Ninth Avenue, each step measured and deliberate, as if she's savoring the simple pleasure of being here, in this moment, in this place.

The conversation with Boris flits briefly through her mind, but she brushes it aside with ease. It's weightless, inconsequential—a mere passing cloud in the clear night sky of her thoughts. She doesn't dwell on it, nor does she feel the need to. Instead, she lets the serenity of the evening wash over her, filling her with a quiet peace that seems to pulse in rhythm with the city itself.

She continues down the avenue, her pace leisurely, her gaze wandering over the familiar sights of the city she loves. The storefronts, the bars with their open doors spilling light onto the sidewalk, the occasional street performer strumming a guitar or playing a saxophone—it all feels like a carefully orchestrated play just for her. There's a joy in the ordinary tonight, a contentment in the small details that she might have overlooked on any other day.

Eventually, she finds herself in front of a cozy little bar, its dimly lit interior promising a calm glamour. She pushes open the door and steps inside, greeted by the low buzz of conversation and the soft clink of glasses. Sliding onto a barstool, she orders a French 75, something simple and elegant to match her mood. As she waits, she lets herself sink into the atmosphere, feeling the warmth of the bar envelop her like a favorite blanket. She raises her glass to her lips, savoring the refined drink.

As Paule sips her cocktail, her gaze drifts over the array of bottles lined up on the shelf behind the bar. She hardly recognizes any labels, a mix of exotic and unfamiliar names. The amber liquids and jewel-toned spirits gleam under the soft, warm lights, inviting curiosity and a sense of discovery.

A young man slips onto the barstool beside her, and immediately, she catches the scent of his cologne—a sweet blend of honey and lavender that wafts gently through the air. He's on the shorter side, well-groomed with a beard that is meticulously trimmed to follow the sharp contours of his cheekbones. He's not unattractive, but he wouldn't turn heads either—a face that lingers on the edge of forgettable, yet with a certain charm.

Paule studies him out of the corner of her eye as he raises a bottle of beer to his lips, his mouth pursing around the neck with a certain crass, almost like a fish testing the waters. There's something about his ears, sharply angled, that makes her think of an elf from a fantasy novel, though his stocky build and impressive beard might

have suited a dwarf better. The thought amuses her, and she finds herself wondering which character he might play if life were a storybook.

Finally, the man turns to her and smiles—a broad, somewhat awkward expression that crinkles his eyes nearly shut. “Hey there. Are you drinking alone?” he asks, his voice carrying a faint accent that she can’t quite place—European, perhaps, or Middle Eastern. The smile is a bit too tight, the corners of his lips pulling just a touch too far, but there’s something endearing about his effort.

“Not anymore,” she replies, a playful smile edging at her lips. There’s a lightness in her tone, a hint of flirt that catches the man off guard. His eyes brighten, surprised and pleased by her response.

“Cheers to that, then.” He lifts his glass, and she meets it with hers. Their glasses touch with a clear, melodious chime that resonates in the quiet intimacy of the bar. On this night, Paule feels she could be anywhere, with anyone, and still find herself content. The evening, with all its gentle rhythms, feels just right.

When the time comes, she follows the man home, her steps light and unhurried, as if floating through the calm of the night. His performance in bed is unremarkable, a forgettable episode in her perfect evening. But it doesn’t matter. The night had already given her everything she needed—a sense of peace, a quiet connection with the city, and the comforting knowledge that she can find joy even in the most ordinary of encounters. As she closes her eyes and drifts off to sleep, Paule feels the contentment settle over her like a warm blanket, wrapping her in the serene afterglow of a night well spent.

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On the 42nd floor of the tower, where sunlight once poured in through a massive atrium, the residents have transformed what used to be a grand, resort-style swimming pool into their makeshift laundry room. The space still carries traces of its former glory—the curved edges of the pool lined with cracked mosaic tiles, the floor sloping gently toward the deep end where the water used to glisten under the daylight. Once, this was a place where hotel guests could lounge on deck chairs, sipping cocktails under the artificial beach umbrellas, enjoying a slice of paradise in the heart of the city. Now, the pool lies empty, drained of its extravagant past.

The skylights above, though partially cracked and grimy from the fire, still allow shafts of light to pierce through, casting sharp beams that illuminate the space in a ghostly glow. The open atrium, with its vast, soaring ceilings, gives the area an airy, almost divine quality, like a cathedral that has been repurposed to the most remedial of tasks, washing clothes.

Today, the task of managing the laundry falls to Marisol, a bulky man in his late thirties with a sharp eye and incredible discipline. Marisol grew up in the Bronx, where he learned early on how to make do with what he had. He's been with the tower residents since the beginning, one of the first to move in after the fire, and he's taken on the role of organizing some of the everyday necessities—like laundry. Unlike Martina or Boris, Marisol prefers to keep to himself, observing his surroundings and intervening when necessary. The residents did not really know much about his past, only hints from his tattooed arms and the large scar running down his cheek. Despite the mystery, he got along with everyone, never imposing, never late or unresponsive, and always ready to take on a new task.

The former swimming pool, with its deep basin and sloping sides, has become the heart of their laundry operations. Around the pool's perimeter, large metal basins—rescued from the hotel's long-abandoned kitchens—are neatly arranged. These basins, repurposed from their culinary origins, now brim with steaming water, heated by a clever system the residents have devised.

The building's old steam pipes, once used to fill the hotel's opulent baths with warmth, now serve a different purpose. Steam, redirected through an intricate network of copper tubes that weave through the walls, gently heats the water in the basins. The system isn't connected to the city's infrastructure; instead, it draws its power from the trash burned in the building's underground chambers. The smoke from the burning waste is funneled through a series of filters—leftover relics from the tower's previous life—purifying the air before it escapes into the atmosphere. As the hot air surges upward, it passes beneath one of the pools, this one exposed to the network of pipes running underneath. Here, the residents place the water basins, letting the heat rise and warm the water to the perfect temperature for washing.

The entire system runs like clockwork, but only for a short window each day. Once activated, the residents have just one hour to wash all the clothes and linens before the heat dissipates and the water cools. It's a daily ritual of efficiency and precision, the once-grand pool now a hub of industrious activity. After the washing, the linens and clothes are carefully hung to dry, the fabric swaying gently in the breeze that flows through the hollowed-out space, carrying with it the faint, lingering scent of steam and clean water.

Marisol moves through the space with purpose, his sleeves rolled up and a ragged apron tied around his waist. He's in charge of making sure the laundry system operates without a hitch, and today is no different. He stirs the clothes in one of the large basins with a long wooden stick, the water swirling with suds as he works. The sound of fabric sloshing against metal echoes softly in the cavernous space, a rhythmic, almost meditative noise.

Around him, a few other residents are busy with their own tasks. An older man, Mr. Patel, who used to run a laundromat before he lost his lease, is carefully wringing out a sheet, his strong hands making quick work of the heavy, wet fabric. He and Marisol exchange a nod of understanding—no words are needed between them. They've both done this a thousand times before, and their movements are fluid, practiced. Nearby, a young mother, Lina, is hanging clothes on a series of taut ropes that crisscross the deep end of the pool, turning it into a patchwork of drying linens and garments. The sunlight streaming through the skylights catches on the damp fabric, creating a kaleidoscope of colors that dance across the walls.

The smell of detergent fills the air, mingling with the scent of damp concrete and the faint, lingering chlorine etched into the tiles. It's a comforting smell, one that speaks of care and effort. As Marisol finishes stirring the basin, he glances over at the deep end of the pool, where a small group of children are playing with makeshift toys—a few plastic bottles and pieces of driftwood they've collected from the streets. With these precious tools, they have recreated a secure vault in the back corner, using the rows of linens as the robbers try to loot the

treasures without the guards tagging them and sending them to prison. Their laughter echoes up to the ceiling, filling the space with a sense of life and joy that seems to defy the tower's somber history.

He takes a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow, his gaze drifting over the room. The floor beneath his feet is still covered in the original smooth tiles, though they're chipped and cracked in places, and the once-blue mosaic of the pool is faded, its colors dulled to a cool greyish hue. The light filtering through the grimy skylights casts long, dappled shadows across the space.

As he moves to check on another basin, Marisol catches the eye of one of the younger residents, a boy of about ten who has been helping out with the lighter tasks. He's balancing a basket of freshly wrung clothes, his small frame straining under the weight. Marisol gives him an encouraging smile, and he grins back, his spirits lifted by the acknowledgment of his efforts.

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Every time the subway passed beneath the tower, a low rumble would shake the foundations of the second basement, where the former laundry rooms sat in quiet disrepair. The machines were still there—fourteen large washers lined up along the walls, with two bulky folding machines standing like relics in the center of the room. Most of the essential parts had long been stripped away: the circuit boards, folding arms, and metal wash basins now missing, leaving behind hollow shells. Without any natural light or running electricity, the room was pitch black, the kind of darkness that seemed to swallow even time itself.

Wooden shelves still clung to the walls on either side of the room, where linens had once been stacked before being sent back up to the guest rooms through the now defunct service elevators. On the south side, a narrow passage used to lead to a break room where housekeepers would take a rest between loads. It wasn't much more than a tunnel, with flickering tube lights and a worn veneer floor that had once mimicked hardwood but now peeled away in tired strips. The passage had been sealed off with a heavy metal gate, the kind you'd find in old subway stations, blocking off the space beyond.

Access to the laundry room remained through a single staircase that the residents had cleared early on when they first explored the depths of the tower. On the northwest side of the room, near a pair of outdated vending machines, a door opened to a similarly dark hallway. Through this tunnel, another door led back into the laundry room—a space that no one dared to enter anymore. Loose wires hung from the ceiling, still holding the dangerous potential of a lingering current, and the abandoned machines had likely become nests for whatever creatures now called the basement home.

Despite the laundry room's foreboding atmosphere, the residents discovered another, more promising area in the basement. Toward the west end of the tower, several shelves remained intact, marking what had once been the warehouse. Packages had been left behind, scattered across the shelves, and the residents had managed to salvage some practical items—pans, cushions, and a few bathroom accessories. But these were small finds compared to what they discovered next. In an adjacent room, a set of machines had once processed and sorted the tower's waste, now long out of service. But sitting beside them were two industrial-sized generators.

This discovery marked a turning point for the residents. The generators, though long dormant, offered a path toward power. Ahmed had made quick work of them, hauling the hulking machines up the stairs—a feat in itself—before setting to work. He cannibalized parts from other abandoned machinery in the tower, while other residents scavenged the city for fuel. After a few weeks of effort, both generators roared to life, bringing electricity back to several floors of the building. If there was one moment that symbolized the residents' shift toward stability, it was when those generators were connected.

Once the generators were running, the basement was left mostly untouched again. The space was still too dark, too damp, and too unsettling for anyone to linger long. Occasionally, a resident would venture down in search of something useful, but the basement had little to offer. The only consistent reminder of its existence was the subtle shake of the foundations as the subway passed by at regular intervals—a faint tremor in the otherwise lifeless vault beneath the tower.

The first basement level presented even more challenges for the residents. Its proximity to the underground network made it impossible to monitor who came and went. The former loading docks had been taken over by a group of drug addicts who set up camp, lighting up in the shadows. The residents had tried to negotiate, to reason with them, but the squatters had turned violent, chasing them off. In response, the residents sealed off the entrances to the loading docks, hoping that the intruders wouldn't find another way up into the tower.

The infestation of rats in the first basement was another issue altogether. On the south side of the tower, an old cold room had once been used to temporarily store food before it was sent up to the kitchens. The leftover residue had drawn hordes of rats that now claimed the space as their own. It was impossible to reclaim the area without a proper extermination, so, like the loading docks, the residents had sealed the room as best they could, trying to keep the infestation from spreading further into the tower.

The ground floor was the only part of the building that had seen any real renovation since the fire. While the tower sat vacant, with no clear future in sight, a few individuals connected to the former Metropolitan took it upon themselves to clean up. They scrubbed the grime from the pillars and replanted the dead bushes that lined the entryway. A local artist even donated a sculpture—a sleek aluminum figure holding what resembled a lightning bolt. Some believed it depicted Zeus, though others found its contorted form more reminiscent of a



man being electrocuted. The statue remained for a few months before it was stolen, vanishing without a trace. No one reported it missing—it was never meant to be there in the first place.

The lobby continued to evolve in its own way, a slow transformation visible through the layers of graffiti and tags that began to cover the walls. Most of the markings were small and unremarkable—quick slogans scrawled in messy, illegible fonts, each one a fleeting attempt to leave a trace, a signature of someone’s passing through. But every now and then, something more ambitious would appear. Along one of the longer walls near the elevator cores, a mural emerged—a bold and unexpected work depicting a group of elephants gathered around a poker table.

The central elephant, dressed in a blue pinstripe suit, had a tusk peeking out of his breast pocket, replacing the usual handkerchief with a symbol of status. To his left, another elephant, monocle perched on one eye, studied his cards with laser focus, his expression a mix of calculation and cool confidence. On the right, an elephant nervously sneaked a couple of cards under the table, a single drop of sweat rolling down his cheek as he tried to avoid detection. At the center of the table, the dealer—another elephant—flipped a card with his trunk, the moment frozen in vibrant color.

Despite its intricacy and humor, the mural remained largely unnoticed. It wasn’t part of the city’s celebrated underground graffiti scene, and few eyes ever passed through the lobby to appreciate it. In time, the mural was buried beneath another wave of tags, its clever tribute to the building’s past as a casino lost to the layers of spray paint that followed. Had it been painted in a more visible space, where more people could linger and take it in, the mural might have been considered a masterpiece. But here, hidden in the shadowy corners of the tower, it became just another fleeting artifact in the building’s slow, quiet evolution.

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Jocelyn sits on her fire escape, cradling a glass of wine in her hand. The cool metal of the railing presses against her back as she gazes down at the quiet Harlem alley. The silence of the evening feels heavy, almost oppressive, as she reflects on the day's events—the interview, the visit to the tower, and, most unsettlingly, Boris's abrupt shift in attitude. She can't quite grasp what caused him to shut down so completely, as if the trust they had been building was suddenly shattered. It gnaws at her, the uncertainty of it all, the sense that she had unwittingly crossed a line.

She takes a slow sip of her wine and begins sifting through her notes. Page after page, she searches for clues, some hint of where things went wrong. But nothing stands out—no pointed question, no careless comment that might have turned the tide so sharply. Was he simply tired? Did some forgotten obligation pull him away? Neither explanation seems to justify the stark change in his attitude. Somewhere in their conversation, she must have said something that shook him, and now, she's determined to figure out what it was, to find a way to fix it. She's come too far to let her story unravel now.

Jocelyn pouts, her lips pressing into a thin line as she takes another sip of wine. In the distance, she spots a large silhouette moving slowly along the street below. As it draws nearer, the figure becomes clearer, the shadows sharpening into the familiar form of Simone, a homeless woman known to all the residents of Upper Harlem. Simone's slow, steady gait and the unique rhythm of her walk are unmistakable. She wears a large trench coat, its pockets bulging with trinkets she's collected to resell at the pawn shop down the street. To the neighborhood, Simone is a fixture, as much a part of the landscape as the old brownstones and the corner bodega. She's not particularly warm or friendly, but there's a certain mystique about her presence. Those fortunate enough to receive her acknowledgment feel a quiet sense of belonging, as if they've been granted some unspoken approval to be here.

Jocelyn watches as Simone meanders down the sidewalk, her movements deliberate, as if she has all the time in the world. A thought crosses Jocelyn's mind: could Simone find a place at the tower? She contemplates the idea, turning it over in her mind like a puzzle piece that doesn't quite fit. The more she considers it, the more she realizes that the dynamics wouldn't work. Simone's life is on the streets, among the crowds, woven into the fabric of the city. The hidden, insular nature of the tower's residents would clash with her lifestyle. The squatter's life isn't for everyone.

She drains the last of her wine and slips back through the window into her living room. The soft afternoon light spills across her couch, bathing it in a gentle, golden glow. Instead of bringing comfort, the quiet, the normalcy of her surroundings frustrates her. The tranquility annoys her, as if it were mocking her. She feels a mix of anger and dissatisfaction bubbling up, refusing to be placated by the calm around her. Her story can't end like this. Without more from the residents, she fears she'll be left with nothing but a shallow tale, a surface-level narrative that barely scratches the depth of what she's experienced.

As she moves through her apartment, her mind returns to Simone, imagining how she might fit into the tower's world. How would she be introduced? How would she integrate? Jocelyn pictures Simone at first reluctant to engage, spending her days wandering the halls, wary of everyone and everything. She imagines Martina and Boris trying to draw her into the collective, urging her to attend meetings or join a sewing circle. The thought of Simone at a sewing course makes Jocelyn laugh out loud—it's an absurd image, and she knows it wouldn't last. Simone would likely distance herself, slipping into the background, learning the rhythms of the building just as she knows the schedules of the neighborhood. She knows when the barber walks by, when the chicken shop owner takes his smoke break—she would use this skill to avoid the others, staying hidden in the shadows, a paradoxical figure in a community that itself exists on the fringes of society. In time, Jocelyn imagines, Simone would grow tired of it all and leave, returning to the streets of Harlem, the only place that truly feels like home.

As evening settles in, the bright light from the lamppost outside her window blinds her momentarily. With it comes the familiar sounds of the city—sirens wailing in the distance, the murmur of voices, the occasional burst of laughter—all seeping into her apartment, reminding her that she's still in the heart of it all. She gets up to prepare something to eat, her thoughts still drifting back to Simone and the tower, the scenarios playing out like scenes from a movie in her mind. After the day she's had, she finds herself with little appetite, settling for a simple salad and a yogurt for dessert. As she eats, her eyes keep returning to her computer, the notes on the screen a jumbled mess of confusion.

"God damn it," she mutters to herself, frustration tinging her voice.

As the minutes tick by, Jocelyn's frustration begins to shift, hardening into a steely determination. She revisits the interview in her mind, dissecting every word, every pause, until she zeroes in on the moment things began to sour. It was when they discussed the politics of squatting—she's sure of it now. Before her visit, she had done her homework, delving into New York's squatting history and exploring alternative living models from Copenhagen to Berlin and Athens. She hadn't intended to compare the tower to these places, but the similarities were hard to ignore. The potential for the tower to make a powerful statement about the city's housing crisis had seemed too significant to pass up.

Jocelyn hops onto her computer and opens her folder documenting the origins of the Metropolitan, a project that had once been the pride of the city. The tower was not just a building; it was a symbol of what urban living could become—a bold experiment in low-income housing and alternative ownership structures, through a model of hospitality. In its early days, the tower was hailed as a beacon of social innovation. The city, plagued by a growing housing crisis, had put its hopes into this towering structure, envisioning it as a model for the future.

The Metropolitan was conceived with the promise of accessibility. The plan was ambitious: units would be owned by the city but managed by independent hotel entities, allowing for a unique mix of residents from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The project aimed to foster a community where people could stay, share resources, and benefit from the building's shared spaces—like the sprawling restaurants, the rooftop gardens, and the innovative childcare cooperatives. In the beginning, the tower was a success. It defied expectations, becoming a vibrant community that attracted national attention. The right-wing critics had warned that the project would drag down property values, but those fears were quickly overshadowed by the tower's financial success. The casino, nestled within the building's lower floors, brought in profits that silenced most of the opposition. Even the skeptics had to admit that the Metropolitan was working—at least on the surface.

Beneath that surface, though, the challenges began to emerge. Managing such a diverse and densely populated community was no small feat. The independent entities responsible for the tower's upkeep found themselves in complicated legal battles about the allocation of space and duty. Disputes arose over resource allocation, maintenance responsibilities, and the inevitable tensions that came with living in such close quarters. Nonetheless, the Metropolitan remained a symbol of hospitality for the city like no other.

The fire was the final blow. It ripped through the building, gutting its core and leaving behind a charred skeleton of what had once been a thriving community. In the aftermath, the city panicked. The Metropolitan, once seen as timeless, was now a liability. Investors and city officials, once so proud of the project, backed away. The tower was abandoned, left to stand alone amidst the skyline, a monument to both the city's ambition and its failure. That is, until the residents arrived.

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At around noon, the sky hung low with thick, overcast clouds, casting the city in a familiar, oppressive gray blanket. On the upper floor of the tower, the lights flickered with an unsettling rhythm. This floor once housed a bustling kitchen, a culinary powerhouse manned by some of the best cooks in the city. The air used to be alive with the sounds of roaring stovetops, the sharp hiss of vegetables hitting hot pans, and the sizzle of sauces reducing to perfection. Aromas of thyme, coriander, and rosemary would waft down the hallways, winding through the corridors and filling the hall with a mouthwatering scent.

But now, those days were just a memory. The kitchen, once a hive of activity, had been gutted after the fire. The titanium-plated countertops, once gleaming under the fluorescent lights, were stripped away and sold off, scavenged and dispersed throughout the city. Some pieces found new life in trendy venues like the Carousel bar in Williamsburg, where patrons leaned on repurposed metal, unaware of its rich origins. Compared to the rest of the tower, the kitchen was a particularly hollowed-out shell, stripped clean of everything valuable.

The space is composed of two large, symmetrical rooms that stretch across the width of the tower, connected by a narrow bridging corridor. This corridor, once a bustling artery of the kitchen's operations, was now a ghostly passage lined with empty offices and staff areas. The remnants of a once-thriving culinary empire lay in ruins, the linoleum floors cracked and peeling, the drop ceiling above torn apart, exposing a tangled mess of wires and ventilation ducts.

In one of these rooms, Mohammed sits in a battered swivel chair, the fabric worn thin and the metal frame creaking with each movement. He rocks back and forth, his gaze fixed on the exposed ceiling above, as if searching for something amidst the decay. The twenty-year-old had been tasked with scavenging what little was left of value in the kitchen, anything that could be repurposed or reused by the residents downstairs.

With a sudden burst of energy, he jumps up from the chair, pausing for a moment with sharp eyes, like a tiger stalking its prey. Then, with a determined nod, he drops to his knees and begins tearing at the linoleum floor, prying it up to reveal whatever might be hidden beneath. Mohammed had become something of a professional scavenger, a modern-day treasure hunter in the urban jungle. No longer in school, his days were spent roaming the streets of Midtown and Uptown, pushing a rickety trolley filled with the random, discarded objects he found along the way.

One day, while wandering through Central Park, he stumbled upon an entire air conditioning unit, abandoned beside a walking path. It was too large to fit in his small cart, but with a few tools he always carried with him, Mohammed carefully dismantled it, piece by piece. He hauled the parts back to the tower, where he reassembled the unit, giving it a second life. It was this kind of ingenuity that had earned him respect among the tower's residents. Mohammed wasn't just a dumpster diver; he was an urban alchemist, turning the city's trash into treasures.

After each of his scavenging rounds, he would return to the tower and meticulously catalog his findings, laying them out on a makeshift table covered with an old, stained tablecloth. He would spend hours on the internet, researching each item, calculating its worth, and imagining how it could be repurposed within the tower's walls. In the ten months since he had made the tower his home, Mohammed had amassed around six thousand dollars' worth of scrap.

As he worked, the room around him was eerily silent, save for the occasional groan of the building settling into its old bones. The kitchen might have been stripped bare, but in the hands of someone like Mohammed, its story was far from over. Each piece he salvaged was a small victory.

Mohammed moves swiftly through the deserted offices of the abandoned tower, gathering loose screws, light fixtures, and any movable panels he could find. Despite being jobless and technically homeless, he refuses to be seen as anything other than dependable and honorable. His work ethic is unmatched. Whenever he found himself with idle hands, he would take the initiative to collect more materials or devise commercial strategies for the building's residents. Above all, Mohammed wants to be respected.

Though still young, Mohammed has lived through more than most experience in a lifetime. Born and raised in Athens, his life was marked by relentless discrimination and oppression. From an early age, he and his mother, a Libyan immigrant who had entered Greece through illegal channels, found themselves homeless and confined to harrowing migrant camps. In the early 2020s, after the global pandemic and ongoing wars in the Middle East, the migrant crisis in Southern Europe reached unprecedented levels. While countries like Italy and Germany

adopted authoritarian measures to close their borders, Greece remained a tenuous haven for many. The Greek government was not particularly welcoming, but numerous channels allowed migrants from North Africa to seek refuge in Europe. This changed drastically with the election of President Fylos Kranidiotis. The far-right leader's administration swiftly implemented a strict anti-immigration program, not only barring new arrivals but also dismantling most public programs designed to help migrants integrate into the Greek economy. This led to a surge in anti-immigration protests and violent evictions of popular squats around Athens. Both the police and far-right activists took it upon themselves to enforce the new policies, burning community centers and assembly areas for migrants.

Amidst this chaos, Mohammed and his mother moved from squat to squat, never knowing when they would have to leave. In February 2027, his mother was raped in one of the last large refugee camps in the city. Sexual violence was rampant in the camps, fueled by the naïve and dangerous assumption that all migrants would support one another like good Samaritans. The harsh reality was that homelessness, joblessness, and hopelessness led many to alcoholism and drug use, creating perilous dynamics within the camps. Mohammed's mother became a victim of this disarray. One evening, after a day of begging and hustling, Mohammed returned to find his mother on the floor, unresponsive. He spent the night comforting her, though she never spoke of what had happened. The signs were clear: ripped curtains, a broken table, smashed plates, and blood trails leading to the front door. Despite his best efforts to find help, his mother took her own life a week later in the Aegean Sea. Mohammed was only sixteen. Four years later, he found himself in New York, granted refugee status and a new place to call home.

In the north side kitchen space, Mohammed strikes gold. Inside one of the few remaining cupboards, he discovers a set of fancy frying pans, their once gleaming surfaces now buried under a thick layer of dust. Carefully, he lifts each one, brushing off the dust with the care of an archaeologist unearthing a precious artifact. He counts six in total, and each one finds a place in his large duffel bag, their weight pulling on his shoulders as he slings it over his back.

Mohammed pauses for a moment, sitting in the middle of the empty bar space, the silence pressing down on him like the heavy air before a storm. He tries not to dwell on his past—Athens, his mother, the life he left behind. His personal motto has always been to keep moving forward, never looking back. He tells himself that the past is a dead weight, and his future is all that matters. But as he sits there, the empty space around him echoing with memories he'd rather forget, he feels the familiar tug of his history trying to pull him under.

Shaking off the thoughts, he pushes himself up from the floor, the duffel bag's straps digging into his shoulders. The kitchen might be stripped bare, but his find today is a small victory. He drags his heavy loot towards the staircase, knowing the service floor he's on isn't connected to the tower's makeshift elevator system. It's a decision between climbing five flights up to the pool floors or descending twelve floors to the next lobby space. The pans aren't particularly heavy, but their bulk makes the journey cumbersome. After a moment of deliberation, he decides to go up. It'll give him a chance to catch up with Jermaine, his best friend in the tower, before heading back down.

Mohammed begins his ascent, carefully lifting the duffel bag above his head to avoid scraping the walls and damaging the goods inside. The staircase is steep and narrow, the kind that was never designed for frequent use, especially not by someone hauling salvaged kitchenware. But Mohammed is used to the physical demands of life in the tower—every day is a test of endurance, pushing to keep moving forward.

The pool floors are a misnomer for what they've become. Once part of the tower's luxurious spa hotel, the area had been a sanctuary of water therapy, with dipping ponds and other aquatic structures designed to soothe the city's elite. Now, the residents are trying to repurpose the space as a clean water tank, a critical resource for their community. The idea came from Martina, who recognized that while they could secure food and electricity, potable water remained a constant struggle. The pool could be their solution, not just for drinking water, but also for irrigating the gardens they've begun to cultivate. Urban agriculture is a lifeline for them, but without reliable water, their efforts are hampered at every turn.

When Mohammed reaches the pool floor, he finds Jermaine and Ahmed huddled over a set of blueprints and plumbing diagrams. Ahmed, the resident who had resurrected the tower's generators and elevators, is deep in thought, his brow furrowed as he traces the lines on the paper with his finger.

"What's up? Anything new since last week?" Mohammed asks, setting his duffel bag down with a heavy thud.

Jermaine looks up and gestures for Mohammed to join them. “Hey, Mohammed, come take a look. Maybe you can make sense of this.”

Mohammed leans in, examining the diagrams in silence. The tangle of pipes and valves means little to him, but he appreciates the intricacy of the system they’re trying to decipher. After a moment, he shakes his head. “No idea, guys. Not my field.”

Jermaine sighs, a hint of frustration flickering across his face, while Ahmed remains engrossed in the plans. The key to their success lies in understanding the building’s complex plumbing, in finding the city’s water pipes and figuring out how to tap into them without drawing too much attention.

“It shouldn’t be too complicated,” Ahmed says, his voice steady and confident. “The goal is to figure out which pipes connect and how much pressure we need to bring the water up to this floor. In a typical building, there would have been a tank on the top, with water pumped up from the basement. But in this tower, the mechanicals are distributed across different floors—four in total. It means we need to understand how they’re relayed and how they connect to the city’s distribution system.”

Mohammed listens, nodding along even though most of it goes over his head. He trusts Ahmed to figure it out—after all, this is the same man who managed to resurrect an elevator system that had been all but destroyed by fire. If anyone can solve this problem, it’s him.

Satisfied with his visit, Mohammed hauls his duffel bag back onto his shoulder and heads to the elevator bay. The elevator is slow, painfully so, a relic of a system that Ahmed is still trying to optimize. As the minutes tick by, Mohammed feels the familiar weight of impatience creeping in, but he knows there’s no point in rushing—time moves differently in the tower, where every second is a battle against entropy. When the elevator finally arrives, Mohammed steps inside and rides it down to the common hall. The doors creak open, and he steps out into the cavernous space, heading towards the corner where he stores his haul. He begins the meticulous process of cataloging his finds, noting each item’s condition and potential value. Behind him, he hears the familiar sound of footsteps—Martina’s, light and quick, as she approaches.

“This is all I could find,” Mohammed says preemptively, not bothering to turn around. Of all the residents, Martina is the one he trusts the least. Her over-enthusiastic and overly welcoming nature sets him on edge, like a parasite he can’t get rid of. Martina, ever the optimist, makes a conscious effort to befriend him, knowing full well that she’s the last person he wants to trust. To her, winning him over is a challenge, a necessary step in proving her commitment to the community. Unlike the actual mothers of the tower, Martina tries to adopt the whole group, assuming the caretaker’s role. He finds it repulsive, if not insulting to their independence. All of residents came with their own motives, their own stories. To him, her character is oppressive to their freedom.

“Hola, Mohammed! This is a great haul, I knew you could do it,” she says, her voice as bright as ever.

Mohammed doesn’t respond, focusing instead on cataloging the items with methodical precision. He can feel her presence behind him, a constant, oppressive weight that makes his skin crawl. He hates being observed, questioned, pitied. Martina lingers, her silence growing heavy, until finally, she retreats back to the large tables where a group is sewing a new curtain for the floor-to-ceiling windows.

When she’s gone, Mohammed lets out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. He shrugs off the lingering frustration and decides to find Boris, the one person in the tower he trusts without reservation. Unlike Martina, who tries to mother everyone, Boris is more like an older brother—steady, reliable, and always ready to offer support without smothering him.

Mohammed searches the usual spots—the common hall, the laundry areas, the balconies, the rooms, and the service corridors—but Boris is nowhere to be found. Now that he thinks about it, he hasn’t seen Boris since that reporter visited two days ago. But Mohammed isn’t worried. Disappearing for a few days is common among the residents, a way to recharge and come back with renewed energy and excitement. He’s sure Boris will turn up soon.

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In Central Park, tucked beside the 110th Street Playground, stands an old stone fort, a relic from the War of 1812. It's a place few New Yorkers know about, its history obscured by time and overshadowed by the city's more famous landmarks. But those who do know it cherish the fort for its solitude and the stunning views it offers across the park. Technically, it's off-limits, but the chain that blocks the staircase is never locked. The narrow, winding stairs lead to a hidden perch, invisible to the casual passerby. On weekends, teenagers sometimes claim the spot, sneaking up to share a few beers away from prying eyes. But during the week, the fort is a sanctuary, a quiet refuge where city dwellers can escape the relentless pace of life and lose themselves in the green expanse of the park.

Jocelyn sits on an ancient stone bench, its surface worn smooth by centuries of weather and time. The air is cool and still, the kind of evening where the city seems to pause, holding its breath before night falls. She gazes out at the park, where the sunset bathes the trees in a soft, golden light, casting long shadows across the lawn. A week has passed since her visit to the tower, but the memories linger, gnawing at her with a persistence she can't ignore. She knows she has to go back. Despite a string of unanswered messages to Boris, her resolve has only hardened. Paule is her next best option, though the idea of meeting her again fills Jocelyn with a sense of dread. Still, she had reached out, and they had arranged to meet at a rooftop bar in Midtown—a venue far too upscale for Jocelyn's tastes, but one that Paule had chosen for reasons known only to her.

She takes a drag from her cigarette, a habit she picked up in the past week, though she finds it repulsive. The smoke curls around her fingers, mingling with the evening air, and she wonders why she keeps doing it. Maybe it's because the harshness of the smoke matches her current state of mind, a mix of dissatisfaction and simmering anger that she can't quite shake.

As the clock ticks toward 7:30, Jocelyn rises from the bench, stubs out her cigarette, and makes her way down the old, rickety stone stairs. The unlocked fence gate creaks as she pushes it open, and she steps out into the park, blending into the flow of pedestrians heading home for the night. She finds the subway on the Northwest corner of Central Park and slips into the crowd, her thoughts still lingering on the tower and the tangled web of emotions it had stirred within her.

The subway is particularly crowded tonight, a crush of bodies and noise that makes Jocelyn long for the quiet of the fort. She can't find a seat, so she stands by the doors, leaning against them once they close. From this vantage point, she has a clear view of the entire car, and she keeps a wary eye on her purse. Among the throng of passengers, a group of boys are gearing up for one of the famous New York City subway shows. Jocelyn has seen hundreds of these performances, the acrobatic displays that turn the cramped space into a makeshift stage. The boys swing from the railings, flipping and spinning to the beat of an old-school hip-hop track, their energy palpable. They're talented, no doubt, but Jocelyn can't help but feel irritated. Their performance, impressive as it is, forces the rest of the passengers to huddle together, squeezing into an uncomfortable amount of space.

She finally gets off at Penn Station, navigating the labyrinthine tunnels with ease. The rooftop bar is in the iconic New Yorker Hotel building, its grand entrance exuding an air of luxury that immediately makes Jocelyn feel out of place. The opulent yellow and cream décor seems to mock her, a glaring reminder of her insufficient income. She's never been able to afford places like this, and even if she could, she wouldn't want to.

Inside, she finds a security guard who kindly directs her to the rooftop. There's something about his demeanor that puts her at ease, his gentle eyes contrasting sharply with the imposing aura of the place. As he escorts her to the elevator, she catches a glimpse of his name tag 'Goldy.'

"What's Goldy short for?" she asks, breaking the silence.

"Goliath," he replies with a small smile. "It's a bit much, especially for tourists, so I just go by Goldy."

"Lovely. Thank you, Goldy," Jocelyn says, returning his smile with one of her own.

The elevator doors close, and she ascends to the top floor, stepping out into the bar lobby. The space is a chaotic mix of neon signs and Christmas lights, a schizophrenic décor that's so kitsch it's almost endearing. Jocelyn can't help but laugh, the absurdity of it breaking through her tension. She approaches the hostess, who's engrossed in her phone and oblivious to Jocelyn's presence. With a loud clearing of her throat, Jocelyn finally gets her attention and gives her name for the reservation. She's led outside to the rooftop, where the city sprawls out beneath her, its lights twinkling in the starless sky. The sunset is gone, but the night has its own beauty, the

skyline alive with a kaleidoscope of colors. Paule is already there, sipping on a Martini and staring out at the view with a dull, detached gaze.

“Hey Paule, nice to see you again,” Jocelyn says, her voice carrying a note of insincerity that she doesn’t bother to hide. From the start, Jocelyn had found Paule difficult—standoffish, aloof, and frustratingly hard to connect with. Their relationship had been more of a negotiation than a partnership, with Jocelyn practically begging to be let into the tower. It was a struggle she didn’t enjoy, and one that left a bad taste in her mouth.

Paule barely acknowledges her, offering only a nod and a gesture to the empty chair beside her. It’s another small act of superiority that Jocelyn despises, but she forces herself to sit down, determined to see this through. Before she can say anything, a server appears to take her order. She scans the menu quickly, opting for a Cosmopolitan—if she’s going to be in this over-the-top setting, she might as well embrace it.

As she waits for her drink, Jocelyn takes a moment to steady herself, knowing that this conversation could be the key to unlocking the next chapter of her story...

“I talked to Boris,” Paule begins, her voice calm and measured. Jocelyn leans in slightly, sensing that Paule has something significant to share. “I think you are exactly what the residents need.”

The words land heavily in the space between them, and Jocelyn feels a jolt of surprise. She doesn’t know what to make of it, anxiety prickling at the edges of her mind as she waits for Paule to elaborate.

“Your story, your background, your experiences,” Paule continues, her gaze steady and unflinching, “all lead me to believe that you want to make a difference—not just for yourself, not just for the residents, but for the city as a whole. I’ve spent years fighting to keep people like the residents in homes, to give them a chance at a decent life. I believe New York needs a bit of rattling, and you, Jocelyn, you’re the one who can kick the hornet’s nest.”

Jocelyn’s initial confusion begins to morph into something else—excitement, a spark of recognition that she’s on the brink of something important. But she’s cautious, remembering Paule’s guarded nature and the unexpected intensity of her words. There’s more to this, she thinks.

“Can you explain yourself a bit better?” Jocelyn asks, her tone careful. “What do you mean by rattling?”

Paule leans back in her chair, her expression contemplative. “People like the residents—they’re not just squatters. Well, technically they are, but they’re more than that. Many laws exist to protect individuals seeking homes, but when it comes to groups, to communities—those same protections vanish. The city is terrified of a community that challenges its norms, that embraces alternative living methods. It threatens the very foundations of their precious real estate empire and the consumerism that fuels it.”

Jocelyn listens intently, the pieces of the puzzle beginning to fall into place. Paule’s voice carries a quiet intensity as she continues, her words cutting through the noise of the rooftop bar.

“New York has always been a city for the rich, in many ways,” Paule says, her eyes narrowing slightly. “But it was also the center of counterculture, of rebellion—that’s what made it alive. Now, it feels like the city is dying. So many vacant buildings, so much homelessness, and nothing on the horizon to change it. The residents of the tower are a way to show that the city is still autonomous, that its people are resilient. I believe you can craft a story that will turn heads, that will make people see the tower and its transformation for what it truly is. I believe in you, and I believe in them.”

Jocelyn sits back, stunned by the boldness of Paule’s vision. She had never imagined this woman, so protective and secretive, to be capable of such revolutionary thoughts. But this—this is exactly what Jocelyn has been searching for, a way to not just tell a story, but to spark a movement. She feels a smile tugging at the corners of her lips, a smile that tells Paule she’s ready, more than ready, to dive into this.

“So what would you have me do next?” Jocelyn asks, her voice steady with newfound resolve. “Can I visit the tower again?”

“Not right now,” Paule replies, her tone softening slightly. “Boris got frightened by the idea of the article in the end. He’s the moral leader of the tower, whether he likes it or not. If he’s not on board, the others won’t be either. I need to convince him first—give it a week. In the meantime, I want you to write what you saw. Not



what you learned, but what you experienced firsthand. Describe the residents, what they were doing. Don't add names for now, don't even mention the address—just a description of a place transformed.”

Jocelyn nods, her mind already spinning with ideas as she scribbles a few notes on the back of her hand, a habit she's picked up when she's without a notebook. The ink smudges slightly, but she doesn't care; the thoughts are already cemented in her mind.

“Then I want you to publish it in an independent magazine,” Paule continues. “I can give you a few contacts. It can't be a big name—something that won't get too much attention, but something that gets the story out there.”

“Why publish now, if you don't want an audience?” Jocelyn asks, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“The point isn't to expose the tower,” Paule explains, her eyes locking onto Jocelyn's with a fierce intensity. “It's to set a tone, to tell a story. Think of it as an abstract for a book—something poetic and true. A piece that will lay the foundation for the rest of your story.”

Jocelyn looks at Paule, a newfound admiration blooming within her. She never would have guessed that this reserved woman could be so strategic, so revolutionary in her thinking. The ideas Paule is presenting aren't just powerful—they're exactly what the narrative needs, and what the movement needs. Jocelyn is impressed, and for the first time, she feels a genuine connection to Paule, a shared sense of purpose that transcends their previous interactions.

For a moment, they sit in silence, the weight of their conversation settling between them like a pact. Then, Paule's voice breaks through the quiet, a warm smile softening her features.

“Alright, Jocelyn, finish your drink and then get to work,” she says, the genuine encouragement in her tone catching Jocelyn off guard.

Jocelyn returns the smile, a sense of determination flooding her senses. She drains the last of her Cosmopolitan, the sweetness lingering on her tongue as she sets the glass down with a quiet resolve. It's time to get to work.

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Julian sits across from the fountain in Washington Square, the familiar rush of water providing a soothing backdrop to the evening bustle. After work, he often finds himself drawn to this spot, a place where the city's chaotic energy seems to condense into something manageable, almost serene. As an assistant professor at Parsons School of Design, he spends his days surrounded by the vibrant pulse of students finding their own creativities, though his role in graphic design is something he stumbled into rather than sought out. His artistic inclinations, varied and unfocused, had somehow coalesced into a teaching position that he's held onto more out of habit than passion. He's not particularly attached to the field, but he enjoys the act of teaching—guiding students, seeing the flicker of understanding in their eyes—and he's found a kind of equilibrium in his life here in the city.

From his vantage point, Julian watches the flow of people in the park, observing them with the detached curiosity of someone watching a film. To him, the figures that populate the square are like characters in a movie, their actions playing out before him as if scripted. A group of students is sprawled on the grass, engrossed in a card game, their laughter rising and falling in the evening air. Nearby, a young woman sits on a bench, her nose buried in a book, oblivious to the world around her. A child races around the fountain, his small feet pounding the pavement as if he's in a race against time.

Julian views these scenes as if through a lens, an audience member in the grand theater of the city. He often finds himself pondering what keeps these people together, what makes them seek out each other's company or simply find comfort in their own solitude. For as long as he can remember, Julian has grappled with anxiety and self-doubt, though he's always framed it as a kind of self-preservation. He doesn't want to be a burden to others, nor does he want to be burdened by them. He lives a life of quiet introspection, content but never quite reaching for the elusive state of happiness that others seem to chase so fervently.

Happiness, to Julian, is an overrated feeling. He often wonders if people convince themselves they are happy as a way to fend off darker thoughts, or if they truly feel the emotion in its purest form. For him, contentment is a more fitting term—a state of acceptance, a settling into the life he has without the need to label it as either good or bad. There are moments, of course, when emotions flare up, when something happens that jolts him out of his usual equilibrium, but these moments are fleeting, mere ripples on the surface of his otherwise passive existence.

As Julian watches the crowd around the fountain, he sees them as himself, struggling with invisible thoughts. He imagines that most of them, like him, are neither particularly happy nor sad, but simply content to be here, in this moment, doing whatever it is that makes them feel connected to the world, even if just for a little while. In his mind, this contentment is enough—more than enough, really—to sustain him through the days and nights.

He recalls a passage from a book he once read, a line that struck him: being overly positive is a form of violence. What this means, he believes, is that the burden of reciprocating positive emotions when they don't naturally exist is oppressive. There is something almost coercive about the expectation to mirror another's happiness, especially when that happiness feels alien, distant. Julian has always felt that one person's joy can often be another's misery, and the assumption that happiness is a universal state is, to him, painfully naive.

Perhaps this is why he so often keeps to himself, content to observe rather than engage. He doesn't want to feel the weight of others' emotions pressing down on him, nor does he want his own emotions to be questioned or dissected. In the quiet solitude of his thoughts, he finds a kind of freedom—a place where he can exist without the expectation of performing happiness, where his contentment is enough. And as he sits there, watching the world go by, he feels a quiet satisfaction in knowing that this, at least, is something comfortable.

Julian decides it's time for a coffee. Most of the coffee shops in the area are either too expensive or too commercial for his liking, places that seem to value branding over substance. Instead, he walks about ten blocks east, heading toward a small deli he discovered years ago. To him, they serve the best coffee in the city—unpretentious, strong, and reliable. He finds a table outside, settles in with his Americano, and lights a cigarette. Cigarettes are a luxury he can barely afford on his salary, and he knows he'll have to quit soon. But for now, he lets the nicotine soothe his mind.

As he sits, something catches his attention. Julian has a keen ear, one that can pick up subtle sounds even amid the roar of the city. There's a low, steady rumble, barely audible beneath the usual din of traffic and conversation. It's a sound he might have ignored, but there's something about its rhythm that draws his attention. It's almost like the sound of a washing machine in a distant room—a persistent, rhythmic vibration

that doesn't belong in this setting. He listens more closely, closing his eyes to concentrate his hearing. The sound grows louder, more distinct, and he begins to pick out the details. It's too quiet to be the wheels of a suitcase, too fast for a walker or a cane. There's a metallic quality to it, but also something hollow, as if it's carrying a heavy load. As the sound approaches, Julian can now clearly hear the wheels—straining against the pavement, as though the weight they bear is almost too much for them.

Finally, from around the corner, a piano emerges. Two men in delivery uniforms are pushing the large instrument across the crosswalk, their movements slow and deliberate as they navigate the uneven ground. Julian watches them, a small smile tugging at his lips. "A piano," he thinks to himself. "Would have never guessed that."

He finishes his coffee, the warmth of the cup seeping into his hands before he discards it and quietly makes his way home. The walk is familiar, carrying him to a small apartment in Midtown that he rents from a relative. It's a modest space, just enough for one person, but it's comfortable and offers a view that's nothing short of spectacular. From his thirty-fifth-floor window, Julian can see the skyscrapers of Midtown rising around him, like pillars tugging at the clouds above.

His neighbors are an older couple from Massachusetts who moved to New York in the late seventies. They like to tell him stories of how the city used to be—back when Midtown was a far grittier place, plagued by heavy drug use and abandoned buildings. Penn Station, just down the street, was an epicenter for dealers and vagabonds. Julian listens to their stories with a mix of fascination and detachment. The city they describe feels like a different world, though in some ways, he knows it hasn't changed all that much. The biggest difference at the Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts at every corner.

He enters his apartment and settles into his favorite chair, a worn but comfortable seat that's perfectly positioned in front of a large window. The space around him is too small to be called a dining room, but it's distinct enough not to blend into the living room either. The walls are painted a dull yellow ochre, a color he's grown to dislike but never mustered the energy to change. The window sill is bare—where others might have placed plants or trinkets, Julian prefers the unobstructed view of the city outside. He's not particularly tidy, but he keeps his windows spotless, wanting the clearest possible view of the world beyond.

He gazes down at the building on the corner, a particular structure that has always captured his interest. It used to be a renowned hotel, almost as tall as the Empire State Building. But a few years ago, a fire tore through it, leaving the once-majestic tower a charred skeleton. Julian remembers coming home that day to find the city in a state of panic, the air thick with smoke. Oddly enough, his first thought wasn't of the tragedy unfolding but of the fact that he'd have to clean his windows again.

The tower now stands empty, never repurposed or rebuilt, its windows either boarded up, broken, or left curiously pristine, as if untouched by the flames. A few weeks ago, Julian noticed the silhouette of a figure high up in the tower, around the fiftieth floor. Since then, he's kept a watchful eye on the building, curious about whether it was just a trick of the light or something more. Over time, he began to see more signs of life—a woman stepping out onto a balcony for a cigarette, a couple of men on a higher floor removing a board from a window and replacing it with a tarp. These glimpses of movement have convinced him that the ghost tower is indeed inhabited, though by whom and for what purpose, he can only speculate.

Today, the thought crosses his mind to document the tower, to capture it in some tangible form. A year ago, he had splurged on a high-end camera for a photography project he was commissioned to do. But photography has never been his calling—he prefers drawing, the abstraction of reality to his image. So instead of reaching for the camera, he pulls out a large sketchbook, its pages almost as tall as his torso, and begins to draw.

He starts with the outline of the tower, its silhouette familiar and yet always striking from this angle. From his perspective, the building seems to split into two distinct parts, divided by a glass curtain wall. On his side, the tower is shorter, while the opposite side stretches higher into the sky. He can almost see it as two separate towers, linked by an atrium that forms a bridge between them. He sketches the shape with precision, carefully detailing the segments and the surrounding buildings, capturing the essence of the scene.

As he works, Julian's style begins to emerge—an exaggerated, almost comic approach that plays with proportions and perspectives. He starts to focus on the windows, the empty eyes of the building that once looked out over the city. But before he can delve too deeply into his drawing, the doorbell rings.

Julian opens the door to find Etienne standing there, a familiar grin on his face. Etienne is an old friend, someone who's become a constant in Julian's life—a kind of anchor. Tall, with short blond hair and a peculiar mustache that he insists makes him look more sexy, Etienne is, in many ways, Julian's best friend. Living out in Queens, Etienne often prefers to hang out at Julian's place in the heart of the city. He works at a restaurant near Times Square, and after finishing the morning and lunch shifts, he usually stops by Julian's apartment for dinner. It's become a routine, their own version of family dinners.

Etienne steps inside, his presence filling the small space with an energy that Julian finds both comforting and amusing. Despite his often-lumberjack appearance, with the broad shoulders, Etienne has a certain lightness to him, a way of turning even the most mundane moments into something worth remembering. A scar runs across his face, from his cheek to his forehead—a permanent reminder of a motorcycle accident from his teenage years. Half of his teeth are fake, and his right eye only has about thirty percent vision, but Etienne wears his scars with pride, spinning wild tales of a bear attack whenever someone asks. "True, if the bear had wheels and ran on diesel," he likes to joke.

"I brought dinner today. Do you have anything to drink?" Etienne asks as he heads straight for the kitchen, dropping the Tupperware on the counter.

"Silly question, of course I have something to drink," Julian replies, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. He opens the fridge and pulls out a pitcher of sangria he'd made the day before, pouring them each a glass as Etienne reheats the food. They settle onto the couch, the familiar routine unfolding without a word. Etienne, out of habit, grabs the remote and flicks on the TV, the screen lighting up with the colorful chaos of Mario Kart. Most evenings, they spend a few hours racing, the competition friendly but fierce. But tonight, Julian feels a different kind of mood settling over him—a more introspective, philosophical air that's hard to shake.

"What do you think about squatters?" Julian asks suddenly, his voice thoughtful as he stares at the screen, his mind clearly elsewhere.

Etienne, mid-bite of mashed potatoes, looks over at him with a puzzled expression. "Wha' you mean?" he mumbles around a mouthful of food, pausing the game as he tries to gauge Julian's mood.

"I don't know... I've just been thinking," Julian says, his eyes dropping to his plate as he picks at his food. "I need a new project, something to stimulate me. You know the Metropolitan, that tower that burned down? I've been seeing people inside from my window. I think people are living in there. I'm curious about what their lives are like... I want to draw it, or document it somehow. I just know that I'm interested."

He falls silent, his thoughts drifting as he contemplates the idea. The tower has been a lingering presence in his life for months, its empty shell a constant reminder of something lost, something forgotten. The more he thinks about it, the more the idea of exploring it, of understanding it, takes root in his mind.

Etienne swallows an abnormally large mouthful and, in a rare moment of seriousness, responds in an unexpectedly stoic manner. "I think it's another world from you and me. If you document it, you'll need to show the good as well as the bad."

Julian is taken aback by the insight, the depth of understanding that Etienne, usually so easygoing, brings to the table. Etienne may not be the brightest in an academic sense, but he's quick to read people, to understand their motivations and fears. Their friendship has always been one of contrasts—Julian, the intellectual, the overthinker, and Etienne, the jock, the easygoing spirit who seems to navigate life with confidence. In high school, Julian had been the quiet, nerdy kid obsessed with manga and metal, while Etienne had been the star athlete, popular and always surrounded by friends. Yet, their bond had been unshakable, made from mutual respect and understanding.

Julian remembers a day in high school, adjusting the spotlights for his theater club when three jocks cornered him, mocking his small frame and emo haircut. Etienne had appeared out of nowhere, stepping in to stop the bullying without hesitation. The story had spread around the school, casting them as the duo who fended off the childish antics of their peers, a mature friendship admired by everyone. Even now, their dynamic remains the same—Etienne, more popular and socially adept, and Julian, the one who struggles to keep a conversation going without overthinking it.

Julian hesitates for a moment, then declares, "I think I want to go in."

“Go in where?” Etienne asks, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“The Metropolitan. The ghost building,” Julian answers, his voice steadier now, the decision settling into his mind with a sense of inevitability.

“Okay, well, I’ll come with you then,” Etienne says without missing a beat.

“Why?” Julian asks, surprised by the offer.

“Because otherwise you’ll get scared,” Etienne replies with a grin, the lightness returning to his tone. He knows Julian too well—his fear of scary movies, spiders and snakes, his general unease around anything that crawls.

“Alright, let’s do it then,” Julian says, feeling a jolt of excitement at the thought. It’s not often that he initiates anything—he usually follows Etienne’s lead in their adventures. Etienne knows this and is always more enthusiastic when Julian comes up with an idea on his own, as long as it’s not something too out of intellectual sphere like a play or an avant-garde art show.

They begin to plan the afternoon of their exploration, debating whether it would be better to go during the day or under the cover of evening. In the end, they settle on a late night visit, figuring it’s safe enough. Julian decides to bring his camera—not the fancy one, but a smaller, more discreet model designed for film. Etienne will bring gloves and some basic construction gear, just in case they need to handle anything potentially dangerous. They agree to meet back at Julian’s apartment and head out together toward the 34th Street end of the tower, the smaller, more hidden side.

After Etienne leaves, Julian feels a surge of energy, a sense of purpose that has been absent for too long. He’s been drifting, uninterested in most things around him, but this—this feels different. It feels like the start of something new, something that could reignite his creativity and give him a reason to look forward.

He spends the rest of the evening on his couch, sketching ideas on a large board. He wants to have a concrete vision before they go in, something to guide him in the tower. He has no idea what to expect, but the act of creating a storyboard before knowing the content excites him. It’s like going in blind, but with a plan—a paradox that fuels his imagination. For the first time in a long time, Julian feels like he’s exactly where he needs to be.

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Boris wanders through Battery Park, his steps slow and aimless as he meanders along the paths that weave through the trees and open spaces. He hasn't been back to the tower in three days, and he's not sure if he even wants to return. The thought of going back feels heavy, like a weight pressing down on his chest, but the alternative—being alone out here—feels equally oppressive. He pauses near the water's edge, gazing out at the Statue of Liberty in the distance. The monument, once a symbol of hope and opportunity, has always struck him as a bitter irony, a mockery of the very ideals it claims to represent. How could a city that prides itself on freedom and opportunity leave so many people struggling just to survive? The statue's tarnished green hue, weathered and worn, reminds him of a crisp dollar bill—an appropriate color for a symbol that seems more about money than liberty.

His eyes drift along the shoreline until they land on Ellis Island, the historic entry point for countless immigrants seeking a new life in the 20th century. Boris once visited the museum there, taking in the stories of those who came before him, their hopes and hardships etched into the walls of the old processing center. To him, Ellis Island is the true monument of the cityscape—a place that speaks honestly about the struggles and dreams of those who sought a fresh start in a harsh and indifferent world.

A distant boat horn breaks through his thoughts, a low, mournful sound that echoes across the water. Boris glances at his watch and notices it's just past midnight. "Happy Birthday," he mutters to himself, a wry smile tugging at his lips. Birthdays have never meant much to him, just another day in a long string of days. But this one feels different—this is the first time he's been alone for it.

He begins walking back through downtown, the quiet of the evening settling over the empty streets. Office buildings loom on either side, their windows dark and lifeless, like giant tombstones marking the graves of another day's work. The city, usually so full of energy, feels drained, its soul sucked out by the sterile, impersonal architecture. As he crosses the Brooklyn Bridge, Boris becomes aware of a soft clicking of footsteps behind him. He turns to find a dog trailing him, its tail wagging lazily as it trots along, keeping pace with his slow, steady stride. The dog has no collar, no tags—nothing to suggest it belongs to anyone. It's just there, a silent companion on this lonely walk.

Boris feels neither attachment nor irritation toward the dog. It's just another presence in a city full of them. He considers the responsible thing to do—stay in Manhattan, find a police officer or someone who might help return the dog to its owner—but the thought exhausts him. He doesn't want to deal with it, doesn't want to be responsible for anyone or anything right now. If the dog wants to follow, it can, and if it decides to leave, that's fine too. By the time they reach the end of the bridge, the dog suddenly turns and sprints back the way they came, as if it was only there for the calming walk and the cool night air.

As Boris steps into Brooklyn, the atmosphere changes abruptly. The dead, financial heart of Manhattan gives way to a vibrant, pulsing nightlife. Groups of students wander the streets, their voices loud and slurred with the obvious signs of drunkenness. The sidewalks are alive with movement, conversation and the occasional burst of laughter filling the air. Boris weaves through the crowds, his mind drifting to the last time he was near the Brooklyn School of Technology. He remembers the front building being occupied by protesters during the demilitarization initiative, a tense time when the government had passed a bill allowing the military to siphon public funds from schools and medical institutions. The bill proposed that the military would take over some public responsibilities, setting up its own schools and hospitals in a move that was met with widespread outrage.

Students across the country had risen in protest, uniting under the slogan "Army School, Nazi School." The tensions escalated quickly, and in cities like New York, the National Guard was called in to clear the occupations, resulting in several deaths and many injuries. The violence and hostility shocked the nation, and for a brief moment, it seemed like the city itself would turn against the military. Support for the protesters swelled, with local authority offering protection against the forces sent to quell them. It was a near tipping point, the kind of unrest that could have sparked a civil war if the president at the time hadn't vetoed the bill. Things eventually returned to normal, but for those two weeks, the country had stood united against its most revered institution, the military—a rare moment of collective resistance that still lingers in Boris's memory.

As he continues his journey back to his friend's apartment, Boris feels disconnected from the world around him. The city, usually so vibrant and alive, fades into a dull, monochrome landscape. The lights blur together, the smells and sounds blending into an indistinct haze. His mind is clouded with feelings of hurt and anger, twisting everything around him into a muted, oppressive atmosphere. He passes the towering silhouette of the Brooklyn

Tower and feels a sudden, sharp urge for a drink. Boris has been sober for three years, but the thought of a cold drink in his hand is particularly tempting tonight.

Whenever he feels these urges, he's developed a technique to distract himself: go to a park, find a bench, and watch the people. Observing the world around him, the simple act of noticing others, helps to pull him out of his own head. But at this hour, most parks are closed or deserted, so he decides to find a major plaza instead. He spots one in the distance and makes his way over, finding a concrete bench that's both uncomfortable and soothing in its cold solidity. He sits down and leans back, the rough texture of the stone against his skin grounding him in the present moment. For the next hour, he watches the nightlife unfold in front of him—a special birthday spectacle just for him.

A man in a rumpled suit paces back and forth near a lamppost, his phone pressed tightly to his ear. His tie is loosened, his hair disheveled, and the shadow of a five o'clock stubble clings to his jawline. Boris imagines him as an overworked office drone, perhaps an investment banker who's just had a particularly bad day. The man's face is creased with frustration, his gestures sharp and agitated as he talks into the phone, likely to a client or maybe even his wife, trying to explain why he won't be home tonight. The city has swallowed him whole, and now he's stuck in its gears, a cog in the relentless machine of corporate America.

Near the fountain, a woman stands with a camera slung around her neck, her gaze darting from one corner of the plaza to the next. She's dressed in layers, a scarf wrapped loosely around her neck despite the mild weather, her boots scuffed and well-worn. She moves with a quiet purpose, snapping photos of the mundane—cracked pavement, an abandoned shopping cart, the reflection of neon signs in a puddle. Boris watches her with interest, wondering if she's an artist, someone who tries to see beauty in the overlooked details of the city. Perhaps she's just passing through, a visitor trying to capture the essence of Brooklyn in a series of snapshots, hoping to take a piece of it back with her when she leaves.

A group of teenagers, all clad in dark hoodies, huddle near the entrance of a convenience store, their faces obscured by the shadows of their hoods. They laugh loudly, the sound echoing off the brick walls, but there's a nervous energy in their movements, a sense of hesitation that doesn't quite ring true. Boris imagines them as kids from the nearby projects, out looking for a bit of excitement. They're at that age where everything feels like a challenge, a test of boundaries. He wonders if they'll make it out of this place, or if the city will trap them too, pulling them into its underbelly where the streets are less forgiving.

Further down the plaza, an elderly couple sits on a bench, their hands clasped tightly together. They're both dressed in their Sunday best, even though it's a Thursday night. The woman's hair is neatly pinned back, her coat buttoned all the way up, and the man wears a hat that looks like it hasn't left his head in years. Boris watches them with a mix of curiosity and admiration. There's a steadiness to them, a quiet resilience that speaks of decades spent together. He imagines they've lived in the neighborhood their whole lives, witnessing the changes, the rise and fall of buildings around them. Perhaps they've just come from a church service, or maybe they're simply enjoying one of their midnight walks, a routine they've kept up for as long as they can remember.

At the edge of the plaza, almost hidden in the shadows, a young man sits cross-legged on the ground, a guitar resting on his knee. He strums it softly, the sound barely audible over the noise of the city, his voice a low murmur as he sings to himself. His clothes are ragged, his dirty blond hair falling in unruly waves across his face, but there's a peacefulness about him, a sense of contentment that Boris finds almost enviable. The young man could be homeless, a drifter who's found a temporary solace in music, or maybe he's just someone who prefers the simplicity of life on the streets to the complexities of modern existence. Boris wonders if he's running from something, or if he's simply chosen a different path, one that leads away from the conventional and toward something, although less fortuitous, more authentic.

Boris's gaze shifts again, landing on a woman who is standing near a food cart, arguing with the vendor. She's dressed in vibrant colors—a bright red coat, yellow leggings, and a green scarf that flutters in the breeze. Her gestures are animated, her voice rising in exasperation as she tries to make a point. Boris imagines her as someone with a menial nine to five, someone who lives in a small studio apartment filled with random bits and bobs to keep her life interesting. The food cart is likely one of her guilty pleasures, a rare indulgence in an otherwise frugal life. Boris can see the fire in her, the kind of determination that refuses to let her dreams die.

As he sits there, Boris lets the stories play out in his mind, each one a fragment of a larger narrative that he'll never fully know. The plaza, with its eclectic mix of characters, feels like a living, breathing organism, each

person a cell contributing to the life of the whole. The city, so often overwhelming and impersonal, becomes intimate in these moments, when he can sit back and observe, weaving tales from the smallest visual clues.

Suddenly, as Boris continues to observe the life unfolding around him in the plaza, his thoughts drift back to the tower and its residents. The images come to him in a rush, vivid and clear, like snapshots from a reel of film—scenes of the dining hall filled with laughter and the clatter of plates, the meeting areas where ideas and plans were exchanged in whispers and shouts, the rooftop gardens where the residents had coaxed life from the soil in defiance of the concrete jungle around them. These images flood his mind, and as they do, something clicks into place, a realization that hits him with the force of revelation.

This—this was what Paule had been talking about. This was the vision she wanted him to see. The tower wasn't just a refuge, a respected place for those who had nowhere else to go. It was a microcosm of the city itself, a living, breathing organism whose personalities and moments defined urban life as much as, if not more than, any other corner of New York. The residents, with their struggles and triumphs, were not merely surviving—they were creating, shaping a community that embodied the truest possible form of urban living.

A wave of emotion sweeps through Boris, a potent mix of panic and determination that sets his heart racing. His mind, previously clouded with doubts and anger, suddenly sharpens with clarity. The fight with Paule, the lies, the feelings of betrayal—they all fade into the background, insignificant in the face of this new understanding. It's as if a switch has been flipped inside him, and all he wants now is to go back, to embrace the tower and its residents, to present their story to the world with the pride and reverence they deserve.

Without a second thought, Boris springs to his feet, driven by a sudden, fierce urgency. He locates the nearest city bike station, and in a flurry of motion, he unlocks a bike and takes off, pedaling furiously toward Manhattan. The wind whips past him as he speeds through the streets, his legs pumping with a relentless rhythm, fueled by the fire of his newfound resolve. The city blurs around him, a kaleidoscope of lights and shadows, but Boris sees only one destination—the tower, the place where everything now seems to converge.

As he crosses back into Manhattan, the familiar skyscrapers rise before him, their towering forms a testament to the city's unyielding spirit. He navigates the streets with practiced ease, his focus singular as he heads toward Midtown. The tower looms in the distance, a silhouette against the night sky, and Boris feels a rush of adrenaline as he approaches the hidden entrance off 34th Street.

He dismounts the bike and dashes toward the door, his heart pounding in his chest as he races up the stairs, his feet echoing in the narrow hallways. The walls seem to close in around him as he nears the common hall, his anticipation building with every step. This is where it all began, where the residents had forged a community out of the ashes of what once was. This is where Boris expects to find the familiar faces, the friends and comrades who had become his family.

But as he bursts into the common hall, his breath coming in ragged gasps, he stops short. The room is not filled with the faces he knows so well. Instead, two young men, strangers to Boris, stand in the center of the space, their eyes widening in surprise at his sudden entrance. They are not part of the life he knows here—they are outsiders.

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Julian and Etienne stand in a large, dimly lit room. The late-night billboards from outside filter through the cracked glass block windows, casting just enough light to reveal the sprawling space. They had entered the tower around midnight, squeezing through a small, barely open door they found after circling the building. For the first hour, they wandered through narrow service hallways, testing doors and finding most of them locked, until they finally stumbled upon an open one that led to a staircase. The stairwell, though aged and decrepit, showed signs of recent use—the floors were unusually clean, almost polished, a subtle hint that others had passed through here before.

When they reach the former casino floors, Julian feels a mix of unease and fascination. The room is vast, empty, and eerily quiet, the only sound the faint hum of the city outside. The ochre carpet, once vibrant, is now faded and worn, its patterns barely discernible under a thin layer of dust. The few slot machines that remain are scattered around the room, their screens dark and lifeless, some tilted at odd angles as if knocked over in a hurry. Julian approaches one of the machines, the metal frame cold under his hand as he wipes away the dust to reveal the faded colors of the display.

Julian carefully frames the shot, his camera lens focused on the solitary slot machine that stands amid the debris. One of the sequences he's most intent on capturing is the essence of neglect, the palpable feeling of abandonment that permeates the room. To Julian, this sense of forgottenness is most powerfully conveyed through the objects left behind. Unlike some of his contemporaries, who believe in defining the history of objects through the stories they were part of, Julian finds more truth in their current, postmortem state. Instead of speculating on what could have been, he likes to explore what it has become, working backwards to find out more about its life. The wear and tear, the dust, the way they sit in silence—these are the true markers, speaking more loudly than any invented narrative could.

This particular slot machine, he realizes, is a perfect example. Once, it must have been a focal point, a beacon in the sea of flashing lights and chiming sounds, drawing crowds with the promise of instant wealth and thrill. In its heyday, it was likely surrounded by eager players, their hopes and anxieties poured into every pull of the lever, every spin of the reels. But now, it's nothing more than a relic—a once-revered object that time and circumstance have left behind.

Julian steps closer, examining the machine with a mixture of curiosity and melancholy. The buttons are worn, the paint chipped, but the machine still holds a certain dignity, as if it hasn't fully accepted its fate. There's a layer of dust on the screen, thick enough to obscure the once-vibrant display, which Julian gently brushes away with his hand. He films the machine from different angles, capturing the way the flickering light from outside splashes across its surface, giving it a fleeting, ghostly life.

The neglect of this machine, Julian finds, is particularly striking. Unlike many of its companions, which were likely salvaged or stripped for parts, this one was left to rot. It sits alone, separated from the others that once formed a bright, buzzing line across the casino floor. What was it about this one that made it undesirable, unworthy of being taken when the rest of the casino was dismantled? Was it broken, deemed worthless, or simply overlooked in the chaos that followed the fire? As he films, Julian tries to capture the machine's current state in a way that tells its story without words. The emptiness around it, the dust, the way it still seems to hold on to its former purpose, despite everything.

After a long moment, Julian lowers the camera. He takes one last look at the slot machine, then steps back, leaving it behind as the casino did. The machine remains stationary in the frame, as if it was at peace and would be here to greet him the next time he comes.

He steps back, taking in the room as a whole. The ceiling is high, with fabric drapery hanging from steel beams, still adorned with white and gold trim that has mostly frayed over time. Black domes of security cameras are barely visible, their lenses covered in dust. The walls, once covered in mirrors and flashing lights, are now bare, the glass block windows allowing just enough of the city's neon hues to seep in and give the room a ghostly glow.

Continuing his slow tour of the space, Julian films other remnants of the casino's past—a toppled chair here, a crumpled playing card there. Each item tells a similar story, but none resonate with him quite like that lone slot machine. Its neglect is confounding, its abandonment almost personal.

Near the windows, Julian spots a makeshift setup—a few magazines and cardboard boxes arranged like a makeshift bed. Etienne moves closer, his footsteps cautious as he surveys the floor, which is littered with needles and empty bottles. They exchange a glance; no one is here now, but the remnants of recent activity are clear. They continue their exploration, filming the casino floor, capturing its current state of decay.

Finding another staircase, they ascend, this time more quietly, aware of the possibility of encountering someone. The stairwell leads to another large room, empty except for a few chairs stacked haphazardly in a corner. The space is bare, with exposed steel beams crisscrossing above them. The floor, once covered in the same luxurious carpet as below, is now mostly stripped, with only patches of fabric remaining. Neither Julian nor Etienne know exactly what this room was used for, but the large windows and open space suggest it might have been a lobby or event space.

As they wander, the sound of hurried footsteps echoes from behind them, and Julian's heart skips a beat. He freezes, panic rising as Etienne takes a few steps back, trying to stay out of sight. The room offers little cover, and they both know they've been heard. A man appears at the entrance to another stairwell, his blue tracksuit damp with sweat. His wide blue eyes locked onto them, the look in them like a deer caught in the headlights. He's breathing heavily, and for a moment, the three of them stand still, sizing each other up.

Julian stood frozen, panic creeping up his spine, his legs trembling beneath him. He felt paralyzed, unable to move or speak. He feels his legs tremble, but before he can say anything, Etienne steps forward, his voice steady but cautious. "We're unarmed," he says, holding his hands up slightly to show they mean no harm.

The man looks them over, his gaze sharp and suspicious. "What are you doing here?" he asks, his accent carrying a slight Eastern European lilt that Julian barely notices.

"We're just here to film," Etienne explains quickly. "He's an artist. We wanted to see the tower and document what we found. Just some shots of the building, that's all."

The man narrows his eyes, clearly not convinced. Julian feels a surge of anxiety—why did Etienne have to say he was an artist? He steps forward, trying to sound calm. "Hi, we really don't mean any harm. We're just curious about the tower. I live nearby and have noticed some activity here. We're only here to film, nothing more."

The man studies them for a moment longer, then, after what feels like an eternity, finally speaks. "Come by tomorrow around noon. Penn Station subway entrance on 7th Avenue. But you have to leave now."

Julian and Etienne nodded quickly, relief washing over them as they turned to make their way back down the stairs. Even though it was just one person, his presence had felt overwhelming. As they approached the door they had entered through, Julian hesitated, gathering his courage to ask one last question.

"What's your name, by the way? So we know who to find tomorrow?"

"Boris," the man replies curtly before turning and disappearing into the darkness.

...

Martina sits in her favorite spot on the twenty-fifth floor, a space she's carefully curated over the years. The room, once a cluster of tiny, impersonal hotel rooms, has been transformed into something more intimate. The wooden floors, which she had painstakingly scrubbed and polished, gleam faintly under the dim overhead light. The walls, now painted a soft cream color, give the room a warm, comforting feel. There's a calmness here, a quiet that seems to hold the chaos of the world at bay. On one side of the room, a small, worn couch is nestled against the wall. Martina would often sit in the evenings, sewing clothes or patching up various items brought to her by the other residents. The couch is covered in a handmade quilt, each square a different pattern of fabric, the only significant spot of color in the room. Nearby, a low table holds an assortment of tools—needles, thread, fabric scraps—neatly organized in small, repurposed containers. The room's orderliness reflects Martina's need for a space where she can work and think without interruption. A space that is hers alone.

In the far corner stands a tall, metal filing cabinet, its surface dented and scratched, but still sturdy. Inside, she keeps meticulous records of the tower's residents—who they are, where they came from, what they need. This cabinet is Martina's lifeline to the community, a way for her to keep track of the many small, yet significant, details that make the tower a home for so many.

The small kitchenette in the corner is spotless, the counters wiped clean, the cabinets neatly stocked with basic supplies. Martina had fixed the bathroom door herself, reattached the handle, and ensured it no longer creaked when opened. These small acts of maintenance had become a way for her to regain control and create a sanctuary for herself.

Next to the filing cabinet, a large plastic container sits on the floor, filled with clothes she had brought back from a nearby donation center. Most of the items are children's clothes, packed neatly in vacuum-sealed bags. Martina carefully sorts through them, examining each piece with meticulous precision. It's late, but she's determined to finish sorting before going to bed. This task, like so many others she takes on, is what she considers a 'leftover necessity'—a job that no one else thinks to do, but one that she knows is crucial for the well-being of the residents.

As she sorts the clothes, her thoughts drift to Boris. He is the most respected resident in the tower, always with a plan, always with a solution to keep them moving forward. Despite his young age, Boris is the smartest person she has ever met, and that infuriates her in ways she doesn't like to admit. Martina works tirelessly, often late into the night, doing more for the tower than anyone else. She is the one who keeps everything running smoothly, yet it's Boris who gets the recognition, the respect. She knows she deserves more from them, more appreciation, more acknowledgment of all that she does.

Responsibility is a strange thing, she muses. It shapes you, forces you to confront parts of yourself you never knew existed. For her, it has been both a burden and a salvation, a way to atone for the years she spent drifting, unmoored by any real sense of duty. There was a time when responsibility was a foreign concept to her, something that belonged to other people. Back then, she considered herself comfortably middle class. The labels of wealth never mattered much to her, but she never took for granted the ease that came with it either. She grew up in a serene, suburban enclave just outside Guatemala City, surrounded by the warmth of a loving family. Her parents were gentle souls, and her siblings—two brothers and a sister—were always supportive, their bonds close-knit and unbreakable. Martina was the vibrant one, the girl with a magnetic energy that drew people to her effortlessly. For her twelfth birthday, her father had rented out the municipal center and invited the entire neighborhood. Over two hundred people came to celebrate with her, a testament to the light she brought into people's lives.

In school, Martina was neither a star student nor a troublemaker. Her challenges didn't stem from academics but from her popularity. The school offered no extracurricular activities, but Martina always found ways to keep herself entertained with her friends. At sixteen, she had her first boyfriend—a tall, mature-looking boy with the beginnings of a beard and a voice that had already deepened into a baritone. Their relationship lasted a few months before Martina, growing bored, decided to end it. Despite his outwardly grown-up appearance, he was a kind-hearted person who genuinely cared for her, and the breakup wounded him deeply. This pattern of fleeting romances would define Martina's love life for the next few years, as she drifted from one relationship to the next without much interest in anything deeper.

When she reached university, Martina enrolled in a public city college, intending to study medicine—following in the footsteps of her older brother. But the enthusiasm for her studies quickly waned. By then, she had fully

embraced her role as a social butterfly, flitting from event to event, party to party, more interested in the thrill of the moment than in any academic pursuit. Her parents, concerned for her future, sat her down for a serious talk about her lifestyle. But Martina dismissed their worries. In her mind, they would always let her do as she pleased, so long as she insisted.

But her arrogance caught up with her. She failed out of college around the same time her mother fell ill. Guilt and responsibility were foreign to her then; she rarely visited her mother, even as her condition worsened. When her mother passed away, Martina didn't attend the funeral. That was the turning point for her father. The warmth and indulgence he had always shown her evaporated. He stopped giving her money, stopped inviting her for their regular Sunday dinners. From that moment on, Martina was on her own.

Her siblings, once so close, had grown distant, leaving Martina to navigate life without the safety net she had always known. The fall was swift—she went from a life of comfort and security to one where she was nearly on the streets, desperately searching for any job that would keep her afloat.

This period marked a profound change in Martina. The kind, caring woman she became might well be a response to the guilt that weighed heavily on her from those years of neglect and selfishness. When she finally made her way to the United States, she seized every opportunity to send money back to Guatemala, knowing that each U.S. dollar could make a world of difference for those she had left behind. She managed to reconnect with her younger brother, who had found work in a barbershop, but her father remained unreachable. For him, she might as well have been lost forever, a daughter who had chosen her path and was never coming back.

The room is still, the air heavy with the heat of the summer night. She sticks her head out of the window, hoping for a breath of fresh air, but the city offers none. The night feels stifling, as if the world outside has forgotten her, leaving her alone with her thoughts and her work. She returns to the task at hand, folding each piece of clothing with care, her movements precise and deliberate. She picks up a small, tattered sweater, holding it up to the light. The fabric is worn, the colors faded, but she knows it will be appreciated by one of the younger children in the tower. As she folds it and places it in a pile, she feels a sense of satisfaction.

She can smell smoke in the air tickling her nose. Martina always liked the smell of fire, something aggressive and assertive, uncontrollable and raw. Sometimes, she would light up a piece of paper or a pile of tissues and set them down in the ashtray on her desk, watching the flames consume its prey leaving nothing behind but the amber ashes and scent of a memory of what the paper once was. Fire was like that, despite its destruction and violence, it always left a memory in the form of a warning. Something so permanent could disappear in an instant.

A soft knock at the door startles her, and she realizes she must have dozed off. Groggy and disoriented, she gets up, hesitating for a moment before opening the door. Outside stands Andrew, one of the older residents, holding a thick binder in his hands. His face, lined with age, is filled with a gentle concern.

“Hi Martina, I hope I didn't wake you. I was wondering if you could take a look at this,” he says, his voice slow and trembling. Andrew no longer leaves the tower, too tired from the endless stairs and long hallways. Instead, he spends his days in the Market, caring for the children or doing crossword puzzles. On Saturdays, he huddles in his room, listening to the Yankees game on his radio. Martina likes Andrew, but she often finds him to be a burden. She worries about him, feels responsible for him in a way that weighs on her, even as he insists he's fine on his own.

“Hola Andrew, yes, please come in,” she says, ushering him inside and guiding him to the small desk that anchors the room. If anything defines this space as her office, it's this desk—solid and organized. The legs are carved out into an intricate pattern reminiscent of seventeenth century aristocracy. On each side, there are large drawers separated by an arching space designed for legs to stretch out comfortably. Compared to the other items in the room, the desk looks brand new. She sits across from him, her hands clasped together on the surface, ready to listen.

Andrew explains that he's gathered his life insurance policy statements from the past five years, and the insurance company is asking for a premium to continue the plan. Martina isn't well-versed in life insurance policies, but she's used to pretending she knows more than she does. It's important to her that the residents see her as knowledgeable, as someone they can rely on. As Andrew speaks, she flips through the binder, trying to

make sense of the numbers and terms. What she does understand is that the insurance company is asking for a lot of money, more than Andrew could possibly afford.

“Hm, let me think about this. Can you leave me the folder?” she asks, her tone measured and calm.

Andrew nods and sets the binder down on the table. He stands, giving her a slight bow—his signature gesture—before shuffling out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Martina sits back in her chair, staring at the binder. The room is quiet again, the only sound the faint rustle of the plastic bags filled with clothes. She lets out a long breath, her mind heavy with thoughts. Outside, the city sleeps, unaware of the small, private struggles happening within the tower’s walls. For Martina, this room is both a safe haven and a burden—a place where she can escape, but also where the weight of responsibility bears down on her. She knows she’ll help Andrew, just as she always does, but for now, she allows herself a moment to simply sit and breathe.

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Jocelyn's apartment has become a sanctuary of storytelling, a place where the chaos of the city is crammed into four walls. She rarely invites company over; the thought of others in her personal space makes her uneasy. Here, in her den, she is the master of every detail, the curator of her own world. The wall that divides her kitchen from the living room has become a sprawling canvas of her recent obsession—a visual map of her first visit to the tower. She spent countless hours arranging it, opting for an organization that was less about order and more about atmosphere. The wall is split into four vertical sections, each representing a different floor she explored.

At the bottom, the story begins with her initial encounter on the abandoned casino floor. Photos of beaten slot machines and faded playing cards mingle with notes scrawled in her hurried handwriting, capturing the eerie remnants of what once was. Above that, the meeting hall—a space that now serves as the communal heart of the residents. Here, the visual documentation thins out, replaced by dense blocks of descriptive text. Jocelyn had found few photos of its past life as the Jukebox, but what she lacked in images, she compensated for with meticulous descriptions, capturing both the echoes of its former glory and its current state of disrepair.

The third section of the wall is devoted to the Market and the Campsite floors. This area is chaotic, a collage of pamphlets, photographs, and scraps of paper, all pinned haphazardly but with a purpose only Jocelyn fully understands. To an outsider, it might seem like a jumble of information, but to her, each piece serves as a sensory cue—a trigger for memories of the spaces, the sounds, and the smells that defined them. The topmost section, like the pinnacle of the tower itself, is dedicated to the Cloud Lobby. It's the emptiest of the sections, with only a few photographs and even fewer notes. Her visit there had been rushed, leaving her with just a fragment of the story she so desperately wanted to tell.

As she stands before the wall, her eyes narrow, scanning the images and notes as if trying to decipher a code hidden within. The colors of her underlined words—blue, red, purple, green—jump out, each representing a different thread of thought. She traces the connections between the past and the present, searching for the invisible lines that link them. The photos she managed to find, particularly the archival images, offer a stark contrast to her own. The old pictures show a pristine, luxurious tower, while hers capture its faded grandeur, the marks of time and neglect clearly visible.

This wall is her investigation hub, the physical manifestation of the work she's been pouring herself into for the past month. But it's only part of the story. Her computer is a vault of digital sources, a treasure trove of information that she simply hasn't had the space—or the ink—to bring into the physical world. Every day, she spends at least six hours writing, trying to wrestle the sprawling narrative into something coherent. After her meeting with Paule, Jocelyn had been torn between styles, unsure of how to approach the story. Initially, she envisioned a straightforward investigative piece, a collection of interviews and resident profiles that would paint a picture of life inside the tower. But after her visit, that idea felt insufficient, too narrow for what she wanted to achieve. She began to imagine something broader, more crafted—something that could be both beautiful and true.

The more she wrote, the more overwhelmed she felt. She toyed with different formats—a short story, a novel, a documentary, even an art exhibition—but nothing seemed quite right. Her inexperience with certain mediums only added to her frustration. She could see the story so clearly in her mind, but every time she tried to put it on paper, the vision slipped away, replaced by something far less satisfying.

In an attempt to break free from this creative block, Jocelyn developed a method she called 'spins.' Each session, she would force herself to forget everything she knew about the tower and approach her wall with fresh eyes, starting from a single document or photo. One day, she might focus on the money trail; another day, the floorboards or the logistics of food deliveries. One spin, however, took her on an unexpectedly deep dive into the building itself—the tower, its architecture, and the minds behind it. She discovered that the building was designed by an office based in New York, with branches in Paris, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, and Washington, D.C. She tried to reconstruct the tower's plans in her mind, piecing together its sections and elevations as if solving a puzzle.

She found herself captivated by the contrast in how the project was presented. The architectural office had rendered the Metropolitan as a kind of atmospheric shell, a container for whatever life might inhabit it. Their drawings were discreet, often just soft lines outlining the structure populated by abstract silhouettes, leaving much to the imagination. In contrast, the Port Authority, which owned the building, had developed lush, detailed renderings that depicted the tower as an urban utopia. Their images were filled with life—trees and gardens,

children playing, people laughing. In nearly every interior view, the Empire State Building loomed in the background. Out of twenty-six renderings, Jocelyn counted seventeen that included this iconic view.

She created a digital board, placing the images from the architectural office and the Port Authority side by side. The more she studied them, the more she realized that these were not two versions of the same project, but two entirely different visions that somehow coexisted within the same structure. The most revealing document she found was a large sectional drawing that labeled the different hotels and floors throughout the tower. This became her map, guiding her through her explorations and helping her understand the building's original function and its current state.

What struck her most was how the architects' vision seemed to align with the present reality of the tower. The idea of the building as a shell, a container for whatever life might take root inside, mirrored the way the residents now inhabited the space. Hidden within the massive structure, they had repurposed it in ways the original designers might never have imagined, yet it felt strangely in tune with the architectural intent. Jocelyn never saw the luxurious pools, the sleek bars, the grand entertainment spaces that once filled the tower. Instead, she saw what was there now—a raw, repurposed space that felt eerily in line with the architects' ambiguous and abstract drawings, as if they had somehow known the Metropolitan would end up like this.

Feeling the need to clear her mind, Jocelyn rises from her couch, the spot that has served as her base of operations for the past month. She decides to take a walk downtown, something she rarely does these days. The idea of wandering through Chinatown appeals to her, a way to reset her thoughts and perhaps spark new ideas. She takes her usual subway route, switching at Penn Station to reach Herald Square for another line. Each time she finds herself in this part of the city, a wave of frustration hits her. She could have seen so much more, learned so much more, but now she's burdened by an indefinite ban from the tower. She shakes off the thought—this walk isn't about work; it's about getting away from it.

Emerging from the subway on Bleeker Street, Jocelyn is greeted by the crisp, early evening air. The seasons seem to have changed in the blink of an eye. Just a couple of weeks ago, she could wander the park in a light dress. Now, she needs a sweater and tights to ward off the chill. She wanders aimlessly for a while, but the cold soon becomes too much, cutting her walk short. She ducks into a bar a few blocks south, drawn by its serene appearance.

The bar is bathed in sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows that line the entire façade. Inside, everything is white—the stools, the bar, the tables, even the flowers in their vases. The effect is both sterile and serene, like a hospital ward in heaven. Jocelyn finds a small table near the window and settles in, setting down her bag. She had meant to take a break, but she couldn't resist bringing along a few documents to look over. She pulls out a small stack of papers, a mix of photographs and article printouts, and begins flipping through them.

A waitress approaches, her smile faint and perfunctory, more out of routine than genuine warmth. Jocelyn appreciates this indifference; she's always found overly cheerful people to be somewhat exhausting, preferring those who are content to exist in their own space without the need to please.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asks, her voice surprisingly melodic, catching Jocelyn off guard.

"I'll just have a Gin and Tonic, please," Jocelyn replies, returning to her papers as the waitress nods and heads back to the bar.

She immerses herself in the documents, her focus narrowing on the photos of the Cloud Lobby. No matter how many times she looks at them, the view still takes her breath away. The aptly named Cloud Lobby seems to float above the city, offering a vantage point that is nothing short of spectacular. In the photos, the terrace extends out over the city, framed by glass railings that allow for an unobstructed view of the skyline. The furniture is sleek and modern, with low, white lounge chairs and small tables arranged in intimate clusters. The lighting, subtle yet effective, is embedded in the tables and floor, casting a warm, ambient glow that complements the bright, almost jewel-toned cocktails resting on the tables.

There's a quiet luxury to the space, a sense of calm that contrasts sharply with the bustling city below. The few people in the photos are relaxed, their faces softened by the warm light, their conversations private and subdued. Jocelyn can almost feel the atmosphere—the gentle hum of low conversation, the clinking of glasses, the faint

scent of expensive cologne mingling with the crisp night air. It's a place designed for reflection, for taking in the beauty of the city from a serene distance, far removed from the chaos of the streets below.

As she stares at the photos, Jocelyn can't help but feel a pang of longing. The Cloud Lobby, with its blend of luxury and tranquility, is a stark contrast to the raw, unfinished spaces she encountered in the tower. Yet, in a way, it's all part of the same story—a narrative that spans the spectrum from opulence to survival, from a dream realized to a dream repurposed. She knows that understanding this contrast is key to telling the story of the tower, and she's determined to capture it in a way that does justice to both sides.

The waitress returns with her drink, placing it on the table with a soft clink. Jocelyn murmurs her thanks, but her mind is already back in the tower, lost in the complexities of the story she's trying to tell. She takes a sip of her drink, the cool, sharp taste of gin mingling with the citrusy tang of tonic and lets herself get lost in the photos once more.

Before Jocelyn can dive back into her thoughts, she becomes aware of the waitress lingering by her side. The woman isn't just standing there; she's fixated on the photos spread out across the table, her face pale as though she's seen a ghost. Jocelyn turns slightly, curious, and notices the distant look in the waitress's eyes, as if she's lost somewhere deep within the images. The waitress's fingers twitch slightly, gripping on to her serving tray with force. After what feels like an eternity, she snaps out of her reverie, offering an embarrassed apology as she tries to retreat. But before she can slip away, Jocelyn catches her.

"Did you know this place?" Jocelyn asks, her voice soft but laced with curiosity.

The waitress pauses, her hesitation palpable. For a moment, it seems as if she might not answer at all, but then she nods, a shadow of sadness crossing her face. "Yes, the Cloud Bar. I know it well."

Jocelyn's interest piques, the journalist in her awakening fully. "Did you go there often?"

"Yes," the waitress replies, her voice barely above a whisper. "I worked there for a while actually."

"Beautiful," Jocelyn murmurs, though the word feels insufficient. She senses the waitress's unease, the way she looks at the photos with a mix of longing and sorrow. Perhaps this was not just a job for her, but a chapter of her life that had left a lasting mark. Jocelyn considers this an opportunity—an unexpected lead into the building's past, seen through the eyes of someone who lived it.

"I want to ask you something," Jocelyn begins carefully. "You can say no, but I'm a journalist working on a story about the Metropolitan. I would love to talk about your experiences there if you have the time."

The waitress, whose name Jocelyn still doesn't know, hesitates again. Jocelyn can see the conflict in her eyes—whatever memories are tied to that place, they are not easy ones. But Jocelyn also knows that these are the stories that matter most, the ones that reveal the true heart of a place.

"Okay," the waitress finally says, though her voice is still tinged with reluctance. "I can't today though."

"Don't worry about that," Jocelyn replies quickly, sensing the need to tread lightly. "I'll leave you my number. You can text or call me anytime when you have some time." She pauses, offering a warm smile. "What's your name?"

"Ruby," the waitress answers.

"Well, Ruby, I look forward to our talk," Jocelyn says, slipping a business card into Ruby's hand.

Ruby nods, her expression still conflicted, and retreats to the bar, leaving Jocelyn with a sense of cautious optimism. This was not a breakthrough, but it was a way in—something to push her investigation forward. As she takes a sip of her gin and tonic, a small smile tugs at her lips. The excursion had been worth it.

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Nothing feels right to Martina. Everywhere she looks, imperfections scream at her, problems begging to be solved. The curtains in one room are poorly washed. Without hesitation, she rips them down, stuffing them into her duffel bag. As she moves through the residential hallway, toys are scattered in front of one of the rooms, a mess left behind by careless residents. She picks them up carefully, one by one, sliding them into the bag as well. When she reaches the elevator, she notices the harsh white light of a bulb. With a practiced motion, she replaces it with a softer orange one, a shade that better complements the warm tones of the walls. In the Market, she finds a couple of plates left out, half-finished meals abandoned. She collects them, bringing them to the washing basin, her movements efficient, almost mechanical.

These tasks have become second nature to Martina, a routine she follows without thinking. After a long day's work, she still finds time to pick up the scraps, clean up the messes, and continue her rounds. This relentless attention to detail, this drive to maintain order, has earned her a reputation as the most reliable resident, the one who cares more than anyone else, at least in her mind. There's a satisfaction she finds in this work, a quiet pride in knowing she is the best, the one who goes above and beyond. But what she sees as dedication, others have begun to perceive as something else entirely.

The residents, once grateful for her help, now feel suffocated by her constant need to fix everything. They can't have a moment to themselves, can't relax for a second before Martina swoops in to correct whatever mistake she perceives. Her well-meaning interventions have become disruptive, disrespectful even. They have their own ways of doing things, their own rhythms and routines that Martina's intrusions disrupt. But she doesn't see it that way.

One day, as she was going about her usual routine—rearranging, tidying, setting things right—Martina picked up a rug that had been laid out in the Market and tossed it aside, assuming it was just another piece of clutter. It wasn't until Boris found her, anger simmering beneath his usually calm demeanor, that she learned the rug was a prayer mat, brought from Egypt by one of the residents. It was their only real possession, and her casual, thoughtless handling of it was more than just disrespectful—it was deeply hurtful. Boris told her she needed to be more attentive, to understand the lives of the people around her, not just impose her own vision on them. "You can't be everyone's mother if you don't know them," he said.

But Martina barely registered his words. To her, a rug was a rug, and it had no business being left around where it could be in the way. She couldn't understand why the residents didn't appreciate her efforts to create a comfortable space for everyone. They thanked her, sure, but she could sense the insincerity in their voices, and it grated on her. She became especially irritated with Mohammed, who refused her help at every turn. He was arrogant, dismissive, acting as if he didn't need her, and it pissed her off. After everything she did for him, all the effort she put in, he couldn't even muster a simple thank you.

Martina knew she needed to make herself indispensable. She couldn't wait for discussions or debates; she knew what needed to be done. While others talked about projects, income, community, privacy—she already had a vision for the tower, a clear understanding of what it was supposed to be. When Paule returned to the tower to discuss Jocelyn and Boris's plans, Martina felt a burning anger. How dare Boris decide the future of the tower, acting as if he knew what was best? Jocelyn was her lifeline, her opportunity to prove her worth to everyone, not just the residents but the whole world. She envisioned herself as 'The Pillar of the Tower,' a title she believed she deserved more than anyone.

Determined to get her story out, Martina bypassed Paule, who had refused to give her Jocelyn's contact information. Instead, she found Jocelyn's details online and arranged an interview. They met in Bryant Park on a crisp Tuesday afternoon. Martina spoke passionately, detailing her role in the tower, her overtime hours, her proactive attitude. But as she talked, she noticed Jocelyn had stopped taking notes.

"Why aren't you writing anything down? You can use my name, you know. I don't mind," Martina said, a slight edge to her voice.

Jocelyn looked at her, her expression polite but distant. "Oh, it's okay. I appreciate our talk, but I think I need to see everyone in action to get a full picture. I'm not writing your story; I'm writing the story of the tower."

The comment haunted Martina. Once again, her hard work, her dedication, was going to be overshadowed by someone like Boris, who just happened to be there first. It was unfair, it was criminal. She considered calling Paule, telling her that Jocelyn had harassed her, that she wanted to write her out, steal her moment. But what

would be the point? Martina knew she had no real power. All she could do was what she always did—convince Jocelyn with her smile and caring nature.

Since that meeting, Martina began writing herself. She documented everything she did, everything she felt, everything she expected from the others. It became a kind of manifesto, a call to remind everyone who she was and what she was capable of. Within a week, she had nearly filled an entire notebook with her thoughts and ideas.

The evening before Jocelyn's second visit, the tower held a general meeting, urging all residents to attend. Martina arrived early, as always, carrying a couple of gallons of lemonade for everyone. She took a seat in the front row, her floral dress draping elegantly over her crossed legs. As Boris spoke, she couldn't help but imagine the support beam above falling, crushing him along with his pretty speeches. In her mind, she pictured the weight snapping his body in half, leaving him to die slowly, calling for help that would come too late.

She scanned the room, noting that most residents had gathered. Mohammed sat a couple of rows back, his eyes fixed on Boris with a look of admiration that made Martina's skin crawl. Next to him, Ahmed was tinkering with a switchboard, oblivious to the proceedings. The meeting dragged on, each resident expressing their support or concern for Jocelyn's return. Martina had already made her feelings clear, warning everyone that Jocelyn's presence would bring nothing but trouble. But in the end, the vote favored Boris. The residents accepted a second visit and the continuation of Jocelyn's story.

Martina returned to the Market full of resentment. She knew it would go Boris's way; it always did. Nothing ever went her way. As she began sewing her quilt, Boris approached the table.

"Hi, Martina. Could we talk for a minute?" he asked, his tone gentle, as if he was trying not to provoke her.

"Sure, sit down," she replied, her voice flat.

"I know you didn't want Jocelyn to come back. I get it—you're protective. But you need to see the opportunity it gives us," Boris continued, his words careful, measured.

Martina's silence told Boris everything he needed to know—she wasn't interested in his explanations.

"I heard you met with her after her last visit. Paule told me. I don't know what happened to make you change your mind about her, but you need to talk to us before doing something like that," Boris added, his voice soft but firm.

Martina looked up at him, her eyes blazing with anger. "What was that? I need to think? What the fuck did you do when you just left for a couple of days? What the fuck was that? I don't need you to tell me what's good for everyone. You've been getting all the credit, but you know nothing. You're just a hypocrite and a liar, and I couldn't care less what you think."

Her words hit Boris like a punch, the venom in her voice shocking him. For a moment, he was too stunned to respond. Then, with a heavy sigh, he stood up and walked away. Martina quietly resumed her sewing, but her hands were shaking. The needle snapped in two, and she stared at the broken pieces, feeling the weight of her rage pressing down on her chest.

The following days were tense. Word of Martina's outburst spread quickly, and now, wherever she went, she could feel the residents' wary eyes on her, careful not to crack the eggshells she had laid. The atmosphere in the tower shifted, but Martina continued her tasks, her responsibilities, as if nothing had changed.

But everything had changed. A week after the argument, Martina decides enough was enough. Nobody respected her anymore, and it was time to prove once and for all that she was better than Boris. After the dinner service, while the last of the linen was folded and the benches were wiped clean, Martina slipped into the kitchen alcove. She crouched down under the stove, the warmth of the oven brushing her face like a cruel caress. She turned the knobs slowly, listening to the quiet hiss of gas filling the room. Delicately, she dabbed a few drops of oil into the trashcan and placed it next to the stove, then retreated the way she had come in.

A few minutes later, an explosion rocked the Market, blowing away tables and benches. Residents rush in to contain the fire, but the extinguisher was nowhere to be found. Panic spreads as the flames grow. Boris arrives,

searching frantically for the extinguisher, but it was useless. Ahmed, quick on his feet, sprints up several floors to retrieve another one.

Amid the chaos, Martina makes her entrance. Extinguisher in hand, she rushes toward the fire like a hero ready to save the day. But as she reaches the flames, a sudden burst of heat engulfs her arm, searing her skin. She drops the extinguisher, which rolls straight toward Boris. The universe seemed to mock her—once again, Boris was the hero, extinguishing the flames as she lay on the ground, her arm burning with pain and resentment. A few residents rush to her aid, but she brushes them off, her gaze locked on Boris, her eyes burning with rage and humiliation.

As she is escorted to the balcony for first aid, Martina clings to the hope that her actions would be seen as heroic, a sacrifice for the good of the community. But when she returns inside, she is met with a sea of cold, accusing eyes. The weight of their stares crushes her, and she realizes with dawning horror that they were not looking at her with admiration, but with disappointment, even disgust.

She approaches the smoldering remains of the fire, where Boris stops her, his voice heavy with disbelief. “Why would you do this?”

“What do you mean? Do what?” Martina’s voice wavers, a mix of anxiety and delirium washing over her.

“Marisol saw you. You set the fire. Why would you do such a thing?”

Martina’s heart races. It wasn’t fair. They should be thanking her, praising her for everything she had done, for the sacrifices she made. Without a word, she walks slowly toward Marisol, her mind reeling.

Her heart pounds in her chest, but her voice doesn’t waver as she begins to shout at the room, trying to drown out Boris’s accusations. “What do you know? You know nothing! None of you do! Day in and day out, I pour all my love and energy into this place, into all of you. And what do I get in return? Nothing! I hate you all. You don’t deserve me. You don’t deserve this place.”

The residents stare in silence, but Martina pushes on, her words becoming frantic. “What’s the matter? Can’t you all see? Boris is leading you to your end! I don’t get why you follow this idiot. He doesn’t know anything. I know what’s best for every single one of you. I’m always here to help! All he does is mope around and talk like that’s going to change anything.”

She feels the air grow thick with judgment, their eyes filled with a mixture of pity and disgust. Martina’s gaze flickers around the room, her thoughts racing back to the moment years ago when the tower changed forever, the moment she had done something far worse than they would ever know.

“You have no idea what I’ve sacrificed for you,” she continues, her voice cracking. “If you have the tower to begin with, it’s thanks to me. Without me, none of this would exist. None of you would be here.”

Her hands clench into fists, the memory burning at the edge of her mind. Her eyes flash toward Boris, her voice steady and precise. “I’ve built this place. I’ve saved it from ruin. I’m the reason you all have a home. I’ve done things for this tower you can’t even imagine... things no one else had the guts to do.” She looks away for a moment, as if recalling something she wishes she could forget, her hands trembling at her sides.

“I’m the one who acted when everyone else stood around talking, waiting for something to change. It took me. It always takes me.” She inhales sharply, her anger bubbling over. “But what do I get? You all act like I’m nothing, like I’m in the way. You want me gone? Fine! But don’t ever forget who made this place what it is. When everything was falling apart, I was the only one willing to do what needed to be done!”

The words hang in the air, an unspoken weight pressing down on the room, a vague but unsettling confession that lingers in the silence. Boris and the others exchange glances, but no one dares to speak, the realization slowly settling in their minds.

“You need to leave.” Mohammed’s voice cuts through the tension, quiet but firm as he points to the door.

Martina stands there, frozen for a moment, before finally turning and walking out, her world unraveling around her. She stumbles down the stairs, each step unfamiliar, the ground pushing her off like a springboard. She rams through a service door, locked from the outside, but equally imprisoning from the inside. Every step crashes

onto the hard ground with the impact of a missile, explosive and final. The street warps around her, twisting as if it were trying its hardest to get rid of her. She stops, gripping a railing to catch her breath. The metal is cold, electric, sending a harsh jolt up her arm—as if even it refuses to accept her touch. She looks up at a sign that seems to scream at her ‘STOP’, the whole city rejecting her, turning against her.

Panic sets in, a cold hand tightening around her throat. She starts to run, each step faster than the last, desperate to escape the city’s menacing gaze. She doesn’t stop—not for the red lights that mock her, not for the pedestrians who curse at her, not for the pavement that tries to trip her, not for the scaffolding that seems ready to crush her. She runs until the cold air stabs at her eyes, until her breath comes in ragged gasps, until she finally collapses onto the sticky grass of Bryant Park, ready to let it consume her, to disappear into the earth and be forgotten.

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At four in the afternoon, as the golden hour light filters through her living room window, Jocelyn's phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number. She unlocks her phone to read: *Good afternoon, this is Ruby, the bartender from the other night. I wanted to reach out again, to set up a meeting. I'm sorry for my apprehension the other day. I am meeting with a couple of friends, all of whom have worked in the Metropolitan, on Wednesday. If you would like to come by and talk to all of us, we would be happy to answer your questions. Cheers, Ruby.*

Jocelyn's heart pounds with excitement. Not only had she found someone who worked at the Cloud Bar, but she was also being offered the chance to speak with more former employees. She looks over at her investigation wall, thinking of what she might bring. This meeting wouldn't be about the hotel's past, but rather about the lived experiences of those who once called it their workplace. Should she show them photos of the current state of the tower? Would it be too soon to mention the residents? She decides to prepare for any possibility, carefully packing a selection of photos and snippets from her conversations.

Jocelyn places the photos and notes into a sturdy folder and slips it into her bag. She opts for a different notebook this time, one with a soft leather cover that feels both professional and personal. As she pulls on her big red coat, she glances at her reflection in the mirror. The coat, bright and bold, gives her a sense of confidence. She has found that a polished, professional look can sometimes be intimidating during interviews, so she prefers her everyday style—classy but approachable, something that puts people at ease.

She steps out of her apartment and makes her way to the subway, mentally preparing herself for the meeting. The address Ruby gave her leads to a bar in Brooklyn, a forty-minute ride away. The subway is calm, and Jocelyn finds herself lost in thought, her mind focused and sharp. Where a few weeks ago she might have been trembling with nerves, today she feels prepared. The conversations she's had with Boris, Martina, and Paule have steeled her, giving her the confidence to handle whatever might come.

When she arrives at the bar, she is greeted by the sight of a heavy wooden door, its surface embellished with weathered copper plates that gleam faintly under the lamppost in front. She pushes the door open and steps inside, immediately enveloped by the warm, earthy scent of aged timber. The interior feels like the belly of an old ship—dark wood everywhere, from the floors to the bar that stretches almost the entire length of the room. Behind the bar, a single shelf is crammed with an eclectic collection of bottles, their labels faded and peeling. The tables are sturdy, worn with years of use, and the chairs and stools look like they've been pulled straight from a 1950s diner. Against the back wall, a row of booths lines the space, each one padded with brown leather cushions that have softened and cracked with time. The wooden trims around the booths give them the appearance of well-worn books on a shelf, inviting and familiar.

Jocelyn scans the room and spots Ruby at a booth in the back, seated with two others. As she approaches, she takes in their faces, as if she is trying to learn their life stories through the creases and dents on their skin. One of them looks strangely familiar, though she can't quite place where she's seen him before. She settles into the chair next to Ruby, who greets her with a warm smile, effortlessly introducing the two men at the table, Manuel and Goldy.

Manuel is a slender figure, not particularly tall, but his posture gives him an air of quiet confidence that makes him seem taller than he is. His small mustache frames a face marked by deep green eyes that carry both intensity and warmth. His curly hair falls in waves just above his neck. Dressed in a blazer layered over a blue sweater, he exudes a casual sophistication, though something about him suggests he's more comfortable in the kitchen than in a boardroom.

Goldy, on the other hand, is a massive presence, his frame reminiscent of a retired football player—broad, imposing, and physically overwhelming. Yet, despite his size, there's a gentleness in his eyes, a softness that belies his intimidating appearance. He sits beside Manuel, his large hands folded lightly on the table, his demeanor light and cheerful. His gray shirt, emblazoned with a faded New York Mets logo, hangs loosely on him, the XXL size still struggling to contain his bulk.

As Jocelyn joins them, a calmness settles over the table, a sense of easy camaraderie among the three that she immediately senses. There's a bond between them, not forged from childhood, but from something deeper, something lived and endured together. Ruby continues with the introductions, explaining Jocelyn's work, and as the conversation flows, Jocelyn's eyes widen with recognition.

“Goldy,” she says, a note of familiarity in her voice. “Do you work at the New Yorker building?”

“Absolutely,” Goldy replies with a smile that spreads warmth across his face. “Have you seen me there?”

“Yes, a couple of weeks ago. I knew you looked familiar,” Jocelyn responds, marveling at the chance of the encounter. The city, vast and overwhelming at times, suddenly feels small and intimate, like a village where paths cross in unexpected ways. She’s reminded of the countless lives intertwined around her, connections she hadn’t realized existed until now.

There’s something about this group that inspires her trust. They feel genuine, true to themselves and each other. As Ruby continues speaking, Jocelyn decides to share her entire project with them—the tower, its current residents, and the story she’s trying to tell. She spreads out the photos she’s taken on the table, and the three former employees examine them with a mixture of admiration and nostalgia.

“My goal,” Jocelyn says, her voice steady, “is to tell the story of the people living there now. To show the city how they’ve created their own lives, their own way of existing in that space.”

Ruby looks up from the photos, her expression thoughtful before turning to Goldy. “This is pretty cool, right? Did you see Sky Lobby Two? It’s unrecognizable.”

Goldy nods, his voice tinged with a paternal concern. “It’s impressive, sure. But I don’t know how they manage to live there in the state it’s in. I guess that’s the point, though. I’m not sure what to think of it.”

“This is cool,” Manuel chimes in, his eyes gleaming with interest. “I mean, I agree with Goldy that it must be tough living there, but look at that—they’ve built their own kitchen. How do they still get power and water?”

Jocelyn explains what she’s learned about the residents’ resourcefulness—repairing elevators, rigging generators, and setting up makeshift water systems. She’s careful not to reveal too much, mindful of the need to protect their anonymity, but she shares enough to convey just how impressive their operation is. After laying out the details, she finally asks the question that’s been on her mind.

“I’d like to understand what the tower was like before. Could you tell me more about what you did there, how people worked together?”

Manuel and Ruby exchange glances, silently deferring to Goldy. He clears his throat, takes a measured sip of water, and begins to speak.

“The Met,” he starts slowly, his voice tinged with a mix of fondness and sorrow, “was more than just a building. It was a world unto itself. The kind of place where you could get lost in the rhythm of it all. Every floor, every corner had its own pulse, its own way of being. You’d step into the lobby and feel the beat of the city, but as you moved deeper into the tower, it was like entering different worlds, each with its own set of rules.”

He pauses, letting the memories catch up to him. “I spent four years there, but it felt like a lifetime. There was always something happening, always someone passing through—whether it was the regulars or the visitors just dipping their toes for a night or two. You could feel the energy shift as you moved from the ground floor’s chaos to the calm of the higher lobbies. The way people carried themselves, the way they talked, it all changed depending on where you were in the tower. You get to know folks in a place like that, not just by their faces, but by the way they move through the space. There was Roberta, the hotel manager—she had this way of gliding through the lobby, checking in on everyone, making sure things ran smoothly. She always had a kind word and a tight smile. Told me once I reminded her of her brother. I held onto that. And then there were the bellboys, the doormen—faces I’d see every day, always a nod, a ‘how’s it going?’ as we passed each other in the halls. We weren’t friends exactly, but there was a connection. We were all part of the same machine, keeping the tower alive.”

He smiles at a memory. “And the spaces... each one was like its own little world. The Jukebox, that place was always buzzing, especially on the weekends. The music, the lights, the people—it was electric. You’d think it would wear on you, but it didn’t. It kept me going, kept me sharp. Then there was the Cloud Lobby—what a contrast. It was a place where time seemed to slow down, where the noise of the city faded into the background. I’d find myself wandering up there after a long shift, just to catch my breath. It was peaceful.”

Goldy's expression grows more contemplative as he continues. "But it wasn't just the places; it was the people in them that made the tower what it was. Manuel, my neighbor—quiet guy, but dependable. We didn't need to say much to understand each other. He'd leave me and Lionel leftovers from the restaurant, and in return, I'd keep an eye on things, make sure everything was good. And Ruby... she brought a different kind of energy. She was always up to something, always had a story to tell. The three of us, we found a kind of family in each other, something solid to hold onto in a place that was always shifting."

"But then there was the fire. The tower had always felt alive, almost indestructible, but that night... it was like watching a giant fall. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it. The way the flames moved, the way the smoke filled every hallway, every room—it felt like the building was weeping, as if it knew it was the end. We did what we could, tried to get people out, but it was chaos. It was... it was like the soul of the place was being torn apart."

He shakes his head slightly, as if to clear the haunting images. "After that, the Met was never the same. It was like the fire had burned away more than just the physical structure—it took something out of all of us. We carried on, but those things stay with you."

Goldy looks up, his eyes meeting Jocelyn's. "You see, the Met wasn't just a place to live or work. It was a space that held all these lives together, weaving them into something bigger than any of us. And when it was gone, it left a hole that we're all still trying to fill, one way or another."

Jocelyn listens, not just to the words, but to the emotion behind them, feeling as though she'd been granted a glimpse into a world that no longer existed, but still lived on in the memories of those who had once called it home. Goldy's storytelling is captivating, his passion for the tower evident in every word, yet there's a shadow of grief that lingers just beneath the surface. As he finishes his tale, his voice trailing off into silence, Jocelyn dares to ask the question that has been on her mind since the beginning.

"Were you there when it burned?"

The bluntness of the question catches her off guard, and she quickly apologizes, not wanting to dredge up painful memories, though her curiosity about the incident remains strong. Goldy hesitates, the weight of the question hanging between them, but before he can respond, Ruby interjects.

"When the fire started, it was the middle of the night," Ruby begins, her tone almost clinical. "The alarm went off, and at first, it felt like another drill. But then you could smell the smoke, thick and acrid, and that's when we knew it was real. People were panicking, rushing to the exits, trying to get out any way they could. It was chaos, pure and simple."

Her words come quickly, almost rehearsed, as she recounts the chaos of that day. Jocelyn notices the way Ruby holds herself, the way her eyes seemed to focus on a point far beyond the table, as if distancing herself from the memories she was about to share.

She pauses, her gaze still distant, as if she was watching the events unfold all over again. "The flames weren't just in one part of the building—they were everywhere, spreading. The glass facade of the tower, which always looked so clean, was cracking and shattering, the heat too much for it to bear. Outside, the streets were filled with people, but there was this eerie quiet, like everyone was holding their breath, waiting for the worst to happen."

There was a tightness around her eyes, a subtle sign that the memories were not as distant as she wanted them to be. "We ended up on one of the refuge floors, waiting for the firefighters to reach us. It was supposed to be safe, but you could feel the heat, hear the fire getting closer. People were scared, it was hard to keep your head straight in all that chaos."

She shrugs slightly, as if trying to shake off the lingering weight of the past. "When we finally got out, it wasn't a relief. It was just... numbness. The city kept moving around us, like it always does, but we were in a different world, trying to make sense of what we'd just survived. We ended up in Central Park, just lying on the grass, watching the sky turn orange with the dawn, soot still falling like snowflakes around us."

Ruby looks up at Jocelyn, her expression unreadable. "The fire took everything from us, but I don't dwell on it. It's easier that way. We made it out, and that's all that matters now."

Jocelyn could hear the flatness in Ruby's voice, the way she spoke as though the event was something distant, impersonal. But she also caught the subtle tremor in her hands, the way her words seemed carefully measured, as if Ruby was holding back the full force of her emotions, keeping them locked away where they couldn't hurt her anymore. The trauma was there, lurking beneath the surface, but Ruby had chosen to speak of it as though it belonged to someone else, maintaining a distance that protected her from the pain that still lingered.

The air is thick in the bar. Not with anger or burden, but with memories. Over the stereo, Radiohead's 'Reckoner' plays, lingering with the hypnotizing riff and beautiful harmonies. Jocelyn is taken aback by the group. What they lived was surely tragic, but also so rich and full of life. They speak of the Metropolitan like a home, their home. The building was not important, but the spaces each served as the backdrop for their experiences. She feels a wave of intimation, not from them, but from the building itself. The empty shell that the architects envisioned was not to give way to the residents, but to allow it to engulf everything inside, creating so many narratives, changing overtime, and watching over its residents transform.

"What happened afterwards?" she asks quietly. Her notebook lingers on the table, forgotten, unimportant now to the story. Jocelyn was absorbed by their stories, completely lost in their tales of tragedy. For a moment, she would have considered writing their stories instead, full of pain, full of hope and regret. It's powerful and true, but it leaves more questions than answers.

Ruby continues to explain how they each found their ways around the city, Manuel taking over a restaurant in Chelsea, Ruby and Goldy both working at the New Yorker off of recommendations. They adjusted, and moved on. Jocelyn can't help but notice another character that keeps coming up in their stories, Roberta. Apparently, she was the hotel manager, but she seemed to have been important to everyone, present in each part of the narrative. On the thought, she picks up her notebook quickly and marks down her name.

As she writes, Manuel catches her off guard with a question she did not expect.

"What do you want to do with this article of yours? What are you trying to prove?"

Jocelyn doesn't know what to answer. In full truth, she did not know exactly what to focus on anymore. Every turn, there was more to discover, more to understand. The more she thinks of it, the more she feels that everything she is interested in revolves around the tower itself, its mysterious aura and immortal shell.

"Well, I came in with the expectation that I would write about the residents, those who live in the tower now, their resilience and strength. But I am not so sure anymore. Don't get me wrong, they are amazing and deserve their stories to be heard, but there's more there. The tower is an enigma. It's like it breathes a life of its own, experiencing what everyone else does inside it. I don't know. I just know I want it to be engaging, thought provoking, and I want it to be impactful for the city."

Manuel nods, as if he understood exactly what she was about, but instead of continuing, he asks Goldy to tell Jocelyn about the story of the phantom of the tower. Goldy laughs, and begins to recall a wonderful horror story, set in the tower. A woman, dressed in red, with tall heels and a suitcase would roam the halls, floor by floor, always looking for her room, but never finding it. She would never appear more than once, but everyone in the staff has sworn having seen her at least once. Then, suddenly, she would emerge from a room, only to roam the halls again. It's like she was the essence of the building, the ghost of the hotel, damned to an eternal existence inside its halls.

Manuel bursts in laughter, Goldy's dramatic storytelling was too much for him. Although it was exaggerated and built up through urban legend, Goldy swears both he and Manuel had seen her, only days before the tower burned.

"Whatever you write, you should include her. The lost lady of the Metropolitan." Manuel tells Jocelyn.

After another couple anecdotes and stories of their past, Jocelyn leaves the three friends to enjoy the rest of their night together. She is filled with nostalgia, like she just watched a beautiful movie. Everything seemed so beautiful, so perfect. The story was unfolding around her, all she had to do was write it down. As soon as she arrived back in her apartment, Jocelyn jumps onto the couch and begins writing. She writes without structure, without restraint, letting the creative flow take over her fingers clicking on the keys to her computer. All the tales that the trio shared, she rewrote trying to remain as true to their word as she could remember. The story had



become more complex, but it only fueled her ambitions more. Between, the Metropolitan, the fire, the tower, and the Residents, the pieces were falling together.

She is pulled away from her text with an unexpected phone call from Boris. She picks up a little perplexed and cautious about what he might say. He first apologizes for the last visit, how he acted, and how it ended. He explains his talk with Paule, and his more recent meetings with the residents about a second visit. Finally, he asks if she would like to visit the following day, and this time, all the curtains will be pulled, she will get everything.

She hangs up the phone and lets out a long, steady breath, the tension in her shoulders slowly easing. Rising from the couch that had cradled her tired body, she feels its imprint lingering on her skin, as if it had tried to hold onto her. She crosses the room, her footsteps soft against the worn hardwood floor, and moves towards the window. With a quiet creak, she pushes it open and steps out onto the fire escape, the cool metal railing a calming comfort under her hands.

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a cigarette, a habit she'd abandoned since her last meeting with Paule, but somehow, it feels right in this moment. The flick of the lighter cuts through the darkness, and soon, the cigarette's tip glows a soft orange. She takes a deep drag, the smoke filling her lungs with a bittersweet warmth.

As she exhales, she watches the smoke curl towards the streetlamp that casts a muted glow over the alley below. The narrow space between the buildings feels insignificant, almost claustrophobic. The alley, once a familiar part of her every day, now seems too small, too ordinary, for the person she is becoming. She knows there is so much more waiting for her beyond these confined walls.

The smoke dances around the light bulb, swirling in lazy spirals before dissipating into the night. For a brief moment, time seems to stretch, the world slowing to a crawl. In that stillness, she feels a quiet power, a sense of control over the pace of her life, as if only she had the ability to move things forward.

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On the forty-fifth floor, a room on the southeast corner of the tower glows with a warm light. The room is small, cramped and somewhat oddly laid out. The front door opens immediately onto a partition wall. Moving left, there is a bathroom, the shower curtains yellow stained from time, and the toilet with similar wear. On the standalone sink, there is a single toothbrush, a large bottle of water, and an old razor. Despite the appearance, the bathroom is spotless, not a single hair in sight. Moving right from the door, the foyer leads to a single room which comprises the rest of the apartment. Despite being on a corner with two faces of windows, the room feels narrow, like a corridor. The walls are lined with books, not like one found in an old manor, but one from a secondhand bookstore, chaotic and thrown together. The books sit on shelves made from various construction materials, CMU bricks stacked with two by four plywood sheets in between. In the back corner off the foyer wall, there is a single bed sitting on a metal frame. Like in the bathroom, the sheets are made perfectly. On the bed, there lies a single copy of the Bible, worn and used, like its been read through a thousand times.

This was Wallace's room. Wallace, one of the first residents of the tower, was a veteran squatter in the city. Since the nineties, he had vagabonded the streets of New York, finding refuge from place to place, eventually ending up in the tower. If there ever were an alternative lifestyle, Wallace was a perfect example of that. He never had a cell phone, or a computer, or even an email for that matter. Wallace found refuge and comfort in books. Romantic as it was, he did not reject technology out of romanticism, but out of ideology. He was, as one may say, a conspiracy nut. Wallace believed that the electronic waves would brainwash him, and stayed away from everything with a screen.

Despite his reclusive and paranoid nature, Wallace found his place in New York. Or rather, he never had any reason to leave. The city was just big enough that nobody would recognize him, nobody would bother him either. Among his adventures in the city, he felt that the more he learned, the more he was left out. The perfect place for isolation was amongst the busiest streets.

His room in the tower was well kept because he spent all his time in it. He did not go out, only on occasion to find a new book or to take a walk. He didn't speak to anyone other than Ahmed, with whom he liked to have intellectual debates. Ahmed, a scientist at heart, couldn't help but challenge Wallace's paranoid beliefs, but could never find a breakthrough to change his mind. Each conversation was the same, Wallace would ask a wild but specific question, to which Ahmed would respond with technical jargon, which Wallace would ignore and move on to the next question. Although it seemed like a never-ending cycle of arguments, Wallace enjoyed it. He liked Ahmed's company, and found his answers thoughtful, even though he did not agree with any of them.

Underneath his bed, Wallace would keep a couple trash bags full of wooden toys. In his past life, Wallace was an apprentice toy maker, working under some old man from the neighborhood. The old man was retired, but had spent his career making various toys, some more complex than others, and took Wallace in to teach him the craft. Wallace enjoyed it, but was about fifty years too late, the profession replaced with machines and mass production. He never did find a job in toy making, and instead worked at a retirement home as a helper for a couple of years. He washed basins, helped move patients, organized afternoon activities, or brought them on walks out in the park. He listened to their stories, always something about a war or their parents' home, mundane, predictable, but nice nonetheless.

After a couple years at the retirement home, Wallace decided to leave and move to New York. He did not know why, did not have any particular reason apart from the fact he wanted to see the city. He found an apartment in Queens, something cheap, and lived his days airing the streets until he had no money left. Somehow, he never was interested in looking for a job. He lived day by day, scavenging food around, moving from shelter to shelter, but remained uninterested in anything more. He always kept to himself, avoiding people.

One day, walking through the Upper East side, he noticed a boarded up house. It was one of those nice nineteenth century homes that were often times converted to apartments, but this one seemed like it never received that treatment. Curious, he forced his way in, pushing in the door, and discovered something remarkable inside. The house was completely empty apart from the old study, filled with books from end to end. Wallace remained in that house for two years, never leaving the study apart for food or basic necessities. He spent his days on an old chair he brought from the outside and read every single book available, even the encyclopedia. It did not matter what the book was about, as long as it had text, he would read it like any other.

He was finally evicted when the owners realized someone was inside. But it did not matter to him, he had accomplished all he needed, completing the library. All the books he did not finish, he brought with him in a leather suitcase. For the next twenty years, Wallace would go from squat to squat, each time with his suitcase full of books.

The apartment did not bring in much light despite its large windows. On one side, the windows were covered up with large black curtains, absorbing the heat and light from outside. In front of the curtains, stacks of books formed a haphazard barricade, like a bunker. The other window was patched with various cardboard panels, makeshift coverings that left only small gaps for glances out onto the city outside. But the view did not matter much, he was content in his chair, reading. Sometimes, instead of his chair, he would sit by the window, facing back towards the blank foyer wall.

The light, when it did manage to slip through the cracks, seemed to shy away from him, leaving the room in a perpetual state of twilight. The air was thick with the musty scent of old paper and dust, mingling with the odor of the gray rug he had placed in the foyer, just inside the front door. The rug, scavenged from who knows where, smelled faintly of garbage—a stench that Wallace had long since grown accustomed to after years spent on the streets. It wasn't until another resident came by to borrow a book and recoiled at the smell that Wallace finally agreed to get rid of it.

Among the many books in his apartment, there was one that Wallace guarded closely—his Bible. It was the only book he refused to lend out, keeping it for himself as a private solace. Wallace had never been particularly religious, yet he read the scriptures with the devotion of a true believer. Each night, he would take the tattered book in hand, its pages thin and fragile from constant use, and read a passage, sometimes going over the same lines again and again. The act was comforting, a ritual that brought a sense of peace and nostalgia, grounding him in a world that he did not really understand. The Bible was so worn that some pages had faded to near blankness. Rather than replace it with a new copy, Wallace simply skipped those sections, reading only what was still legible.

Once a week, Wallace would venture down to the Market, making his way through the tower's winding corridors to collect meals for the days ahead. He would spend two hours at a cafeteria table, always choosing one far from the others, his head bowed over the familiar pages of another volume. The children in the tower feared him, whispering tales of the “man-eating monster” who would come for them if they didn't behave. Wallace didn't mind their fear; in fact, he preferred it if it meant they would leave him in peace.

Occasionally, Ahmed would join him, sliding into the seat across from him without a word. Their conversations were often heavy, filled with the kind of arguments that friends can have—intense but tinged with an underlying respect. After these exchanges, Wallace would retreat to his dim apartment, vanishing from the communal areas for another week until the next time he reappeared, as solitary and enigmatic as ever.

When Wallace died, the news got little reaction from the residents. His absence was noted, but it didn't shock or deeply affect anyone. Wallace had always been a solitary figure, a quiet presence that moved through life like a ghost. When he failed to show up for his weekly check-in at the Market, a few of the residents went to his apartment, already suspecting what they might find. There, in his familiar chair, they discovered his lifeless body, seated just as he always had been, his head bowed as if in quiet reflection.

The discovery was met with a kind of resigned acceptance. There was no outpouring of grief, no gathering to mourn his passing. Instead, the residents carried him down to the basement, where they buried him beneath the building, the concrete and steel of the tower forming a kind of tomb around him.

There was no service, no funeral, no eulogy spoken in his memory. Wallace had lived his life in quiet isolation, and in death, the same silence followed him. As they prepared his grave, one of the residents retrieved a book from his room, the same Bible he had read every night. Without a word, they decided to bury it with him, tucking the worn volume alongside his still form. It was a simple gesture, something to keep him company in the quiet of eternity, a last offering to a man who had sought solace in its pages.

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Jocelyn arrives back at the Metropolitan right on schedule, the discoveries from the previous evening still vivid in her mind. She pauses before entering, wrestling with the decision of whether to share her encounter with Boris and whether to let the story expand. Standing outside the entrance to the Manhattan Mall, she inhales deeply, the cool air filling her lungs, then gives herself a gentle slap across the cheek as if to shake off the lingering doubts. Steeling herself, she steps forward, ready for her new visit. Despite the uncertainty, she's prepared as ever—camera equipment, microphone, everything she needs for proper interviews slung across her shoulders. She feels a surge of professionalism, a sense that this, finally, could become routine.

She navigates through the familiar corridors, making her way down to the hat shop. The store, like the rest of the building, feels like it's frozen in time, like a relic of class and style that now feels vintage rather than outdated. She slips behind the counter and through the service door, entering the dark corridor that seems to be waiting for her, its shadows creeping along the walls, nudging her forwards into the tower. The air is thick with a damp smell, the passageways as unsettling as ever. She ascends the narrow staircase, her footsteps resonating against the worn stone, until she reaches the meeting hall.

Here, she finds a few residents seated, deep in discussion. Their faces are etched with contemplation, their words quiet and serious. They greet Jocelyn with a nod, directing her upstairs to the Market to meet Boris. She returns the gesture and continues her climb through the stairwells, the walls closing in around her as she ascends.

Upon reaching the Market floor, Jocelyn is struck by how different it feels from her last visit. The space, once rich with activity, now seems tight, as though it's shrinking in on itself. There is a heavy atmosphere, almost suffocating. The kitchen alcove is completely destroyed—charred and blackened by flames. The seats are stacked haphazardly, cleaning equipment scattered across the tiled floor, as if a bomb had gone off. As she surveys the space, frightened and tense, she spots Boris scrubbing the floor with a kind of aggressive determination.

Jocelyn approaches cautiously, her footsteps soft on the slippery scorched tiles. She taps Boris gently on the shoulder. He looks up, his face a mixture of exhaustion and sadness, which he quickly masks with a forced smile when he sees her.

"Hi! So sorry I couldn't meet you downstairs. It's been a crazy day. How are you doing?" His voice is overly cheerful, almost exaggerated. Jocelyn can sense the strain behind his words, his attempt to convince her of some normalcy.

She glances at the charred remains of the kitchen stall, the blackened wood and melted metal, and asks, "What happened? It looks like someone blew it up."

Boris's gaze lingers on the destruction, his forced smile fading. "I'll tell you later. Let's finish the tour first. I think there are some things you'll want to see."

Jocelyn nods, her curiosity piqued, and follows him to the elevators. Since her last visit, Ahmed has managed to get another elevator cabin running, doubling their mobility within the tower. This one is bare and unpolished, still waiting for renovation, but functional nonetheless. As they ascend to a new floor, Jocelyn notices a deep grief in Boris, something that wasn't there before. Whatever happened, it was bad, but he's pretending that everything is fine.

They step out onto a vast floor, once the third Sky Lobby of a luxury spa hotel, now repurposed into a clean water tank facility. The space feels cavernous, the high ceilings and large platforms giving it an industrial atmosphere. Boris guides Jocelyn around the various pools, most of them empty, but a few half-filled and ready for treatment. The vast containers are stripped of their tiles, the concrete scrubbed clean and covered with thick plastic tarps. On one side, a large generator hums loudly, pumping water out of the pool into containers, filtering it until it's safe to drink. Jocelyn is impressed by the operation—it's like stepping into a factory, a place of raw, roaring innovation.

The windows are covered with heavy curtains, stitched together from various thick dark materials, creating a tapestry that blocks out the outside world. The curtains, with their haphazard stitching and mismatched patterns, provide both soundproofing and a barrier, keeping the residents' activities hidden from prying eyes. Inside, the

operation feels completely isolated, self-contained, and secure. She can't help but to picture a secret lab of sorts, something where the next superhero serum would be created.

They move from platform to platform, each with its own purpose. On one, washboards and laundry are laid out above an empty pool, organized into neat stacks of linens and clothes drying on long lines that crisscross the space. Another platform houses makeshift washing facilities, where residents make the arduous journey up to the third Sky Lobby for the shared showers. The tiling and booths are mostly gone, replaced by a series of wooden dividers and repurposed showerheads, creating seven functional shower spaces. Boris explains that this is the best they could manage with their current setup, but they have plans to eventually bring water down to the lower floors, so each room can have its own working shower. Despite the ad-hoc assembly, the dividers are all customized with some sort of paint or sticker, making the uncomfortable process a little more pleasant.

"One day, we'll even have hot water!" he says with a laugh, the sound tinged with hope and determination. Jocelyn smiles, though the sight of their makeshift setups and the luxuries they lack tugs at her heart. The residents' resilience is undeniable, and every reminder of their hardships only deepens her admiration for them.

They continue through the water-related functions, eventually moving up to another residential floor. This one is different—the corridors are wider, the rooms larger and more spacious than those on the other floors. Despite the usual grime and occasional spots of damage, the hallway feels almost clean, with an intentional minimalist design that reminds Jocelyn of polished concrete buildings with exposed ceilings, the pseudo industrial look that has appropriated industrial luxury. They walk down the hall and enter a room that surprises her with its neatness and order. It's almost like stepping into a newly renovated condo in an old Brooklyn warehouse—there's a well-made bed, a nightstand, and a large desk placed in the center of the room. On the stripped concrete walls, several posters are scattered along with a large calendar precisely annotated with red ink. In the corner of the room by the windows and rusty radiator, a large plastic bin houses a stack of clean white pages on top of which sits a color printer.

"This is our new HQ of sorts," Boris explains.

"HQ? What do you mean?" Jocelyn asks, intrigued.

"Since your last visit, we've been working together in the tower to figure out what to do next. The conclusion is that we want to go public, but on our terms. This city could help us—we could build something incredible with the right resources. So, we've decided to officially create 'The Residents.'"

Jocelyn waits for him to continue, she needs something more from him.

"Essentially, we want to mobilize, to engage with others, to share our story and stop living in the shadows. We don't want to look like a group of hippies or rebels. We want to be taken seriously and to have an impact. We've decided to create an organization, register with the city as a social group, and go public asking for investment. We're even thinking about establishing a sort of election system, a way to present ourselves formally and create representation. Martina and..." He suddenly stops, as though the mention of Martina's name has frozen him in place.

"What about Martina?" Jocelyn asks, gently probing for an answer.

"Okay, well... some things happened. Martina is no longer a resident," he says, his tone heavy with sadness.

"Why? What happened?"

"... She set a fire in the Market, in the kitchen. What you saw earlier—that was her, just yesterday. I don't know, something snapped. We all noticed she was getting more aggressive, but yesterday she went too far."

"Why would she do that?" Jocelyn asks, though a part of her isn't as surprised as she should be.

"Martina craves attention. More than attention, she craves respect and acknowledgment for her work. We were all extremely grateful to have her—she did a lot, more than most—but she didn't realize she was doing too much, and it became overbearing for everyone. She set the fire to put it out herself, to be a hero, I guess. Marisol saw her though, and we had to kick her out. She's no longer welcome in the tower."

Jocelyn takes a moment to process this. Martina had always seemed joyful, caring, and attached, but after their one-on-one conversation, Jocelyn had sensed something off about her. Martina was too eager, too willing to have her voice heard, and Jocelyn had recognized the desperation in her. Her giving nature and positive attitude seemed disingenuous, as if it were a means to an end, to be in the spotlight. Still, she hadn't expected that Martina would go so far.

Boris begins shuffling through some papers on the desk, searching for something. Finally, he pulls out a crumpled slip of paper and hands it to Jocelyn—it's a receipt, with a phone number scrawled across the top.

"Here's her number, if you want to contact her and get her side. I don't know if it's a good idea, but it's only fair," he says. Jocelyn takes the paper and tucks it into her notebook. She feels some sympathy for Martina—despite everything, it's clear she has issues, and now she's alone. Maybe Jocelyn will call her later, but given what happened, it might be best to wait.

Boris continues to explain the resolutions the residents have come to. Some of their ideas are still raw and not fully formed, but it's clear there's a vision, and if Jocelyn has learned anything, it's that when the residents set their minds to something, they find a way to make it happen. It's not far-fetched to think they could become a legitimate organization and continue developing the tower in collaboration with the city.

Eventually, they return to the Market, where Boris insists Jocelyn meets someone in particular. She assumes it's a resident with an interesting perspective or someone who can offer more insight into the new group strategy. But when they arrive, she's led to a man sitting in the corner, filming the wobbly beams above. The shot he's capturing is a little nostalgic, slightly absurd—a yellow cardigan hangs from a dent in the beam, swaying lightly back and forth in the dim light.

"This is Julian," Boris says. "He's here, sort of like you, to document the tower. He's an artist and filmmaker—I think it could be nice for you two to talk and maybe coordinate something." Jocelyn is surprised by the sudden new character, but also relieved. The hardest part of her journey so far has been navigating everything on her own. She's felt overwhelmed and confused, without anyone to debrief with, to discuss or advise. All of her feelings and frustrations she had to deal with herself, without any outlet.

She smiles at Julian, who waves shyly as he packs his camera into his bag. He's quite cute, Jocelyn thinks—a quiet, introspective type who can lose himself in his art and forget the world around him. She has met many characters like him, those who can find beauty in the midst of chaos.

Boris excuses himself, needing to help the residents dismantle the remains of the kitchen alcove, leaving Jocelyn and Julian alone. Julian silently flips through footage on his camera roll, the images reflecting off his glasses. Jocelyn asks about his background and how he ended up here. He shares his story—first as a neighbor, then a trespasser, and now a collaborator. Boris had invited him to film anything he wanted, but Julian chose to focus on the building itself, capturing the residue of people rather than the residents. He shows Jocelyn a few shots—each one full of nostalgia, full of character, but without a single human being in sight. The images are serene, yet not idealized; they show the tower exactly as she feels it—mysterious, complex, and alive with stories trapped in its debris.

As he talks about his vision, his plans for a collection of vignettes that tell the story of a place that has lived in its own unique way, Jocelyn feels a spark ignite within her. It's as if all the answers she's been searching for are suddenly within reach, unlocked by his words.

"Let's work together. I have some ideas," she says, interrupting his artistic monologue. Julian looks at her and nods, an endearing smile spreading across his face.

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The next couple of days are full of long sessions between the two of them, brainstorming and writing a script worthy of both their ambitions. They meet at the tower, creating a sort of studio for themselves on the thirty first floor in a large room that was cleared out for them. Working in-house, they could get the input from different residents, and capture any shots or moments as they pleased.

The project, as they called it, would essentially be a biography of the tower, its past, present, and ideas for its future. Jocelyn's narrative touch would be used to recall the Metropolitan's history, its grandeur and its death, a sort of documentary. Meanwhile, Julian would capture the essence of the tower today, in its raw nature. The storyboard was still in the works, but it would integrate a sort of temporal jump between the then and now, juggling the image of what was, could have been, and what it became. Jocelyn was determined to add the voices of the former employees, develop their stories and integrate their visions to what the tower became.

During the day, Jocelyn would work on writing, creating scripts for the film shots, going back and forth with Julian who had an eye for unexpected visual poetry. Julian would wander around the tower, documenting whatever he found interesting. He would spend a lot of time listening to Jocelyn recite her texts, which gave him a better understanding of the tone. In the evenings, before going home, they would each have a sort of summary of the day's work, presenting each other with what they found most interesting that day. As she went home each night, Jocelyn felt more fulfilled, happier even, with what they were making together. They complemented each other, their storytelling complex and beautiful, while remaining true to the image of the tower.

After three weeks or so, they had developed a draft of a preliminary film. It was still raw, still missing much of the tower's origins, but Julian was adamant on showing it to someone who could give them feedback before they got too attached. Although Jocelyn is hesitant at first, she agrees to share what she has so far with a former editor of hers, who she first came to with the story. As they pack up for the day, Boris knocks on the open door.

"Hey there, I know its late, but the residents are about to have a meeting, if you two would like to join."

Jocelyn stands there, staring at Boris, while Julian accepts the invitation. She is struck. For months now, she has tried to build a trust with the residents, gotten closer to all of them. She felt that she had finally done it. The meeting could be routine, but to her, it was the evidence that she had built something here. She could feel like one of them, and they felt the same about her.

She follows Boris and Julian down to the meeting hall, her heart pumping. She can feel the tears start to swell around her eyes, but quickly gets her composure back. She walks into the hall, where all the residents are talking amongst themselves. She sits with Julian in the last row, but as they settle, Mohammed waves to them to join him in one of the front rows. It all seems so surreal to her. In a way, this was all she wanted, to be part of the group, to be accepted and invited, to be trusted. All her anxiety surrounding the story disappeared, they trusted her. She can feel her face in a permanent smile, unable to contain her joy.

Boris takes the stand first, conducting his usual summary of the month, their expenses, their goals, and how they should proceed the following month. Since their decision to organize, he had been elected as the face of the Residents, someone who could speak publicly, who had always been there, who was trusted by all. He continues with an open hall for all the residents to voice their opinions and thoughts about how to run things smoother. After half an hour of conversation, Boris turns to Julian and Jocelyn.

"So I heard that there was a draft. If you are willing, we would love to see what you have so far."

Both Julian and Jocelyn feel like they should sink into their seats. They don't know if what they have is good, and Jocelyn is always afraid of what the residents might say, especially now that she was invited to the inner circle. Her mind is spinning with excuses to postpone the screening, but before she can come up with anything, Julian stands up.

"Ok, we have a copy here. Remember that it's a draft, still early and not resolved. We would love your thoughts."

She begins to tremble with nerves. He did the right thing, they could use the feedback, but she is terrified that they won't like it. As Julian heads towards the projector setup, Boris and another resident pull down a large white cloth from the ceiling that they use as a screen for their movie nights. They pull the lights and Julian hits play.

The scene opens with a wide shot of the pools, their still waters reflecting the pale light of dawn. Great white linens sway gently in the morning breeze, their movement a gracefully responding to the city's morning call. The fabric catches the light, shimmering like the first rays of the sun stretching across the awakening skyline. The quiet is almost hypnotic, the linens dancing in a rhythm that seems in tune with the pulse of the city.

Suddenly, a faint crackling sound disturbs the serenity, a subtle disruption that grows louder, breaking the smooth flow of the scene. The noise appears as a vacuum enters the frame, its hum growing in intensity as it draws nearer. The camera captures its approach, the vacuum's mechanical whirring drowning out the soft rustling of the linens, before it passes by, leaving only a fleeting glimpse of yellow loafers shuffling hesitantly behind it.

The next shot shifts to the view from the window bay. The sun dominates the frame, flooding the screen with its brilliant light, a stark contrast to the shadows that carve out the sharp contours of the city skyline. The camera struggles to adjust, the glare overwhelming as it tries to focus on the entangled geometry of the urban landscape beyond. Just as the image begins to take shape, a shirt flutters into view, filling the screen with a sudden burst of white that blinds the lens, resetting its focus.

A soft piano melody begins to play, the notes delicate yet slightly off-kilter, creating a sense of unease tempered by an underlying comfort. The music lingers, echoing through the scene with a haunting calmness that soothes even as it unsettles.

Jocelyn's voice cuts through the melody, her tone gentle but with a hint of intrigue. "Under the nose of the busiest city in the world, hidden in plain sight, the Residents have made their home."

As the film plays, the room is completely silent. Jocelyn can't help but to watch for every reaction. Did they laugh during the funny moments? Are they moved by the shots? Did they like the way she wrote the dialogue? She had never been more stressed in her life. As the thirty-minute cut comes to a close, the silence felt like an eternity. Suddenly, the room erupted with claps and cheers. Everyone gets up and one by one comes to Julian and Jocelyn with a hug or handshake. Jocelyn can't quite understand yet, but everyone liked it. She looks at Julian, who is blushing like a ten-year-old around their first crush. Finally, it registers that they all liked it. Boris finally comes to them.

"This was amazing. I am so impressed. I didn't know this place was so special, you even made me discover things. I can't quite put it into words. All I can say is thank you."

With these words, Jocelyn finally breaks, tears starting to stream down her face. She falls into Julian's arms, who understands her completely despite his late entry to the tower. For the first time in five months, she felt like all her work was worth it. As the crowd settles, and regains their seats, Boris makes one final announcement.

"In two weeks, we will finally open the tower. I want to thank everyone for your support. You are all amazing, I can't believe we made it this far, but we have some distance to go. Let's all work together. Thank you."

As he concludes the meeting, he heads straight for Jocelyn and Julian.

"I'm still shook by the film, honestly it was amazing. I can't wait to see how it ends up. So about that last announcement, this is a good time to tell you all, we decided to go public in two weeks. We will have a sort of party, or event, with a couple bands from around New York. We have Mohammed making flyers with one of Julian's pictures. It's going to be a combination of shows, drinks, and symposium of sorts. We would love for you two to speak about your film if you can."

Jocelyn takes a moment and answers. "You mean, you are going public, like to the world?" Her question seems full of excitement. It's a day she imagined but never thought would come. Boris nods, a smile of pride and accomplishment on his face.

"Absolutely, we will have something to say. I don't think it's a good idea for a screening, it's still too early, but we can talk about the project, it would be good for our publicity too." Julian answers. He is always calm for some reason, always finding the best answers. Jocelyn nods quietly before heading for the exit with Julian. They walk down the stairs, through the hallway, towards a service exit that they were given the keys to. As they walk out, they exchange a long meaningful hug. It's been a long three weeks of work, but it's paid off. They know



now that they are on the right track, and they can continue comforted with the idea. Jocelyn heads to the subway, elated, but exhausted.

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In Midtown Manhattan, just after two in the afternoon, a police officer approaches a food truck outside Rockefeller Center and orders a black coffee. The vendor, knowing the routine well, has the coffee ready before the cop even reaches the cart. The two men have never exchanged more than a few words, yet the ritual has lasted over twenty years. They don't know each other's names, but an unspoken understanding has formed between them—a bond built on routine. The officer hands over a dollar, the vendor nods, and they go their separate ways.

This quiet, unspoken bond is not unlike the relationship between Boris and Marcus. Marcus, a regular at Boris' bike shop, stops by three times a week for a cappuccino on his way to work. The exact time may vary, but it's always between ten and eleven in the morning. As Marcus enters, Boris nods in greeting, already preparing his usual order. Marcus takes his seat, pulls out his phone, and waits. Boris brings the cappuccino, Marcus offers a quick thanks, and Boris returns to his counter. It's a routine, one that's rare in a city as restless as New York, where it can be hard to form habits amidst the constant flow of new sights, new people, and new places.

For Marcus, this routine is a small anchor in a life that often feels adrift. He works from home in a modest flat above a bakery in Brooklyn, his job in tech provides him a good source of income but not much fulfillment. His days begin with overpriced eggs and an occasional smoothie, followed by a cold shower—a habit he picked up in the Navy. Even though his meetings are online, he's meticulous about his appearance, choosing his outfits with care, as if preparing for an invisible audience. After a quick workout, he either takes a walk or heads to Boris' shop for his morning coffee.

Biking was never Marcus's thing. Since frequenting the coffee shop, he's met some of the regulars at the shop—people who blame all their problems on capitalism while shopping at Whole Foods and living in one of the world's most expensive cities. Their naïve worldview frustrates him. But the shop itself, and the quiet routine it offers, provides him a brief pause from the aimlessness he's felt since leaving the Navy. His job, though stable, is unfulfilling. He is constantly searching for something more—a project, a purpose, something to reignite the fire that once drove him.

As he sips his coffee, scrolling through the usual emails filled with tech support requests and mundane fixes, something different catches his eye. A flyer, left on the table next to his mug, invites him to 'The Met Ball' at the 'Ghost Tower of Manhattan' on Saturday, November 25th. The words alone don't interest him—just another eccentric New York event, he thinks—but the image below stops him cold. It's the Metropolitan. His Metropolitan. The tower he had tried so hard to rebuild after the fire, only to see every effort fail.

He stands abruptly, clutching the flyer as if it might vanish if he lets go. Approaching the counter, he asks Boris, "Did you leave this on my table?"

Boris, taken aback by Marcus's sudden intensity—they rarely spoke beyond pleasantries—answers cautiously, "Yes, is there a problem?"

"No, not at all. But is this the Metropolitan? I recognize it." Marcus's voice now carries an urgency, a need to understand.

Boris nods, still wary. "Yeah, it's the tower in midtown. It used to be the Metropolitan."

"Who's organizing this? Who gave you the flyer?" Marcus's questions come rapid-fire, his tone almost aggressive now.

"I did," Boris replies, taking a small step back, bracing for a reaction. But instead of anger, Marcus's face breaks into a wide smile.

"What happened? Please, tell me everything. Do you still go there? How is it still open?"

Boris hesitates. Why is Marcus, usually so reserved, suddenly so invested? Is it the music? The groups playing are mostly underground, nothing special. Maybe it's something about the building itself. Boris weighs his options, unsure of how much to reveal, but Marcus's intensity is overwhelming.

"Well, I can't tell you everything," Boris finally says, playing it safe, "but I can tell you I'll be there."

Marcus's eyes shine with desire, his usual calm demeanor replaced by something almost fervent. Boris, sensing this, scribbles down his number on a napkin and hands it over before retreating to the back of the shop. Marcus

stands at the counter for a moment, then returns to his seat. He digs through his phone, searching for an old contact, his mind racing. Finally, he finds what he's looking for—a number with no name attached. Without hesitating, he calls.

The phone rings four times before a woman answers, her voice sharp and direct. "Hello? Who is this?"

"Hi, is this Roberta? This is Marcus, from the Met group. I have something you might like."

"Marcus? What do you need?" Roberta responds, unphased by the surprise call.

"I'm at a coffee shop in Brooklyn, and I was invited to some kind of party. You won't believe where it's being held."

"Where?" Roberta asks, her tone indifferent.

"The Metropolitan," Marcus says, letting the suspense hang for a moment.

A long silence follows. Marcus can almost picture Roberta's reaction, the shock and confusion on her face.

"What? Say that again?" she finally responds, not quite believing what she's heard.

"The Metropolitan. The barista here has some ties there. I've got his number, and he'll give me more information. It's on Saturday. I'll send you a photo of the flyer."

"What's the coffee shop? I can come by right now," Roberta says, her voice suddenly focused.

"Well, I don't know if that's a good idea. The barista seemed a bit secretive. I don't want to bring too much attention and risk him clamming up," Marcus replies, sensing that Boris's hesitance might mean this event is more underground than he initially thought.

"Okay. I understand. Send me the information. I'll clear my schedule for Saturday. Bye." Roberta's abrupt sign-off is typical—she's always been about efficiency, getting to the point and moving on.

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On Saturday, Roberta waits for Marcus at a coffee shop in SoHo. She's fresh off her shift at a prestigious Public Hotel, her latest position after her tenure as general manager at One Hotel in the Metropolitan. Despite being offered various high-profile roles across the city, she chose this one for the freedom it gave her to run things her way. The money wasn't her concern; she had enough. What she missed was the complexity and challenge the Metropolitan offered. It wasn't just a building; it was an icon, a world within a world where she faced new challenges every day, met fascinating people, and never felt bored. The work was grueling, but it filled a hole nothing else could.

Navigating the busy SoHo streets, she expertly weaves through the crowd of tourists, a smile playing on her lips. Even as a hardened New Yorker, she appreciates the wonder in their eyes as they experience the city for the first time—the amazement at the monuments, the joy of vacation, the fear at the chaos around them. She walks with purpose, checking her phone to confirm the location Marcus sent her. Her heart races with a mix of excitement and fear. The Metropolitan was her pride and joy, and since the fire, she had fought tirelessly to save it, to revive it. But all her efforts had failed, and she had finally accepted that the tower was now just a ghost of its former self.

She arrives at the coffee shop and takes a seat by the window, still dressed in her work clothes—a designer blazer over a pantsuit, with high heels. She wonders if she should change before heading to the event. She would stand out too much in this outfit. Searching on her phone for nearby stores, she's distracted by Marcus's arrival.

"Hey, Roberta. Good to see you. I'm going to get a coffee, want anything?" he asks, already heading to the counter.

She shakes her head, still focused on her search. He returns with a large black coffee and a piece of cake, glancing at her phone.

“Just go to a vintage shop,” he suggests, reading her mind. Despite his basic military look, Marcus is very perceptive, able to read a situation quickly.

“I don’t know any good ones. I don’t want to look out of place,” she admits, her usual composed demeanor cracking slightly.

“Don’t worry. I know a couple in the area. Let’s go together.”

They leave the coffee shop and wander the neighborhood, eventually finding a busy vintage store filled with art kids and skaters. They browse the racks until Roberta finds a dress—stylish but not too fancy. She usually doesn’t wear dresses, but tonight, she wants to blend in, to hide not only her appearance but something of herself as well. While she tries it on, Marcus picks out a jean jacket and a baseball cap, amused at the idea of Roberta in such a casual getup.

They exit the shop, Roberta now in her new outfit, and begin their walk toward Midtown. It’s chilly, but the anticipation of returning to the Metropolitan keeps them warm. As they pass through Greenwich Village and Chelsea, the streets seem quieter than usual, like a funnel leading them to the tower. But they’re too focused on their destination to pay much attention. When they finally reach the tower, they pause, staring up at the charred façade behind the leftover scaffolding. It looks the same as it did two years ago, frozen in time.

They circle the building, looking for an entrance. The flyer didn’t specify how to get in, almost as if you had to be in the know. Marcus texts Boris, careful to mention that he’s bringing a friend but not revealing her identity. The reply comes quickly with detailed instructions on how to find the hidden entrance. They follow the directions, slipping through a breach in the scaffolding and entering through an old service door marked with a red ribbon. The stairwell is familiar to Roberta, the memories flooding back as they climb to the first Sky Lobby. She pauses on the second floor. Her office used to be just a couple steps away, out the staircase own the corridor to the left. She wants to see it, just one more time, but now is not the time. She shakes her head and continues up the stairs.

The large open hall is filled with people—young and old, from all walks of life, all chatting and waiting for something to happen. The air is thick with anticipation, a buzz of excitement that seems to vibrate through the crowd. As they navigate the room, Roberta begins to recognize faces—people she once worked with, staff from the various hotels within the tower. Her heart aches with nostalgia, a wave of emotion washing over her as she feels like she’s among her people again, her trusted team. But she holds back, staying discreet, unsure of how to interact with them. She doesn’t want to stand out, afraid it might cause a scene. She takes a deep breath and gets back into character, the woman with the dress and the cap, not Roberta.

Suddenly, a figure emerges from the elevator bay. Roberta’s eyes widen with surprise. The elevators still work? The man steps forward—it’s Boris, the barista from Marcus’s coffee shop. He finds a small platform to stand on and addresses the crowd.

“Welcome, everyone. I want to thank you all for being here. Tonight, we’re celebrating something very special. As many of you know, this used to be one of the greatest hotels in the city. After the fire, the building was left behind, abandoned. But what if I told you it wasn’t abandoned, but reinvented? Tonight, I want to introduce you to the Residents.”

A group of people, each wearing a blue armband, step forward from the stairwell, joining Boris at the front.

“For the past two years, these people have built a community from the ruins of the tower. The Residents are a group living together, working together, to create a better life in the city. We are refugees, migrants, aspirants, lovers. We are old, young, and everything in between. Together, we’ve made our home here. Tonight, we’re opening our doors to the world, inviting you to see what we’ve built. There will be shows, panel discussions, and tours throughout the evening. Thank you.”

The crowd bursts into applause, a wave of excitement rippling through the room. Marcus joins in, his face lighting up with genuine enthusiasm. This announcement was massive—it marked the beginning of a new era for the Metropolitan, a fresh direction and renewed purpose, a chance for the place to live on in a way that felt meaningful again. As the energy in the room swells, Marcus spots a few familiar faces in the crowd, mingling with the Residents.

Goldy, a close friend from the Metropolitan support group, stands nearby with his son, the boy's eyes wide with curiosity. Next to them, a woman Marcus recognizes from several meetings—a former bartender from the Cloud Lobby—laughs and claps alongside them. Together, they gather around a woman dressed in blue, her face radiant with joy, the kind of happiness that makes Marcus smile instinctively.

Weaving through the crowd, Marcus makes his way toward them, eager to join in on the celebration. The air buzzes with excitement, the momentousness of the occasion settling over the room like a shared breath of relief and hope. As he approaches, he feels a surge of pride—not just for the Metropolitan's future, but for the people who've brought it here, himself included.

While the crowd chatters, laughs and expresses their amazement, Roberta feels a coldness settle over her. This wasn't the Metropolitan she knew, the one she had poured her heart and soul into. It felt like her baby had been taken from her, transformed into something unrecognizable. In any other building, she would have championed this event, celebrated the Residents for their resilience. But here, in the place she once called her own, she felt only betrayal, as if the building itself had turned its back on her.

Without a word to Marcus, she slips away, losing herself in the crowd and heading for the exit. Her mind races with conflicting emotions—joy at being back in this place, anger at the Residents for what they had done to it. The Metropolitan had never really belonged to her, she knew that. But it had been her pride and joy, the project that defined her career. And now, it was gone, replaced by something she couldn't recognize.

She exits through the service stairs, the metal steps echoing beneath her feet, each one weighed down by the heavy pull of regret. The dimly lit stairwell feels colder now, the walls pressing in on her as she pushes open the door and steps out into the night. Past the metal grate fence, the familiar growl of Penn Station greets her, a chaotic pulse beneath the city's surface. She rounds the corner without a second thought, her mind set on the first rooftop bar she can find, a place to drown the swirl of emotions clouding her thoughts.

There is no hesitation as she strides through the lobby, her footsteps quick and determined. The elevator's sleek doors glide open, and she steps inside without pause, her reflection momentarily catching her eye in the mirrored walls, but she looks away. There's no need to wait to be seated when she reaches the rooftop—she heads straight for the balcony, where the city stretches out beneath her like a glittering sea of lights. The cool night air hits her skin as she stands at the edge, gin and tonic already in hand, the glass sweating in the warmth of her grip. She welcomes the sting of the alcohol, letting it numb the edges of her frustration, her bitterness, her deep sense of betrayal. The sky above is a deep, starless black, the lights of the city reflecting off the low clouds, casting a soft glow over everything.

Her thoughts circle back to the Metropolitan, the building she has poured her life into. The Residents have taken what she built and turned it into something she no longer recognizes, something that feels alien and wrong. They have succeeded where she failed, not by following her vision, but by creating their own. That truth gnaws at her, cutting deeper with each passing moment. It isn't just that they did it without her; it's that they did it in spite of her, and that realization hurts more than she can admit.

She takes another sip, closing her eyes as the warmth of the gin spreads. Why was she so blind? Why didn't she see the potential in what the Residents were doing? They are living the very ideals she championed—community, resilience, adaptability. But instead of embracing their efforts, she clung to her vision, refusing to see the life that was growing in the ruins of her dream. The truth is, she was too proud, too stubborn to acknowledge that the Metropolitan could survive without her, that it could thrive in ways she had never imagined.

A gust of wind sweeps across the patio, sending a shiver down her spine. She pulls her jacket tighter around her, but the cold seems to settle deep inside her, mixing with the melancholy that has taken root in her chest. She can't help but feel a deep sense of loss—not just for the building, but for the part of herself that she has lost along the way. She has defined herself by her work at the Metropolitan, by her success in making it an icon of the city. Now, that identity feels hollow, as empty as the ruins of the tower she once called her own.

Her phone buzzes again, pulling her out of her thoughts. She glances at the screen, seeing Marcus's name flash up once more. Five missed calls and now a sixth. She stares at the phone, her thumb hovering over the screen, but she can't bring herself to answer. What could she say? That she was wrong? That she failed? She sets the phone down again and lets it ring out until it quiets.

The gin burns as it goes down, a dull ache spreading through her chest. She sets the glass down and buries her face in her hands, letting the silence of the rooftop engulf her. For the first time in a long while, she feels truly alone, adrift in a city that has always felt like home but now seems foreign and unwelcoming. The Residents have built something new, something vibrant and alive, and in doing so, they have left her behind. She looks out over the city, the skyline a jagged silhouette against the night. From up here, the buildings seem almost peaceful, but she knows better. The city is a beast, a relentless force that consumes everything in its path, leaving behind only those strong enough to endure. The Metropolitan hasn't endured. Unlike these landmarks, her building died, and its corpse was violated with new life.

She thinks about the banner she saw earlier, the one advertising free education, another in a long line of attempts to make something meaningful out of the city's vast, impersonal landscape. It reminds her of the ideas she tried to pitch for the Metropolitan—an educational center, a community hub, a place for growth and learning. But no one was interested. No one wanted to take a chance on a building that seemed cursed, destined to rot away in the middle of the city. Perhaps the Metropolitan is under a spell, one that keeps it from ever truly being reborn, leaving it to linger in a state of perpetual decay.

The thought makes her stomach turn, and she signals the waiter for another drink. She needs something stronger, something to drown out the noise in her head, the persistent voice that tells her she is no longer relevant in the city she once commanded. As the waiter brings her another gin and tonic, she stares down at the glass, her reflection distorted in the clear liquid. The person staring back, wearing a baseball cap and jean jacket, is a stranger, someone she no longer recognizes.

She finishes her drink and orders another, then another. The night grows colder, the air biting through her coat, but she barely notices. The alcohol dulls her senses, blurring the edges of her thoughts, turning her anger and frustration into a dull, throbbing pain. She is a woman without a purpose, a relic of a past that no longer matters. The city has moved on, and she is left behind, clinging to the ghost of a dream that has long since died.

By the time she decides to leave, the bar is nearly empty, the last of the patrons trickling out into the cold night. Roberta stands, her legs unsteady beneath her, and makes her way to the elevator. She presses the button for the lobby and leans against the wall, closing her eyes as the elevator descends. The night has been a failure, just like everything else in her life. She came here looking for solace, but all she found was more loneliness, more pain.

When the elevator doors open, she steps out into the lobby, her steps slow and measured. The city outside is quiet, the streets empty, the lights dimmed. She walks out into the night, the cold air sobering her slightly, and begins to walk. She doesn't know where she is going, doesn't care. All she knows is that she needs to keep moving, to keep walking until the city swallows her whole.

As she walks, the buildings loom above her, their heights oppressive, their histories mocking her. She passes by the Metropolitan once more, its dark silhouette stark against the night sky. She doesn't stop, doesn't look up. She can't bear to. The building is no longer hers, and it never will be again. It belongs to the Residents now, to a new generation that has no need for her or her dreams. She keeps walking, the sound of her footsteps echoing in the empty streets, the city stretching out before her, vast and unyielding.

Roberta walks through the city with no clear destination, the night air heavy and cool against her skin. The streets blur around her, a swirl of faces and lights, but she pays them no mind. As the hours slip by, she begins to realize that it doesn't matter where she's going—there's nowhere left for her here. The city, once a place she knew intimately, feels distant now, as if it has quietly moved on without her. She is just another face in the crowd, another nameless story swallowed up by the millions of lives unfolding around her.

The Metropolitan, now the tower, with its Residents, their daily routines, their struggles, their triumphs—it has all continued forward, while she remained rooted in place, clinging to the past. She had once imagined herself as essential, a fixed axle on which the wheel of the city kept turning. But now, she can see that the wheel turns without her. The tower has become something else, something new, and she is no longer a part of it. Nostalgia lingers in her chest, a dull ache as she waits for a new chapter, some miraculous return to her former glory. But she knows, deep down, that there will be no such return.

There are no new chapters waiting for her, only the relentless forward march of time—the city continuing its story, character by character, moment by moment, without pause, without looking back. The lights flicker in the

distance, the rumble of traffic and the murmur of voices swirl together, but it all feels so far away. Roberta lets the night carry her, aimless yet resigned, a silent observer without purpose.

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The market stalls in Moynihan Hall had long lost their charm, any hint of local flavor drained from the space. What had once been a bustling hub now felt sterile, filled with the safe, familiar brands that lined shopping centers across the globe. Each store was polished and sleek, offering the same glossy facade found in places like Canary Wharf or Hudson Yards. There was no texture, no friction—just a smooth, curated space designed to appeal to the masses. Among them, a Walgreens, a Blue Truck Coffee, a macaron shop, a tap room that looked more like something from an airport terminal. There was Zara, Starbucks, Auntie Anne's, McDonald's—all the usual suspects of 'what to find in any city.'

Yet, tucked away by the west entrance, a small stall offered something different. Sandwiched between the restrooms and an unassuming exit, an old cartography store stood quietly, its presence almost a whisper in the roar of the commercialized hall. There was no flashy storefront, just a few maps in the window—one of New York, another of the former Metropolitan, rendered in a minimalist artistic style.

Behind the desk sat the shop's owner, a middle-aged woman with the quiet air of someone who had seen the world. She'd spent her life teaching geography and mapmaking across the country, and now she was here, in this small corner of the city, surrounded by a collection of maps she had gathered from flea markets and estate sales. Each piece was meticulously cataloged, her worn notebook filled with handwritten notes on the age of the paper, the type of ink used, the faint creases that revealed a map's long journey through time. Over the years, she had amassed more than 3,400 maps, each one recorded with the same care and precision.

Her latest haul sat spread out before her—a couple of subway maps, one from the '80s, three from the 2000s, and a detailed map of the Bronx. There were a few more of Central Park, its pathways and landmarks neatly illustrated. Most were maps of New York, nothing particularly special beyond their age. But then there was one that caught her eye—a worn map of East Berlin from the 1970s, its west side conspicuously blank. It smelled faintly of whiskey and smoke, as if it had spent decades in the back room of a bar before finding its way into her hands.

Once the maps were catalogued, she sorted them—those worthy of display and those that would join the others on the shelves. The special ones were taken to the back of the shop, into her atelier. The room was small, an octagonal space she had reorganized with shelves to accommodate her work. A large table with built-in lighting stood in the center, where she carefully placed the Berlin map. With a metal ruler, she gently scraped away the dirt that had settled on its surface, then placed heavy weights on the corners to flatten it. After letting it sit, she delicately worked over the map with a cotton ball dipped in a chemical solution she had mixed herself, reducing the yellowing and bringing the colors back to life. Once the treatment was finished, she sealed the map in an acid-free frame, ready for display.

Her shop operated like a carefully curated library, each map cataloged with the same precision as a rare book. For every map, she created an accompanying card, meticulously detailing its origins, age, and unique features. These cards were added to a well-organized index, a resource her customers could browse through, guiding them to the exact piece they sought. Over time, the collection had grown into something vast, yet easily navigable—a system that felt personal, intimate.

She had also created a look book, a visual guide spread across five volumes, each organized by theme. The first volume was dedicated to national maps, tracing the boundaries of states and territories, the shifting lines of history. The second focused on international maps, a collection that spanned continents and empires. The third was her pride: New York, a tribute to the city that surrounded her, filled with subway lines, boroughs, and forgotten landmarks. The fourth volume, technical maps, showcased more intricate, detailed works—building blueprints, infrastructure layouts, and engineering plans. The final volume was dedicated to landscapes, capturing the world's natural beauty.

Each volume, carefully bound and stored behind her counter, was a testament to her dedication. Customers would flip through the pages, discovering maps that spoke not just to geography but to time, memory, and the art of cartography itself.

As she worked through her latest stack, she noticed a flyer among the maps. It was large, folded in three, with a piece of cloth stapled to one side. The flyer's base was white, but its design was bold—a colorful array of primary shapes depicting a tower in a striking Constructivist style. The tower soared up and away in a sharp, exaggerated perspective. On the right, bold black text announced: *The Residents are opening the doors.*



At first glance, it seemed like just another piece of modern art. But something about it caught her attention. The tower—it looked familiar. Squinting, she leaned in closer. It wasn't just any building; it was the Metropolitan. She knew it well, having spent countless hours wandering its halls, drawn to the diversity of people and the hidden corners of the once-vibrant space. She peered at the address at the bottom of the flyer: *Off 33rd and 7th*. There was no mistake—this was the Metropolitan, or what was left of it.

The date, however, was several days past. She had missed whatever event had taken place, but curiosity pushed her forward. She grabbed her laptop and began searching, piecing together keywords until she stumbled across a website—no title, no introduction, just a vast archive of photos and videos. The images were of the vacant Metropolitan, its rooms and corridors eerily empty, yet somehow still brimming with life. No people were in the frames, but the essence of the building remained, captured in every detail.

At the bottom of the page, two paragraphs sit boldly, a manifesto:

*We are The Residents. A collective of the displaced, the dreamers, the forgotten, and the determined—each of us bound by the desire to reclaim what this city has left behind. In the shadows of the greatest skyline in the world, we have found our place. What was abandoned, we have resurrected—not to replace the old, but to rebuild, to reimagine a space where life can thrive again.*

*Time has not defeated us. It has given us the right to redefine what it means to belong in this city. In the cracks of what remains, we have built a new community, reshaping the tower into a home that defies the cycles of destruction and violence that the city imposes. We claim the right to live, to occupy, and to create. If you, like us, believe that the city belongs to those who inhabit it, that living here is not a privilege but a fundamental right, we welcome you. More to come soon.*

*Signed: The Residents.*

## Epilogue.

The Market's concrete floor shimmers faintly with a delicate layer of dust, like a thin veil of frost left untouched. On this spring morning, sunlight filters through the grimy windows, casting a pale, ghostly light across the vast, empty space. The kitchen alcove, once a hub of activity, now stands in a state of quiet disrepair. A few plastic bags, now disintegrating, lie abandoned on the counter, their contents overtaken by a creeping mold that slowly consumes what remains. The benches stand as skeletal frames, their remaining surfaces marked by scribbled graffiti.

Outside, on the balcony, the remnants of once-lush greenery have long since vanished, overtaken by a wild, untamed jungle. What were once neatly trimmed plants have given way to a riot of nature—vines wind their way up the elevator shaft, climbing with persistent determination. Their arms reach desperately towards the narrow slivers of sunlight that pierce the dusty air, eager to soak up every drop of warmth.

Below, in the forgotten space between the concrete floor and the drop ceilings, a family of squirrels has made its home. Their tiny feet scuttle over the metallic vents echoing in the emptiness like the distant patter of rain. Each movement reverberates through the space, a sporadic collection of sounds. The evening rain has left droplets scattered across the floor, while a lone pigeon rustles its feathers high above, nestled within the skeletal remains of the high beams. The old pipes, twisted and corroded by time, clank intermittently, their sounds a disjointed symphony against the peaceful backdrop.

Above the Market, on the playground, the monkey bars have become a canvas for a spider's intricate web. The steel, once warmed by the grip of children swinging from bar to bar, now feels cold and abandoned. On the swing set, one seat has fallen to the ground, its chain broken and sagging beside its companion, which still sways gently with each passing breeze. The sandbox, once a haven for children's imaginative play, is now a hardened crust of compacted dirt and dust, a parched desert. The floorboards on the lower platform have given way, weakened by years of exposure, collapsing into the hollow atrium below with a quiet thud.

In the darkened corridors, shadows stretch long and ominous. The lights, long since extinguished, have left the passageways in a state of perpetual twilight. Doors hang open like forgotten entries in a book, while others are completely missing, leaving only faded and barely legible room numbers behind. The golden plaques that once proudly identified each space now gleam dimly in the gloom, their shine lost to years of dust and decay.

Inside one of the rooms, a mattress is draped over the windows, creating a stark, vacant spot in the center of the room. An old cardigan, still neatly hung on a hanger despite the years of neglect, stands as a solitary testament to its previous owner. The carpets have become rough and bristly like an old paint brush, collecting debris from years of abandonment. In the bathroom, the tub has been ripped from the wall, leaving a gaping hole where the pipes have been stripped bare.

By the front door lies a doll, a porcelain little girl in a blue dress with blond pigtails. Her serene smile, frozen in time, offers hope to the surrounding decay. She remains, a symbol of innocence and quietude amid the dust and debris.

Some rooms show faint signs of recent life—an occasional needle, a discarded bag left behind by transient visitors. Each stray item, from a letter to a single glove, contributes to a silent narrative of fleeting presences, each object a fragment of the tower's ongoing story.

A few floors above, the pools that once served as a water source are now dry and abandoned. Their basins, once filled with crystal-clear water, are now coated with graffiti and tags, a patchwork of vibrant colors covering the emptiness. The pools stand hollow and silent, their echoes of past life now subdued by the stillness. The showers are barren, lockers toppled over like fallen dominoes, and a few snails have claimed the smaller basin, inching their way up towards the warm patches of sunlight.

On the rooftop, the wildlife has established its own little ecosystem. Birds nest in the overgrown grass, worms wriggle through the soil, and a seagull perches on the railing, surveying the Empire State Building with an unblinking gaze. The grass has found its way into the seams of the wooden floors, pushing up panels with persistent roots. The single tree planted years ago as a decorative piece has finally claimed its rightful place, its roots breaking through the heavy tiles to breathe the fresh air. It blooms defiantly, as if to say this rooftop and this view are its dominion.

The tower is almost entirely vacant, except for the casino floors. Once a grand gaming room, it now serves as a makeshift supermarket. The shelves dissect the once-open space into tight aisles filled with canned goods and various condiments. The opulent casino area has been transformed into a functional, if unremarkable, retail center. Additionally to the supermarket, there is a bowling alley, a barbershop, a few small restaurants, a real estate office, and a travel agency. These businesses coexist within the walls, oblivious to the tower's past, each living its own day by day.

Where the grand lobby once welcomed guests on the ground floor, concrete slabs have been stripped away to reveal a small garden. Nestled in the midst of Penn Station's bustling area, the garden feels almost out of place—shy and ignored. It's home to a few tulips, chrysanthemums, and other common flowers, their beauty often overshadowed by the grime of the city. The garden is a silent witness to the city's hustle, occasionally used as an impromptu restroom or trash can. Yet, amidst the struggling flora and scattered trash, the rats of the city find sustenance, making the garden their own paradise. Despite the removal of scaffolding and sealing of service entrances with concrete blocks, the top floors remain impenetrable, cutting off any contact with the outside world.

A year after the Residents were formally recognized by the city, a partnership with the local government led to the creation of a nonprofit organization dedicated to housing. This initiative, supported by grants and funding, enabled the Residents to rebuild the tower according to their vision. The project's success was undeniable, propelled in large part by the documentary Jocelyn and Julian produced. Unexpectedly, the documentary became a nationwide sensation, earning widespread acclaim and even several award nominations. The duo spent weeks touring the country, sharing the story of the tower. Their newfound fame opened doors to a host of new opportunities for them.

Julian lingered in New York for a while, developing a film-making course and maintaining ties with the Residents. He often visited the tower, sometimes bringing his students to explore its unique world. Yet, as the initial excitement faded, Julian found himself restless, yearning for a fresh challenge. When a job offer came from California, he seized the chance, leaving the city for new horizons.

Jocelyn didn't stay much longer either. Ever in pursuit of the perfect story, she relocated to a small town where she could focus on her writing. Over the next three years, she developed her first novel—a blend of fiction and fact—titled *The Metropolitan: A Memento*. Afterward, she continued writing, turning her attention to stories of diverse communities across the country. She explored life on a reservation through the lens of casino culture, then chronicled the lives of truckers on the open road in Texas. Each of her books was met with great success, but as the accolades and attention grew, her connection to the tower slowly faded into the background.

Boris, meanwhile, remained with the Residents for a few more years. Initially, their efforts centered on improving living conditions within the tower, but gradually, the movement expanded across Manhattan. As interest grew, the Residents began to disperse, seeking stable housing rather than continuing the social experiment of redefining urban living. The original group thinned out, and Boris found himself increasingly detached from the movement. Eventually, he accepted a position as an associate professor at NYU, where he shared his experiences with liberal arts students fascinated by the romanticism of squatting.

As for Martina, she vanished after being expelled from the tower, her fate unknown. Mohammed and Ahmed found stability together in Queens, securing steady jobs and quietly building their new lives. Marisol met a man at a concert, married him a few months later, and moved to the suburbs, where they now raise three children who play soccer every Saturday. Paule ascended quickly in her career, becoming a judge in the New York Court Circuit, where she now presides over civil disputes, with a focus on real estate claims.

The city continues its relentless march, each character carving a path through the ever-shifting landscape. The Metropolitan's staff and Residents, once intertwined with its fate, have woven their own stories and moved on, leaving the tower to stand alone. Time has softened the wounds of its past; the fire's scars have settled into the building's skin, now a patch of charred history and beauty. The tower, marked by its burned exterior, wears its identity with a quiet dignity, standing as a proud sentinel among the city's giants. The Metropolitan, the tower, whatever its name is, remains an icon.

An empty shell is a home, a space for those who dare to enter and build their own narratives. It waits patiently for new guests to step through its doors.