

A Window Left Open

The air smells wrong.

Too clean, like detergent drowning out something real underneath. But the window is open, and the curtains ripple like a slow sigh. The street outside hums—a car engine, a muffled voice, the distant shriek of a child's laughter. Life. Continuing.

I should close the window.

I don't remember the funeral. I was there. I know that. There's a program tucked inside a book on the shelf, stiff and glossy, her name printed in heavy black type. But when I try to recall it, my brain flickers like a dying bulb. A priest said something. A woman touched my arm. I blinked, and suddenly I was home, sitting on the couch, the walls closing in.

It was summer, I think. The heat felt like pressure.

She hated the summer.

We used to sit on the floor, backs pressed against the fridge, chasing coolness like dogs under a table. She would braid my hair with cold fingers. She always had cold fingers.

"Your head's too hot," she'd say, twisting strands tight. "You think too much."

I should've braided hers more often.

It's autumn now. The leaves don't know if they're supposed to stay green or go golden, so they cling to the branches in streaky confusion. I walk past them every day, counting the ones that have made up their minds. It's stupid, but I think she'd laugh.

She laughed like a match being struck. Bright, sharp. Vanishing too quickly.

I see her sometimes. Not really. Not properly. Just—shadows, flickers. I catch movement at the edge of my vision, turn, and there's nothing. A shape where no shape should be.

Once, I heard her breathing. Right behind me. I knew it was impossible. I knew it in my bones, in the way my skin tightened, in the way my ribs locked. But for a second—
For a second, I believed.

She used to say we don't vanish when we die. "Not all at once," she'd whisper. "We scatter, like ashes, into the people who remember us."

That's not comforting. I don't want pieces of her. I want her. Whole. Laughing. Braiding my hair, pulling too tight and pretending not to notice when I wince.

But memories fray at the edges. I used to think I'd never forget the sound of her voice.
But now it shifts when I try to hear it, warping like a radio losing signal.

Did I call her that night? Or did I just think about it? The phone was in my hand. I
remember that. My fingers hovering, my thumb skimming the screen.
I was going to. I was. I was just so tired.

Maybe I fell asleep. Maybe that's why she never picked up.

Maybe she never would have anyway.

I found her sweater in the laundry today.
Soft grey, frayed cuffs. It smells like fabric softener now. Like everything else, it's
fading—her scent replaced by something blank and clean. It used to smell like her.
Citrus and ink. A little smoke, from the incense she lit when she couldn't sleep.

I pressed it to my face and breathed in anyway.

Last night, I dreamed we were on the floor again, backs against the fridge. Her hands
moved through my hair, slow and familiar.

"Too hot," she said, tugging just a little too hard.

I turned to tell her I missed her.
But there was no one there.

Just air. Just stillness.

But when I woke up, the ache had softened. Just a little.

I leave the window open.
Not because I'm waiting.
But because I'm not ready to shut her out.

