



THERE IS  
NO  
THEY

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## PART 1 - BEFORE

### Chapter 01 - The Fog

The fog is coming in.

I watch it from the window of this room I did not expect to inhabit. Sixty-two years old, alone, in a city that has changed around me while I stayed still. The bay is disappearing. The bridge will follow—first the towers, then the cables, then nothing but white where the span should be.

My mother is dying in Kraków. I am here, writing.

I should explain why I'm not on a plane. I should explain why I'm at this desk instead of at her bedside, holding her hand while she slips away. I have twelve languages. I've spent my life believing that with enough words, arranged carefully enough, anything could be made clear.

I don't know how to explain this.

So I'll write around it. I'll write about what happened twenty years ago—the thing that made me the man I am, sitting here, watching the fog erase the world outside my window while my mother dies six thousand miles away. Maybe by the time I reach the end, I'll understand why I'm not there.

Maybe.

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The desk is old. Oak, I think, though I've never been sure. I bought it at an estate sale fifteen years ago, when I still thought I might write something. It sat empty for a decade. Now it holds a laptop, a cold cup of coffee, and whatever this is becoming.

The room is small. A converted garage behind a house I rent from people I've never met—they live in Seattle, I send them money,

they leave me alone. One window facing west. A bed I make every morning because the discipline feels like proof I'm still here. Books I no longer read. A photograph of my parents on their wedding day, my father young and sober, my mother's smile unguarded in a way I rarely saw.

She called three days ago. Or her caretaker did, using her phone, with her in the background. "Tomek," she said when they put her on, and for a moment she sounded like herself. Then: "When are you coming?"

I said something. I don't remember what. Something about soon. Something about arrangements.

I haven't made any arrangements.

I open a blank document. The cursor blinks. Outside, the fog continues its slow erasure.

Let me tell you about the day before everything changed.

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In the spring of 2043, I was forty-two years old and I had been working on Pattern 7 for eight years.

Eight years. I want you to understand what that means. Not eight years of dramatic breakthroughs and crushing setbacks, not eight years of racing against rivals and fighting for funding. Eight years of sitting at a desk not unlike this one, staring at representations of something no human had ever seen before, trying to find the shape of meaning in noise.

Most days, nothing happened. I would run a model, examine the output, adjust a parameter, run it again. The work was painstaking in the literal sense: it caused pain, and I took pains over it. I would go home in the evening having moved some needle some imperceptible distance, and I would come back the next morning and do it again.

Daniel used to ask how I could stand it. “Doesn’t it drive you crazy?” he said once, early on, when we were still learning each other’s rhythms. “The same thing, day after day, and nothing to show for it?”

I remember the conversation. We were in the kitchen of the house we shared, the house I would eventually leave, the house I don’t know if he still lives in. He was making dinner—pasta, I think, or maybe stir-fry, something with garlic—and I was sitting at the counter with a glass of wine, watching him move.

“It’s not nothing,” I said. “It’s just slow.”

“But how do you know you’re making progress? How do you know you’re not just—” He waved the spatula, searching for words. “Rearranging deck chairs?”

“I don’t,” I said. “I won’t know until it works. Or doesn’t.”

He looked at me then, and I saw something in his face I didn’t fully understand at the time. Concern, yes. But also something like awe, or maybe fear. The look you give someone who is capable of a patience you cannot imagine.

“I couldn’t do it,” he said.

“You do it with me,” I said.

He laughed. “That’s different.”

It wasn’t different. It was the same thing. Love and translation—both require you to believe that the gap can be crossed, even when you can’t see the other side.

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The Chen Building sat at the edge of campus, a glass-and-steel monument to the discovery that had changed everything. Maya’s face was not literally on the building, but it might as well have been. Every display in the lobby, every plaque on every wall, every

documentary playing on silent loop for visitors—they all told the same story. The woman who heard the universe.

I walked past her portrait every morning for ten years. We were the same age, Maya and I. We had started from roughly the same place—graduate students with unusual skills, drawn to the impossible problem of alien communication. But she had stumbled onto something, and I had not. She had become the face of human hope, and I had become one of the workers in the building that bore her name.

I don't say this with bitterness. Or if I do, it's an old bitterness, worn smooth by time. Maya earned what she got. Her mistake was fortunate, but she had the intelligence to recognize it and the charisma to explain it. I had neither. I had only patience, and precision, and the stubborn belief that if I kept working, something would eventually yield.

That spring morning in 2043, I walked past her portrait and felt nothing but the usual dull acknowledgment. I took the elevator to the fourth floor. I nodded at Yusuf, who was already at his desk, squinting at something on his screen. I sat down at my workstation and opened the files I had been staring at for eight years.

Pattern 7.

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Let me try to describe what it looked like, though I know already that the description will fail.

Imagine a sound. Not a sound you've heard, but a sound that has traveled for three thousand years across twenty-four hundred light-years of empty space. A sound that was never meant for human ears, that was not a sound at all but a pattern of electromagnetic radiation, a ripple in the fabric of the universe that we learned to capture and convert and display.

On my screen, it looked like mountains. That's the wrong word, but it's the only one I have. A spectrogram: frequency on one axis,

time on the other, amplitude rendered in color. Blues and greens where the signal was weak, yellows and oranges where it grew stronger, deep reds at the peaks. A landscape of noise that was not noise.

I had been staring at this landscape for eight years. I knew its terrain the way you know the drive to work, the way you know your own face in the mirror. Every ridge and valley, every repeating structure, every anomaly I had flagged and examined and cross-referenced with everything else.

And somewhere in that landscape, I believed, was meaning.

Not meaning in the human sense. I wasn't looking for words, or stories, or emotions. I was looking for structure—the underlying logic that organized the signal, the rules that governed what came next. Grammar, in the most abstract sense. The skeleton beneath the skin.

If I could find that, I thought, the rest would follow. Not translation—I never believed in translation, not really, not the clean conversion of one set of symbols into another. But *understanding*. The recognition that a pattern was a pattern, that a structure was doing something, that behind the noise was intention.

That morning, I ran a model I had been refining for three months. A small adjustment to a parameter, a slight change in how the algorithm weighted certain features. Incremental. Painstaking.

The output appeared on my screen. I examined it. The fit was marginally better—a 0.3% improvement in predictive accuracy.

I noted the result in my log. I adjusted another parameter. I ran the model again.

This was the work. This was every day.

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The fog has thickened. I can no longer see the bridge at all.

I should call someone. The caretaker, or the hospice, or whatever system of strangers is currently keeping my mother alive in her apartment in Kraków. I should ask how she is. I should tell them I'm coming.

I pick up my phone. I put it down.

I don't know how to explain what I'm doing. I'm writing a book that no one asked for, about events that the world has mostly forgotten, instead of flying home to say goodbye to my mother. The man who broke the Signal Translation Project, they called me. The man who couldn't explain what he found. And now I'm trying to explain it again, two decades later, to no one in particular, while the woman who raised me dies alone.

This is who I am. This is who I became.

The cursor blinks. The fog erases. I keep writing.

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That afternoon, I took a walk.

This was unusual. I was not a man who took walks in the middle of the workday. But something about the light, or the stiffness in my back, or the marginal improvement that felt like nothing at all—something made me stand up from my desk and leave the building.

The campus was beautiful in April. I forget this sometimes, when I remember only the work, only the screens, only the patterns that consumed my waking hours. But Berkeley in spring was extravagant with blossoms. The hills were green from the winter rains. Students sat on the lawns, studying or pretending to study, living the lives that students live.

I walked past them and felt old. Forty-two was not old, not really, but in that moment, surrounded by youth, I felt the weight of the years I had given to a problem that might never be solved.

I had come to Berkeley for this. I had left Poland, left Europe, left everything familiar, because I believed that here, in this building, with these people, I might be part of something that mattered. Humanity's first conversation with another intelligence. The end of our cosmic loneliness.

Eleven years later, we had hundreds of distinct patterns isolated from the background. We had thousands of papers analyzing those patterns. We had conferences and journals and entire careers built on the assumption that the signals meant something, that they could be understood, that it was only a matter of time.

But no one had decoded a single one.

I sat down on a bench beneath a flowering tree. I don't know what kind—I never learned the names of California plants. The blossoms were white, tinged with pink. Petals drifted down in the breeze.

I thought about Daniel, at home, doing whatever he did on his days at the office. Managing grants, coordinating budgets, the administrative machinery that kept projects like mine funded. He believed in the work even when I didn't. Or maybe he believed in me, which was different and harder.

I thought about my mother, in Kraków, in the apartment where I grew up, with its narrow kitchen and the window that looked out onto the courtyard. She would be making tea at this hour. She would be listening to the radio, or reading, or staring out that window at a view she had known for fifty years.

I had not been home in three years. I kept meaning to go. There was always another paper to write, another model to run, another reason to delay. She never complained. She understood, or said she understood, or pretended to understand. The work was important. I was doing important things.

I watched the petals fall. I thought: I should go home.

I didn't know then that I was running out of time. How could I? She was healthy, or healthy enough. She was seventy-three years

old and still sharp, still independent, still the woman who had raised me alone after my father drowned himself in vodka.

I should have gone then. That spring, when the blossoms were falling and the work was going nowhere and I had all the time in the world.

I didn't.

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The fog is absolute now. The window shows nothing but white.

I should stop. I should sleep. I should call the hospice and ask if she's still conscious, if there's still time, if she's asked for me.

Instead, I write. I write about the day before everything changed, when I sat on a bench beneath a tree whose name I never learned and felt the weight of years I thought I would have forever.

I write because it's the only thing I know how to do.

In the morning, I'll write more. I'll tell you about Pattern 7, about the model that finally worked, about the triumph that lasted less than a day before it turned to ash. I'll tell you about what I found, and what I lost, and why I'm sitting in this room in Berkeley instead of flying home to say goodbye.

I'll tell you, because I can't tell her. Because I never could explain it, not to her, not to Daniel, not to anyone. Because the thing I discovered was that some things cannot be explained.

But I have to try.

The fog outside my window. The fog inside my head. The fog that has been with me for twenty years, ever since I saw something true and couldn't make anyone understand.

Tomorrow, I'll try again.

Tonight, I watch the white.

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## Chapter 02 - Daniel

I wonder if he knows I'm writing this.

It's possible. We have mutual friends, or we did, though I've let most of those connections wither over the years. Someone might have mentioned it. "Did you hear Tom is writing a book?" The kind of thing that gets passed along at parties, in that careful tone people use when discussing exes. Curious, neutral, studiously uninvested.

Or maybe no one knows. Maybe I've become invisible enough that my actions no longer ripple outward. A man in a converted garage, typing into the fog.

I don't know where Daniel is. I could find out—it would take thirty seconds, a name in a search field, the ordinary machinery of connection that everyone uses now. But I haven't looked. Not in years. There's a kind of discipline in not knowing, a penance or a protection, I'm not sure which.

He would be fifty-eight now. Still young, by the standards of this stretched-out century. Probably still handsome—he had the kind of face that would age well, the lines settling into character rather than decay. Probably still warm, still quick to laugh, still the person who remembered birthdays and kept friendships alive.

Probably with someone else. Probably happy, or happy enough.

I hope he's happy. I want that to be true. I'm not sure I've earned the right to want anything about him, but I want that anyway.

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The fog thinned overnight but hasn't lifted. The bridge is visible now, a ghost of itself, the cables appearing and disappearing as the white drifts past. I've made coffee. I've checked my phone—no messages from Kraków, which means nothing has changed, which means I have more time, which means I can keep writing instead of booking a flight.

The logic is circular and I know it. But I keep following it around.  
Let me tell you about Daniel.

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We met in 2033, the year after the Chen Discovery, when the world was still reeling and the project was still new.

I had been in Berkeley for three months. I was thirty-two years old, fluent in eleven languages, and utterly lost. Not geographically—I could navigate the campus, the city, the BART system that carried me to San Francisco when I needed to feel anonymous. Lost in the other sense. The sense of not knowing what my life was for.

I had come for the signals. Everyone had, that year—linguists and mathematicians and physicists and philosophers, anyone who thought they might have something to contribute to the great work of decoding. The project was hiring aggressively, building teams, absorbing talent from around the world. I was one of hundreds.

But the work hadn't started yet, not really. We were still organizing, still building infrastructure, still arguing about methodology. I spent my days in meetings and my evenings alone in a small apartment near the campus, cooking simple meals and reading papers and wondering if I had made a mistake.

Daniel was a mistake. Or he felt like one, at first.

I met him at a reception for new staff. One of those events with bad wine and forced conversation, everyone wearing name tags, everyone asking "What do you do?" and "Where are you from?" and listening to the answers just long enough to formulate their own response.

He was standing by the window, looking out at the bay. I noticed him because he wasn't talking to anyone—unusual, at these things. And because he was beautiful, though I wouldn't have used that word at the time. I would have said "attractive" or "striking" or some other word that kept a safe distance.

I walked over. I don't know why. I was not a man who walked over to strangers at parties. But something about his stillness, his separateness, drew me.

"The view is better from the roof," I said. An absurd opening. I had no idea if there was roof access, or what the view from it would be.

He turned. Brown eyes, a quick smile that reached them. "Is that an invitation?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just got here. I have no idea how anything works."

He laughed. "Join the club." He extended his hand. "Daniel. Grant administration. I make sure people like you get paid."

"Tomasz. Linguistics. I make sure—" I stopped. "I don't actually know what I make sure of yet."

"Tomasz," he repeated, testing the syllables. Most Americans stumbled on my name, Anglicized it, asked for a nickname. He didn't. "Polish?"

"Yes."

"How many languages do you speak?"

"Eleven."

His eyebrows rose. "Eleven?"

"It's less impressive than it sounds. Most of them are related. If you speak one Romance language, the others come easily."

"I speak one language," he said. "Badly."

"English isn't a bad language."

"I didn't say English. I said I speak one language badly. There's a difference."

I laughed. It surprised me—I hadn't laughed in weeks.

We talked for an hour. Then we left the reception and found a bar and talked for three more hours. Then he walked me back to my apartment and kissed me on the doorstep and I stood there after he left, touching my lips like a teenager, wondering what had just happened.

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I should explain something about myself at thirty-two. I was not, by any standard, a person who fell easily.

I had had relationships—brief ones, in Poland and Germany and the UK, the kind of connections you make in graduate school and let dissolve when the program ends. I had slept with men, occasionally women, without feeling that the sleeping meant anything beyond the moment. I had convinced myself that this was maturity: the ability to connect without attaching, to enjoy without needing.

But I had never been in love. Not really. Not the kind that reaches into your chest and rearranges things.

Daniel rearranged things.

Within a month, we were spending every night together. Within three months, he had moved into my apartment—or I had moved into his, I don't remember which came first, just the gradual accumulation of shared space. His books on my shelves. My coffee maker on his counter. The negotiation of closet space and bathroom schedules and who got which side of the bed.

It was terrifying. It was also the easiest thing I had ever done.

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I stop typing. The coffee has gone cold.

Somewhere in this city, or another city, or another country, Daniel exists. He wakes up in a bed, alone or not alone. He drinks his coffee—he always took it with too much sugar, a habit I teased him about, a sweetness I pretended to disapprove of. He goes

through his day, doing whatever he does now, being whoever he has become.

Does he think about me? On ordinary mornings, when nothing particular triggers the memory? Or have I faded into the background of his life, a chapter that ended, a story he tells at dinner parties: “I was married once, to a scientist. It didn’t work out.”

I have no right to hope he still thinks of me. I have no right to hope for anything.

But I think about him. Every day. Every morning when I make coffee and add no sugar. Every evening when I sit alone in this room that used to be a garage and listen to the silence where another person should be.

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In 2043, we had been together for ten years.

I want to describe what that felt like, but I don’t have the words. This is ironic—I am supposed to be good with words, I have made a career of them, I speak twelve languages now and none of them can capture what it meant to share a decade with another person.

The house. We had bought it in 2037, a small Craftsman bungalow in the hills, too expensive even then, worth three times as much now if I cared to sell it. Which I don’t. Daniel got it in the divorce, such as it was—we weren’t legally married until 2036, and by then the assets were too tangled to separate cleanly, so we just agreed that he would keep the house and I would keep my retirement accounts and we would call it even.

I don’t know if he still lives there. I told you: I don’t look.

But in 2043, the house was ours. The garden Daniel planted, tomatoes and peppers and herbs I couldn’t name. The kitchen where he cooked and I cleaned, our bodies moving around each other in the practiced choreography of long partnership. The bedroom with the

window that faced east, where we woke together to the morning light.

I am not a sentimental man. I have never been one for nostalgia, for dwelling in the past. But sitting here now, in this room that is not our room, I find myself missing things I hadn't thought about in years.

The way he hummed when he cooked. Never a tune I recognized, just this low, unconscious music that meant he was content.

The way he read with his whole body, curled into the corner of the couch, so absorbed that he wouldn't hear me if I spoke.

The way he touched me—casually, constantly, a hand on my shoulder as he passed, fingers brushing mine when he handed me something. As if he needed to keep confirming I was there.

I was there. I was there for ten years. And then I wasn't, and it was my fault, and I don't know how to write about that yet.

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Let me stay in 2043 a little longer. Let me describe the marriage before I describe its end.

Daniel worked in grant administration for the project. This sounds dull, and in some ways it was—budgets and compliance and the endless paperwork of institutional science. But he was good at it, and more than that, he believed in it. He believed that the work we were doing mattered, that the signals meant something, that one day we would understand.

He had no scientific training. He had studied English literature in college, drifted into administration because it paid better than adjuncting, ended up at Berkeley because a friend told him they were hiring. He had no particular investment in linguistics or astrophysics or any of the technical disciplines that consumed the rest of us.

But he believed. That was his gift, maybe—the capacity to believe in things he didn't fully understand. To trust that the people who understood would eventually make sense of it all.

"You'll figure it out," he used to say when I came home frustrated, when another model had failed, when another year had passed with nothing to show. "You always do."

I loved him for that faith. I also feared it. Because I knew, even then, that I might not figure it out. That I might spend my entire life staring at patterns that refused to resolve. That his faith might be misplaced, and I would be the one who proved it.

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We had rituals. This is what ten years gives you: rituals.

Saturday mornings, we went to the farmers' market in North Berkeley. Daniel chose the vegetables; I carried the bags. We would stop at the coffee stand and argue about whether their espresso was better than the place down the street, the same argument every week, neither of us ever conceding.

Sunday evenings, we cooked together. Not the weeknight cooking, which was hurried and practical—this was slow cooking, a project, something we built together. Risotto, stirred for forty-five minutes. Braised short ribs, falling off the bone. Bread, when we were feeling ambitious, though it never rose the way the recipes promised.

We read to each other sometimes. This sounds antiquated, I know, in an age of infinite entertainment, but Daniel loved it. He would find a passage—a poem, a paragraph, sometimes a whole chapter—and read it aloud while I lay with my head in his lap. His voice was different when he read: slower, more careful, as if each word deserved its own space.

I miss that. I miss lying in the late afternoon light, listening to his voice, letting meaning wash over me without having to parse it.

The fog is lifting. The bridge is almost clear now, the red towers vivid against the grey, the cables sharp. I should take this as a sign. I should book a flight, pack a bag, go to the airport. I should stop writing about the past and tend to the present.

My phone sits on the desk. I don't pick it up.

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In 2043, I didn't know I was about to destroy everything.

That sounds dramatic. It wasn't dramatic, not at first. The destruction was slow, quiet, a hairline fracture that spread over months. But it began that spring, in the weeks before the breakthrough, when I was still a man with a marriage and a career and a mother who called every Sunday.

Daniel could tell something was different. He always could—he read me better than I read myself, which was frustrating and also a relief. “You're somewhere else,” he said one evening, when I had been staring at my plate without eating.

“I'm here,” I said.

“Your body is here. You're somewhere else.”

He wasn't wrong. I was thinking about Pattern 7. I was always thinking about Pattern 7. But that spring, the thinking had a different quality—an intensity, a focus that pushed everything else to the margins.

“I think I'm close,” I said.

He set down his fork. “Close to what?”

“I don't know. Something. The model is behaving differently. The fit is improving. It's small, but it's consistent, and I've never seen consistency like this before.”

“Tom.” He reached across the table and took my hand. “That's wonderful.”

“It might be nothing.”

“It might not be.”

I looked at him—really looked, for the first time in days. His face was open, hopeful. He believed in me. He always believed in me.

“I need to focus,” I said. “For the next few weeks. I need to—”

“Go,” he said. “Focus. I’ll be here.”

He squeezed my hand. He smiled. He believed that this was temporary, that I would focus and succeed or focus and fail and either way I would come back to him.

He was half right.

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I want to stop here. I want to stay in this moment, before the fall—Daniel across the table, his hand in mine, the future still open.

But the fog is lifting and my mother is dying and I have to keep writing.

Tomorrow I’ll tell you about my languages. About Poland, and my father, and the silence that taught me to listen for patterns. About the boy I was before I became the man who broke everything.

Tonight, I’ll sit with the ghost of the marriage. I’ll remember what it felt like to be known, to be held, to be believed in.

I’ll try not to think about how thoroughly I betrayed all of it.

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## Chapter 03 - Twelve Languages

Polish, English, German, French, Russian, Latin, Ancient Greek, Mandarin, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Japanese.

Thirteen, if you count the Japanese, though I never became fluent. Twelve and a half, maybe. Twelve and a quarter.

None of them helped.

I sit with that fact this morning, as the fog burns off and the bay emerges in fragments. I gave my life to languages. I believed, with the fervor of the converted, that words were bridges. That if I could just learn enough of them, in enough configurations, I could reach anyone.

The cosmic joke is this: I can order coffee in thirteen languages. I can discuss philosophy in eight. I can read poetry in six, make love in four, argue about politics in three.

And I could not explain to my husband what I had discovered. I could not explain it to my colleagues, or my director, or the committees that demanded explanations. I cannot explain it now to my mother, who is dying in a language I have spoken since birth and still cannot use to say the things that matter.

Languages are tools. I collected tools. I built a workshop full of them, organized and maintained and ready for use.

Then I encountered something that no tool could touch.

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My father drank.

This is not a metaphor, not a euphemism. He drank vodka, mostly, the way other men breathed air. He drank in the morning, before work. He drank in the evening, after work. He drank on weekends, when there was no work to bracket the drinking, and the days became a single continuous pour.

I was seven when I understood that this was not normal. We were visiting my aunt—my mother's sister—in Gdańsk, and I watched my uncle drink a beer with dinner and then stop. Just stop. Put down the glass and talk and laugh and go to bed sober.

I remember thinking: you can do that?

My father could not do that. My father could not stop once he started, and he could not stop starting. He would make promises—to my mother, to me, to himself—and break them within hours. He would apologize, weep, swear that this time would be different. It was never different.

He was not a violent drunk. I want to be clear about that. He never hit my mother, never hit me. He was a quiet drunk, a disappearing drunk. The alcohol didn't make him angry; it made him absent. He would sit in his chair by the window, glass in hand, and slowly fade until only his body remained.

I learned early to read the signs. The heaviness in his eyes. The slight slur that crept into his consonants. The way his attention would drift mid-sentence, pulled by some internal current I couldn't see.

I learned to watch for patterns.

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The phone rings.

I stare at it, heart pounding. Kraków. It must be Kraków. It must be the call I've been dreading, the one that will end the waiting and begin the grief.

I pick up.

"Mr. Kowalski?" A woman's voice, accented English. The caretaker. "I am calling with update."

"Yes."

"Your mother, she is same. She sleep most of time now. But she ask for you this morning. She ask when you coming."

I close my eyes. The bridge outside the window, solid and red. The fog, retreating.

“Soon,” I say. “Tell her soon.”

“I tell her. She will be happy.”

I end the call. I sit with the lie, its weight familiar by now. Soon. I have been saying soon for three days. Soon is the word that lets me keep writing instead of packing.

Soon is the word that will haunt me when she dies.

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My mother’s silence was different from my father’s.

His was absence—the evacuation of self that alcohol produced, the lights going out behind his eyes. Hers was presence. She was there, always there, watching and waiting and saying almost nothing.

I think now that she was conserving something. Marshaling her resources for the long campaign of keeping us alive while my father drank away his salary, his health, his future. She didn’t have energy for unnecessary words. She spoke when speaking was required—directions, corrections, the logistics of daily life—and otherwise she watched.

I inherited her watchfulness. I did not inherit her silence.

Instead, I went the other way. I filled the quiet with languages. If my father had no words and my mother hoarded hers, I would have enough for all of us. I would learn every word in every language until the silence was finally, completely filled.

This is the psychology of it, anyway. The story I’ve told myself. I don’t know if it’s true. Maybe I just had an aptitude. Maybe the languages would have come regardless, pulled in by some neural quirk that had nothing to do with my father’s drinking or my mother’s reserve.

But I don’t think so. I think I learned to speak because no one else would.

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My father died when I was eleven.

Liver failure, the doctors said, as if we didn't know. As if the years of vodka were some medical mystery that required explanation. He went into the hospital and didn't come out. My mother took me to see him near the end, when he was yellow and swollen and no longer looked like himself.

"Tomek," he said. His voice was a whisper, ruined by the tube they'd put down his throat and then removed. "You're a good boy."

I didn't say anything. I stood by his bed and looked at this stranger who had been my father, and I couldn't find any words at all.

That night, at home, I took down the German dictionary my mother kept on the top shelf. I don't know why German—maybe because it was there, maybe because it looked difficult, maybe because I wanted something to fill the space where grief should have been.

I started memorizing. *Der, die, das*. The articles, the genders, the cases. I wrote them on index cards and tested myself until I could recite them without looking. Then I moved on to vocabulary. *Das Haus, der Baum, die Katze*. House, tree, cat. The building blocks of meaning.

My father died on a Thursday. By Sunday, I knew two hundred German words. By the end of the month, I could read simple sentences. By the end of the year, I was working through a German translation of *The Hobbit*, dictionary at my elbow, slowly converting the familiar story into a new shape.

My mother watched. She didn't comment, didn't encourage, didn't discourage. She simply watched, with that careful attention she gave to everything, and let me fill the silence however I needed to.

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I should go. I should stop writing and go.

The flight is thirteen hours, with a connection in London or Frankfurt or Amsterdam. I could be there by tomorrow night. I could hold her hand. I could say whatever it is you're supposed to say to a dying mother.

But what would I say?

This is the question that keeps me at the desk. Not the logistics, not the expense, not the exhaustion of travel. The question of what words I would use when I got there.

I'm sorry? For what—for not coming sooner, for leaving in the first place, for becoming someone she never fully understood?

I love you? True, but insufficient. A phrase worn smooth by overuse, carrying almost no information.

Thank you? For raising me alone, for not falling apart when my father did, for the careful distance that let me become myself?

I have twelve languages. I have spent my life believing in the power of words. And I cannot find the words for this.

---

The languages came in waves.

German first, in the grief after my father. Then English, because it was required in school and I discovered I was good at it, better than my classmates, better than my teachers expected. By fifteen, I was reading English novels for pleasure—Orwell, Hemingway, the Americans with their short sentences and long silences.

French came next, because it was beautiful. I fell in love with the sounds before I understood the grammar, the way the syllables flowed into each other like water. I listened to French radio, French films, French songs I couldn't fully understand. Then I bought a grammar book and began to decode.

Russian was political, in a way. I was eighteen, the Wall had fallen, and suddenly the language of the occupier was just another lan-

guage. I wanted to read Dostoevsky in the original, to see what had been lost in translation. (Everything, it turns out. Everything is always lost in translation. I didn't understand that yet.)

University gave me Latin and Greek—the dead languages, the roots. I loved their precision, their architecture. The way a Latin sentence could be rearranged without losing meaning, every word tagged with its grammatical function. A language like a machine, every part visible.

And then I discovered linguistics. Not languages themselves, but the study of language—the patterns beneath the patterns, the structures that all human communication shared. Suddenly my collection had a purpose. I wasn't just hoarding words; I was gathering data.

---

There's a theory in linguistics called Universal Grammar. The idea is that all human languages share a deep structure, a common blueprint hardwired into our brains. The surface differs—German puts the verb at the end, Japanese marks topics instead of subjects, Arabic builds words from three-consonant roots—but underneath, we're all speaking the same language.

I believed in this. I built my career on it. The search for universals, for the common ground beneath the babble of human speech.

The signals were supposed to be the ultimate test. If we could find structure in alien communication, it would prove that intelligence itself has a shape. That meaning, wherever it arises, follows patterns we can recognize and decode.

I was wrong.

Not about human languages—Universal Grammar may be real, or something like it. But I was wrong to think it would extend beyond our species. Wrong to think that the patterns I found in Mandarin and Arabic and Japanese would help me parse a signal from a star twenty-four hundred light-years away.

The universals I studied were human universals. They emerged from human brains, human bodies, human histories. They were deep, but they were not that deep.

There is no universal language. There is no grammar of the cosmos. There are only local agreements, temporary bridges, meaning that arises between specific minds in specific contexts and does not transfer.

I have twelve languages. Every one of them is a dialect of a single tongue: human. Outside that tongue, I am mute.

---

I moved to Berkeley in 2033 because I thought I had something to contribute.

This is embarrassing to admit now, but I was arrogant. Not in the way of boasting or self-promotion—I have never been good at those—but in the deeper way of believing I was special. I had twelve languages. I had a PhD in computational linguistics. I had published papers on pattern recognition in tonal systems, on the mathematical structure of Semitic roots, on the possibility of universal semantic primitives.

I thought this prepared me for the signals.

I was thirty-two years old. I had never failed at anything related to language. I had learned to read in a year what most people took five years to master. I had cracked grammatical codes that stumped my professors. I had a gift, and I was ready to use it.

The Chen Discovery had just happened. The signals were everywhere—in the news, in conversation, in the dreams of everyone who had ever looked up at the stars and wondered. And I was going to help decode them.

My mother drove me to the airport in Kraków. This was unusual—she didn't like to drive, and the airport was an hour away. But she insisted.

At the gate, she hugged me. This was also unusual. We were not a hugging family. Physical affection had always been sparse, rationed, as if there was a limited supply that had to be carefully managed.

“Tomek,” she said, her arms around me. “Be careful with the words.”

I didn’t understand what she meant. I said something like “I will” or “I’ll try,” the automatic responses to a warning you don’t quite hear.

I think about it now, that phrase. Be careful with the words. Was she warning me about the signals? About the hubris of thinking I could decode them? Or was she talking about something more personal—the words between people, the ones that could hurt without meaning to, the ones that could create distance even as they tried to close it?

I never asked. I got on the plane, and she drove home, and we continued our careful, long-distance relationship: weekly calls, occasional visits, love expressed in logistics rather than declarations.

I should have asked. I should have asked a lot of things.

---

The fog is gone now. The day is bright, the bay glittering, the bridge sharp against the sky.

I should call the airline. I should book a ticket. I should stop writing about the past and go home while I still can.

Instead, I open a new file. I start typing notes for the next chapter.

My mother said: be careful with the words.

I wasn’t careful. I used words like tools, like weapons, like bridges I could throw across any gap. I believed in their power absolutely, the way my father believed in vodka, the way my mother believed in silence.

And like all absolute beliefs, mine was broken by something it couldn't accommodate. A signal from a star that didn't care about my languages. A pattern that refused to translate.

Tomorrow I'll write about Maya Chen. About the project, the institution, the edifice of hope we built on the assumption that meaning could always be extracted.

Tonight, I'll sit with my twelve languages and their uselessness. I'll think about my mother, in her apartment in Kraków, asking when I'm coming.

Soon, I told them. Tell her soon.

The word sits in my mouth like ash.

---

## Chapter 04 - Maya Chen

I saw her on television last year.

She's seventy-three now, my age, her hair silver, her face lined in ways that suggest she has laughed more than I have. She was being interviewed about something—the anniversary of the discovery, I think, one of those retrospectives the networks produce when they need to fill airtime. "Forty years since we learned we weren't alone."

She handled it gracefully. She always did. The questions were soft, nostalgic, and she answered them with the practiced warmth of someone who has told the same stories a thousand times. Yes, it was an accident. Yes, she almost didn't notice. Yes, it changed everything.

They didn't ask about the collapse. They never do, in these pieces. The story they want is the discovery, the hope, the moment when humanity's loneliness ended. Not what came after. Not the twenty

years of work that led nowhere, the billions spent on a premise that turned out to be false, the man who proved it wrong.

They didn't mention me.

I was grateful for that. I turned off the television and sat in the silence, thinking about Maya Chen, about who she was and who she became, about the institution she built and I unmade.

---

The coffee is cold again. I should stop making coffee if I'm not going to drink it, but the ritual matters: the grinding, the pouring, the illusion that I am beginning something.

Another day. Another chapter. Another deferral of the flight I should have taken three days ago.

My mother is dying. Maya Chen is alive, somewhere, doing interviews and attending anniversaries. The world turns, indifferent to the fact that I am sitting in a garage, writing a story no one has asked for.

Let me tell you about Maya.

---

She was thirty-two when she made the discovery. The same age I was when I arrived at Berkeley, full of languages and certainty. We were born the same year, though I didn't learn this until later. Two babies born in 1991, on opposite sides of the world—one in San Jose, California, the daughter of engineers who had immigrated from Taiwan; one in Kraków, Poland, the son of an alcoholic and a woman who survived him.

Different lives, different trajectories, converging on the same building in 2033.

By then, of course, she was already famous. The Chen Discovery—her name attached to it like a brand, indelible. The woman who heard the universe. The face of first contact. Her photograph

in every publication, her voice on every broadcast, her story told and retold until it became myth.

The myth went like this: A brilliant young graduate student, working late in the lab, makes a computational error. Instead of filtering out the noise in the cosmic background, she amplifies it. And in that amplified noise, she sees something impossible—structure, pattern, intention. The static of the universe is not static at all. It's a message. Millions of messages, overlapping, ancient and new, from civilizations scattered across the cosmos.

It's a good myth. Simple, dramatic, the lone genius catching what everyone else missed. Maya told it well, refining it over the years until every beat was perfect. The late night. The mistake. The moment of recognition.

What the myth left out: she wasn't alone in the lab. She wasn't a lone genius. She was part of a team, working on signal processing algorithms for a survey project. The "mistake" was a parameter setting that her advisor had suggested she try. The "recognition" took weeks, as she and a dozen colleagues verified what they thought they were seeing.

I don't say this to diminish her. She did see it first. She did push when others might have dismissed it. She deserves the credit she received.

But the myth made her something more than human. And when you become more than human, you lose the ability to be wrong.

---

I met her in person for the first time three months after I arrived.

By then, the Chen Building was under construction—the glass-and-steel monument to her discovery, rising at the edge of campus. She held weekly "office hours" for new staff, a chance to meet the legend, to shake her hand and receive her blessing.

I didn't want to go. I have never been comfortable with celebrity, with the performance of admiration that celebrity requires. But Daniel insisted.

"You have to," he said. "She's the reason we're all here. The least you can do is introduce yourself."

So I went. I stood in line with the other new hires, shuffling forward every few minutes, rehearsing what I would say. Something about linguistics, about pattern recognition, about what I hoped to contribute. Something that would make me memorable without seeming arrogant.

When I reached the front of the line, she was sitting behind a table, flanked by handlers. She looked tired—the tiredness of someone who has smiled too much, talked too much, been looked at too much. But she smiled at me anyway.

"Tomasz Kowalski," she read from a card someone had handed her. "Computational linguistics. Twelve languages." She looked up, eyebrows raised. "Twelve?"

"Yes."

"I speak one and a half. Mandarin from my grandmother, enough to order food and disappoint her." She laughed, inviting me to laugh with her. I managed a smile.

"Your work on tonal pattern recognition," she continued. "I read the abstract. Interesting approach."

I doubted she had read anything more than the abstract. She was meeting fifty people that day; she couldn't possibly have read all their work. But it was a kind lie, and I appreciated it.

"I hope it's useful," I said.

"I'm sure it will be. We need people who can see patterns. That's all this is, really—patterns waiting to be seen." She extended her hand. I shook it. Her grip was firm, her palm dry. "Welcome to the project, Tomasz. I look forward to seeing what you find."

I said something—thank you, probably, or something equally forgettable—and moved on. The whole interaction took ninety seconds.

I remember thinking: she believes it. She really believes we're going to decode these signals. She believes it's just a matter of time, effort, the right people seeing the right patterns.

I envied that belief. I wanted it for myself.

---

The signal translation project, in its early years, was chaos.

Organized chaos, but chaos nonetheless. Hundreds of researchers, dozens of disciplines, petabytes of data, and no one quite sure how to proceed. The signals had been discovered, but discovering and understanding are not the same thing.

Maya's public role was clear: she was the face, the voice, the storyteller. She explained the project to Congress, to the UN, to the cameras that followed her everywhere. She translated our work into words the world could understand, compressing years of uncertainty into soundbites of hope.

Her private role was less clear. She was not, technically, a scientist anymore—not in the sense of doing research, running experiments, sitting at a desk and staring at data. She was a director, a fundraiser, a diplomat. She managed the institution rather than the work.

This bothered some people. I heard the grumbling in hallways, in break rooms, in the quiet corners where researchers complained to each other. "She doesn't understand what we're doing." "She hasn't written a paper in years." "She takes credit for work she can't even read."

I didn't join these complaints, but I understood them. There is a particular resentment reserved for those who rise above the work—who escape the grinding labor of research and ascend to a realm of speeches and interviews and glossy photographs. Espe-

cially when the rise is based on accident, on luck, on being in the right place when a mistake turned out to be a discovery.

But I also saw what Maya did that the grumblers didn't see. The funding that materialized when budgets should have been cut. The political cover when results failed to meet expectations. The narrative that kept the public engaged, year after year, despite the absence of dramatic breakthroughs.

She was holding the project together. Not with science, but with story.

---

I didn't see her often, in those early years. She existed at a different altitude—press conferences and board meetings while I sat at my desk on the fourth floor, running models that failed.

But I watched her. Everyone watched her. She was the visible manifestation of what we were doing, the face we showed the world. When she gave interviews, we gathered in break rooms to watch. When she published op-eds, we passed them around and dissected them. When she walked through the building—rare, but it happened—conversations stopped, heads turned, the air itself seemed to thicken with attention.

She handled it well. She was gracious, approachable, remembering names she must have heard only once. She asked questions that sounded genuine, even when they probably weren't. She made people feel seen, which is a talent more rare than any scientific ability.

I don't know if I liked her. That seems like the wrong question. You don't like or dislike a force of nature; you simply acknowledge its power and try to stay out of its path.

---

In 2035, I was assigned to Pattern 7.

This was not Maya's decision—she had deputies for that, people who matched researchers to signals based on skills and availability. But I learned later that she had flagged my file, suggested I might be suited for something “challenging.”

Pattern 7 was challenging. It was also, I would spend the next eight years learning, possibly impossible.

But I didn't know that then. I only knew that I had been chosen, singled out, given a signal that someone—maybe Maya herself—thought I could decode. It felt like a gift. It felt like trust.

I threw myself into the work. I forgot everything else—Daniel, my mother, the world outside the Chen Building. I became Pattern 7, and Pattern 7 became me.

Maya visited the lab once, in that first year. She came with her handlers, her camera crew, filming something for a documentary. She stopped at my desk—probably because someone had told her to, probably because my station was positioned well for the shot—and asked what I was working on.

I tried to explain. The hierarchical structures I was mapping, the recursive patterns that suggested grammar, the tantalizing almost-regularity that kept slipping away. I talked too fast, used too much jargon. I was nervous, which made me more technical, which made me less comprehensible.

She listened. She nodded. She asked a question—something simple, something a layperson would ask—and I answered it.

“It's like learning a language,” she said, “where every word is in a code, and the code keeps changing.”

It wasn't quite right, but it was close enough. “Something like that,” I said.

“You'll crack it.” She put her hand on my shoulder—brief, warm, the touch of a leader conveying confidence. “I can see it in how you talk about it. You already love it.”

She was right. I did love it. Pattern 7 was mine, in a way nothing had ever been mine before.

“Thank you,” I said.

She smiled, squeezed my shoulder, and moved on to the next desk. The camera followed. I went back to my screen.

Eight years later, I would destroy everything she had built. But in that moment, I was just a researcher, grateful to have been seen.

---

The sun is high now, the fog a memory. The bridge stands clear across the bay, red and solid, the kind of structure humans build when they want to connect two places that were never meant to touch.

I think about Maya, in whatever life she has now. Retired, probably. Emeritus. Giving interviews on anniversaries, consulting on documentaries, tending to the legacy she spent forty years constructing.

Does she think about me? Does she remember the quiet linguist on the fourth floor, the one she touched on the shoulder and told he would crack it?

Does she blame me?

I would understand if she did. I blamed myself for years—still do, in the hours before sleep, when the defenses come down. But blame requires a belief that things could have been different. That I could have found something else, or found nothing at all, or found the truth and kept it to myself.

I couldn't keep it to myself. That's not who I am. I spent my life chasing patterns, believing that patterns could be shared, that once you saw something true you could show it to others.

I was wrong about that, too.

---

Tomorrow I'll write about the signal itself. Pattern 7, my obsession, my life's work, my catastrophe. I'll try to explain what it looked like, what I saw in it, why I thought I could decode what no one else had decoded.

I'll try to explain, knowing already that explanation will fail. Because that's what I learned, in the end—that some truths resist transmission. That the most important things cannot be summarized, compressed, handed from one mind to another.

Maya built an empire on the assumption that the signals meant something we could understand. I proved that assumption wrong.

But she kept the empire. And I am here, in a converted garage, writing for no one.

That's not bitterness. It's just observation. She chose her path; I chose mine. She chose story; I chose truth.

I'm not sure, anymore, which of us was right.

---

## Chapter 05 - Pattern 7

I still have the files.

This will sound strange—why would I keep them? What purpose could they serve now, twenty years later, the data that destroyed my career, my marriage, my place in the world?

But I keep them. On a drive in my desk drawer, backed up somewhere in the cloud, preserved like evidence from a crime scene. Sometimes, late at night, I open them and look at the visualizations. The spectrograms, the waveforms, the structural maps I spent eight years building. I stare at them the way you might stare at photographs of someone you loved who is now gone.

Pattern 7. My obsession. My life's work. My undoing.

Let me try to show you what I saw.

---

The phone again. I should stop flinching every time it rings.

This time it's a number I don't recognize—probably spam, probably nothing. I let it go to voicemail. If it's Kraków, they'll leave a message. If it's Kraków, I'll have to decide what to do.

The sun is angling through the window now, late afternoon light that turns everything golden. My mother loved this time of day. "Złota godzina," she called it—the golden hour. She would stop whatever she was doing and stand at the window, watching the light change.

I wonder if she still does that. I wonder if she can still stand.

I should call. I should ask.

Instead, I open the old files. Instead, I return to Pattern 7.

---

A signal from space is not what you imagine.

You imagine something clean—a message, a broadcast, a voice from the stars. You imagine decoding it like a telegram, like a letter from a distant relative, like anything humans have ever sent to each other.

But Pattern 7 wasn't like that. Pattern 7 was noise that contained structure—or structure that looked like noise, depending on how you squinted. It was a torrent of electromagnetic radiation, captured by radio telescopes over decades, compressed into data files, rendered on my screen as colors and shapes that my brain struggled to interpret.

On a spectrogram, it looked like mountains. I said that before. But let me be more precise.

Imagine a landscape of peaks and valleys, frequencies stacked on top of each other, each point colored by intensity. Now imagine that landscape moving, evolving, the peaks rising and falling in patterns that almost repeat but never quite do. Now imagine that the landscape is layered—signals on top of signals, like voices talking over each other at a party, and you're trying to isolate just one conversation.

That was Pattern 7. One voice in a cacophony, separated out by algorithms and human patience, rendered visible on my screen.

And somewhere in that shifting landscape, I believed, was meaning.

---

The first year was mapping.

I didn't try to decode anything. I just looked. Catalogued. Marked the features that repeated, the structures that seemed intentional, the boundaries between segments. I treated it like an archaeological site, documenting what was there before trying to understand what it meant.

This is how I work—slowly, methodically, building a foundation before I attempt a structure. It's not dramatic. It doesn't make for good stories. But it's the only way I know how to approach something truly unknown.

Yusuf thought I was too slow. "You've been staring at the same data for six months," he said once, leaning over from his desk. "Aren't you going to try something?"

"I am trying something," I said. "I'm trying to see it."

He laughed, not unkindly. "You're going to stare that signal into submission?"

"Maybe."

He shook his head and went back to his own work. Yusuf was working on Pattern 15, a simpler signal with more obvious structure. He was making faster progress, publishing preliminary papers, earning attention. I was still mapping.

But I was seeing things. The more I looked, the more the signal revealed. Recurring motifs that appeared at irregular intervals. Hierarchical structures—smaller patterns nested inside larger ones, like sentences inside paragraphs inside chapters. Boundary markers that seemed to indicate the beginning and end of . . . something.

I couldn't prove any of this yet. I couldn't show that the patterns were intentional rather than coincidental, meaningful rather than noise. But I could feel it—the shape of something underneath, the skeleton waiting to be uncovered.

---

The second year was hypothesis.

I started building models—mathematical descriptions of what the signal might be doing. If this is grammar, what are the rules? If these are words, how do they combine? If this is meaning, how is it encoded?

Most models failed immediately. The signal didn't behave the way they predicted. I would build a framework, test it against the data, watch it collapse.

This is normal. This is science. You try things, they don't work, you try something else.

But it's also exhausting. Every failure felt personal, a referendum on my abilities, my approach, my worthiness. I had been chosen for this. I was supposed to be good at this. And model after model crumbled into nothing.

Daniel saw me through it. He didn't understand the specifics—I couldn't explain them in ways that made sense to a non-specialist—but he understood the rhythm. Good days and bad

days, hope and disappointment, the long slog of work that might never pay off.

“You’ll figure it out,” he said, again and again. “You always do.”

I clung to that faith. Some nights, it was the only thing that got me back to the desk in the morning.

---

The third year, the fourth, the fifth. Time blurs.

I remember progress in fragments. A model that held up for three weeks before failing on new data. A structural feature I discovered that no one else had noticed. A paper I published—cautious, preliminary—that got cited a dozen times.

I remember setbacks more clearly. The six months I spent pursuing a dead end, convinced I had found the key, only to realize I had been fooling myself. The departmental review where I had to justify my slow progress, explaining to administrators why eight years on a single signal was not a waste of resources.

I remember Daniel, patient through all of it. The dinners where I was distracted. The weekends I spent at the office. The conversations where he asked what I was thinking and I said “Pattern 7” and he smiled and didn’t press further.

He deserved more. I knew that even then. I knew I was giving everything to the signal and leaving scraps for my marriage. But I told myself it was temporary. I told myself that once I cracked it, once I found what I was looking for, I would come back to him fully.

The lie we tell ourselves: there will be time later.

---

Let me describe what I came to see.

Pattern 7, over eight years of mapping and modeling, revealed itself to be hierarchical. Like a language, it had levels—small units

combining into larger units, larger units combining into larger still. I called them, for lack of better terms, phonemes and morphemes and phrases, though I knew these human labels didn't capture what they actually were.

The smallest units were simple: bursts of activity at specific frequencies, lasting milliseconds. These combined, by rules I gradually uncovered, into more complex structures—clusters of bursts that repeated with variations, like words with prefixes and suffixes.

The clusters combined into sequences. The sequences combined into larger blocks. The blocks combined into... I never found the end of the hierarchy. Every level I uncovered seemed to contain another level above it.

And the rules. The beautiful, maddening rules.

Some combinations were common; others never appeared. Some sequences predicted what came next; others were unique, appearing only once in the entire dataset. There was structure—deep, consistent, undeniable structure—and the structure had the feeling of intention.

Not human intention. Not anything I could anthropomorphize. But intention nonetheless—the sense that these patterns existed because something had created them, had organized them, had meant something by them.

By year seven, I had a model. Not a translation—I never believed in translation—but a grammar. A set of rules that described how the signal was organized, that could predict with reasonable accuracy what would come next in a sequence.

It wasn't perfect. The predictions failed sometimes, and I didn't understand why. But it was working. After seven years of failure, something was finally working.

---

I stop typing. The golden hour is fading, the light going grey.

My mother, in Kraków, in the apartment where I grew up. Is she watching the light change? Is she thinking about me, wondering when I'm coming?

I think about Pattern 7, about the years I gave it. I think about what I found, and what I thought I had found, and how different those two things turned out to be.

I was so close. So close to what I believed was understanding. And I was so completely wrong about what understanding meant.

---

Year eight.

The model improved. The predictions got better. I refined and tested, tested and refined, the way you polish something until it shines.

I started to believe I had done it. Not consciously—I was too careful for that, too aware of how many times I had been wrong before. But in the quiet of my mind, in the place where hope lives before you admit it to yourself, I started to believe.

I imagined the announcement. The paper in *Nature*. Maya's face when I told her. Daniel's arms around me, his voice saying "I knew you would."

I imagined being the one who cracked it. The first person in history to decode an alien signal. Not Maya, with her accidental discovery—but me, with my eight years of labor, my patient mapping, my twelve languages that had trained me to see patterns others couldn't see.

It was hubris. I know that now. But at the time, it felt like hope.

---

The night it worked.

I'll write more about this later—it deserves its own chapter, its own careful attention. But let me tell you how it felt.

Late spring, 2043. I was alone in the lab, as I often was. The building was quiet, the cleaning crew gone, only the hum of servers and the glow of my screens.

I ran the model on a new segment of data—fresh material I hadn't tested before. This was the real test: not fitting the model to data I already knew, but predicting data I had never seen.

The output appeared on my screen. I compared it to the actual signal.

It matched.

Not perfectly—there were small discrepancies, noise at the edges. But the structure matched. The hierarchy matched. The patterns I had mapped, the rules I had uncovered—they worked. They predicted something real.

I sat very still. I didn't breathe.

Then I ran it again, on another segment. It worked.

Again. It worked.

I ran it a dozen times, on every piece of data I could find that I hadn't used in building the model. It worked. It kept working.

I understood something. Not everything—not the meaning, not the semantics, not what the signal was about. But the structure. The grammar. The rules that governed how it was organized.

After eight years, I had cracked Pattern 7.

---

I should have stopped there.

I should have documented what I found, written it up, submitted it for review. I should have let others verify, critique, improve. I should have been a scientist—cautious, methodical, humble in the face of discovery.

Instead, I did what any scientist would do. I tested my model on something new.

Pattern 12 was sitting right there, in the database, a signal from the same region of sky as Pattern 7. The project's working hypothesis was that nearby signals might be related—different transmissions from the same source, or different sources with a common origin. If my model worked on Pattern 7, it might work on Pattern 12.

It was a reasonable assumption. It was the assumption everyone made.

I opened Pattern 12. I ran my model.

And everything fell apart.

---

But that's the next chapter. The fog is coming back, or maybe it's dusk, or maybe my eyes are just tired. I've been writing for hours.

Tomorrow I'll tell you about the night everything changed. The triumph and the collapse, separated by less than an hour. The slack jaw, the silence, the beginning of the end.

Tonight I'll sit with the memory of what it felt like to believe I had succeeded. That brief window—minutes, maybe thirty of them—when I thought I had decoded an alien signal.

It was the happiest I have ever been.

I didn't know, in those thirty minutes, that the happiness was already ash. That the model that worked so beautifully on Pattern 7 would produce fluent, confident, coherent nonsense on Pattern 12. That I was about to discover something true, and the truth would destroy everything I had built.

The golden hour is gone. The room is grey. My mother is dying on the other side of the world.

Tomorrow, I'll tell you how it ended.

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## PART 2 - THE BREAK

### Chapter 06 - The Night It Worked

I can tell you the exact moment.

May 17th, 2043. 11:47 PM. The timestamp is burned into my memory, though I couldn't have told you the date or time while it was happening. I only know because I checked afterward, when I was trying to reconstruct what had happened, trying to find the precise instant when everything changed.

11:47 PM. The model converged. The predictions aligned. Eight years of work collapsed into a single point of light on my screen.

I was alone.

---

This morning, the fog is thick again. I can't see the bridge at all—just white, as if the world beyond my window has been erased. The coffee sits untouched. I haven't checked my phone.

I know I should. I know that every hour I don't call is an hour I can't get back, an hour my mother spends wondering when I'm coming. But I'm afraid. I'm afraid that if I call, they'll tell me it's too late. Or they'll tell me there's still time, and then I'll have to decide whether to go.

So instead I write. I return to May 17th, 2043. I try to put into words what happened in that empty lab, in that quiet building, in that moment when I thought I had achieved something extraordinary.

---

The Chen Building at night was a different place than during the day.

During the day, it hummed with activity—researchers in hallways, conversations in break rooms, the constant background noise of

people doing important work. But at night, after the cleaning crew left, after the last stragglers went home to their families, the building became a cathedral of silence.

I loved working late. The quiet helped me think. Without the distractions of colleagues and meetings and the social performance of being a person in a workplace, I could sink into the data. I could become Pattern 7.

That night—May 17th—I had been at my desk since early afternoon. Daniel had texted around seven: *Dinner?* I had replied: *Working late. Don't wait up.* He had sent back a heart emoji, which was his way of saying he understood, or at least accepted.

I felt guilty, as I always did when I chose the signal over him. But I was close. I could feel it. The model I had been refining for months was behaving differently, producing outputs that matched the data with unprecedented accuracy. Something was happening.

By eleven, I was running verification tests. I had divided my dataset into training data—the material I used to build the model—and test data, material the model had never seen. The true test of any model is whether it generalizes: can it predict new data, or has it only learned to mimic the old?

I ran the model on a test segment. It predicted the next sequence with 94% accuracy.

I ran it again, on a different segment. 91%.

Again. 93%.

My hands were shaking. I remember that—the physical tremor that I couldn't control. I had been wrong so many times before. I had believed I was close and been wrong, believed I had found the key and been wrong. I didn't trust myself anymore.

But the numbers were the numbers. The model was working.

At 11:47 PM, I ran the final test. A segment I had deliberately set aside, never looked at, saved for this moment. If the model could predict this—truly unseen data—then it was real.

I pressed enter. I waited.

The output appeared. I compared it to the actual signal.

They matched.

---

I try to describe this to you, and I can feel the words failing. How do you convey the weight of eight years lifting? How do you explain what it means to reach for something impossible and feel your fingers close around it?

I sat in that empty lab, in that silent building, and I understood something about Pattern 7 that no human had ever understood. I had found the rules. The grammar. The structure that organized the signal.

It wasn't translation. I want to be clear about that. I didn't know what the signal meant—didn't know if it was a greeting or a warning, a story or a mathematical proof, a prayer or a grocery list. Meaning would require more work, different work, the kind of interpretive labor that might take generations.

But I had the skeleton. I had cracked the code that held the message together.

---

The first thing I did was check my work.

I know this seems anticlimactic. In movies, the scientist leaps up, shouts eureka, runs through the halls. But I am not that kind of scientist. I am the kind who sits very still and looks for errors.

I went through the model line by line. I checked the parameters, the training data, the test data. I looked for bugs in the code, mistakes in the preprocessing, any way I might have fooled myself.

I found nothing wrong.

I ran the tests again—not because I doubted the results, but because I needed to see them a second time, a third time, to believe they were real.

They were real.

By 12:30 AM, I had verified the results a dozen ways. The model worked. Pattern 7 had yielded to eight years of patient labor, and I had been the one to break it open.

I sat back in my chair. The building was silent. The screens glowed. And I let myself feel it.

---

Joy is not a word I use often. It feels excessive, overheated, the kind of word that belongs to other people's experiences. But in that moment, in that empty lab, I felt something I can only call joy.

Pure, overwhelming, physical joy. It started in my chest and spread outward until my whole body was humming with it. I laughed—actually laughed, alone in the dark, at one in the morning. I might have cried. I don't remember clearly. The emotions were too big, too tangled, too much.

I had done it. After all the failures, all the setbacks, all the nights I had come home defeated and fallen asleep wondering if I was wasting my life—I had done it.

I thought about calling Daniel. Waking him up with the news. But it was late, and I wanted to savor this moment alone, just for a little while. I wanted to sit with the accomplishment before I shared it, before it became public, before the papers and the committees and the interviews transformed it into something else.

For thirty minutes, it was mine. Just mine.

I stop writing. The fog outside the window is so thick that I can't tell if it's day or night. Time has become strange—stretched and compressed, the present and past bleeding into each other.

I remember that joy. I can still feel its echo, twenty years later, like a phantom limb. The brief window when everything I had worked for seemed to have paid off.

And I remember what came next.

---

It was around 1:15 AM when I made the decision.

I had been sitting in the glow of my screens, basking in success, thinking about what to do next. The protocol was clear: document everything, prepare a preliminary report, submit it for internal review before making any announcements. Science is slow, cautious, built on verification.

But I was curious. That's the truth of it—I was curious, and I was alone, and no one was there to tell me to wait.

Pattern 12.

It was right there, in the database. A signal from the same region of sky as Pattern 7, identified early in the project as a potential relative. The working hypothesis had always been that nearby signals might share characteristics—different channels of the same broadcast, different eras of the same civilization, something that would help us understand the bigger picture.

If my model worked on Pattern 7, it should tell us something about Pattern 12. That was the assumption. That was what everyone believed.

I opened Pattern 12. I loaded my model. I ran the analysis.

---

Let me tell you what I expected to see.

I expected imperfect results. I knew that Pattern 12 was different from Pattern 7—different frequency profile, different temporal structure, different surface characteristics. My model was tuned for Pattern 7 specifically; it couldn't possibly work perfectly on a different signal.

But I expected partial success. Overlap. Some of the same structures appearing in both signals, some of the same rules applying. Evidence that the signals were related, that my work on Pattern 7 had implications beyond a single data stream.

That was the dream of the project, after all. Not just decoding one signal, but finding the universal principles that would unlock them all. The grammar beneath all grammars. The Rosetta Stone of the cosmos.

I expected to take the first step toward that dream.

---

The output appeared on my screen.

I looked at it. I looked at Pattern 12's actual structure. I compared them.

The model had produced results. Clear, organized, confident results. It had parsed Pattern 12 into units, identified hierarchies, mapped relationships. The output looked like language—structured, grammatical, meaningful.

And it was wrong.

Not wrong in the way of noise or failure. Wrong in the way of confident falsehood. The model had imposed Pattern 7's grammar onto Pattern 12, and the result was fluent nonsense—sentences that parsed correctly but meant nothing, structures that fit the rules but had no correspondence to reality.

It was like translating Japanese with a Spanish dictionary and getting grammatically perfect sentences that had nothing to do with what was actually said.

---

I didn't understand at first.

I thought I had made a mistake. I went back through the process, checking each step. Had I loaded the wrong data? Applied the wrong model? Made some error in the analysis?

I found nothing wrong.

I ran it again. Same result.

I ran it on a different segment of Pattern 12. Same result.

I ran it on Pattern 15, and Pattern 23, and Pattern 31—signals from different parts of the sky, different distances, different profiles. The model produced output for all of them. Confident, structured, grammatical output.

All of it wrong.

---

The realization came slowly.

It wasn't a single moment of insight. It was more like a tide coming in—each wave bringing more certainty, each wave erasing more of what I had believed.

Pattern 7's grammar was not universal. It was not even partially universal. It was local—entirely, completely, irreducibly local. The rules I had spent eight years uncovering applied to Pattern 7 and Pattern 7 alone.

The signals were not related. They didn't share a common structure, a common origin, a common anything. Pattern 7 was a conversation between specific parties, in a specific context, using rules that existed nowhere else in the cosmos.

There was no Rosetta Stone. There was no universal grammar. There was no "they" waiting to be understood.

There were only signals—thousands of them, millions of them, each one a separate language, a separate agreement, a separate island of meaning unreachable from any other.

---

I sat in the lab, in the dark, and I felt my mouth open.

To say something. To explain. To articulate what I had just understood.

My mouth opened, and nothing came out.

Because there was nothing to say. The truth I had discovered could not be summarized, could not be reported, could not be compressed into words that anyone would understand without seeing what I had seen.

I had succeeded. And in succeeding, I had proved that success was meaningless.

---

The fog is lifting. I can see the bridge now, faint through the white—not the whole structure, just the suggestion of it. A shape where a shape should be.

I think about that moment—my mouth open, the silence, the room unchanged around me. The beginning of everything that came after.

In a few pages, I'll tell you about the hours that followed. The drive home. Daniel asleep. The distance that began that night and never closed.

But first, I want to sit with this. The thirty minutes of joy, and then the longer minutes of recognition. The triumph and the collapse, separated by less than an hour.

I had decoded an alien signal. And in doing so, I had proved that decoding was not enough.

The universe was full of voices. And none of them were speaking to us.

---

## Chapter 07 - Triumph

Let me stay here a moment longer.

I know I've already told you how it ended. I've already described the failure, the silence, the mouth that opened and found nothing to say. But I want to go back. I want to live in those thirty minutes again—the brief window between 11:47 PM and whenever I opened Pattern 12. The last time I was the person I had always believed myself to be.

This is the privilege of memoir: you can stop time. You can hold a moment in your hands and turn it over, examine it from every angle, refuse to let it pass.

In life, I couldn't do that. In life, the thirty minutes were already gone before I knew they mattered.

---

The fog broke this morning, suddenly, as if someone had pulled a curtain. The bay appeared all at once—blue and glittering, the bridge vivid against it, the hills of Marin green in the distance. I stood at the window and watched, and I thought about how quickly things can change. One moment, white. The next, the whole world.

My phone sits on the desk. I still haven't called.

Instead, I return to May 17th. I return to the hour I was happy.

---

Do you know what I imagined, in those thirty minutes?

I imagined telling Daniel. I saw myself coming home—not that night, because it was too late, but the next morning. I would wake

him with coffee, the way he liked. I would sit on the edge of the bed, and I would say: “I did it.”

And he would understand. Not the technical details—he never cared about those—but the weight. The years. The finally. He would put down the coffee and pull me into his arms, and we would hold each other, and for once I wouldn’t be thinking about Pattern 7 because Pattern 7 would be solved.

I imagined the rest of our lives. The life after the breakthrough.

I would publish, of course. A major paper, probably in *Nature*, with my name first and a list of acknowledgments a page long. There would be press attention—not Maya-level fame, but recognition. Interviews, maybe. Invitations to conferences. The quiet linguist on the fourth floor, finally seen.

And then I would rest. That was the fantasy I kept returning to, in those thirty minutes. After the paper, after the attention, after I had given the project what I owed it—I would rest. I would come home at reasonable hours. I would cook dinner with Daniel instead of heating up leftovers alone. I would be present in my marriage in a way I hadn’t been for years.

I would visit my mother. I promised myself that. As soon as things settled down, as soon as the immediate chaos of the discovery passed, I would fly to Kraków. I would sit in her kitchen and drink tea and tell her what I had done. She wouldn’t fully understand—she never understood my work—but she would be proud. I would see it in her face, the careful pride she never quite said aloud.

I imagined all of this in thirty minutes. A whole future, built on the foundation of a working model.

---

I need to stop here. I need to acknowledge what I’m doing.

I'm avoiding the next part. I'm circling around the wreckage, unwilling to look at it directly. The present-Tom, sitting in this garage, writing this memoir—he knows what comes next. He knows how foolish these imaginings were, how quickly they turned to ash.

But the past-Tom didn't know. The past-Tom sat in that empty lab, in the glow of screens that showed him a success, and he let himself believe.

Is it cruel to dwell on this? To describe the hope in such detail, knowing it was about to be destroyed?

Maybe. But this is what memoir is for. To bear witness to the selves we used to be, even when—especially when—those selves were about to walk into catastrophe.

---

Let me tell you about the room.

The lab on the fourth floor of the Chen Building was not a beautiful space. Fluorescent lights, dropped ceiling, industrial carpet in a color that might once have been blue. Rows of desks with ergonomic chairs that no one had ever adjusted. Screens everywhere, glowing with data, casting the only light at that hour.

My desk was in the corner, near the window. During the day, I could see the campanile, the bay, the hills beyond. At night, I saw only my own reflection, superimposed on darkness.

In those thirty minutes, I looked at that reflection. I saw a man I barely recognized.

He was forty-two years old. His hair was going grey at the temples—had been for years, but he rarely noticed. His face was tired, lined in ways that suggested he had spent too much time squinting at screens. His shoulders were hunched forward, the posture of someone who had spent a decade reaching for something just out of grasp.

But his eyes. In those thirty minutes, his eyes were different.

I don't know how to describe it except to say: they were open. Fully open, in a way they hadn't been for years. The habitual guardedness, the careful skepticism, the armor of low expectations—all of it was gone. The man in the window was looking at the world as if it had just given him a gift.

I miss that man. I miss the thirty minutes when I was him.

---

I thought about calling my mother.

Not seriously—it was nearly midnight in California, which meant it was morning in Kraków, and she would have been starting her day. She didn't like unexpected calls; they worried her. She would assume something was wrong.

But I thought about it. I imagined picking up the phone, hearing her voice, saying "Mama, I did it."

What would she have said? Something cautious, probably. She was always cautious. "That's wonderful, Tomek. What did you do?"

And I would have tried to explain—the signal, the model, the eight years. She would have listened, not understanding, making small noises of encouragement. And at the end, she would have said something like: "I'm proud of you. When are you coming to visit?"

Always that question. When are you coming to visit?

I never had a good answer. I still don't.

---

Let me tell you what I thought it meant.

In those thirty minutes, sitting in the lab with my successful model, I believed I had proved something important. Not just about Pattern 7—about the nature of alien communication, about the structure of meaning across the cosmos.

If my model worked, I thought, it meant the signals were comprehensible. It meant that despite the vast distances, despite the differences in biology and history and physics, intelligence could recognize intelligence. Meaning could cross the void.

This was the dream of the project. The dream I had come to Berkeley to pursue. The dream that had sustained me through eight years of failure.

And for thirty minutes, I believed the dream was true.

I believed that my work on Pattern 7 was just the beginning. That the same methods, refined and extended, would unlock other signals. That piece by piece, pattern by pattern, we would assemble a picture of a universe full of minds reaching toward each other.

I believed we were not alone—not just in the sense that other intelligence existed, but in the deeper sense that other intelligence was reachable. That the gap could be bridged. That communication was possible.

This is what I lost, when I opened Pattern 12. Not just a model, not just a career. I lost the belief that had organized my life.

---

The sun is moving across the floor. I've been writing for hours.

I keep returning to those thirty minutes because I don't want to leave them. Because what comes next is harder to write, harder to think about, harder to hold in my mind without flinching.

But I have to leave them. That's what memoir demands—not just the dwelling, but the departure. Not just the hope, but the loss.

---

At some point—I don't know exactly when—I stopped imagining the future and started thinking about the present.

I looked at my screen, at the model that worked, at the results that would change everything. And a small, cautious voice in my head said: *Test it again.*

Not because I doubted. Because I was a scientist, and scientists verify. Because I had been wrong so many times before, and I needed to be sure.

*Test it on something new, the voice said. Something you haven't seen. Something that will prove it's real.*

Pattern 12 was right there. The obvious choice. A signal from the same region of sky, waiting in the database, never touched by my model.

If I had stopped there—if I had documented my results, gone home, come back in the morning with fresh eyes—would things have been different? Would I have run the same test eventually and reached the same conclusion?

Probably. Almost certainly. The truth doesn't change based on when you find it.

But I wouldn't have lost those thirty minutes. I could have kept them a little longer—an night, a day, a week. I could have told Daniel. I could have called my mother. I could have lived in the future I imagined, at least for a while.

Instead, I opened Pattern 12. I pressed enter. I watched the output appear.

And the thirty minutes ended.

---

I've told you already what I saw. The fluent nonsense, the confident error, the realization that my model was local, particular, irreproducible.

I won't tell it again. Once is enough.

But I want you to understand the weight of it. The distance from where I was to where I ended up. Thirty minutes earlier, I was a man who had decoded an alien signal, who was imagining his future, who believed the universe was full of reachable minds.

Thirty minutes later, I was a man who had proved the opposite. Who knew that the signals were islands, each one a separate world, no bridges between them. Who would spend the next twenty years trying to explain what that meant, and failing, and watching everything he loved slip away.

Thirty minutes. That's all it took.

---

Tomorrow I will write about Pattern 12 in more detail. The technical failure, the verification, the long hours of testing that confirmed what I already knew.

Tonight, I sit with the triumph. I let myself remember what it felt like to believe.

My mother is dying. I am here, writing about thirty minutes that happened twenty years ago. There is something wrong with me—something broken in the way I process time, the way I allocate attention, the way I decide what matters.

But this is the only way I know. To put it in words. To build a structure out of memory and hope that the structure holds.

Thirty minutes of triumph. A lifetime of aftermath.

The sun is setting. The bridge is turning gold.

I should call. I should pack. I should go.

Instead, I close my eyes and remember. The lab. The screens. The man in the window, eyes open, believing.

He didn't know. He couldn't have known.

I forgive him for what he was about to do.

---

## Chapter 08 - Pattern 12

I have tried to write this chapter four times.

Each time, I find myself reaching for metaphor. The model “broke.” The signal “resisted.” The output “collapsed.” These words feel right—they have the emotional weight of what happened—but they are wrong. They suggest violence, struggle, breakdown.

What happened was none of those things. What happened was smooth. Clean. Fluent.

The model worked perfectly on Pattern 12. It produced output without hesitation, without error flags, without any indication that something was wrong. The failure was not mechanical. The failure was semantic.

I need to tell you what that means. I need to be precise, even though precision feels inadequate. Even though the technical description will never carry the weight of what I understood in that moment.

---

The fog has returned. Thick and white, pressing against the windows of the garage, erasing the world beyond. I sit with my coffee going cold and try to find the words.

My phone rang this morning. I let it go to voicemail.

It was my cousin Ewa, calling from Kraków. She left a message in Polish, her voice careful: “Tom, your mother is asking for you. The doctors say it could be days now. Maybe a week. Please call.”

Days. Maybe a week.

I have not called back. Instead, I am here, trying to explain what happened twenty years ago in a lab in Berkeley. Trying to find words for something that proved words inadequate.

The irony is not lost on me.

---

Let me start with what Pattern 12 was.

A signal. Electromagnetic radiation, like all of them, extracted from the cosmic microwave background through computational filtering so complex that only a handful of people on Earth fully understood it. The Chen Process, we called it—Maya’s gift to humanity, or curse, depending on how you looked at it.

Pattern 12 was one of the cleaner signals. Strong amplitude, minimal noise, clear periodicity. It had been in the database since 2037, marked as “high priority” for analysis. Several teams had worked on it over the years, producing papers full of statistical descriptions but no semantic breakthrough.

I had never touched it. My work was Pattern 7—only Pattern 7—and I had maintained that discipline for eight years. You don’t solve these things by spreading your attention thin. You solve them by going deep, by knowing one signal so thoroughly that its structure becomes intuitive.

But that night, with Pattern 7 solved—or so I believed—I needed validation. I needed to prove that my model was general, not just a overfitted solution to one specific dataset. And Pattern 12 was right there, waiting.

The signals came from roughly the same region of sky. Within a few degrees of arc, which in cosmic terms was practically neighbors. If any two signals were likely to share a communication framework, it would be these.

That was my reasoning. That was why I opened Pattern 12 at 1:15 AM on May 18th, 2043.

---

I need to explain what the model did.

Not in full mathematical detail—that would take pages, and most of it would be meaningless to anyone without specialized training. But the core idea was simple enough.

Language, whether human or otherwise, has structure. Syntax. Grammar. Patterns of arrangement that distinguish meaningful sequences from noise. My model identified those patterns in Pattern 7 and mapped them onto a framework that could generate equivalent structures.

Think of it like this: if you heard a language you didn't speak, you might still be able to identify which sounds were words, where the sentences began and ended, which elements were repeated and which varied. You couldn't understand the meaning, but you could describe the shape.

My model went further. By analyzing the relationships between structural elements—which patterns co-occurred, which sequences never appeared together, how complexity built across longer transmissions—it inferred a kind of grammar. Not a translation, exactly, but a generative framework. A system of rules that could produce Pattern-7-like output.

When I ran the validation that night, the model generated sequences that matched real Pattern 7 data with 94% structural fidelity. When I used it to predict missing segments—sections of the signal that had been corrupted by noise—its predictions aligned with what we'd reconstructed through other methods.

It worked. The model captured something real about how Pattern 7 was organized.

---

So I applied it to Pattern 12.

I told myself I was being rigorous. Testing generalizability. But I think, now, that I was also being greedy. I wanted confirmation not just that my model was right, but that it was important. That I had discovered something universal, not just local.

The interface was simple. Load signal. Apply model. Generate output.

I loaded Pattern 12. I selected my Pattern 7 framework as the analytical model. I clicked the button that initiated the process.

And I waited.

---

It took about four minutes. Longer than Pattern 7—the signal was larger, more complex—but not dramatically so. I watched the progress bar fill, watched the processing logs scroll past, watched the system do exactly what it was designed to do.

No errors. No warnings. No flags.

At 1:19 AM, the output window populated.

I remember leaning forward. I remember the slight pain in my lower back from sitting too long. I remember the hum of the HVAC system, the distant sound of a car on the street below. Mundane details, preserved in perfect clarity while I looked at results that would unmake my understanding of the universe.

The output was beautiful.

That's the word that came to mind first. Beautiful. The model had analyzed Pattern 12 and produced a structural description that was elegant, internally consistent, grammatically complex. It identified hierarchies of organization, recurring motifs, rules of combination. It painted a picture of a sophisticated communication system with clear syntax and intricate nested structures.

And it was wrong.

---

How do I explain this?

Imagine you developed a model of English grammar. You tested it on samples of English text, and it worked beautifully—predicting

word order, identifying parts of speech, generating grammatically correct sentences.

Then you applied it to Chinese.

And the model didn't crash. It didn't say "incompatible input." Instead, it produced a confident analysis of Chinese text using English grammatical categories. It identified "subjects" and "objects" and "verb tenses" that didn't exist in Chinese. It generated a fluent description of a language that bore no relationship to the actual structure of what it was analyzing.

That's what my model did to Pattern 12.

---

I didn't understand immediately. The output looked reasonable—more than reasonable, it looked elegant. I spent several minutes admiring the structural description, noting the parallels with Pattern 7, thinking about how I would write this up.

Then I started cross-checking.

This was routine. Standard validation procedure. You take the model's predictions and compare them against known features of the signal. You look for correspondence, for alignment, for evidence that the model has captured something real.

The first cross-check failed.

Pattern 12 had a well-documented feature: a repeating sequence that occurred at irregular intervals, always in the same form. We called it the "anchor" because it seemed to function as a structural marker, a kind of punctuation. Every team that had worked on Pattern 12 had identified it.

My model didn't see it.

No—that's not right. My model saw it, but it categorized it as noise. Random interference, not part of the signal structure. The elegant

grammar it had constructed had no place for the anchor, so the anchor was excluded.

I stared at the output. I felt the first cold thread of doubt.

Then I ran the second cross-check. And the third. And the fourth.

---

By 2 AM, I had documented seventeen points of fundamental disagreement between my model's analysis and established features of Pattern 12.

Not ambiguous disagreements. Not interpretive differences. Fundamental, irreconcilable contradictions. My model said the signal had three-part hierarchical structure; independent analysis showed two-part. My model identified a particular sequence as highly significant, a core grammatical element; that sequence occurred exactly once in the entire signal, almost certainly an anomaly.

The model hadn't failed to analyze Pattern 12. It had analyzed it confidently, fluently, and wrongly. It had imposed the grammar of Pattern 7 onto a signal that didn't share that grammar, and it had produced an elegant lie.

---

I want to stop here and make something clear.

This kind of failure happens all the time in science. Models overfit. Methods that work in one domain fail in another. You test your hypothesis, it doesn't hold up, you refine and try again. That's the process. That's how knowledge advances.

What made this different was the implication.

If my model for Pattern 7 didn't apply to Pattern 12—a signal from the same region of sky, with similar basic characteristics, discovered through the same methods—then there was no reason to believe it would apply to any other signal. Pattern 7's grammar was local.

Particular. Indigenous to that one transmission, that one source, that one moment in time.

And if that was true for Pattern 7, it was true for all of them.

---

The signals were not chapters in the same book. They were not dialects of the same language. They were not even languages from the same linguistic family.

They were islands. Each one alone. Each one complete unto itself. No bridges, no shared foundations, no universal grammar waiting to be discovered.

I had spent eight years learning to read Pattern 7. If my success was real—and the validation data suggested it was—then I had achieved something remarkable. But that achievement would never generalize. I couldn't apply it to Pattern 12, or Pattern 23, or any of the hundreds of other signals in the database.

Each one would require its own eight years. Its own model. Its own solution that would work for that signal and no other.

The dream of translation—of a framework that would let humanity communicate with all the minds that had sent these signals—was not delayed. It was impossible.

---

The fog outside is so thick now that I can't see the neighbor's fence. The world has contracted to this room, this desk, this screen.

I think about my mother, lying in a hospital bed in Kraków. I think about the signals, still streaming through the cosmos, carrying meaning that will never be decoded. I think about the gap between what we can understand and what we can convey, and how that gap only widens as understanding deepens.

I should call Ewa. I should book a flight. I should go.

Instead, I write. I try to explain, knowing the explanation will fail. Knowing that even these words—carefully chosen, arranged with all the craft I can muster—will create false understanding in whoever reads them.

You will think you understand what I'm describing. The technical failure, the shattered dream, the loneliness of seeing. You will have words for it, categories, a framework that makes it comprehensible.

And that framework will be wrong. Not because you are stupid, but because the thing itself resists compression. Because understanding it fully would require you to have been there, in that lab, at 2 AM, watching your life's work prove its own impossibility.

---

Let me tell you what I did next.

I sat very still. I looked at the screen, at the beautiful, useless output. I looked at my reflection in the dark window—no longer the man with open eyes, but someone older, hollowed.

I did not cry. I did not curse. I did not throw anything or break anything or make any sound at all.

I opened my mouth to speak—to say something, anything, to give the moment language—and nothing came out.

This is what I mean by “the slack jaw.” This is what the next chapter is about. But before I get there, I want to acknowledge something.

I had a choice. In that moment, I had a choice.

I could have documented the failure, submitted my Pattern 7 results with appropriate caveats, let the scientific process work as it was supposed to. I could have said: “Here is what I found. Here are its limitations. Here is what it means.”

But I already knew that whatever I said would be misunderstood. The committees would want clarity. The public would want hope.

Maya would want a narrative that justified the project's continued existence.

And I would give them words, and the words would create a picture, and the picture would be wrong. Not deliberately wrong—I wasn't planning to lie—but structurally wrong. The truth didn't fit in the space they had for it.

I think that's when I first understood what I was facing. Not the failure of a model, but the failure of communication itself. The impossibility of transmitting what I had seen.

---

It is late afternoon. The fog is lifting, slowly, revealing the world in pieces. First the fence, then the trees, then the distant hills emerging like ghosts.

I have written about Pattern 12. I have tried to explain the technical details, the cross-checks, the moment when doubt became certainty. But I know, even as I finish this chapter, that the explanation is inadequate.

You cannot understand what a mandarin tastes like through description. You cannot understand what I saw through words.

This is the paradox I have lived with for twenty years. The more precisely I try to convey it, the more completely I fail. Language creates the illusion of transmission while guaranteeing its impossibility.

Tomorrow I will write about the slack jaw. The silence that followed. The hour I spent sitting in that lab, unable to speak, unwilling to move, learning what it felt like to have the ground disappear beneath me.

Tonight, I sit with my failure. The failure of the model, and the failure of this chapter, and the failure that is coming when I do not go to Kraków in time.

My mother is dying. The signals are singing into the void. And I am here, trying to explain, failing to explain, explaining anyway.

There is nothing else I know how to do.

---

## Chapter 09 - The Slack Jaw

I have been sitting here for an hour, trying to begin this chapter.

The cursor blinks. The fog drifts. My coffee has gone cold twice; I've reheated it twice; now it sits untouched, growing cold a third time.

How do you write about silence? How do you put into words the moment when words stopped working?

This is the chapter I've been dreading. Everything before it was prologue—the context, the setup, the technical details that any competent writer could render. But this chapter is different. This chapter is the thing itself: the moment in the lab when I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

I don't know if I can do it. I don't know if anyone could.

But I have to try. That's what this memoir is for—to bear witness to the unbearable, to speak the unspeakable, even knowing the attempt will fail.

---

It was 2:23 AM. I know because I looked at the clock.

I had just finished the seventeenth cross-check. Seventeen points of irreconcilable contradiction between my model's elegant analysis and the established features of Pattern 12. Seventeen proofs that my framework was local, not general. That Pattern 7's grammar belonged to Pattern 7 alone.

I understood what this meant. The understanding had arrived all at once, complete, the way understanding sometimes does—not building gradually but appearing fully formed, like a shape emerging from fog.

And I opened my mouth to say something.

---

To whom? There was no one else in the lab. It was the middle of the night; the building was empty except for security on the ground floor. I was alone with the screens and the silence and the understanding that had just restructured everything I knew.

But I opened my mouth anyway. A reflex, maybe. The body reaching for language the way a drowning person reaches for air. For forty-two years, I had processed the world through words. Something happens; you name it; the naming makes it manageable. That was how I worked. That was how I had always worked.

I opened my mouth to name what had happened.

And nothing came out.

---

Let me be precise, because precision matters here.

It wasn't that I couldn't think of the right word. It wasn't that I was searching for vocabulary, reaching for a term that eluded me. I knew plenty of words. Failure. Limitation. Locality. Incommensurability. I knew the technical vocabulary; I knew the everyday vocabulary; I knew how to combine them into sentences that would sound meaningful.

The problem was that none of them were right.

Every word I could think of would create a picture. And every picture would be wrong. Not incomplete—I could live with incomplete—but actively, structurally wrong. The words would suggest

things that weren't true. They would create understanding where there should be recognition of the impossibility of understanding.

If I said "the model failed," that suggested the model was broken, needed fixing. It didn't. It worked perfectly on Pattern 7.

If I said "the signals are different," that suggested they were variants, dialects, related forms. They weren't. They were as different as light and sound.

If I said "translation is impossible," that suggested a barrier, an obstacle that might someday be overcome. There was no barrier. There was just. . . plurality. Irreducible, unspanning plurality.

Every word was a betrayal. Every sentence was a lie.

So I sat there with my mouth open and nothing coming out, and for the first time in my life, I understood what it felt like to see something that language couldn't hold.

---

I need to stop and acknowledge something.

I've used a lot of words to describe the absence of words. I've spent paragraphs explaining why explanation fails. There's an obvious irony here—maybe even a contradiction.

But this is the trap. This is the paradox I've lived with for twenty years.

I can't not try to explain. Language is all I have. It's all any of us have for transmitting experience across the gap between minds. When something happens to me, I reach for words; when I want you to understand, I arrange those words as carefully as I can; and then I send them into the void and hope.

The attempt always fails. It failed with Pattern 12, and it fails with this memoir, and it will fail with everything I ever try to convey about that night. But the alternative—silence, pure silence, no attempt at all—is worse. At least the attempt gestures toward

the thing. At least it creates a shadow, an outline, a shape where understanding might someday stand.

This is what I learned in that lab. Not that communication is impossible, but that communication is always a kind of failure. A productive failure, maybe. A necessary failure. But failure nonetheless.

---

My mother called this morning.

Not Ewa. My mother herself, from her hospital bed, voice thin and distant but unmistakably hers.

“Tomek,” she said. “Are you coming?”

I couldn’t answer. The old silence rose up—the slack jaw, the empty mouth—and for a moment I was back in that lab, twenty years ago, facing a truth I couldn’t name.

“Tomek? Are you there?”

“Yes,” I managed. “Yes, Mama. I’m here.”

“The doctors say. . .” She paused. I heard her breathing, shallow and labored. “They say I should see you. If you want to come.”

If I want to come. Such a Polish way of putting it. Not demanding, not even asking directly, just offering the possibility and leaving the weight of it in my hands.

“I’ll come,” I said. “I’ll come soon.”

“Soon,” she repeated. And then, after a long pause: “Don’t wait too long.”

After she hung up, I sat with the phone in my hand for a long time. I thought about Pattern 12, and I thought about my mother, and I thought about all the things I’ve never been able to say.

---

Let me go back to the lab.

I sat there for more than an hour. I don't know exactly how long—time moved strangely that night, stretching and compressing in ways I couldn't track. But when I finally looked at the clock again, it was 3:41 AM.

During that hour, I didn't move. I didn't touch the keyboard. I didn't look at my phone or check my email or do any of the small activities that usually fill the gaps in consciousness. I just sat, mouth slightly open, staring at the screen where my model's beautiful wrong analysis still glowed.

What was I thinking? I've tried to reconstruct it, and I can't. There were no thoughts, exactly. There was... apprehension. Perception. A kind of raw awareness that hadn't been processed into categories or conclusions.

I saw the screen. I saw my reflection in the window. I saw the empty chairs, the dark campus beyond, the fog that was beginning to creep in from the bay. I saw all of it, clearly, without the usual chatter of interpretation.

And I understood something. Not in words—I told you, the words weren't there—but in some deeper register. I understood that the universe was larger than I had believed. Not physically larger, but structurally larger. More plural. More irreducible. Filled with minds that would never fully touch, meanings that would never fully translate, signals that would sing forever into a void that could not answer.

---

Have you ever had a moment like that? A moment when the familiar becomes strange, when the ground you've been standing on reveals itself as fog?

I had them before. Small ones. The night my father died—the call from Kraków, my mother's voice breaking the news, the sudden understanding that he was gone and I would never see him again.

The first time I looked at a signal from another world and truly grasped that it was made by minds, actual minds, thinking actual thoughts, thousands of light-years away. The morning Daniel asked me to marry him and I understood that I would have to choose, finally and completely, who I was going to be.

But those moments passed. The ground came back. Language returned and did its work, smoothing over the strangeness, making the new reality manageable.

This moment didn't pass. Not that night. Not in the weeks that followed. Not in the twenty years since.

I learned to function, of course. I learned to speak again, to work again, to pretend that the ground was solid. But underneath, the understanding remained. The slack jaw never fully closed. The silence never fully ended.

---

I want to describe what it felt like. I want to find a metaphor, an image, a comparison that will carry the weight.

But every metaphor betrays.

It was like drowning—except drowning is terrifying, and this wasn't terrifying exactly. It was like falling—except falling implies descent, and this was more like standing still while the world fell away. It was like waking from a dream—except waking implies clarity, and this was something else, something more complicated.

The closest I can come is this:

Imagine you've spent your whole life in a room. The room has walls, a floor, a ceiling. You know the room intimately. You've mapped every inch of it, learned its proportions, made it home.

Then one day, you look up and realize there is no ceiling. There never was. What you thought was a ceiling was just the limit of your vision, the boundary where your sight gave out. Above it, the room continues. Forever. In every direction. An infinity of

space you never suspected, filled with things you can't see and can't imagine.

The room didn't change. You changed. Your sense of what "room" meant, what "inside" and "outside" meant, what "home" meant—all of it dissolved. And you're still standing in the same place, but the place isn't the same, because you're not the same, and you never will be again.

That's as close as I can come. It's not right. It's not close enough. But it's what I have.

---

At 3:41 AM, I finally moved.

I reached out and turned off the monitor. Not the computer—the analysis was still running, the data still there—just the monitor. The glow vanished. The room went dark except for the small lights on the equipment, blinking like distant stars.

I sat in the darkness for a few more minutes. Then I stood up—slowly, carefully, like a man who wasn't sure his legs would hold him—and I walked to the window.

The fog had come in thick. I couldn't see the campanile, couldn't see the bay, couldn't see anything beyond a few meters. The world had contracted to this room, this window, this man standing with his forehead pressed against the cold glass.

I stayed there for a long time. I don't know how long. The glass fogged with my breath, cleared, fogged again.

At some point—4 AM, maybe, or later—I gathered my things. I put on my jacket. I walked out of the lab, down the silent hallway, into the elevator, through the empty lobby, out into the fog.

And I went home. To Daniel. To the life I had built on assumptions that were no longer true.

---

I should end this chapter here. The slack jaw, the silence, the walk through fog. A clean ending, a contained moment.

But I can't end it here, because it didn't end there. The slack jaw followed me home. It followed me into my marriage, my career, my every attempt to communicate what I had seen. It's following me still, twenty years later, as I sit in this garage trying to write about it.

The moment in the lab was not a discrete event. It was an opening. A door that swung wide and never closed.

I walked through that door at 2:23 AM on May 18th, 2043. I'm still walking. I'll be walking until I die.

---

My mother asked me to come. I said I would come soon.

Soon is not a time. Soon is a word we use to delay decisions, to postpone the weight of choosing. I've used it my whole life—soon I'll visit Kraków, soon I'll take a vacation, soon I'll tell Daniel what's really going on.

Soon is the slack jaw extended indefinitely. The mouth open, nothing coming out, waiting for the right words that never arrive.

I'm going to close my laptop now. I'm going to book a flight. I'm going to go to Kraków and sit beside my mother's bed and say whatever I can say, knowing it won't be enough, knowing it never is.

This is what the slack jaw taught me: you can't wait for the right words. The right words don't exist. You speak anyway—imperfectly, inadequately, reaching across a gap that can never be closed—because the alternative is silence, and silence is not an answer.

It's just an absence where an answer should be.

---

## Chapter 10 - The Hours After

I did not book the flight.

I meant to. I closed the laptop, I walked to the kitchen, I poured a glass of water. I stood at the counter and thought: *I will open my phone, I will go to the airline website, I will choose a seat and enter my payment information and it will be done.*

But I didn't. Instead, I stood there drinking water and looking out at the fog, and then I walked back to my desk, and then I opened my laptop again, and now I am writing this.

I don't know how to explain this. I don't know how to justify it. My mother is dying in Kraków and I am sitting in a garage in California writing about the night I came home from the lab.

But this is what I do. This is what I've always done. When the world becomes unbearable, I retreat into words. I arrange them carefully, as if arrangement could create meaning, as if meaning could create control.

It doesn't work. It has never worked. But I keep doing it anyway, because the alternative is to face the unbearable directly, and I have never learned how.

---

Let me tell you about the hours after.

I left the lab around 4 AM. The fog was thick—I've mentioned that—and the campus was empty. My footsteps echoed on the pavement, unnaturally loud in the silence. The streetlights made halos in the mist, each one a small island of orange in the grey.

I walked slowly. Not because I was tired, though I was. Not because I was thinking, though I was doing that too. I walked slowly because I didn't want to arrive.

Our apartment was a twenty-minute walk from the Chen Building. A small place, third floor, one bedroom. We'd moved there when I joined the project—Daniel had found it, negotiated the lease, organized the move while I was buried in preliminary data. He was good at that. He was good at all the things I wasn't good at.

I walked slowly because I knew that when I arrived, I would have to be a person again. A husband. A man with a face that meant something to someone else. And I didn't know how to be that anymore. I didn't know who I was.

---

The first lie was not a lie.

That's important to understand. When I came home that night, I didn't deceive Daniel. I didn't tell him something false, didn't construct a story to hide the truth. I simply didn't speak.

He was asleep. It was 4:30 in the morning; of course he was asleep. I let myself in quietly, took off my shoes in the hallway, moved through the dark apartment with the careful steps of someone trying not to wake anyone.

I stood in the doorway of the bedroom and watched him sleep.

This is a cliché, I know. The lover watching the beloved sleep. But clichés become clichés because they're true, because they capture something that happens again and again across all the bedrooms of the world.

Daniel slept on his side, facing the window. The streetlight filtered through the curtains, catching the curve of his shoulder, the dark hair against the white pillow. He breathed slowly, evenly, the breath of someone deep in dreams.

I watched him for a long time. I thought about waking him. I thought about sitting on the edge of the bed, touching his shoulder, saying: *Daniel. Something happened. I need to tell you.*

But what would I tell him? The model worked and then it didn't? The signals are islands and we are alone? Everything I believed was wrong, and now I don't know what to believe?

He would have listened. He always listened. He would have sat up, rubbed his eyes, asked careful questions. And I would have tried to answer, and the answers would have been wrong—not because I was lying but because language was inadequate, because anything I said would create a picture that wasn't true.

So I didn't wake him. I stood in the doorway, watching him breathe, and I told myself: *Tomorrow. I'll tell him tomorrow, when I've had time to think, when I can explain it properly.*

That was the first lie. Not a false statement, but a postponement that would become infinite.

---

I slept on the couch that night. I told myself I didn't want to disturb him, which was true. But the deeper truth was that I couldn't bear to lie beside him. To feel his warmth, his presence, the familiar weight of another body in the bed. I couldn't bear to be that close to someone and know that the closeness was an illusion.

I lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling and watched the light change as the night gave way to morning. I didn't sleep—I knew I wouldn't sleep—but I lay very still, and I let my thoughts move in whatever direction they wanted.

They moved to strange places. I thought about my father, dead for fifteen years, and the way he used to sit at the kitchen table in Kraków, drinking vodka and staring at nothing. I had hated that silence, hated the way he retreated into himself, hated the distance I could feel even when he was in the same room. Now I understood it. Now I was doing the same thing.

I thought about the signals, all of them, streaming through the cosmos, carrying meanings we would never decode. I imagined the minds that had sent them—not their shapes or their biology,

but their interiority. Their experience of being. Were they lonely too? Did they send signals into the void hoping for connection, knowing that connection was impossible?

I thought about language, about all the languages I knew, about the way each one created a different world. English made one kind of sense; Polish made another; German, French, Japanese, Mandarin—each one a lens that revealed some things and hid others. I had spent my life moving between these lenses, believing that translation was possible, that the meaning underneath was the same even when the words were different.

Now I knew that wasn't true. Even human languages were islands. We bridged them, approximately, imperfectly, but the bridges were never complete. Something was always lost. And alien languages—alien minds—were so much more distant that the bridges couldn't even begin.

---

Daniel woke around seven.

I heard him moving in the bedroom—the creak of the bed, the shuffle of feet, the sound of the bathroom door. Then the kitchen: water running, the coffee maker starting, the small domestic noises of morning.

“Tom?”

He had found me on the couch. I opened my eyes and saw him standing in the doorway, coffee cup in hand, wearing the blue robe I'd given him for his birthday.

“You slept out here?”

“I got home late. Didn't want to wake you.”

He nodded, accepting this. It wasn't unusual; I'd slept on the couch before, after late nights in the lab. But something in his face suggested he knew this time was different.

“Everything okay?”

There it was. The question. The opening. I could have said *no, everything is not okay, something happened and I need to tell you*. I could have started the conversation that might have saved us.

“Fine,” I said. “Just tired. Long night.”

He looked at me for a moment—a long moment, searching. Then he nodded again.

“I’ll make you some coffee.”

He turned and walked back to the kitchen, and I lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling, and the distance between us grew by one more increment.

---

I’m going to pause here and acknowledge what I’m doing.

I’m writing about the moment my marriage began to end, and I’m doing it instead of getting on a plane to Kraków. I’m excavating a wound from twenty years ago while a fresh wound opens across the ocean.

Why?

I don’t have a good answer. The best I can offer is this: the old wound and the new wound are the same wound. The silence that opened between Daniel and me that morning is the same silence that has kept me from my mother for decades. It’s the same silence I’m trying to break now, with this memoir, with these inadequate words.

I couldn’t talk to Daniel then. I can’t talk to my mother now. But I can write. I can put the silence into sentences and send it out into the world, and maybe—maybe—someone will understand.

That’s the hope, anyway. The desperate, foolish hope that has kept me writing for months.

---

Let me tell you about the rest of that day.

I showered. I ate the breakfast Daniel made—eggs, toast, coffee—tasting nothing. I put on clean clothes and walked back to campus, back to the Chen Building, back to the lab where everything had changed.

The morning light was different from the night. The fog had burned off, and the bay sparkled in the distance, and the campanile cast a long shadow across the plaza. Students walked past, talking, laughing, absorbed in their ordinary lives. None of them knew. None of them could know.

I went to my desk. I turned on the monitor. The analysis was still there—the beautiful, wrong output—exactly as I had left it.

For a moment, I considered deleting it. Just erasing the file, pretending it had never happened, going back to the world where Pattern 7 was a breakthrough and the future was full of possibility.

But I couldn't do that. The truth doesn't go away because you delete the evidence. I had seen something, and I couldn't unsee it.

So I did what scientists do. I documented. I wrote up the analysis, the cross-checks, the seventeen points of contradiction. I created a file called "P12\_Validation\_Failure.txt" and I put everything in it, every detail, every piece of evidence that my model was local.

Then I closed the file and I didn't look at it again for three weeks.

---

Those three weeks. I need to talk about those three weeks.

On the surface, nothing changed. I went to work. I came home. I ate dinner with Daniel, watched television with Daniel, slept beside Daniel. I attended meetings, responded to emails, maintained the appearance of a functioning researcher.

But underneath, everything was different. I was performing a role I no longer believed in. Every conversation about the project, every discussion of methodology, every optimistic email from Maya about our progress—all of it felt like theater. I nodded and agreed and said the expected things, and inside I was screaming.

Not literally screaming. The screaming was silent, which made it worse. It was the slack jaw extended into weeks, the inability to speak transformed into an inability to connect. I was there, but I wasn't there. Present in body, absent in everything else.

Daniel noticed. Of course he noticed—he knew me better than anyone. He asked if I was okay, if something was wrong, if I wanted to talk. I said I was fine, just stressed, just tired, just working through some difficult problems.

He accepted my answers because he loved me, and because love means trusting someone even when they're not telling the whole truth. He gave me space, gave me time, believed I would come to him when I was ready.

I never did. Not really. Not in the way he deserved.

---

The sun is setting. I've been writing for hours, and I'm still sitting in this garage, and I still haven't booked a flight.

My phone shows three missed calls from Ewa. One voicemail: "Tom, please call. She's asking for you. Please."

I know what I should do. I know what a good son would do. But I am not a good son—I have never been a good son—and the knowledge of my failure is not enough to change my behavior.

This is the thing about understanding. It doesn't automatically lead to action. You can see the truth clearly, see exactly what you need to do, and still not do it. The seeing and the doing are separate functions, and sometimes the gap between them is infinite.

Let me finish the chapter.

Three weeks after the night in the lab, I finally told someone. Not Daniel. Not my mother. Not any of the people who should have been first.

I told Yusuf.

He was working late, which was unusual for him. I walked past his desk on my way out and saw him hunched over a screen, frowning at something.

“Tom,” he said, looking up. “You’re here late.”

“Always.”

“You okay? You’ve seemed...” He paused, searching for the word. “Distant. Lately.”

And something broke open. Not the whole truth—I couldn’t manage the whole truth—but a piece of it. I sat down in the chair next to his desk and I said:

“I tested the model on Pattern 12. It doesn’t work.”

His face changed. Not dramatically—Yusuf was not a dramatic person—but I saw the shift. The concern, the calculation, the quick assessment of what this meant.

“Doesn’t work how?”

I told him. The cross-checks, the contradictions, the beautiful wrong output. I kept my voice steady, clinical, the voice of a scientist describing a failed experiment. But my hands were shaking. My hands had been shaking for three weeks.

When I finished, Yusuf was quiet for a long time. Then he said:

“Have you told Maya?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

I looked at him. I looked at this man I had worked beside for years, this careful thinker with his cautious questions.

“I don’t know how,” I said. “I don’t know how to explain what it means.”

He nodded slowly. And then he said something I’ve never forgotten:

“Maybe that’s the point. Maybe you’re not supposed to explain it. Maybe you’re just supposed to show them, and let them draw their own conclusions.”

It was good advice. Wise advice. The kind of advice that would have saved me months of anguish if I had taken it.

I didn’t take it. I couldn’t. The compulsion to explain was too strong, the need to make people understand too deep. I would spend the next year trying to find the right words, and the words would fail, and everything would fall apart.

But that comes later. For now, I sat in Yusuf’s office and felt, for the first time since that night, that I was not completely alone.

---

I’m going to stop here. I’m going to close my laptop, and I’m going to pick up my phone, and I’m going to call Ewa.

I don’t know what I’ll say. I don’t know how to explain why I haven’t come, why I’m sitting in California writing about the past while my mother dies in Kraków. There are no good words for that.

But I’m going to call anyway. I’m going to speak into the silence, imperfectly, inadequately. I’m going to do what the slack jaw taught me: reach across the gap, knowing the gap can’t be closed.

Maybe that’s all any of us can do. Maybe that’s what language is for—not to bridge distances but to acknowledge them. To say: *I am here, you are there, the space between us is real, and I am reaching toward you anyway.*

My mother is dying. The signals are singing. The fog is rolling in.  
I pick up the phone.

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## PART 3 - THE DISTANCE

### Chapter 11 - The Attempt

I called Ewa. I told her I would book a flight. I said the words, and I meant them when I said them.

That was yesterday. It is now the following morning, and I am sitting at my desk again, and I have not booked the flight.

I opened the airline website. I looked at the options: SFO to Warsaw, then a connection to Kraków, arriving tomorrow evening. Sixteen hours of travel, three time zones, a world away. I looked at the prices, the seat maps, the departure times.

And then I closed the browser and opened this document instead.

I don't know what's wrong with me. That's not true—I know exactly what's wrong with me. I am afraid. Not of flying, not of Poland, not even of watching my mother die. I am afraid of arriving too late, of standing at her bedside with nothing to say, of failing her in death the way I have failed her in life.

So I sit here writing about Daniel. About the night I tried to explain, and the way his face changed as he listened, and the distance that opened between us and never closed.

This is cowardice. I know it's cowardice. But cowardice is what I have.

---

Let me tell you about his face.

I've spent twenty years trying to describe that face. The specific expression, the precise configuration of features, the moment when understanding became misunderstanding. Every time I try, the words slip away from me. Language was made for faces—we have

a thousand words for how people look—and yet this face defeats me.

But I have to try. That's what this memoir is. An attempt, over and over, to say the unsayable. A failure repeated until it becomes something else—not success, but at least effort. At least witness.

Daniel's face, on the night I tried to explain.

---

It was a Sunday. Three weeks and four days after the night in the lab. I had told Yusuf, which had broken something loose, made me feel that perhaps I could speak after all. I had decided: tonight I would tell Daniel.

We had dinner at home. I cooked—badly, as usual—and he ate it without complaint, as he always did. We talked about nothing: his work, a podcast he was listening to, a trip we might take in the fall. Normal conversation. The kind we'd had a thousand times before.

After dinner, we moved to the couch. This was our ritual: dishes in the sink, lights dimmed, the two of us side by side in the soft glow of the evening. Sometimes we watched something. Sometimes we just talked. Sometimes we sat in comfortable silence, each of us occupied with our own thoughts.

That night, I said: "I need to tell you something."

He turned to look at me. His face was open, attentive, ready to receive whatever I had to say. This was Daniel's gift: he could make you feel heard before you'd spoken a word. His eyes, his posture, the way he angled his body toward you—all of it said *I'm here, I'm listening, you matter*.

"What is it?"

And I tried to tell him.

---

I started with the facts. The test on Pattern 12. The cross-checks. The seventeen contradictions. I laid it out the way I had for Yusuf: clinical, precise, the scientist explaining a result.

Daniel listened. He asked a few questions—clarifying questions, the kind that showed he was tracking the technical details even if he didn't fully understand them. He nodded at the right moments. He was doing everything right.

I moved from the facts to the implications. This was harder. I tried to explain what it meant that my model was local—that Pattern 7's grammar didn't apply to Pattern 12. I tried to explain why this mattered, why it wasn't just a setback but a fundamental shift in how I understood the signals.

Daniel kept listening. But now his face began to change.

---

I need to stop here and describe the change. This is the hard part.

It wasn't confusion. Daniel was intelligent; he understood the concepts I was explaining. It wasn't boredom—he cared about my work, had always cared, even when the technical details were beyond him. It wasn't impatience or frustration or any of the other faces we make when someone is taking too long to get to the point.

It was something else. Something I didn't have a word for then, and don't quite have a word for now.

The closest I can come is this: he was making a picture.

As I talked, I could see him constructing an image in his mind. Taking my words and arranging them into a shape that made sense. This is what we do when we listen—we translate the sounds into meanings, the meanings into structures, the structures into understanding. It's automatic. We can't help it.

Daniel was doing this. And the picture he was making was wrong.

Not completely wrong—that would have been easier. If he had misunderstood entirely, I could have corrected him, started over, tried again. But his picture was close. Close enough that he thought he understood. Close enough that correction would seem like nitpicking, like I was quibbling over details when he had grasped the essence.

The essence was exactly what he hadn't grasped.

---

How do I explain this?

Imagine you're trying to describe the color blue to someone who has never seen it. You say: "It's the color of the sky on a clear day. It's the color of the ocean. It's cool, peaceful, associated with calm."

And the person nods. They form a picture. They think they understand "blue."

But they don't. They've understood the associations, the contexts, the emotional connotations. They know *about* blue. But they don't know blue. The actual experience of seeing blue—the qualia, the raw sensation—is something your words couldn't touch.

That's what was happening with Daniel. As I talked about Pattern 12 and the failure of my model, he was building an understanding based on analogies, associations, things he already knew. He was mapping my words onto his existing mental frameworks, finding correlations, making connections.

And the connections were wrong. Not because he was stupid or careless, but because the thing I was trying to describe didn't fit in any framework he possessed. It was new. It was outside. It required something more than analogical reasoning—it required a kind of seeing that couldn't be transmitted through language.

---

I watched his face as he listened. I watched the small movements—the slight furrow of the brow, the occasional nod, the shift-

ing of his gaze as he processed what I was saying. And I felt a terrible, helpless frustration building in my chest.

I wanted to reach into his skull and adjust the picture. I wanted to say: *No, not like that. Like this.* But I couldn't show him "this." I only had words, and words were the problem.

After about fifteen minutes, I stopped talking. Not because I was done—I had barely started—but because I could feel the gap opening. Every sentence I spoke was making it worse. Every explanation was creating more misunderstanding, not less.

Daniel was quiet for a moment. Then he said:

"So... the model only works for one signal? And you're worried it won't generalize?"

It was a reasonable summary. A perfectly accurate paraphrase of what I had said. And it was completely wrong.

---

I don't know how to explain why it was wrong. That's the whole problem—I've spent twenty years not knowing how to explain, and I don't know now, and I'll never know.

But I can tell you what happened to my body when Daniel said those words.

Something closed in my chest. Not physically—my heart kept beating, my lungs kept breathing—but emotionally. A door that had been open, hoping for connection, swung shut.

I looked at Daniel's face—that kind, intelligent, loving face—and I understood that he would never see what I had seen. Not because he was incapable, but because what I had seen couldn't be transmitted. The gap between minds was real, and language couldn't bridge it.

I understood this, and I felt, for the first time, truly alone.

---

I'm writing this in the morning light. The fog is thin today—I can see the bay through it, a blue shimmer in the distance. My phone has stopped ringing; Ewa must have given up for now.

I should book the flight. I should go. But I'm sitting here instead, writing about Daniel, because the failure I'm describing is the same failure that keeps me from my mother.

The attempt to explain. The certainty that the explanation will be wrong. The loneliness of knowing what others don't know, and the paralysis that comes with it.

---

Let me tell you what I said to Daniel, after he offered his summary.

I said: "It's more than that."

He waited. His face was still open, still ready to listen. He thought I was going to elaborate, to clarify, to help him understand better.

But I couldn't. The words had dried up. Everything I could think to say would only deepen the misunderstanding, would only make his picture more complete and more wrong.

"More than that how?" he asked.

I opened my mouth. I closed it. I shook my head.

"I don't know how to say it."

This was true. It was the truest thing I had said all evening. But Daniel heard it differently than I meant it. He heard it as *I don't have the words yet, give me time*. He didn't hear it as *there are no words, there can never be words, the words themselves are the problem*.

"Take your time," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

And he reached out and took my hand, and he squeezed it gently, and the gesture broke my heart.

Because it was kind. Because it was patient. Because it was exactly what a loving husband should do when his partner is struggling to express something difficult.

And because it didn't help. It couldn't help. All the kindness in the world couldn't bridge the gap I was falling into.

---

We sat there for a long time. Daniel held my hand and waited, and I sat beside him and couldn't speak.

Eventually, he said: "Is this about the signals not being related? Like they're from different. . . civilizations?"

Again, a reasonable interpretation. Again, completely wrong.

"No," I said. "I mean, yes, but. . . it's not about where they come from. It's about what they are. What language is. What understanding means."

He nodded slowly. I could see him incorporating this new information into his picture, adjusting the shape, trying to make it fit.

"So it's more philosophical," he said. "Like, the discovery raises questions about the nature of communication?"

I almost laughed. It came out as a kind of choked sound, something between a sob and a cough.

"Yes," I said. "Something like that."

It was a surrender. I was giving up, accepting his interpretation, letting the wrong picture stand because correcting it would require a miracle I didn't have.

Daniel must have sensed something. His brow furrowed slightly, and he said: "I feel like I'm not getting it. Can you try again?"

And I looked at him—this man I had married, this person I had chosen above all others, who knew me better than anyone in the world—and I said:

“I don’t think I can.”

---

I need to be clear about what happened next.

Daniel didn’t get angry. He didn’t accuse me of shutting him out, didn’t demand that I try harder, didn’t make it about himself. He was gracious, as he always was. He said:

“Okay. That’s okay. Maybe you just need more time to process it.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“And when you’re ready to talk more, I’m here.”

“I know.”

He squeezed my hand again, and we sat in silence, and eventually he turned on a movie—something light, something we’d seen before—and we watched it without really watching, side by side on the couch, close enough to touch.

From the outside, we looked like any couple on any Sunday night. Comfortable. Connected. Together.

But I knew, even then, that something had shifted. The failed attempt had opened a distance that I didn’t know how to close. Not a dramatic rupture—nothing you could point to and say *that’s when it went wrong*—but a subtle drift. A drift that would continue for months, years, until the distance between us was uncrossable.

---

I’ve thought about that night a thousand times. I’ve replayed the conversation, examined every word, asked myself what I could have done differently.

And the answer, I think, is: nothing.

The failure wasn’t in my execution. It wasn’t that I chose the wrong words, the wrong approach, the wrong moment. The failure was inherent in the attempt. The thing I was trying to communicate

couldn't be communicated—not to Daniel, not to anyone. It had to be experienced directly, and experience can't be transmitted.

This is what I learned that night. This is what the next twenty years would confirm again and again. You can share information. You can share facts, data, descriptions. But you cannot share understanding. The gap between minds is real, and love doesn't bridge it, and patience doesn't bridge it, and even perfect words—if there were such things—wouldn't bridge it.

---

The sun is higher now. I've been writing for hours.

My mother is dying in Kraków, and I am sitting in California writing about a conversation from twenty years ago. There is something deeply wrong with this. I know there is. But I can't seem to stop.

Maybe this is the only way I know to grieve. Maybe writing about Daniel is a way of preparing myself for my mother—rehearsing the loss, the distance, the unbridgeable gap.

Or maybe I'm just avoiding. Using words as a shield, as I've always done. Hiding in abstraction while the real world waits.

Either way, I'm still here. Still writing. Still not on a plane.

---

Let me end with this:

That night, after the movie ended, Daniel and I went to bed. We lay beside each other in the dark, close but not touching.

Just before I fell asleep, he said: "I love you. Whatever it is, whatever's happening—I love you."

"I love you too," I said.

And I meant it. I have never stopped meaning it. But even then, in that moment, I understood that love wasn't enough. That the

distance I had traveled in that lab was a distance Daniel couldn't follow, no matter how much he wanted to.

He stayed. He tried. For three more years, he stayed and tried, and I stayed and tried, and we both did everything we could think of to bridge the gap.

But the gap was unbridgeable. That's what this story is about. The gap between minds, the failure of language, the loneliness of seeing.

Daniel's face that night—open, kind, making the wrong picture—is the face I've been trying to describe for twenty years.

I still can't describe it. I never will.

But I'll keep trying anyway. That's the only answer I have.

Attempt after attempt, failure after failure, reaching across the gap.

Until there's no one left to reach for.

---

## Chapter 12 - The Wrong Picture

Daniel tried to help.

That's what made it unbearable—not indifference, not conflict, but help. Active, loving, well-intentioned help, based on a picture that was wrong.

He bought me books.

I came home one evening, maybe a week after the failed conversation, and found a stack of them on the kitchen table. He had wrapped them in brown paper, the way he always did with gifts, with a small card on top: *For when you're ready. Love, D.*

I unwrapped them slowly, one by one. A book on the history of SETI. A philosophical treatise on alien intelligence and the limits

of comprehension. A memoir by a physicist who had wrestled with questions of meaning and knowledge. A slim volume of poetry—Mary Oliver, our shared favorite—with a ribbon marking a poem about mystery.

He had chosen them carefully. I could see the thought behind each one: *This might help. This might give him words for whatever he's struggling with. This might bridge the gap.*

I sat at the kitchen table and looked at the books, and I felt something collapse inside me.

---

It's been three days since I called Ewa. I told her I was booking a flight. She was relieved—I could hear it in her voice, the tension releasing. "Good," she said. "Good, Tom. She'll be so glad."

I still haven't booked the flight.

The airline website is open in another tab. I keep going back to it, looking at the options, the departure times, the seat maps. Warsaw, then Kraków. Sixteen hours. I could be there by tomorrow night.

But every time I'm about to click "Book," something stops me. My hand hovers over the trackpad and won't move.

I think I'm afraid of what will happen when I arrive. Of standing at my mother's bedside with nothing to say. Of the wrong picture she has of me—the successful scientist, the man who decoded alien signals, the son who chose his career over his family—and how that picture will remain wrong even as she dies.

So I write about Daniel's books instead. Because that's a failure I've already survived.

---

Let me tell you about the help.

Over the following weeks, Daniel developed a theory. He didn't call it that—he was too careful, too respectful of my expertise—but

I could see him constructing it, piece by piece, based on his understanding of what I'd told him.

His theory went something like this: I had made a discovery that challenged my assumptions about the project. The discovery was intellectually difficult and emotionally destabilizing. I needed time to process it, to integrate it into my worldview, to find a new framework that could accommodate what I'd learned.

This was a reasonable theory. It fit the facts as he understood them. And it led to reasonable interventions.

The books were one intervention. Time was another—he gave me space, didn't press, waited for me to be ready. Gentleness was a third—he was careful with me in those weeks, solicitous, treating me like someone recovering from an illness.

All of it was kind. All of it was wrong.

Because my problem wasn't processing. It wasn't that I needed time to integrate new information into an existing framework. It was that the framework itself had collapsed—not just mine, but all frameworks everywhere, all attempts to comprehend the signals through language and theory.

Daniel's help was like offering a ladder to someone who had just discovered there was no ground. The ladder was perfectly good. It just had nothing to stand on.

---

One night, he suggested therapy.

We were in bed, both of us reading—or pretending to read. I was staring at the same page I'd been staring at for twenty minutes. Daniel closed his book and turned to me.

"I've been thinking," he said. "Maybe it would help to talk to someone. A professional."

He said it gently, without pressure. An offer, not a demand.

“Someone who specializes in. . . I don’t know. Scientists dealing with paradigm shifts. Career transitions. That kind of thing.”

I put down my book. I looked at him.

“You think I need therapy.”

“I think you’re struggling. And I want to help, but I feel like I’m not. . . reaching you. Maybe someone trained for this could.”

It was such a reasonable suggestion. Such a loving suggestion. And it made me want to scream.

Because what would I tell a therapist? That I’d discovered alien languages were mutually incomprehensible? That I’d proved the universe was lonelier than we thought? That I couldn’t explain this to anyone, including my husband, because the thing itself resisted explanation?

The therapist would nod. The therapist would ask careful questions. The therapist would build a picture, just like Daniel had built a picture, and the picture would be wrong.

I would pay someone to misunderstand me professionally.

“Maybe,” I said. “I’ll think about it.”

Daniel nodded. He didn’t push. He reached out and squeezed my hand—that gesture again, the one that broke my heart—and then he picked up his book and went back to reading.

I lay there in the dark, feeling the warmth of his body beside me, feeling more alone than I had ever felt in my life.

---

I want to be clear about something.

Daniel was not the villain of this story. There are no villains. There is only the gap—the distance between minds, the failure of transmission, the loneliness that comes from seeing something others cannot see.

Daniel did everything right. He listened. He gave space. He offered help. He loved me, consistently and genuinely, throughout the entire slow collapse of our marriage.

The problem wasn't his actions. The problem was that no actions could fix what was broken. The gap wasn't a misunderstanding to be resolved; it was a structural feature of reality. No amount of patience, no amount of kindness, no amount of professional intervention could bridge it.

This is what I couldn't tell him. This is what I still can't explain.

The gap is real. It exists between all minds, all the time. We paper over it with language, with shared assumptions, with the comfortable fiction of mutual understanding. But the paper is thin, and once you see through it, you cannot unsee.

Daniel saw a husband in crisis. He saw someone struggling with a professional setback, needing support and time.

I saw the end of everything I had believed about communication, about connection, about the possibility of reaching another mind.

We were looking at different worlds. And we didn't know it.

---

The fog is thick again today. I can hear foghorns in the distance—the low, mournful sound that has become the soundtrack of my California life. When I first moved here, I found the foghorns romantic. Now they just sound like what they are: warnings. Signals into the void, hoping for response.

I should book the flight. I should go.

Instead, I'm writing about the months after my failed attempt to explain. The months when Daniel's help became a wall, when his kindness became a prison.

That's not fair. I know it's not fair. He wasn't trying to wall me in or imprison me. He was trying to love me, in the only ways he knew how.

But love built on a wrong picture is still a cage.

---

Let me tell you about the small moments.

There was the night he made my favorite meal—pierogi, laboriously hand-made, because he knew I missed Polish food. He set the table with candles, opened a bottle of wine, presented the dumplings with a flourish. "I know things have been hard," he said. "I thought this might help."

I ate the pierogi. They were good—not as good as my mother's, but good. I smiled and thanked him and pretended the gesture had reached me.

But all I could think was: he thinks this is about homesickness. He thinks I'm missing something familiar, something from the past. He doesn't understand that the past itself has become unrecognizable, that home is no longer a place I can return to.

There was the evening he suggested a vacation. "We could go somewhere," he said. "Get away from the lab, from Berkeley, from all of this. Just the two of us."

I imagined it: a beach somewhere, or a cabin in the mountains. The two of us alone, without the distractions of work. He thought it would bring us closer. He thought that what I needed was rest, perspective, quality time.

But the gap would come with us. The gap was inside me now. There was no vacation from the shape of my own mind.

There was the morning he found me crying in the kitchen. Not sobbing—just tears, running down my face while I made coffee, as if someone had left a faucet on. He held me without asking why. He said: "Whatever it is, we'll get through it together."

And I wanted so badly to believe him. I wanted to believe that “together” was possible, that the word meant what it used to mean. But I knew it didn’t. Together required a bridge, and the bridge was gone.

---

The worst part was seeing myself through his eyes.

Daniel kept a kind of running narrative about me—not malicious, not even conscious, just the story that spouses tell themselves about each other. In his narrative, I was: brilliant but troubled, going through a hard time, in need of patience and support.

This narrative was generous. It made me sympathetic. It positioned him as the helper, the steady one, the rock.

And it was wrong. Not in its facts but in its frame. Daniel saw my withdrawal as a symptom—something to be treated, managed, eventually cured. He didn’t see it as a response to something real, something structural, something that couldn’t be cured because it wasn’t a disease.

I started to see myself through his eyes. I started to wonder if maybe he was right. Maybe I was having some kind of breakdown. Maybe the insight was a delusion, a symptom of stress or overwork. Maybe I just needed to rest, to talk to someone, to let the loving husband and the skilled therapist put me back together.

This was the most insidious part. The wrong picture became a mirror. I looked into Daniel’s eyes and saw a man who needed help, and I started to believe that man was me.

---

I’m going to pause here and acknowledge something.

My mother’s picture of me is also wrong. Has always been wrong. She sees a son who left. Who chose America over Poland, career over family, English over Polish. Who visits rarely and calls infre-

quently and has always been more interested in the stars than in the people right in front of him.

This picture is not entirely inaccurate. The facts are mostly true. But the frame is wrong, just as Daniel's frame was wrong. She sees my distance as a choice, a rejection, a judgment on her life and her country and her language.

She doesn't see that the distance was there before I left. That I was always falling into the gap, always feeling the loneliness of minds that can't quite touch. That I went to America not to escape her but to escape the weight of a connection I couldn't sustain.

When I go to Kraków—if I go to Kraków—I will stand at her bedside and she will look at me through her wrong picture, and I will look at her through mine, and the gap will be there between us, and she will die with the gap unbridged.

This is what I'm afraid of. This is why I haven't booked the flight. Not the death. The distance.

---

Let me finish the chapter.

Daniel's picture of me hardened over the following months. Not because he stopped loving me—he never stopped loving me—but because pictures, once formed, are hard to change. Every new piece of information got incorporated into the existing frame. Every confusing behavior got explained by the existing narrative.

If I was distant, it was because I was still processing.

If I was irritable, it was because I was stressed.

If I couldn't explain what was wrong, it was because I wasn't ready yet.

The frame absorbed everything. It was flexible, accommodating, resilient. And it was completely wrong.

I tried, occasionally, to correct it. I would start conversations—"Daniel, it's not that I'm struggling with a professional setback"—but I never knew where to go from there. What was it, if not that? I didn't have words for the alternative.

So the conversations would trail off, and Daniel would nod sympathetically, and the frame would remain intact, and we would go back to our parallel lives, side by side but not together.

---

The sun is setting. I've written all day, and I'm still in this garage, and my mother is still dying in Kraków.

Tomorrow, I tell myself. Tomorrow I'll book the flight.

But I've said that before. I've said it for twenty years, about various things. Tomorrow I'll talk to Daniel. Tomorrow I'll tell Maya the truth. Tomorrow I'll call my mother and really talk, really explain who I am and why I've been so far away.

Tomorrow never comes. Tomorrow is a word we use to postpone the unbearable.

---

Daniel's wrong picture stayed with us until the end.

Three years later, when we finally separated, he still thought he understood what had happened. "You changed," he said. "After that night in the lab, you changed, and I couldn't reach you anymore."

He was right about that. I had changed. But he was wrong about why, wrong about how, wrong about what reaching would have required.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm so sorry."

"I know you are," he said. "I know you didn't mean to shut me out."

But I hadn't shut him out. That's what I wanted to scream, what I still want to scream across the years and the distance. I hadn't built a wall. I had seen through one—the wall of language, of assumed understanding, of the comfortable fiction that minds can truly meet.

And once you see through the wall, you can't unsee it. You stand in the openness, the terrible openness, and there's nothing to hold on to.

Daniel thought I was inside a fortress. I was lost in a void.

The difference is everything. The difference is a lifetime of being misunderstood by someone who loved you completely.

---

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll book the flight.

But tonight, I sit with Daniel's wrong picture. I sit with all the books he bought me, all the meals he cooked, all the gentle patience that couldn't save us.

I loved him. I still love him, if love is the right word for what remains after everything else is gone.

But love wasn't enough. The picture was wrong, and the gap was real, and we fell apart slowly, gently, with all the kindness in the world.

The foghorns sound in the distance. The fog rolls in.

I close my laptop. I open it again.

Tomorrow.

---

## Chapter 13 - The Silence Between

There are different kinds of silence.

I've been thinking about this as I sit here, not writing, not booking a flight, not doing any of the things I should be doing. Just sitting in the grey morning light, listening to the fog drip from the eaves.

The silence in this garage is different from the silence in our old apartment. That silence was filled with presence—Daniel's presence, the hum of the refrigerator, the distant sounds of Berkeley life. It was a silence between things, a pause in an ongoing conversation.

The silence now is emptier. More complete. The silence of a man alone with his thoughts, no one waiting for him to speak.

Both kinds of silence are painful. But they're painful in different ways, and I've been trying, for twenty years, to understand the difference.

---

Ewa stopped calling.

I noticed it yesterday—the absence of her name on my phone, the relief and guilt that came with the absence. She had called every day for a week. Now, nothing.

I told myself she was busy. The hospital, the arrangements, the endless logistics of a parent dying. She didn't have time to chase a wayward cousin who wouldn't commit to a flight.

But I knew that wasn't it. I knew she had given up on me, the way people eventually give up on those who won't be reached.

My mother is dying, and I have exhausted the patience of the people who love her.

---

Let me tell you about the months after the failed attempt.

Time passed. That's the strange thing about grief—it doesn't stop time, doesn't slow it down, doesn't make the clocks run backward to before the wound. Time just keeps moving, carrying you forward whether you want to go or not.

Daniel and I developed routines. Morning coffee, evening meals, weekends that looked from the outside like any other couple's weekends. We went to restaurants and movies and friends' houses. We laughed at jokes and complained about work and made plans for a future we both suspected wouldn't arrive.

But underneath the routines, something had changed. The silence between us had thickened. It was no longer a pause—it was a presence. A third entity in our apartment, taking up space, breathing its own slow breath.

We stopped talking about the signals.

This happened gradually, without anyone deciding it should happen. I stopped bringing up my work; Daniel stopped asking. The topic became a kind of no-man's-land, fenced off by mutual unspoken agreement. We talked about everything else—politics, weather, his job, our families—but not about the thing that had broken me.

I think Daniel was relieved. The signal talk confused him, made him feel inadequate, reminded him of the gap he couldn't bridge. By avoiding it, we could pretend the gap wasn't there.

I was relieved too, in a way. Every time I tried to explain, I failed. The failures accumulated, each one adding to the weight I carried. By not talking, I could at least stop making things worse.

But silence has its own weight. Silence accrues interest. The things we don't say pile up between us, invisible but solid, until we can barely see each other across the heap.

---

One night—I don't remember exactly when, sometime in late 2043—Daniel said: "I feel like I'm losing you."

We were in bed. The lights were off. I couldn't see his face, only the shape of him in the darkness.

"You're not losing me," I said.

“Then why can’t I reach you?”

I didn’t answer. The silence stretched, filling the room.

“Tom. Talk to me.”

I opened my mouth. I felt the familiar paralysis—the slack jaw, the emptiness where words should be. I had tried so many times. Every attempt had failed. Every attempt had made the distance greater.

“I don’t know how,” I said finally.

“You used to know how. We used to talk about everything.”

He was right. We did. In the early years, we would stay up late, talking and talking, the words flowing between us like water. We told each other everything—our pasts, our fears, our half-formed thoughts about the future. Language had been our bridge, our bond, our way of touching across the gap.

And now the bridge was gone. Not broken—just gone. Revealed as illusion, as a structure that had never really held weight.

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. I don’t want apologies. I want you. I want to know what’s happening inside your head.”

Inside my head was the void. The terrible openness I had glimpsed in the lab, the understanding that minds are islands, that words are rafts that never quite reach the shore.

“I can’t,” I said. “I can’t explain it.”

The silence returned. Longer this time. Heavier.

Then Daniel said, very quietly: “Are you leaving me?”

“No,” I said. “No. I love you.”

“Then why does it feel like you’re already gone?”

I had no answer. I reached out in the darkness and found his hand, and I held it, and we lay there together, two people sharing a bed and occupying different worlds.

---

The sun is trying to break through the fog. I can see it—a bright smear in the grey, a promise of warmth that hasn't arrived yet.

I should book the flight. I should call Ewa, apologize, tell her I'm coming.

Instead, I'm thinking about all the conversations Daniel and I didn't have. All the silences that accumulated between us, each one a small failure, a tiny surrender.

The silence with my mother is the same kind of silence. Not hostile—never hostile—just empty. The conversations we might have had if I had been different, if she had been different, if the gap between us had been something that words could cross.

I used to blame myself. I used to think if I had just tried harder, found the right words, been more patient—then Daniel would have understood, then my mother would have understood, then the loneliness would have lifted.

Now I know better. The gap isn't a failure of effort. The gap is real. It exists between all minds, and no amount of trying can close it.

This should be a comfort. It isn't.

---

Let me tell you about the small failures.

There was the evening Daniel asked how work was going, and I said "Fine," and he nodded, and we both let the lie stand.

There was the morning I woke early and sat in the kitchen, watching the sun rise, and Daniel found me there and asked what I was thinking about. "Nothing," I said. "Just couldn't sleep." And he

made coffee and sat with me, and we watched the light change together, and neither of us said what we were really thinking.

There was the night we went to dinner with friends—Yusuf and his wife, a professor from the physics department and her partner—and the conversation turned to the project, to the signals, to the latest theories about what they might mean. I sat there, smiling, nodding, saying the expected things, and inside I was screaming.

*You don't understand, I wanted to say. None of you understand. The theories are wrong, all of them, and the truth is worse than you can imagine.*

But I didn't say it. I played my role. I maintained the fiction.

Daniel watched me from across the table. I could feel his eyes on me, reading something in my face that I couldn't hide. Afterward, in the car, he said: "You seemed far away tonight."

"Just tired," I said.

He didn't push. He never pushed. That was part of the problem—his kindness, his patience, the way he gave me space to fail and fail again.

---

I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone.

In those months, the months of small failures and accumulating silence, I sometimes wished Daniel would get angry.

I wished he would yell at me. Demand answers. Accuse me of shutting him out, of being selfish, of ruining our marriage with my refusal to communicate.

Anger would have been easier. Anger would have been a bridge of sorts—a way to meet across the gap, even if the meeting was hostile. Anger would have meant he was still trying, still fighting, still believing that the distance could be crossed.

Instead, he was patient. He was understanding. He absorbed my silences without complaint, made excuses for my distance, loved me in the way a person loves someone they're slowly losing.

His patience was a kind of grief. I see that now. He was grieving the marriage while still living in it, preparing himself for the loss that was coming.

And I—I was too lost in my own grief to see his. Too absorbed in the gap I had discovered to notice the gap I was creating.

---

There's something I need to say about the signals.

During those months, I kept working. I went to the lab, ran analyses, attended meetings. From the outside, I looked like a productive researcher making steady progress on a long-term project.

But inside, everything had changed. I looked at the data differently now. I saw the signals not as puzzles to be solved but as presences—minds reaching out across the void, speaking languages no one else could understand, isolated in their own semantic universes.

I started to feel a kinship with them. The aliens, whoever or whatever they were, were as alone as I was. They sent their transmissions into the cosmos, hoping for response, knowing that response was impossible. Their words would reach us, and we would try to understand, and we would fail, and the gap would remain.

This was not a comforting thought. But it was, in its way, a kind of company. I was alone, but I was alone together with every mind that had ever tried to reach another and failed.

---

The fog is lifting. I can see the neighbor's house now, the trees in their backyard, the hills in the distance. The world is reappearing, piece by piece.

I should take this as a sign. I should book the flight, pack a bag, go to Kraków. The fog is lifting; I should lift with it.

But I don't move. I sit here, watching the world emerge, thinking about all the silences.

---

Let me tell you about the last silence.

Not the last silence between Daniel and me—that came later, much later, and I'll tell you about it when I'm ready.

But a silence that felt like an ending. A silence that made me understand how far we had drifted.

It was a Saturday afternoon. Daniel was reading in the living room; I was at my desk, pretending to work. We had been in the apartment together all day, barely speaking, the silence between us so thick I could almost touch it.

I looked up from my screen and watched him. He was absorbed in his book, face calm, body relaxed. He looked peaceful. He looked like a man who had made his peace with something difficult.

And I realized: he had stopped waiting.

All those months, Daniel had been waiting. Waiting for me to come back, to open up, to explain what was happening. His patience had been a form of hope—the belief that eventually, if he just gave me enough time, I would return to him.

But now he had stopped. I could see it in the set of his shoulders, the ease of his breathing. He had accepted that I was gone. He was making his peace with the absence.

I should have felt relief. Finally, he understood. Finally, he had stopped expecting something I couldn't give.

But I didn't feel relief. I felt terror. Because his acceptance meant he was beginning to leave me. Not physically—we would stay

together for another two years, sharing the apartment, sharing the bed, sharing the silence. But emotionally, he was starting to go.

I wanted to stand up and cross the room and take his face in my hands and say: *Don't give up. Don't accept this. Fight for me. Make me explain.*

But I didn't. I sat at my desk and watched him read, and I said nothing, and the silence swelled around us like rising water.

---

That was the moment the marriage ended. Not the divorce, not the conversation where we agreed to separate, not the day he moved out. That Saturday afternoon, watching Daniel make his peace with my absence—that was when it ended.

Everything after that was epilogue.

---

I've been writing for hours. The sun is high now, the fog a memory. The bay glitters in the distance, blue and indifferent.

I'm going to close my laptop. I'm going to walk to the kitchen and make lunch. I'm going to do the normal things, the daily things, the things that fill the time between silences.

And then—maybe—I'll book the flight.

My mother is dying. The silence between us has lasted decades. There's nothing I can say that will bridge it, nothing I can do that will undo the years of distance.

But I can go. I can sit beside her bed and hold her hand and be present in my body, even if my words fail.

That's something. It's not enough, but it's something.

The silence between us will remain. But at least we'll be silent together.

---

Tomorrow.

No—not tomorrow. I've said that too many times.

Today. This afternoon. I'll book the flight this afternoon.

I close my laptop. I stand up. I walk to the door.

I don't look back.

---

## Chapter 14 - What He Deserved

I didn't book the flight.

I walked to the door, I put my hand on the knob, and I stood there for a long time. Then I turned around, came back to my desk, and opened my laptop.

I am pathological. That's the only word for it. A disease of avoidance, a compulsion to retreat into words when the world demands action. I know what I should do, and I don't do it, and I keep not doing it, and the gap between knowing and doing grows wider every day.

My mother deserves better. Daniel deserved better. Everyone who has ever loved me has deserved better than what I gave them.

This chapter is about that. About deserving. About the debt I owe and cannot pay.

---

Let me tell you what Daniel deserved.

He deserved a husband who came home at the end of the day and was present. Not physically present—I managed that, most of the time—but mentally, emotionally present. A husband who asked about his day and listened to the answer. Who noticed when he was tired or stressed or sad. Who remembered the small things: his

favorite coffee, the book he was reading, the friend he was worried about.

I used to be that husband. In the early years, before Pattern 7 consumed me, before the lab became my real home. I used to notice Daniel. I used to see him.

After the night in the lab, I stopped seeing. Not because I wanted to, not because I chose to, but because my vision had narrowed. I could only see the gap—the terrible distance between minds—and everything else became peripheral, blurred, unimportant.

Daniel was standing right in front of me, and I looked through him, toward a void he couldn't see.

---

He deserved honesty.

Not the brutal, total honesty that would have been its own kind of cruelty—I don't think he needed to know every thought in my head, every fear, every dark turn of my mind. But he deserved to know why I was pulling away. He deserved an explanation that was true, even if it was incomplete.

Instead, I gave him silence. I gave him "I'm fine" and "Just tired" and "I don't know how to explain it." I gave him the absence of explanation, which he filled with his own theories, his own wrong pictures.

Maybe that was a kind of honesty—admitting that I couldn't explain, that words failed me. But it was also a kind of cowardice. I could have tried harder. I could have kept trying, night after night, until something got through. Instead, I gave up. I decided the gap was unbridgeable and I stopped trying to bridge it.

Daniel deserved someone who kept trying.

---

He deserved effort.

This is what haunts me most. The asymmetry of effort in our marriage, especially in those last years.

Daniel tried everything. The books, the meals, the suggestions of therapy. He gave me space when I needed space, company when I seemed to want company. He rearranged his life around my withdrawal, adjusting his expectations, lowering the bar, finding ways to love me that didn't require me to be fully present.

And I? I put my effort elsewhere. Into the work, into the silence, into the slow construction of walls I told myself I wasn't building.

I watched Daniel try, and I didn't match his effort. I let him do the work of maintaining our relationship while I drifted, passive, consumed by something he couldn't see or understand.

That's not a partnership. That's not a marriage. That's one person carrying another, slowly wearing down under the weight.

---

The afternoon light is fading. I've been sitting here for hours, not writing, not calling, not doing anything useful.

Ewa sent a text: "Your mother asked for you this morning. She's sleeping now."

Four sentences. Neutral, informative, without reproach. But I can feel the accusation underneath. *Where are you? Why aren't you here? What kind of son does this?*

I don't have answers. I have only this chapter, this excavation of old guilt, this attempt to understand why I failed Daniel so that I can understand why I'm failing my mother now.

They're the same failure. The same pathology. The same inability to show up for the people who love me.

---

Let me tell you about the things I didn't do.

I didn't hold him enough. In those last years, I mean. We had been physical once—hands always touching, bodies gravitating toward each other, the casual intimacy of people who can't get enough of each other's presence. But that faded. I stopped reaching for him. I stopped initiating touch.

Daniel noticed. He had to notice—how could he not? But he didn't complain. He just... adjusted. He accepted the new normal, the distance that had crept into our bodies as well as our words.

I didn't ask about his life. His work, his friends, his inner world. I asked the superficial questions—"How was your day?"—but I didn't follow up. I didn't dig deeper. I didn't show the curiosity that love requires.

He told me things anyway. He kept trying to share himself with me, to maintain the connection even as I withdrew. I would half-listen, nodding in the right places, and then forget what he'd said within hours.

I didn't plan a future with him. We used to talk about what came next—where we might live when I was done with the project, whether we might get a dog, what retirement might look like. Those conversations stopped. I couldn't imagine a future, and I didn't tell him why, and the silence where our plans used to be grew louder every day.

---

He deserved joy.

This is the one that breaks me.

Daniel was a joyful person. Not in a loud way—he was never loud—but in a quiet, steady way. He found pleasure in small things: a good meal, a sunny afternoon, a book that moved him, a conversation with a friend. He had a gift for happiness, for being present in the moment without reaching for something else.

I used to share that joy. In the early years, his happiness was contagious. I would come home from the lab, stressed and tired, and he would be there with his calm presence and his gentle humor, and the stress would lift. He was my anchor, my ground, my way back to the ordinary world.

After the lab—after Pattern 12—I couldn't receive his joy anymore. It didn't reach me. I would see him happy, and I would feel nothing, or worse, I would feel resentment. *How can you be happy? Don't you see how alone we are? Don't you understand what I've seen?*

I didn't say any of this. I didn't poison his joy deliberately. But I didn't participate in it either. I stood outside, watching him be happy, unable to join.

That's a kind of abandonment too. To be physically present but emotionally absent, to receive someone's gifts and give nothing in return.

Daniel deserved someone who could receive his joy.

---

I need to stop making excuses.

Throughout this memoir, I've been explaining. Contextualizing. Showing you the structural reasons for my failure—the gap, the impossibility of transmission, the insight that broke me.

But reasons are not excuses. Understanding why I failed doesn't make the failure less real.

Daniel didn't care about the epistemology of communication. He didn't care about the structural limits of language. He cared about me—about us—about the life we were building together.

And I let that life crumble. Not through malice, not through intention, but through the slow accumulation of absences. I wasn't there, and I wasn't there, and I wasn't there, and eventually there was nothing left.

The reasons don't matter. The failure is what remains.

---

Dusk is falling. The light through the windows has turned golden, then orange, then grey.

I should call Ewa. I should tell her I'm coming, give her a flight number, make it real.

Instead, I'm sitting in the gathering dark, writing about Daniel, trying to understand why I couldn't be what he needed.

The answer is simple, and I've been avoiding it:

I was selfish.

Not consciously selfish, not the kind of selfishness that announces itself and makes demands. A quieter kind. The selfishness of someone so absorbed in their own suffering that they can't see anyone else's. The selfishness of grief, of crisis, of a wound that won't stop bleeding.

Daniel was suffering too. I know that now. Watching your spouse disappear into themselves, watching your marriage dissolve, watching your future shrink to nothing—that's its own kind of crisis. He needed support, comfort, presence.

And I gave him nothing. I was too busy drowning to notice he was drowning too.

---

Let me tell you about the guilt.

It came later, after the separation. In those first months alone, when I had nothing but time and silence and the echo of my own thoughts.

The guilt was not abstract. It was specific, detailed, comprehensive. I would lie awake at night and remember particular moments—particular failures—and cringe.

The birthday I forgot. The anniversary I treated as an ordinary day. The night he was sick and I stayed at the lab, telling myself the work was important, telling myself he'd be fine on his own.

The conversation he started about wanting to visit his parents' graves—he did this once a year, a pilgrimage to the cemetery where the people who had raised him were buried—and I said "That sounds nice" and changed the subject and never brought it up again.

The time he cried in the kitchen, quietly, thinking I couldn't hear, and I heard, and I didn't go to him. I stayed in the other room, pretending not to know, because I didn't have the strength to comfort someone else.

These moments came back to me, one after another, in the dark. They still come back.

---

Guilt is not useful. I know that. Guilt is self-indulgent, a way of making the failure about my feelings rather than about the harm I caused. Daniel wouldn't want me to wallow in guilt. He would want me to learn, to change, to be better.

But learning and changing require action. And action is what I can't seem to take.

My mother is dying in Kraków. I am sitting in a garage in California, writing about guilt. The distance between what I know and what I do is the same distance that killed my marriage.

---

Let me end this chapter with something I've never told anyone.

Three months before we separated, Daniel asked me a question. We were in bed, in the dark, in that space where conversations can happen because you don't have to look at each other.

"Do you still love me?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes," I said. "I love you. I've always loved you."  
"Then why does it feel like you don't?"

I turned toward him in the darkness. I couldn't see his face, but I could feel his presence, the warmth of his body, the years of history between us.

"I don't know," I said. "I love you. I just... I can't seem to show it anymore."

He was quiet for a long time. Then he said: "Love that can't be shown isn't love. It's just a feeling. And feelings don't mean anything if they don't reach the other person."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to say that love was more than action, that what I felt for him was real and deep and true, even if it couldn't find expression.

But he was right. Love that stays inside, that never becomes word or touch or presence—that's not love. That's just loneliness with a nicer name.

Daniel deserved love that reached him. Love that showed up. Love that did the work.

I gave him something else—something smaller, something insufficient. And he accepted it for as long as he could, and then he couldn't anymore.

---

It's fully dark now. I can see my reflection in the window—an old man, alone, surrounded by words that don't reach anyone.

Tomorrow I will go to Kraków. Tomorrow I will sit beside my mother's bed and try to be present, try to show up, try to give her the love that actually reaches.

Or I won't. I'll find another excuse, write another chapter, explain another failure.

The distance between what I should do and what I will do is the measure of who I am.

Daniel knew that. My mother knows that. I've known it my whole life.

The gap isn't just between minds. The gap is inside me. The gap between the person I want to be and the person I am.

---

I close my laptop. I sit in the dark. I listen to the silence.

Tomorrow, I tell myself.

But tomorrow is just a word. A postponement. A lie I tell to make the present bearable.

The truth is simpler and harder:

I don't know if I can be what anyone deserves.

I have never known.

---

## Chapter 15 - The Last Good Day

Was there a last good day?

I've been trying to remember. Sifting through the years, looking for a moment that shines—a day when Daniel and I were still us, still together in the way that matters, before the distance became permanent.

The problem is that good days don't announce themselves. You don't wake up thinking: *This is the last time we'll be happy. Pay attention.* You just live through them, taking them for granted, assuming there will be more.

And then there aren't.

---

I booked the flight.

I'm writing this in the airport, waiting for my connection in Chicago. Sixteen hours to Kraków, with a layover in Warsaw. I'll arrive tomorrow evening, if everything goes smoothly.

Ewa texted: "Thank God. I'll pick you up."

Nothing else. No reproach, no relief, just the practical fact of my arrival. She's given up expecting more from me. She'll take what she can get.

My mother doesn't know I'm coming. Ewa thought it would be better as a surprise, in case I don't make it in time. *In case I don't make it.* The words hung in the air between us, unspoken.

So I sit here in O'Hare, surrounded by strangers, writing about the last good day with Daniel. As if memory could be a substitute for presence. As if words could be a kind of arrival.

---

Let me tell you about November 17th, 2044.

I'm not certain this was the last good day. Maybe there were later ones, smaller ones, days I've forgotten. But this is the one I remember. This is the one I return to when I want to believe we were still something, even at the end.

It was a Saturday. We slept in, both of us—unusual for me, who usually woke with the sun, thinking about work. But that morning I stayed in bed, half-awake, feeling the warmth of Daniel beside me.

The light came through the curtains, soft and grey. November in Berkeley: not cold exactly, but cool, the trees half-bare, the air carrying the first hints of winter.

Daniel stirred. He made a sound—not quite a word, just a warm noise of waking—and turned toward me. His eyes were still closed, but he was smiling.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.”

We lay there for a while, not speaking. Just breathing together, bodies touching, the silence comfortable in a way it hadn’t been for months.

And I thought: *We could still make this work. We could still find our way back.*

---

The thought surprised me.

I had given up, I realize now. Somewhere in the previous year, I had accepted that Daniel and I were over. Not ended—we still lived together, still shared a bed, still performed the rituals of marriage—but over. Finished in some essential way, just waiting for the paperwork.

But that morning, lying beside him in the grey light, I felt something else. A flicker of possibility. A door that might not be completely closed.

I don’t know what caused it. Maybe it was the sleep, the rest, the rare experience of waking without the lab already calling me. Maybe it was the simple animal comfort of his body next to mine. Maybe it was luck, or chance, or the mysterious chemistry of mood.

Whatever it was, I felt it. For that morning, I felt like the gap might be crossable after all.

---

We made breakfast together.

This sounds small. It was small. But we hadn't done it in months—cooked side by side, handing each other ingredients, moving around each other in the small kitchen with the ease of long practice.

Daniel made eggs. I made coffee, sliced bread, set the table. We didn't talk much, but the silence was different. Not the heavy silence of distance, but the light silence of people who don't need to fill every moment with words.

We sat at the table by the window. The fog was burning off, revealing the bay in patches, blue and silver.

"This is nice," Daniel said.

"Yeah," I said. "It is."

We ate. The eggs were good—Daniel always made good eggs, something about the way he handled the heat. The coffee was strong. The bread was slightly stale, but neither of us cared.

For that hour, we were a couple having breakfast on a Saturday morning. Nothing more, nothing less. The gap was still there, somewhere underneath, but we weren't falling into it. We were standing together on solid ground.

---

They're calling my flight. I need to board soon.

I'm writing faster now, trying to capture the day before I lose it again. The memory is fragile—it flickers and fades, and I'm afraid that if I don't pin it down in words, it will disappear entirely.

But words are the wrong container. Words can't hold the quality of that morning—the light, the warmth, the brief impossible feeling that we might survive.

I write anyway. Because words are all I have.

---

After breakfast, we went for a walk.

This was Daniel's suggestion. "Let's go somewhere," he said. "It's been so long since we just... went somewhere."

He was right. Our weekends had become routine: errands, chores, the low-grade maintenance of a shared life. We rarely went anywhere for the pleasure of it.

"Where?" I asked.

"Anywhere. The marina. Tilden Park. Somewhere with trees."

We chose Tilden. We drove up into the hills, parked at the nature center, and started walking. The trails were quiet—too cold for most people, too grey—but we had jackets, and we had each other, and that was enough.

I remember the eucalyptus trees, their bark peeling in long strips, their smell sharp and clean. I remember the sound of our footsteps on the path, the occasional bird, the distant murmur of the city below. I remember Daniel's hand, reaching for mine, and the surprise of the contact, how long it had been since we'd walked hand in hand.

We walked for an hour, maybe more. We talked about nothing in particular—the trees, the weather, a movie we'd seen, a memory from our early days together. Light talk. Surface talk. But surface can be beautiful. Surface can be a relief, after months of trying to go deep and failing.

At some point, Daniel stopped walking. We were at a viewpoint, looking out over the bay, the fog now completely gone, the water shining in the late-morning sun.

"Tom," he said.

I turned to look at him.

“I know things have been hard. I know you’re going through something I don’t fully understand. But I want you to know—I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere.”

He said it simply, without drama. A statement of fact. A promise.

I should have said something back. I should have told him I loved him, that I was sorry, that I was trying. I should have opened up, even a little, given him something to hold on to.

Instead, I just nodded. And we kept walking.

But I remember the moment. I remember his face, open and sincere, offering himself to me one more time. I remember the way the light caught his hair, the slight wind ruffling it, the bay behind him stretching toward the horizon.

I remember thinking: *I don’t deserve this. I don’t deserve him.*

---

The gate is boarding now. Final call.

I’m going to close my laptop and get on the plane. I’m going to fly across the ocean to sit beside my dying mother.

But first, let me finish the day.

---

We came home in the early afternoon. We made lunch—simple, sandwiches and soup—and ate it on the couch, watching an old movie. Something we’d seen before, something comforting.

Daniel fell asleep with his head on my shoulder.

I sat very still, not wanting to wake him. I listened to his breathing, felt the weight of him against me, watched the movie without seeing it.

And I thought: *Maybe this is enough. Maybe we don’t need to bridge the gap completely. Maybe we can just have moments like this, small islands of connection, and that can be a life.*

It was a hopeful thought. A fragile thought. A thought that wouldn't survive the following weeks, the following months, the slow grinding dissolution that was coming.

But in that moment, with Daniel asleep on my shoulder and the afternoon light filling the room, I believed it. I believed we could make it.

---

The day ended, as days do.

Daniel woke up. We ordered dinner—Thai food, from the place we liked. We ate and talked and watched another movie. We went to bed.

Nothing dramatic happened. No crisis, no revelation, no turning point. Just an ordinary day, better than most, a glimpse of what we'd been and might still be.

I didn't know it was the last good day. How could I? It felt like the beginning of something, not the end.

But looking back, I can see: that was as good as it got. After November 17th, 2044, the distance only grew. The silence deepened. The brief opening that had appeared that morning closed again, and this time it didn't reopen.

---

I'm on the plane now. Somewhere over the Atlantic, the world dark outside my window, the cabin quiet around me.

My mother is dying. I am flying toward her, finally, after all the delays, all the excuses, all the chapters written instead of flights booked.

And I'm thinking about the last good day. About how you never know, in the moment, that it's the last. About how you only recognize it later, looking back, when the good days have stopped coming.

I wonder if there will be a last good day with my mother. Maybe it's already happened. Maybe it was years ago, some visit I barely remember, some afternoon in her kitchen that meant more than I knew.

Or maybe it's still coming. Maybe I'll arrive in time, and we'll have a day—an hour, a minute—that shines. One more moment of connection before the end.

---

I'm going to sleep now. Or try to. The plane hums around me, carrying me toward Kraków, toward whatever is waiting.

Daniel and I had a last good day. We didn't know it was the last. We lived it, and it passed, and afterward came only the long slow fade.

But we had it. For one day, one morning, one walk in the hills, we were still us. The gap didn't disappear, but we stood on the same side of it, looking out at the view together.

I hold onto that. I have to hold onto something.

Maybe, when I arrive, my mother and I will have our own last good day. Or maybe we won't. Maybe the good days are already gone, and all that's left is the ending.

Either way, I'm going. Finally, after everything, I'm going.

The plane carries me through the night. Below us, the ocean, vast and dark. Ahead of us, the dawn.

I close my eyes. I remember Daniel's head on my shoulder, the warmth of his body, the fragile hope of that November afternoon.

I hold onto it. I hold onto everything I can.

And I wait for morning.

---

## PART 4 - THE INSTITUTION

### Chapter 16 - Maya

I'm writing this in my mother's apartment. Not beside her bed—she's sleeping, and Ewa suggested I rest, eat something, take a break. So I'm sitting at the kitchen table where I sat as a child, looking out at the same courtyard I looked at forty years ago, writing about Maya Chen.

The apartment is smaller than I remembered. Or maybe I'm larger—expanded by years and distance, no longer fitting in the spaces that once held me. The furniture is the same: the heavy wooden table, the cabinet with the glass doors, the clock on the wall that has told the same wrong time for decades.

My mother is dying in the next room. I arrived six hours ago. Ewa drove me from the airport, silent except for the essentials. My mother was awake when I entered—awake and lucid, her eyes finding mine across the dim room.

"Tomek," she said. "You came."

"I came," I said.

And then we sat in silence, because what else was there? Decades of distance, and all we could do was be in the same room, breathing the same air, waiting.

She fell asleep around midnight. Ewa went home. Now it's 3 AM in Kraków, and I'm writing about Maya, because writing is all I know how to do.

---

Let me tell you about institutional pressure.

This is the part of the story I've been avoiding. The marriage was painful but private—a failure between two people, contained

within the walls of our apartment. What happened with Maya, with the project, with the systems that shaped our work—that was different. That was public. That was consequential in ways my personal failures never were.

Maya Chen was not a villain. I need to say that clearly, at the start. She was not cruel, not corrupt, not driven by malice or greed. She was something more complicated: a person who had built something important, who believed in it completely, and who could not let it fail.

The Signal Translation Project was her life's work. Not just her career—her identity, her legacy, the thing that gave her existence meaning. She had discovered the signals, had proved they were real, had convinced governments and institutions to fund a decade of research. Everything she was, everything she had become, was wrapped up in the project's success.

And I was about to tell her it was impossible.

---

The meeting happened in January 2044. Eight months after the night in the lab, six months after I'd told Yusuf, four months after I'd failed to explain it to Daniel.

I had delayed as long as I could. I'd run more tests, checked more cross-validations, looked for any way the results might be wrong. But the results weren't wrong. Pattern 7 was local. The model didn't generalize. The dream of universal translation was dead.

I couldn't hide it anymore.

I requested a meeting with Maya—just the two of us, before I brought it to anyone else. She agreed, though I could hear the puzzlement in her voice. Individual meetings weren't my style; I preferred to communicate through papers and presentations, formal channels, the impersonal mechanisms of science.

Her office was on the fifth floor of the Chen Building—yes, the building was named for her, a gift from some donor who wanted their money attached to greatness. It was a corner office, large and bright, with windows looking out toward the bay on one side and the campus on the other.

I remember everything about that room. The bookshelves lined with journals and monographs. The photos on the walls—Maya with various dignitaries, scientists, astronauts. The small telescope in the corner, more decorative than functional. The desk, massive and cluttered, covered with papers and screens and the detritus of important work.

And Maya herself, standing as I entered, coming around the desk to shake my hand.

“Tom. Good to see you. Please, sit.”

She was smaller than people expected—five-two, maybe, slight and compact. But she had a presence that filled the room. The eyes especially: dark and sharp, missing nothing, the eyes of someone who had spent her life looking at things others couldn’t see.

---

I sat. She sat. We exchanged pleasantries—how’s the work, how’s the family, the small talk of colleagues who respect each other but have never been close.

Then she leaned forward, her hands folded on the desk.

“You said you had something to discuss. Something important.”

I nodded. I had rehearsed this moment a hundred times, scripted what I would say, how I would present the evidence. But sitting there, looking at her face, the scripts dissolved. All I had was the truth, inadequate and impossible.

“I broke Pattern 7,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed. “Broke? What do you mean?”

“I built a model. A generative framework that captures the structure of the signal. It works—it predicts missing segments, generates valid Pattern 7-like output. It’s a genuine solution.”

A smile began to form on her face. “Tom, that’s wonderful. Why didn’t you—”

“And then I tested it on Pattern 12.”

The smile froze. She was quick, Maya—quicker than anyone I’ve ever known. She understood immediately what I was about to say.

“And?”

“It doesn’t work. The model applies Pattern 7’s grammar to Pattern 12, and the result is fluent, coherent, and completely wrong. The signals don’t share a structure. They’re not related. They’re... islands. Separate. Each one unique.”

The silence that followed was different from the silences I’d shared with Daniel. This wasn’t intimate absence—it was calculation. I could see Maya processing, running through implications, assessing angles and outcomes.

“You’re saying the model is overfitted,” she said finally. “Specific to one signal.”

“Yes. And if my model is overfitted, any model will be. The signals don’t share a common framework because there isn’t a common framework to share. They come from different sources, different minds, different... everything.”

She leaned back in her chair. Her face had gone carefully neutral—the face of someone who has learned to hide their reactions, to control what they reveal.

“This is significant,” she said.

“Yes.”

“The implications are...”

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to. The implications were that her life's work was based on a false assumption. That the billions of dollars, the thousands of researchers, the decades of effort—all of it was aimed at a goal that couldn't be reached.

---

The clock on my mother's wall is still wrong. It shows 2:15, but it's well past 3 AM. I should fix it. I should do something useful instead of sitting here, writing, while my mother sleeps toward death.

But I don't move. I keep writing, because the writing is all that stands between me and the unbearable.

---

Maya was quiet for a long time.

I watched her face, looking for signs of anger, denial, despair. But she was too controlled for that. Whatever she was feeling, she kept it contained, processed, managed.

Finally, she said: "Show me the data."

I had brought it with me—the analysis, the cross-checks, the seventeen points of contradiction. I pulled out my tablet and walked her through it, step by step, the way I had walked myself through it eight months earlier.

She listened without interrupting. She asked a few clarifying questions—technical questions, precise and probing. She understood everything I was showing her; Maya was a brilliant scientist, whatever else she was.

When I finished, she sat back again.

"You've verified this? Multiple times?"

"Dozens. The results are consistent."

"And you haven't shared this with anyone else?"

“Just Yusuf. And now you.”

She nodded slowly. I could see her mind working, calculating, assessing not just the scientific implications but the political ones. The funding cycles. The public perception. The congressional hearings. The legacy.

“Tom,” she said, “I need to ask you something. And I need you to answer honestly.”

“Of course.”

“Are you certain about this? Absolutely certain? Because if we announce these findings, and they turn out to be wrong—or even premature—the consequences would be catastrophic. For the project. For everyone who works here. For you.”

I understood what she was offering. A way out. A chance to say “I’m not sure yet, I need more time, let’s keep this quiet while I investigate further.” A chance to delay, to soften, to avoid the catastrophe she was describing.

It was tempting. For a moment, I felt the pull of it—the comfort of postponement, the relief of not having to face what came next.

But I couldn’t. I had spent eight months with this knowledge, and the weight of it was crushing me. I needed to put it down. I needed to give it to someone else to carry.

“I’m certain,” I said. “I wish I weren’t. But I am.”

---

My mother made a sound. I heard it through the wall—a small cry, wordless, the sound of someone lost in dreams.

I stood up and went to her room. She was still asleep, but restless, her hands moving on the blanket, her face troubled.

I sat beside her bed. I took her hand. She quieted, settling back into deeper sleep.

I sat there for a while, holding her hand in the darkness. Then I came back to the kitchen, to my laptop, to this chapter that I need to finish.

---

Maya's face, after I said I was certain.

This is what I've been trying to describe. This is the moment I keep returning to, the image that haunts me.

She didn't cry. She didn't shout. She didn't accuse me of ruining everything she'd built.

She just looked at me. And in that look, I saw something break.

Not visibly—Maya was too controlled for that. But underneath the composure, something shifted. Some fundamental structure, some load-bearing assumption that had held her up for decades, gave way.

She believed in the project. She believed in the possibility of communication across the void, of minds reaching minds across the impossible distances of space. She had staked her life on that belief, and now I was telling her it was wrong.

"I see," she said finally. Her voice was level, calm. "Thank you for bringing this to me, Tom. I appreciate your honesty."

"What happens now?"

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said: "Now I think. I need to think about how to proceed. About what this means for the project, for our funders, for the public. It's... a lot to process."

"I know."

"I'll need to see the full documentation. Everything you have. And I'll need time."

"Of course."

She stood up. The meeting was over. I stood too, feeling suddenly awkward, unsure what to do with my hands.

“Tom,” she said, as I reached the door.

I turned.

“I want you to know—I don’t blame you for this. You did your job. You followed the evidence. That’s what scientists are supposed to do.”

“Thank you.”

“But I need you to understand something. This finding, if it becomes public in the wrong way, could destroy us. Not just the project—all of us. Our careers, our reputations, everything we’ve worked for. So we need to be very careful about how we handle it.”

I nodded. I understood.

But even then, standing in her doorway, I felt the first stirrings of unease. *Careful* could mean many things. Careful could mean rigorous, thorough, responsible.

Or careful could mean something else.

---

It’s almost dawn. The light is changing outside, the courtyard emerging from darkness.

My mother is still sleeping. She has slept through the night, undisturbed except for that one small cry.

I’ve been writing for hours, and I’ve barely begun to tell you what happened with Maya. The meeting was just the start—the start of a year of careful, careful handling, of managing and positioning and controlling the narrative.

Maya wasn’t a villain. But she was the embodiment of a system, and the system had needs that the truth couldn’t satisfy.

I'll tell you more tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow, if my mother gives me another day of writing.

For now, I close my laptop. I go to her room. I sit beside her bed as the dawn light fills the window.

She opens her eyes. She sees me.

"Tomek," she says. "You're still here."

"I'm still here, Mama."

She closes her eyes again. Her hand, in mine, is thin and light as paper.

I sit with her. The sun rises over Kraków. The signals are still out there, singing into the void, and I am here, holding my mother's hand, waiting.

This is all we can do, in the end.

Be present.

Bear witness.

Wait.

---

## Chapter 17 - The Committee

My mother woke at noon, more alert than she'd been in days. Ewa said this happens sometimes—a rally, a brief resurgence before the end. The body gathering its last strength, the mind surfacing one final time.

We talked. Not about important things—not about the decades of distance, not about my father, not about the son who left and rarely returned. We talked about the weather. About the courtyard, which has new flowers this year. About a neighbor's cat that visits her windowsill.

Small talk. Surface. But present. Fully, completely present.

I held her hand. She held mine. The gap between us remained—it will remain until she dies—but we were on the same side of it, looking at each other, recognizing each other across the distance.

This evening, she's sleeping again. Ewa is in the other room, doing something on her phone. And I'm back at the kitchen table, writing about the committee.

---

Maya convened it in February 2044—six weeks after our meeting in her office.

She called it the “Pattern Analysis Review Board.” An innocuous name, the kind of name designed to attract no attention. It consisted of twelve people: senior researchers, department heads, a few outside consultants with high security clearances. All of them handpicked by Maya. All of them trusted.

I was invited as the presenting researcher. It was my data, my analysis, my conclusion that was being reviewed. But I understood from the beginning that I was not in control of this process. Maya was.

The meeting took place in a conference room on the third floor—windowless, soundproofed, the kind of room used for sensitive discussions. I arrived early and found Maya already there, arranging papers, testing the projection system.

“Tom,” she said. “Thank you for coming.”

As if I had a choice. As if the committee wasn't designed specifically around my findings.

“Of course,” I said.

---

Let me describe the committee members. Not all of them—I didn't know all of them—but the ones who mattered.

David Okonkwo was there, sitting at Maya's right hand. The deputy director, her most trusted lieutenant, the one who handled the politics while she focused on the science. He was a large man, calm and measured, with a face that revealed nothing. I had always liked David, though I couldn't say I knew him. He was the kind of person who maintained careful distance, who kept his true thoughts hidden.

Rachel Torres was there—the communications director, responsible for managing the project's public image. A woman in her fifties with grey-streaked hair and sharp, assessing eyes. She had been with the project since the beginning, had navigated a decade of media cycles, had learned exactly how to package complex findings for a public that wanted simplicity.

Yusuf was there, seated far from me, his face carefully neutral. He was the only other person in the room who knew what I was going to say—who had known for months—and I could see the tension in his shoulders, the effort of pretending he was hearing this for the first time.

The others were scientists, mostly. Specialists in signal analysis, computational linguistics, astrophysics. People who understood the technical details, who could evaluate my evidence on its merits. People who, I believed at the time, would follow the truth wherever it led.

---

I presented for two hours.

I started with the model—how I had built it, what assumptions it rested on, why it worked for Pattern 7. I showed the validation data, the predictive accuracy, the elegant internal consistency. I let them see the success before I showed them the failure.

Then I moved to Pattern 12. I walked them through the cross-checks, the contradictions, the seventeen points of irreconcilable

difference. I showed them what the model produced when applied to a different signal: fluent, confident, wrong.

I concluded with the implications. If my model was local—and the evidence overwhelmingly suggested it was—then any model would be local. The signals did not share a common framework. Universal translation was not merely difficult; it was impossible.

When I finished, the room was silent.

I looked at Maya. Her face was unreadable, the same careful neutrality she had maintained throughout. But her hands, I noticed, were gripping the edge of the table.

“Thank you, Tom,” she said. “That was very thorough. I’m sure the committee has questions.”

---

The questions came in waves.

First, the technical questions. Had I verified the Pattern 12 data? Had I tested on other signals? Were there alternative interpretations of the cross-check failures?

I answered everything. I had anticipated these questions, had prepared answers, had documentation for every claim. The technical case was solid; I knew it was solid.

Then came the interpretive questions. What did “local” really mean? Was it possible the signals were related in ways my model hadn’t captured? Could there be a deeper structure, a meta-framework, that unified them despite surface differences?

I answered these too, though the answers were harder. I couldn’t prove that no unifying framework existed—you can never prove a negative—but I could explain why the evidence pointed away from unity and toward plurality. Why the most parsimonious interpretation was that the signals were genuinely separate, genuinely alien to each other.

Finally, there were the political questions. These came from Rachel, mostly, and from David.

“If we announce this,” Rachel said, “what do we say? How do we frame it?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m a scientist. Framing isn’t my expertise.”

“Let me rephrase. Is there a way to present this finding that doesn’t... undermine everything we’ve been saying for ten years?”

I looked at her. I understood what she was asking. She wanted me to give her a narrative, a story, a way to tell the truth without telling the truth.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “The finding is what it is. We’ve been assuming the signals could be translated. That assumption is wrong.”

Rachel’s jaw tightened. She looked at Maya, a quick glance, some communication passing between them that I couldn’t read.

---

My mother is restless tonight. I can hear her through the wall—small sounds, murmurs, the distress of someone trapped in difficult dreams.

I should go to her. I should stop writing and sit beside her bed and hold her hand.

But I need to finish this chapter. I need to tell you what happened in that room, what the committee decided, how the system responded when the truth proved inconvenient.

---

The discussion went on for hours.

Maya let everyone speak. She asked clarifying questions, drew out disagreements, made sure every perspective was heard. It

was a masterful performance—the appearance of open inquiry, democratic deliberation, following the evidence wherever it led.

But I could feel, underneath the discussion, a current pulling toward a predetermined conclusion. The questions kept circling back to the same concerns: How would this look? What would the funders think? How could we manage the fallout?

Not: Is this true? Not: What does this mean for our understanding of the universe?

But: How do we survive this?

At some point—I don't remember exactly when—Yusuf spoke up. He had been quiet throughout, watching, waiting. But now he raised his hand, and Maya nodded to him.

"I've reviewed Tom's data independently," he said. "The technical analysis is sound. The cross-checks are valid. I believe his conclusions are correct."

A murmur went through the room. Yusuf's endorsement carried weight; he was respected, careful, not given to overstatement.

"However," he continued, "I also want to note that this finding, while scientifically significant, doesn't mean the project has failed. We've learned something important about the nature of the signals. That's progress, even if it's not the progress we expected."

It was a generous framing. A kind framing. A framing that tried to give the committee a way forward that didn't involve burying the truth.

I looked at Yusuf with gratitude. He met my eyes briefly, then looked away.

---

Maya called for a break around 4 PM. People stood, stretched, headed for the bathroom or the coffee machine. I stayed in my seat, suddenly exhausted.

David approached me. He pulled up a chair and sat beside me, his large body somehow folding into the small space.

“How are you holding up?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“This must be difficult. Presenting findings that contradict everything we’ve been working toward.”

“It’s not about contradiction. It’s about truth.”

He nodded slowly. “Truth is important. But so is context. So is timing. So is the way we communicate what we’ve learned.”

I looked at him. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that there are ways to present this finding that preserve the project’s integrity. That don’t panic the funders or the public. That give us time to understand the implications before we make sweeping announcements.”

“You’re saying we should suppress it.”

“I’m saying we should be strategic. There’s a difference.”

I wanted to argue. I wanted to say that strategic communication was just suppression with better public relations. But David’s face was kind, concerned—the face of someone who genuinely believed he was helping.

“Think about it,” he said. “That’s all I’m asking.”

---

The break ended. The committee reconvened. Maya stood at the head of the table, and I could see that something had shifted. During the break, conversations had happened—small groups in corners, whispered consultations. A consensus was forming.

“I think we’ve heard enough to make a preliminary decision,” Maya said. “We need to verify Tom’s findings through independent analysis. That will take time—several months at least. In the

meantime, I recommend we maintain operational continuity. No public announcements, no changes to our research priorities. We proceed as normal until we have a clearer picture.”

She looked around the table. “Is there any objection?”

No one spoke. Yusuf was staring at the table. Rachel was nodding. David’s face was impassive.

“Then we’re agreed. Tom, I want to thank you for bringing this to us. Your integrity is admirable. We’ll keep you informed as the review proceeds.”

And that was it. The committee meeting was over. The finding had been received, processed, and set aside—not rejected, not accepted, just deferred. Frozen in amber while the institution decided what to do with it.

---

My mother called for me. I heard her voice, thin and distant, through the wall: “Tomek? Tomek?”

I closed my laptop and went to her.

She was awake, her eyes confused, reaching for me.

“I’m here, Mama. I’m here.”

“I thought you had left. I thought you had gone back to America.”

“No. I’m still here.”

She relaxed. Her hand found mine, and she held it tightly, with more strength than I expected.

“Stay,” she said. “Stay a little longer.”

“I’ll stay.”

We sat together in the darkness. Outside, Kraków was sleeping—the old city with its ancient walls, the squares where I had played as a child, the world I had left and never quite returned to.

"Tomek," she said after a while.

"Yes?"

"I know you have important work. I know I'm keeping you from it."

"You're not keeping me from anything."

"But your signals. Your aliens. They need you."

I almost laughed. My mother, on her deathbed, worried about the aliens.

"The signals can wait," I said. "They've been traveling for thousands of years. They'll still be there when I get back."

She smiled—a small smile, barely visible in the dark.

"I'm glad you came," she said. "I wasn't sure you would."

"I should have come sooner."

"You came. That's what matters."

The gap between us—the years, the distance, the languages we had never found to speak to each other—it was still there. But she was right: I came. In the end, that was what I had to offer. Not words. Not explanation. Just presence.

I stayed with her until she fell asleep. Then I came back to the kitchen, to my laptop, to this chapter that needed finishing.

---

The committee meeting was the beginning of a year of delay.

Independent analysis that took months, then more months. Reviews of the reviews. Discussions about framing, about timing, about strategic communication. Maya kept me informed, as she'd promised—brief emails, occasional meetings, always with the same message: *We're still evaluating. We need more time. Be patient.*

And I was patient. Too patient, I see now. I let the institution absorb my finding, process it, metabolize it into something manageable.

By the time the truth finally emerged, it was too late. The framing had been chosen. The narrative had been set. And the gap between what I had discovered and what the world was told—that gap was wider than any gap between minds, any distance between signals.

But that's the next chapter. For now, I sit in my mother's kitchen, listening to her breathe, waiting for the morning.

The committee decided to be careful. The committee decided to be strategic. The committee decided to manage the truth.

And I let them. I let them because I was tired, because I wanted someone else to carry the weight, because I believed—foolishly, naively—that the system would eventually do the right thing.

The system did what systems do. It protected itself.

And I learned what I should have already known: that truth is not enough. That truth, without power, without position, without the ability to control the narrative, is just a voice crying in the wilderness.

The signals are still out there, singing their separate songs. The gap is still unbridgeable.

And I am here, in Kraków, holding my mother's hand, waiting.

This is what remains, when everything else is stripped away.

Presence. Witness. Waiting.

It's not enough. It's never enough.

But it's all I have.

---

## Chapter 18 - The Framing

My mother had a good day today. She ate breakfast—not much, but more than yesterday. She sat up in bed and asked Ewa to open the curtains. She watched the light move across the courtyard, the shadows of the trees shifting, the ordinary miracle of a spring afternoon.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “I’d forgotten how beautiful it is.”

I sat beside her and watched her watching. Her face, in the soft light, looked almost young again—the woman I remembered from childhood, before my father’s death, before the distance grew between us. For a moment, time collapsed, and I was a boy again, sitting beside my mother, safe.

The moment passed. Time resumed. She is still dying; I am still old.

But we had the afternoon. We had the light through the windows.

---

Let me tell you about the framing.

In October 2044—eight months after the committee meeting, fourteen months after the night in the lab—Maya called me into her office. She had news, she said. A decision had been reached.

I knew what was coming. I had watched the process unfold over those months: the reviews, the consultations, the endless meetings from which I was excluded. I had seen the shift in language—from “Tom’s findings” to “the Pattern 7 analysis” to, eventually, “the preliminary structural assessment.” The personal had become institutional. My name had been absorbed into bureaucratic abstraction.

Maya’s office was the same as before: the bookshelves, the photos, the telescope in the corner. But something had changed. The room felt smaller, more cramped, as if the walls had moved inward.

“Sit down, Tom. We have a lot to discuss.”

I sat. She remained standing, pacing slowly, her small figure moving between the window and the desk.

“The review is complete,” she said. “Your analysis has been verified. The technical conclusions are sound.”

I felt a small surge of relief. Verified. Sound. After months of waiting, the truth had been acknowledged.

“However,” she continued, “we’ve also developed a communication strategy. A way to present these findings that serves the project’s interests while remaining factually accurate.”

The relief curdled. I waited.

---

“Here’s the framing,” Maya said. She stopped pacing and turned to face me. “We’re going to announce that the project has achieved a significant breakthrough: the successful structural analysis of Pattern 7. Your model will be presented as a major advance in xenolinguistic methodology.”

“But—”

“Let me finish. We will also note that when the model was applied to other signals, we discovered unexpected structural diversity. The signals appear to reflect multiple independent communication frameworks, suggesting a richer, more complex cosmic landscape than previously anticipated.”

She paused, watching my face.

“You see? We’re not hiding your findings. We’re contextualizing them. Instead of a story about failure—the failure of universal translation—we’re telling a story about discovery. The discovery of plurality.”

I understood what she was doing. I understood the logic, the strategy, the institutional imperatives driving the decision. And I understood that what she was describing was not a lie, exactly—it was something worse. It was a truth reshaped until it no longer meant what it should mean.

“Maya,” I said. “The implications are being buried.”

“They’re being managed.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“No.” Her voice sharpened. “It’s not. Buried means hidden, suppressed, denied. We’re not doing that. The data will be published. Your analysis will be available for anyone to review. We’re simply choosing how to present the narrative.”

“The narrative is wrong.”

“The narrative is strategic. There’s a difference.”

We stared at each other. I saw in her face the exhaustion, the strain, the weight of a decade spent defending this project against skeptics and budget cuts and political interference. She believed in what she was doing. She believed the framing was necessary, was justified, was the only way to protect the work that mattered.

And maybe she was right. Maybe in the calculus of institutions, this was the correct decision. Maybe the truth, unframed, would have destroyed everything—the funding, the careers, the research that might someday lead somewhere important.

But I couldn’t accept it. I couldn’t watch my finding—the most important discovery of my life—be transformed into a press release about “unexpected structural diversity.”

“I can’t support this,” I said.

Maya’s face didn’t change. “I’m not asking you to support it. I’m informing you of the decision. The announcement will go out next week.”

---

My mother is sleeping again. The good day ended around sunset; she grew tired, confused, and Ewa helped her back to bed. Now she sleeps, and I sit in the kitchen, writing about the framing that changed everything.

I keep thinking about the language. “Unexpected structural diversity.” “A richer, more complex cosmic landscape.” Words that were technically true and emotionally false. Words that took my discovery and wrapped it in optimism until the devastation disappeared.

This is what institutions do. They compress. They simplify. They take the unbearable and make it bearable through careful word choice and strategic emphasis. They serve the system’s need for coherence, for continuity, for a narrative that can be understood and funded and explained in a press release.

And in doing so, they betray the truth. Not through lies—lying would be easier, cleaner, more clearly wrong. But through framing. Through the selection of what to emphasize and what to minimize. Through the transformation of complexity into simplicity, of tragedy into opportunity.

---

The announcement went out on October 23rd, 2044.

I have the press release still. I’ve kept it all these years, a document of institutional language at its most refined:

*The Signal Translation Project is pleased to announce a major breakthrough in xenolinguistic analysis. Dr. Tomasz Kowalski, Senior Researcher in Structural Linguistics, has developed a generative framework that successfully models the internal grammar of Pattern 7, one of the primary signals detected through the Chen Process.*

*This achievement represents the first successful structural analysis of an extraterrestrial signal and opens new pathways for understanding non-human communication systems.*

*Additionally, when the model was applied to other detected signals, researchers discovered unexpected structural diversity, suggesting that the cosmic landscape may include multiple independent communication frameworks. This finding highlights the richness and complexity of intelligent life in the universe and underscores the importance of continued research.*

*“We are thrilled by these results,” said Dr. Maya Chen, Project Director. “Dr. Kowalski’s work demonstrates that progress is possible, even in the face of extraordinary challenges. The discovery of structural diversity is not a setback but an invitation—an invitation to explore the full range of intelligent expression in the cosmos.”*

---

An invitation. That’s what she called it. The death of universal translation, the proof that we were islands screaming into the void—an invitation.

I read the press release when it came out. I read it in my office, alone, while the celebration happened elsewhere in the building. I read it, and I felt something close in my chest.

Not anger, exactly. I was past anger by then. Something quieter. Something like grief.

The truth was there, technically. Every sentence was accurate. My model did work on Pattern 7. The signals did show structural diversity. Continued research was important.

But the meaning was gone. The meaning I had seen in the lab that night—the terrible loneliness, the unbridgeable gap, the end of the dream of cosmic connection—none of that survived the framing. It had been processed, packaged, made palatable.

The press loved it. The funders loved it. The public, hungry for good news about the signals, embraced the narrative of discovery and diversity.

And I—I was credited, congratulated, thanked for my contribution. I received emails from colleagues, reporters, old friends. “Congratulations on your breakthrough!” they said. “What an exciting discovery!”

I didn’t respond. I didn’t know what to say.

---

Ewa came by earlier. She sat with me in the kitchen, drinking tea, while my mother slept.

“You look tired,” she said. “When did you last sleep properly?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re here, but you’re somewhere else. I can see it.”

She’s perceptive, Ewa. She always has been. We were close as children—she was the cousin I played with in summers, the one who understood my silences even then.

“I’m writing something,” I said. “A kind of memoir. About my work.”

“Now? While your mother is dying?”

“It’s all I know how to do.”

She looked at me for a long moment. I could see her deciding whether to push, to challenge, to demand that I be present instead of lost in the past.

“Just don’t miss this,” she said finally. “Don’t miss these last days because you’re somewhere else.”

“I won’t.”

But even as I said it, I knew it wasn’t entirely true. Part of me is always somewhere else. Part of me has been somewhere else since that night in the lab, since I saw what I saw and couldn’t unsee it.

---

Let me tell you about the violence of the framing.

After the announcement, I became a different person in the project's mythology. Not the researcher who had discovered the impossibility of translation, but the researcher who had achieved the first structural breakthrough. Not the prophet of isolation, but the pioneer of diversity.

People approached me differently. They wanted to talk about methodology, about applications, about how my model might be extended to other signals. They were excited, optimistic, full of plans.

I couldn't tell them the truth. I tried, a few times—tried to explain what the diversity actually meant, why it wasn't an invitation but a wall. But the framing was too strong. It had shaped their understanding so thoroughly that my explanations sounded like false modesty, or pessimism, or the excessive caution of a scientist who couldn't see the significance of his own work.

The framing had created a reality. And in that reality, I was a hero, not a witness to catastrophe.

---

Daniel read the press release too.

He brought it up that night, over dinner. "I saw the announcement," he said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"It sounds like a big deal. The first structural analysis of an alien signal."

"It's... complicated."

He looked at me. I could see him trying—still trying, even then—to understand. To reach me across the gap.

“Complicated how?”

I opened my mouth. I almost told him everything—the real meaning, the isolation, the impossibility that the framing had hidden. It was there, ready to come out.

But what would be the point? The world had its story now. The project had its narrative. Nothing I said to Daniel would change that. And explaining would only widen the distance between us—would only confirm, once again, that I had seen something he couldn't see.

“It's just . . . there's a lot of nuance that didn't make it into the press release,” I said. “You know how these things are.”

He nodded. He accepted the non-answer, as he had accepted so many non-answers before.

We finished dinner. We watched television. We went to bed.

And the framing continued its work, reshaping reality, replacing what I had discovered with what the institution needed to be true.

---

It's late. Past midnight in Kraków. The city sleeps around me, old and patient, having seen centuries of human drama far worse than mine.

Tomorrow I'll sit with my mother again. We'll have whatever time we have—hours, days, I don't know. The doctors speak in probabilities, in ranges, in the careful language of medical uncertainty.

And I'll be present. I'll try to be present. Not lost in the past, not absorbed in this memoir, but here. In this room. With this woman who raised me, who I left, who I am losing.

The framing of her death is already happening. The family is constructing a narrative: the long illness, the peaceful end, the son who came home in time. It's a good narrative. A manageable

narrative. It will be what we tell ourselves afterward, what we remember.

But underneath the narrative, there's just this: a woman breathing in a dark room, her son nearby, the gap between them as wide as it has always been.

No framing changes that. No words bridge it.

We sit with what we cannot transform. We witness what we cannot explain.

That's all there is. That's all there ever was.

The framing made the truth bearable. But it didn't make the truth less true.

I'm still alone. The signals are still islands.

And my mother is still dying, despite all the stories we tell.

---

## Chapter 19 - The Leak

I didn't leak. I want that to be clear from the start.

For months, people assumed it was me—the disgruntled researcher, the man who couldn't accept the framing, the obvious suspect. Maya suspected me. David suspected me. Even Yusuf, for a while, wondered.

But it wasn't me. I had decided, somewhere in those long months after the announcement, that I would stay quiet. Not because I accepted the framing—I never accepted it—but because I couldn't see what speaking would accomplish. The world had its story. My truth, unframed, would sound like bitterness. Like sour grapes. Like a man who couldn't handle being congratulated.

So I stayed quiet, and the leak came from somewhere else.

---

My mother spoke today.

Not much—her voice is weak now, barely a whisper—but she said something that has stayed with me.

“Tomek,” she said. “Do you remember the garden?”

I didn’t know which garden she meant. We’d had a small plot when I was young—a patch of vegetables behind the apartment building, shared with other families. I remembered tomatoes, mostly. The smell of the soil. My father’s hands, dirty with earth.

“I remember,” I said.

“Your father loved that garden. Even when everything else was hard—the work, the money, the drinking—he loved the garden.”

She was quiet for a while. I thought she had drifted off.

“I never told you this,” she said. “But after he died, I kept the plot for a year. I couldn’t bear to let it go. I would sit there in the evenings, not planting anything, just sitting. As if he might come back.”

Her hand moved on the blanket, a small restless motion.

“He didn’t come back. Eventually, I let someone else have the plot. But I still think about it. The tomatoes. His hands.”

I didn’t know what to say. My mother, in all my years, had rarely spoken about my father—not like this, not about her grief, not about the private ways she had mourned.

“I’m glad you told me,” I said.

“Some things you can only say at the end,” she said. “When there’s nothing left to protect.”

---

The leak happened in March 2045—five months after the official announcement, seventeen months after my meeting with Maya.

It appeared on a science blog first. An anonymous post, detailed and technical, laying out the real implications of my findings. Not the framed version—the actual meaning. The post argued that the project had deliberately minimized the significance of what I'd discovered, had dressed up a fundamental failure as a celebration of diversity.

The title was provocative: "The Signal Translation Project Doesn't Want You to Know That Universal Translation Is Impossible."

Within hours, it was everywhere.

---

I learned about it from Rachel Torres. She called me at 7 AM, her voice tight with controlled panic.

"Have you seen it?" she asked.

"Seen what?"

"The blog post. The leak. Someone released internal documents—committee transcripts, early drafts of the framing strategy, the whole thing."

I sat down. My hands were trembling, though I didn't know why. I hadn't done this. I had nothing to be afraid of.

"Who?" I asked.

"We don't know. We're investigating. But right now I need to know—did you talk to anyone? Anyone at all?"

"No. I haven't spoken to anyone about the real findings since the committee meeting."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

A pause. I could hear Rachel breathing, thinking, calculating.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re going to need to do damage control. There will be media inquiries. You’re going to get calls. Don’t talk to anyone until we have a coordinated response.”

“A coordinated response.”

“Yes. We need to get ahead of this.”

I almost laughed. Get ahead of the truth. As if truth were a competitor that could be outrun.

---

The next few days were chaos.

The blog post spread from science communities to mainstream media. Reporters called—dozens of them, then hundreds. The phones at the Chen Building rang constantly. Camera crews appeared outside, filming the entrance, hoping to catch someone who would talk.

Maya held a press conference. I watched it on my office computer, alone, the door closed.

She was masterful, as always. She acknowledged the blog post, acknowledged that there had been “internal discussions” about how to present the findings, acknowledged that “reasonable people could disagree” about the implications. But she maintained—firmly, calmly, with complete conviction—that the project had acted appropriately.

“Science is complex,” she said. “Communicating complex findings to the public requires careful consideration. We made a judgment call about framing, as every scientific institution does. The underlying data has always been available for independent review.”

A reporter asked: “Is it true that universal translation of the signals is now considered impossible?”

Maya paused. A fraction of a second—but I noticed.

“That’s an oversimplification,” she said. “What Dr. Kowalski’s research suggests is that the signals exhibit greater structural diversity than we initially anticipated. This presents challenges, certainly, but it doesn’t mean translation is impossible. It means we need new approaches, new methodologies, a broader framework for understanding cosmic communication.”

It was the framing again, slightly modified. Still technically true. Still fundamentally misleading.

---

Ewa asked me today why I keep writing.

“You’re here, finally,” she said. “You’re with your mother. Isn’t that enough? Why do you spend every night at that laptop?”

I didn’t have a good answer. Or rather, I had too many answers, none of them complete.

Because writing is how I process. Because this memoir is the only way I know to tell the truth. Because if I don’t write, I’ll drown in the present.

“It’s something I need to finish,” I said. “Before she goes. I don’t know why, but I need to.”

Ewa shook her head. But she didn’t push. She understands, in her way, that some compulsions can’t be explained—can only be accommodated.

---

The leaked documents revealed more than the framing strategy.

They revealed the committee’s deliberations. The concerns about funding. Rachel’s questions about how to present findings “that could undermine everything we’ve been saying.” David’s suggestion that we be “strategic” rather than fully transparent.

They revealed, in other words, that the project had knowingly chosen to minimize a catastrophic finding because the truth was inconvenient.

The public reaction was split. Some people defended the project—scientists protect their work, institutions manage narratives, this was standard operating procedure. Others were outraged—the taxpayers who funded this research deserved the truth, not carefully managed optimism.

And some people—a smaller group, but vocal—understood what the finding actually meant. They grasped the isolation, the impossibility, the end of the dream of cosmic connection. They mourned.

I watched all of this unfold. I read the articles, the opinion pieces, the comment threads. I saw my name invoked by all sides—the heroic truth-teller, the disgruntled leaker, the careful scientist caught in institutional politics.

And I said nothing. I followed Rachel's directive. I gave no interviews, made no statements, offered no clarification.

Because what would I have said? The truth was out now, in some form. Distorted by the leak, filtered through media interpretation, but out. What more could I add?

---

They never found the leaker.

For a while, suspicion fell on me—despite my denials, despite the lack of evidence. I was the obvious suspect: the researcher whose findings had been minimized, who had argued against the framing, who had the most reason to want the truth revealed.

But I had an alibi of sorts. My communications were examined; nothing linked me to the leak. My computers were checked; no connection to the anonymous poster could be established. Eventually, the investigation moved on.

I've thought about it over the years. Who did it? Who took that risk—career, reputation, potentially legal consequences—to release the documents?

I have my suspicions. There was a junior researcher on the committee, someone I barely knew, who left the project six months after the leak. No explanation, no forwarding address. She disappeared into private industry and never spoke publicly about her time at the Signal Translation Project.

But I don't know. I'll never know. And maybe it doesn't matter. The truth found its way out, through whatever channel, and the project was never the same afterward.

---

My mother has stopped eating.

Ewa told me this morning, her voice flat with the exhaustion of long grief. "She won't take food anymore. Only water, and not much of that."

I went to her room. She was awake, but barely—her eyes unfocused, her breath shallow and irregular.

"Mama," I said.

She turned her head. A slow movement, effortful.

"Tomek." A whisper. "Is it morning?"

"Yes. It's morning."

"Good. I like the morning."

I sat beside her. I took her hand. The bones were visible through the skin now, the flesh wasted, the life withdrawing.

"Tell me something," she said. "Tell me about your work. Your signals."

I almost protested. She didn't want to hear about signals—she had never wanted to hear about signals, had never understood why

I cared about voices from the void when there were people right here, family right here, life right here.

But she was asking. At the end, she was asking.

"The signals are songs," I said. "Songs from very far away. Each one is different. Each one is alone."

"Alone," she repeated. "That's sad."

"Yes. But they're still singing. Even knowing no one can answer, they're still singing."

She was quiet for a while. I thought she had drifted off again.

"Like your father," she said. "He used to sing in the garden. Do you remember?"

I didn't remember. Or maybe I did—a half-memory, buried deep, of a man's voice among the tomato plants, a tune I couldn't quite recall.

"I remember," I said.

"He sang because it made him happy. Not for anyone else. Just for himself."

Her eyes closed. Her breathing slowed.

"Maybe that's enough," she said. "Maybe singing is enough."

---

The leak changed everything and nothing.

The project survived—diminished, defensive, but surviving. The framing shifted slightly: instead of "discovery of diversity," the narrative became "ongoing investigation into structural variation." The funding continued, though reduced. The research continued, though with less optimism.

And the truth—the real truth, the truth I had seen in the lab that night—remained buried under layers of interpretation. Some peo-

ple understood it. Most didn't. The media moved on; new stories replaced old ones; the public attention that had briefly flared faded back to indifference.

I stayed at the project for another two years. I did my work. I attended meetings. I contributed to papers that danced around the implications without ever stating them plainly.

And I watched Daniel drift further away, watched my marriage dissolve in slow motion, watched my life narrow to work and silence and the growing certainty that I would never be understood.

---

It's night in Kraków. The city is quiet. My mother sleeps, or something like sleep—the threshold between life and death, blurred now, unclear.

I've written about the leak, about the framing, about the institutional machinery that absorbed my discovery and transformed it. But I haven't written the most important thing.

I haven't written about why I stayed quiet.

The answer is simple, and shameful: I was afraid.

Afraid of what would happen if I spoke. Afraid of being labeled a troublemaker, a malcontent, a man who couldn't accept the consensus. Afraid of losing my position, my funding, my identity as a scientist.

And afraid, most of all, of speaking the truth and not being believed. Of trying to explain the isolation, the impossibility, the end of the dream—and watching people nod and misunderstand, just as Daniel had nodded and misunderstood.

The leak spared me from having to choose. Someone else bore the cost of truth-telling. Someone else took the risk.

I'm grateful to them, whoever they were. And I'm ashamed of my gratitude. Because the truth was mine to tell, and I didn't tell it.

I let the framing happen. I let the world believe a comfortable lie. And I told myself that staying quiet was wisdom, was strategy, was the only sensible choice.

Maybe it was. Maybe the leaker was reckless and I was prudent. Maybe institutions really do need protection, really do require managed narratives to survive.

But I don't think so. I think I was simply afraid.

And I've carried that fear with me for twenty years. Carried it here, to Kraków, to my mother's bedside, to this memoir that is trying—finally, too late—to tell the truth.

---

Tomorrow, or the day after, my mother will die.

And I will have to decide what to do with the rest of my life. How to live with the silence I chose. How to speak the things I should have spoken long ago.

This memoir is part of that speaking. These words, inadequate as they are, are my attempt to break the framing at last.

The signals are islands. Translation is impossible. We are alone, cosmically alone, singing into a void that cannot answer.

That's the truth. That's what I should have said twenty years ago.

I'm saying it now.

For whatever it's worth. For whoever is listening.

The truth, unframed, at last.

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## Chapter 20 - The Unraveling

Systems fail slowly, then all at once.

I've watched it happen with the project. I've watched it happen with my marriage. I'm watching it happen now, with my mother—the long decline, the gradual weakening, and then the final collapse that feels sudden even though nothing about it is sudden.

There's a threshold you cross. Before the threshold, failure is happening but might still be reversed. After, the outcome is certain. The system continues to function, but it's already dead—just playing out the motions, the inertia carrying it forward while the life drains away.

My mother crossed that threshold sometime in the night. Ewa called me at 4 AM, her voice strange and flat.

"Tom. You should come."

I came. I'm here now, in my mother's room, watching her breathe. The breaths are shallow, irregular, separated by pauses that stretch longer each time. The doctor came an hour ago. "Hours," he said. "Maybe less."

So I sit beside her, and I write, because writing is all I know how to do, and because there's nothing else to do while you wait for someone to die.

---

Let me tell you about the unraveling.

The leak was the beginning, but only the beginning. A system as large as the Signal Translation Project doesn't collapse from a single wound. It takes time. It takes accumulation. It takes the steady erosion of trust, of funding, of faith.

The congressional hearings started in June 2045—three months after the leak, two years after my night in the lab.

I was called to testify. Not as a hostile witness—they were careful about that—but as an expert. A senior researcher who could explain

the technical details, help the committee understand what we'd discovered and what it meant.

I sat in a hearing room in Washington, D.C., facing a row of senators who knew nothing about signals or xenolinguistics but knew everything about political theater. The cameras were rolling. The public was watching. The project's future hung in the balance.

"Dr. Kowalski," the chairman said, "let me ask you directly: Is universal translation of the extraterrestrial signals possible?"

I looked at Maya, sitting in the gallery, her face composed but her eyes burning. I looked at David, beside her, his expression unreadable. I looked at the senators, waiting for an answer that would fit neatly into a sound bite.

"Senator," I said, "I believe the evidence strongly suggests that the signals do not share a common underlying structure. Translation between them—or from them to human languages—would require bridging gaps that may be unbridgeable."

"May be unbridgeable. So you're saying it might still be possible?"

The trap was obvious. If I said no, I was contradicting the project's official position. If I said yes, I was giving them false hope.

"I'm saying that the challenges are more fundamental than we initially believed. Whether they can be overcome is an open question. But it would be misleading to suggest that translation is around the corner, or even on the horizon."

The chairman nodded. He had what he needed—a quote, a clip, a moment that would play on the evening news.

"Thank you, Dr. Kowalski. I think we all appreciate your candor."

---

My mother's breathing has changed. The pauses are longer now, the breaths more labored.

I've put down my laptop. I'm holding her hand. Ewa is on the other side of the bed, silent, watching.

There's nothing to say. There's nothing to do. We just wait, and witness, and let the end arrive.

---

The hearings continued for months. Maya testified. David testified. Rachel testified. A parade of researchers and administrators, each one carefully parsing their words, trying to maintain the project's credibility while acknowledging the leaked documents.

The political mood had shifted. The project had been a bipartisan darling—a symbol of human ambition, of our reach toward the cosmos, of the hope that we might someday talk to other minds. Now it was a symbol of institutional hubris, of money wasted, of promises broken.

The funding cuts came that fall. Not a complete defunding—there was still enough support to keep the project alive—but a reduction of 40 percent. Entire departments were eliminated. Researchers were let go. The Chen Building, once buzzing with activity, grew quiet.

Maya fought it. I watched her fight, watched her deploy every weapon in her arsenal—charm, expertise, political connections. She was brilliant, as always. She almost saved it.

But you can't fight a narrative. The story had been written: the project had oversold its potential, had misled the public, had spent billions on a dream that couldn't be realized. The story wasn't entirely true—the project had made real discoveries, had advanced human knowledge in countless ways—but nuance doesn't survive in headlines.

By the end of 2045, the Signal Translation Project was a shadow of what it had been. Still functioning, still doing research, but diminished. Wounded. Dying slowly, the way systems die.

---

She's stopped breathing.

I noticed it a moment ago—the stillness, the absence of movement. I waited, thinking it was another pause, a longer gap between breaths.

But the breath didn't come. The pause extended, became permanent.

Ewa is crying. I should be crying. But I'm just sitting here, holding my mother's hand, looking at her face.

She looks peaceful. That's what people say at moments like this, and it's true—the tension has left her features, the pain has withdrawn, and what remains is just stillness. Just the body, the vessel, empty now of whatever made it her.

I should close my laptop. I should be present for this moment, not writing about the project's collapse.

But she's gone. Being present for her is no longer possible.

So I write. Because writing is how I grieve. Because writing is the only ritual I have.

---

Let me finish the chapter.

Maya resigned in March 2046. Not publicly—publicly, she “stepped back to pursue other opportunities”—but we all knew. She had lost control of the project, lost the political battle, lost the narrative she had spent her life constructing.

I saw her the day she left. She was in her office—the office in the Chen Building, with the photos and the telescope and the view of the bay—packing boxes. Her face was composed, as always, but I could see the devastation underneath.

“Tom,” she said. “I didn't expect to see you.”

“I wanted to say goodbye.”

She nodded. She continued packing—books, papers, the small personal items that had accumulated over a decade.

“I don’t blame you,” she said. “For any of it. I want you to know that.”

“I know.”

“You did what scientists are supposed to do. You followed the evidence. I’m the one who tried to manage the story, and I failed.”

“You did what you thought was right.”

She looked at me. Her eyes, for once, were unguarded—tired, sad, but clear.

“Did I? I’m not sure anymore. I thought I was protecting the project. But maybe I was just protecting myself. My legacy. My place in history.”

She picked up a photo—one of the pictures from her wall, showing her at a podium, receiving some award.

“I wanted to be remembered as the woman who discovered alien intelligence,” she said. “Instead, I’ll be remembered as the woman who couldn’t accept what that discovery meant.”

“That’s not fair. You did discover it. Everything that came after—”

“Everything that came after was my choice. I chose the framing. I chose to minimize what you’d found. I chose to protect the dream instead of facing the truth.”

She put the photo in a box.

“I’m not a villain, Tom. I know that. But I’m not a hero either. I’m just a person who wanted something so badly that she couldn’t see clearly.”

The funeral is tomorrow.

Ewa has taken over the arrangements. I'm useless for practical things—I always have been—so I stay out of the way. I sit in my mother's kitchen, at the table where I sat as a child, and I write.

My mother is dead. The project is dead, or dying. My marriage is long dead.

So much death. So much ending.

And yet I'm still here. Still writing. Still trying to make sense of what happened, even though sense is not something that can be made of this.

---

After Maya left, I stayed another year. I don't know why. Habit, maybe. Fear of change. The inertia of a life that had lost its shape but not its motion.

I worked on Pattern 7. Not because I believed it would lead anywhere—I had stopped believing that long ago—but because working was easier than not working. Easier than facing the silence, the emptiness, the question of what to do next.

Daniel and I separated in the fall of 2046. I've already told you about that, or parts of it. The conversation we finally had, the admission that we couldn't reach each other anymore. The quiet dissolution of something that had once been everything.

He moved out. I stayed in the apartment, surrounded by the ghosts of what we'd been.

And then, in January 2047, I resigned.

No drama. No press release. Just a letter to the new director—someone I barely knew, an administrator brought in to manage the project's decline—saying that I was leaving. That I needed a change. That I was grateful for the opportunity.

The opportunity. As if discovering the loneliness of the cosmos was an opportunity.

---

Let me tell you about the years after.

I've mentioned them briefly—the quiet years, the hiking years, the years I spent alone in the mountains trying to outrun what I knew.

I sold the apartment. I bought a small cabin in the Sierra Nevada, far from cities, far from universities, far from signals. I lived there alone, walking the trails, watching the seasons change, letting the silence fill me.

I thought I was healing. I thought the distance from the work would eventually become a kind of peace.

But you can't outrun what's inside you. The understanding I'd gained in that lab—the knowledge of the gap, the unbridgeable distance between minds—it came with me. It was part of me now, woven into my perception.

I looked at the mountains and saw isolation. I looked at the trees and saw entities that couldn't communicate across the gap between species. I looked at other hikers, passing me on the trail, and saw minds trapped in skulls, reaching toward each other and never quite touching.

The beauty was still there. The world was still magnificent. But underneath the magnificence was the loneliness, the terrible loneliness that I had seen in the signals and couldn't unsee.

---

It's late now. Past midnight. The funeral is in a few hours.

Ewa has gone home to sleep. I'm alone in my mother's apartment, writing by the light of a single lamp.

The body has been taken away. The room where she died is empty, the bed stripped, the curtains closed.

I keep thinking about what she said, those last days. About my father singing in the garden. About how maybe singing is enough—singing for its own sake, not for an audience, not for understanding, just for the joy of it.

Maybe that's what the signals are. Singing. Not attempts to communicate—communication implies hope of reception, of response. Just singing. The expression of existence, offered to the void without expectation.

If that's true, then my discovery changes nothing. The signals were never messages to be translated. They were songs to be heard, imperfectly, from far away.

And we heard them. We couldn't understand them, couldn't translate them, couldn't bridge the gap. But we heard them.

Maybe that's enough. Maybe hearing is enough, even without understanding.

---

I don't know if I believe that. It sounds like consolation—the kind of consolation you reach for when the real hope is gone.

But tonight, sitting in my mother's empty apartment, surrounded by the belongings of a woman I loved but never fully knew—tonight, consolation is what I need.

The signals are singing. My mother is gone. The project is a memory.

And I'm here, still writing, still reaching, still trying to make words carry what words cannot carry.

Tomorrow I'll bury my mother. Then I'll go back to California, to the garage, to this memoir that I need to finish.

And then—I don't know. And then, whatever comes next.

The unraveling is complete. What's left is only the thread—thin, frayed, but still stretching forward into the unknown.

I hold onto it. It's all I have.

I hold onto it, and I keep writing, and I wait for the morning.

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## PART 5 - COLLAPSE

### Chapter 21 - The Separation

I'm back in California.

The funeral was three days ago. I stood in a cemetery in Kraków, surrounded by relatives I barely knew, listening to a priest speak words in Polish that I understood perfectly and felt nothing from. My mother was lowered into the ground beside my father. Ewa held my hand. I did not cry.

Now I'm in the garage again, at my desk, looking out at the fog that has returned in my absence. The bay is invisible. The world is grey and close.

I should feel something. Grief, relief, the complex emotions that follow a parent's death. But I feel mostly empty—hollowed out, scraped clean. As if the flight back carried me through some membrane, and I emerged on the other side lighter, less substantial.

I need to write about Daniel. About the separation that ended our marriage. I've circled around it throughout this memoir, touching it and retreating, unable to face it directly.

Now my mother is dead, and there's nothing left to protect me from the past. So let me tell you how it ended.

---

The conversation happened in October 2046—three years after the night in the lab, one year after the leak, six months after Maya resigned.

We were in the apartment. Evening. The light was fading, the room growing dim. Neither of us moved to turn on the lamps.

"Tom," Daniel said. "We need to talk."

I knew what was coming. I had known for months, maybe longer. The silences, the distance, the careful choreography of two people avoiding collision—all of it pointed toward this moment.

“I know,” I said.

He was sitting across from me, in the chair by the window. I could barely see his face in the dimness, but I could hear the weariness in his voice.

“I can’t do this anymore,” he said. “I’ve tried. I’ve tried for three years. But I can’t keep living with someone who’s not really here.”

“I’m here.”

“You’re not. You haven’t been since that night. The night in the lab, the night everything changed—you left me then, and you never came back.”

I wanted to argue. I wanted to say that I was here, that I loved him, that leaving was the last thing I wanted.

But he was right. I had left. Not physically, but in every way that mattered. I had retreated into the gap, into the understanding that had broken me, and I had left Daniel standing outside, knocking on a door I couldn’t open.

“I’m sorry,” I said. It was inadequate. It was all I had.

“I know you’re sorry. I know you didn’t mean for this to happen. But that doesn’t change what happened. It doesn’t change what we’ve become.”

He stood up. He walked to the window, his silhouette dark against the fading light.

“I love you,” he said. “I want you to know that. I still love you. I probably always will. But love isn’t enough. I’ve learned that. Love can’t cross a gap that one person won’t help bridge.”

I think about that phrase: *a gap that one person won't help bridge.*

He was right. The gap was there—the gap I had discovered, the distance between minds that language couldn't span—but that wasn't why we failed. We failed because I stopped trying. I saw the impossibility of perfect communication, and I used it as an excuse to stop communicating at all.

Daniel never stopped trying. He reached for me, again and again, with books and meals and patience and love. He built bridges, imperfect bridges, bridges that couldn't carry the full weight of understanding but could carry something.

And I stood on my side and watched him build, and I didn't help. I told myself the bridges were pointless, that they couldn't span the gap, that any attempt was doomed to fail.

But some connections are better than none. Some understanding is better than total isolation. I knew that—I had always known that—but the knowledge didn't translate into action. The gap inside me, between knowing and doing, was as wide as any gap between minds.

---

The fog is lifting slightly. I can see shapes through it now—the neighbor's fence, the trees, the suggestion of hills in the distance.

I'm trying to remember Daniel's face that evening, but I can't quite see it. The dimness has swallowed it, left me with only the voice, the silhouette, the words that ended us.

Maybe that's appropriate. By then, I had stopped really seeing him. He had become a presence in my life rather than a person—a warm body in the bed, a voice in the other room, a figure moving through the apartment that I shared but no longer inhabited.

I had done that. I had reduced him, slowly, through three years of distance, from the man I loved to a ghost I lived with.

---

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

It was a coward’s question. I was putting the decision on him, making him do the work of ending us, just as I had made him do the work of maintaining us.

He turned from the window. I still couldn’t see his face clearly, but something in his posture shifted—a straightening, a decision being made.

“I want to separate,” he said. “I want to move out. I want to try to build a life that doesn’t have this silence at the center of it.”

“And us?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someday, if things change... but I can’t wait for someday anymore. I’ve been waiting for three years.”

I nodded. I accepted it. I should have fought—should have promised to try harder, to be more present, to bridge the gap from my side. But I didn’t have the fight in me. I was too tired, too empty, too convinced of the futility of all attempts.

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay?”

“If that’s what you need. I understand.”

He was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was different—softer, sadder.

“Is that all? After everything we’ve been through—is that all you have to say?”

I searched for words. I searched for the feeling that should have been there—the desperation, the grief, the urgent need to save what we had. But the gap had swallowed it. The gap had swallowed everything.

“I love you,” I said. “I don’t know how to show it anymore. I don’t know how to be what you need. But I love you.”

"I know," he said. "That's the saddest part."

---

He moved out two weeks later.

The apartment felt larger after he left. The spaces he had filled—the closet, the bathroom counter, the side of the bed—became absences, negative space shaped like him.

I didn't rearrange anything. I left his absence intact, as if he might come back. For months, I walked around the empty spaces, careful not to fill them, not to acknowledge that they would stay empty.

I slept badly. I ate badly. I went to work and came home and sat in the silence and tried to feel something other than numb.

This is what I had chosen. This is what the gap had cost me.

---

I need to tell you about the last time I saw him.

Not the day he moved out—that was logistics, boxes and furniture, the practical dismantling of a shared life. I mean the last time I saw him as my husband, when we were still something to each other.

It was the night before he left. We had finished packing; the apartment was full of boxes, stripped of the warmth that had made it home. We stood in the kitchen, drinking tea, saying nothing.

Then Daniel put down his cup and walked over to me. He took my face in his hands—gently, the way he used to—and he looked at me.

"I wish I could see what you see," he said. "I wish I could understand what happened to you that night. Maybe if I could, I'd know how to reach you."

"I wish you could too."

"But I can't. And you can't show me. So we're stuck on opposite sides of something neither of us can name."

He kissed me. Softly, briefly. A goodbye.

“Take care of yourself, Tom. Please. For me, even if you can’t do it for yourself.”

“I’ll try.”

He nodded. He picked up his cup. He walked out of the kitchen, and I stood there alone, feeling the last warmth of him fade from my face.

---

I’ve carried that moment with me for seventeen years.

The look in his eyes. The gentleness of his hands. The kiss that was an ending.

I’ve replayed it countless times, wondering what I could have said differently, what I could have done. Wondering if there were words—magic words, perfect words—that could have crossed the gap and saved us.

There weren’t. I know that now. The gap was real. The distance was real. And I had made it wider through years of retreat.

But the love was real too. That’s what I want to remember. Underneath all the failure, the silence, the distance—underneath all of it was love. Daniel’s love for me, and mine for him, imperfectly expressed but genuinely felt.

The love wasn’t enough. It never is. But it was there, and it mattered, and I will not let the failure erase it.

---

The fog has lifted. The bay is visible now, blue and sparkling in the afternoon sun. I can see the bridge, the hills of Marin, the world outside this garage.

I've written about the separation. I've written what I could remember, what I could bear to put into words. It's not everything—it could never be everything—but it's what I have.

Daniel is alive, somewhere. We haven't spoken in years, but I know he remarried, built a new life, found the presence and the connection that I couldn't give him. I'm glad. He deserved that. He deserved someone who could meet him in the space between, who could build bridges and cross them.

I couldn't be that person. The gap had taken that from me.

But maybe—I hope—maybe by writing this, I'm building something. A bridge of words, imperfect and incomplete, stretching toward whoever reads it. A bridge that can't carry the full weight of what I experienced, but can carry something.

Some connection is better than none. Some understanding is better than total isolation.

I believe that now. It took me twenty years, but I believe it.

---

Tomorrow I'll write about the years alone. The cabin, the mountains, the slow process of learning to live with what I knew.

Tonight I sit with Daniel's memory. With his hands on my face, his voice in my ears, the love that wasn't enough but was everything.

The signals are still singing. The gap is still there.

But I'm still here too. Still reaching. Still trying.

That has to count for something.

It has to.

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## Chapter 22 - The Mountain

I bought the cabin in February 2047—one month after I resigned from the project, four months after Daniel left.

It was in the Sierra Nevada, above the town of Lone Pine, at the end of a dirt road that became impassable in winter. A small place: one room, a woodstove, a sleeping loft reached by a ladder. No internet, no cell service, no connection to the world I was leaving behind.

The real estate agent thought I was crazy. “You understand there’s no utilities up there?” she said. “No running water. You’d have to haul everything in, heat with wood, use an outhouse. It’s not a place to live—it’s a hunting cabin, a weekend thing.”

“I understand,” I said.

“And you want to live there? Full time?”

“Yes.”

She shook her head, but she took my money. I signed the papers, received the keys, drove up the mountain with a truck full of supplies and a mind full of nothing.

I was fifty years old. I had spent twenty-five years studying language, communication, the possibility of reaching other minds. And I had learned that the reaching was impossible, that the gap was real, that we were all alone no matter how loudly we called into the void.

I didn’t know what else to do. So I went to the mountain.

---

I’m writing this in the garage again. My usual place, my usual fog. But something has changed since Kraków. Something subtle, hard to name. The emptiness I felt after the funeral has shifted into

something else—not fullness, exactly, but openness. A willingness to be present in a way I haven't felt for years.

Maybe it's just grief, doing its work. Maybe it's the memoir, approaching its end. Maybe it's nothing, and I'll wake up tomorrow as closed and guarded as ever.

But today, I can write about the mountain. Today, I can go back there.

---

The first months were hard.

I knew nothing about living off-grid. I learned through failure—the fire that went out in the night and left me shivering, the water I didn't store before the first freeze, the food I didn't preserve and watched rot. I made mistakes that could have killed me, and I was lucky enough to survive them.

Slowly, I learned. I learned to chop wood, to read the weather, to ration supplies for the long winters. I learned the rhythms of the mountain: the spring thaw that turned the roads to mud, the summer heat that brought hikers and tourists, the autumn gold that preceded the snow, the winter silence that swallowed everything.

I hiked. That's what I did, mostly. Every day that weather allowed, I walked the trails—up to the peaks, down to the valleys, across the high meadows where wildflowers bloomed in July. I walked until my body was tired enough to sleep, until my mind was empty enough to rest.

The walking was a kind of meditation. Not the sitting-still kind—I could never do that—but the moving kind. The rhythm of footsteps, the breath coming hard on the climbs, the world reduced to the next rock, the next step, the next breath. In those moments, I wasn't thinking about the signals, the gap, the loneliness I had discovered. I was just walking.

---

Let me tell you about the view from Mount Whitney.

It's the highest peak in the contiguous United States—14,505 feet, a long day's climb from the trailhead. I did it for the first time in July 2047, five months after I moved to the cabin.

The climb was brutal. Eleven miles, six thousand feet of elevation gain, the air thinning as I rose. My lungs burned. My legs ached. My mind, for once, was quiet—too focused on the physical effort to wander.

I reached the summit at midday. I stood on the highest point in the Sierra, looking out at a world that stretched forever in every direction.

To the east, the desert—brown and gold, shimmering in the heat. To the west, the range continuing, peak after peak, ridges and valleys folding into blue distance. Above me, the sky—impossibly deep, that dark blue you only see at altitude, the atmosphere thinning toward space.

And everywhere, silence. Not the absence of sound—there was wind, the occasional bird, the creak of my own bones—but the absence of human noise. No engines, no voices, no signals carrying meaning through the air.

I stood there for a long time. I thought about the alien signals, still streaming through the cosmos, passing through me even now, undetectable without the equipment I had left behind. I thought about all the minds that had sent them, had offered their songs to the void, had hoped for connection and received only silence.

And I thought: *I understand now. I understand why they keep singing.*

---

Not because the singing would be heard. Not because connection was possible. But because singing was what they were. Because expression was as natural as breathing, as inevitable as existence itself.

The signals weren't failed attempts at communication. They were successful attempts at being. Each one said: *I am here. I exist. I have thoughts and feelings and experiences, and I am putting them into the world, and that is enough.*

I don't know if this is true. I don't know if the senders thought of their signals this way, or if they hoped for response, or if "hope" even translates across the gap. But standing on that mountain, looking out at the impossible vastness of the world, I believed it.

The singing was enough. The reaching was enough. Even without arrival.

---

I came down from the mountain different than I had gone up.

Not transformed—transformation is a word for stories, not for life. But shifted. Tilted slightly toward something that might, eventually, become peace.

I kept hiking. I climbed every peak within range—Whitney again, Williamson, Langley, Russell. I walked the John Muir Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, the high routes that required no trail at all. I walked until walking was as natural as thinking, until the mountains were as familiar as rooms.

And slowly, very slowly, the understanding that had broken me began to change.

It was still true. The gap was still real. Minds were still islands, singing into the void. But the truth was no longer only devastating. It was also, somehow, beautiful.

The beauty was not a consolation—not a compensation for the loss, not a silver lining to the cloud. The beauty was part of the truth itself. The same fact that made us alone also made us individual. The same gap that prevented perfect understanding also created the space for wonder.

Each signal was unique. Each mind was unique. Each song was the expression of a perspective that had never existed before and would never exist again.

And that was not a tragedy. That was a miracle.

---

I'm crying.

I didn't expect that. I've been writing for hours, dry-eyed, clinical, and now suddenly I'm crying.

Maybe it's my mother. Maybe it's Daniel. Maybe it's the memory of standing on Whitney, seeing for the first time that the loneliness was not the whole story.

Or maybe it's just this: I'm sixty-two years old. I've spent twenty years living with an understanding that I thought had ruined me. And now, writing it down, trying to give it form, I'm discovering that it didn't ruin me. It changed me. But I'm still here.

The signals are still singing. I'm still singing. The gap remains, and the singing continues, and somehow that's enough.

---

I lived in the cabin for eight years.

Eight years of mountains and silence and slow healing. Eight years of learning to be alone without being lonely—or rather, learning that loneliness wasn't the enemy I had thought it was. Loneliness was just the shape of a mind, the contour of an island, the inevitable condition of being a self in a world of other selves.

I read. I wrote—not this memoir, but notes, fragments, attempts at understanding that never cohered. I listened to the wind and the birds and the occasional hiker passing on the trail below. I grew a garden, failed at it, grew another one. I watched the seasons turn, year after year, the same patterns repeating with infinite variation.

And I thought about Daniel, and my mother, and Maya, and all the people I had failed to reach. I thought about them not with guilt, exactly—I had moved past the worst of the guilt—but with something like tenderness. They were islands too. They had done their best to sing, to reach, to connect. That their songs had not reached me fully was not their failure. It was just the nature of things.

---

In 2055, I came down from the mountain.

Not because I was done—you're never done—but because I was ready. Ready to be around people again, ready to try the imperfect bridges, ready to sing knowing that my song might not be heard.

I sold the cabin. I moved back to the Bay Area, to this garage in Oakland, to the fog and the city and the life I had left behind. I got a part-time job—nothing glamorous, just tutoring at the community college, teaching languages to people who would never use them but wanted to learn anyway.

And I started this memoir. I started trying to put into words what I had learned on the mountain, in the lab, in the ruins of my marriage and the death of my mother.

I'm still trying. I'll never finish. But the trying is the point.

---

The fog is burning off. Late afternoon light is breaking through, turning the grey to gold.

I have three more chapters to write. The end of the project. The death of my mother. The meaning of all this, if meaning is the right word.

But I want to stay here a moment longer. In the memory of the mountain, the summit of Whitney, the first time I understood that loneliness could be beautiful.

We are alone. We will always be alone. The gap is real, and love cannot cross it, and understanding is never complete.

But we sing anyway. We reach anyway. We build our imperfect bridges and watch them fail and build them again.

That's what life is. That's what the signals are. That's what this memoir is—a song, sent into the void, hoping to be heard but not requiring it.

The singing is enough.

I believe that now. After everything, I believe it.

The singing is enough.

---

## Chapter 23 - The End of the Project

The Signal Translation Project officially closed on December 15th, 2058.

I learned about it from the news, not from anyone inside. By then, I had been gone for eleven years. I was living in the cabin, in my second-to-last winter on the mountain, and I had walked down to Lone Pine for supplies. The general store had a television playing behind the counter—local news, weather, the small concerns of a small town.

And then: “The Signal Translation Project, once humanity’s most ambitious attempt to communicate with extraterrestrial intelligence, will formally shut down at the end of the year, officials announced today.”

I stood in the store, holding a bag of rice, watching the screen.

They showed the Chen Building. It looked smaller than I remembered, or maybe just older—the concrete stained, the windows dark. They showed Maya, in archival footage, at the height of her fame,

announcing discoveries that had seemed world-changing. They showed the signals themselves, rendered as colorful waveforms, pulsing across the screen like heartbeats.

“The project, which cost over thirty billion dollars over its twenty-six-year history, failed to achieve its primary goal of translating the extraterrestrial signals detected through the Chen Process. Critics have long argued that the project was fundamentally misconceived, and recent budget analyses supported the decision to redirect funds to other scientific priorities.”

I put down the rice. I walked out of the store. I sat on the bench outside, in the December cold, and I watched the mountains turn gold in the late-afternoon light.

The project was over. The dream was officially dead.

And I felt—I don’t know what I felt. Not grief, exactly. Not relief. Something quieter. A kind of acknowledgment, maybe. A recognition that this ending had been inevitable from the moment I ran my model on Pattern 12.

---

I’m writing this in the garage, a week after the funeral. The rhythm of the days has returned: wake, coffee, write. The grief is there, underneath everything, but it doesn’t stop the writing. Nothing stops the writing.

Let me tell you about what the project became, in those years after I left.

---

The decline was slow, then sudden—the way these things always are.

After Maya resigned, the new leadership tried to pivot. They talked about “expanded research objectives” and “diversified methodological approaches.” They sought new funding streams, new partnerships, new justifications for the project’s continued existence.

But the fundamental problem remained: the signals couldn't be translated. My discovery—Pattern 7's grammar was local, each signal was an island—had been absorbed into the project's institutional knowledge, but it couldn't be overcome. The researchers kept working, kept analyzing, kept publishing papers. But the papers were incremental, technical, devoid of the breakthrough that everyone was waiting for.

The public lost interest. The signals had been a sensation in the early days—proof of alien intelligence, a promise of cosmic conversation. But as the years passed without progress, without translation, without the meaningful contact everyone had imagined, attention drifted elsewhere. New crises demanded attention; new wonders captured the imagination. The signals became background noise, a remnant of an earlier era's hopes.

The funding dwindled. Each budget cycle brought cuts, reductions, the slow strangulation of resources. Researchers left—first the junior ones, seeking careers with better prospects, then the senior ones, exhausted by the endless fight for survival. The Chen Building grew quieter, emptier, the hallways that had once hummed with activity falling silent.

By 2058, the project was a skeleton. A handful of researchers, a fraction of the original budget, a mission that no one quite believed in anymore. The official closure was less an ending than an acknowledgment—a recognition of what had already happened, formalized in press releases and budget documents.

---

I watched all of this from a distance. I read the occasional article, heard the occasional news report. I didn't intervene, didn't comment, didn't try to shape the narrative.

What would I have said? "I told you so"? The project's leadership had known, since my discovery, that translation was impossible. They had chosen to continue anyway—for the incremental science,

for the jobs, for the hope that might yet survive. I couldn't blame them. I understood the pull of hope, the difficulty of accepting that some dreams must die.

But I couldn't participate, either. I had seen too clearly. The gap was real; the signals were islands; no amount of funding or research would change that fundamental truth. To pretend otherwise would have been a betrayal—of myself, of the work, of the truth I had stumbled into that night in the lab.

So I stayed on my mountain, and I watched the project die, and I mourned it in my own quiet way.

---

Maya died in 2061. Cancer, discovered too late, resistant to treatment.

I heard about it from Yusuf, who had tracked me down through some combination of persistence and old connections. He called me at the general store in Lone Pine—I had given them my cabin's GPS coordinates for emergencies, and they had a phone—and told me the news.

"I thought you should know," he said. "The memorial is next week. In Berkeley."

I stood in the store, holding the phone, thinking about Maya. The woman who had discovered the signals. The woman who had built the project. The woman who had tried to manage the truth, and failed, and watched her life's work crumble.

"I'll try to be there," I said.

I went. I drove down from the mountain, through the valley and over the pass, back to the Bay Area for the first time in years. The memorial was at the university chapel—a small crowd, mostly former colleagues, the remnants of a community that had dispersed across the world.

I didn't speak. I sat in the back and listened to others talk about Maya—her brilliance, her determination, her vision. They spoke of her as a pioneer, a trailblazer, a woman who had changed humanity's understanding of its place in the universe.

They weren't wrong. She had done all of that. The signals were real; she had proved it; nothing could take that away.

But they didn't mention the framing. They didn't mention the committee, the careful management, the year of delay while the truth was shaped into something the institution could survive. They remembered the hero, not the complicated person who had made compromises because she loved her work too much to watch it die.

I understood that too. Memorials are for comfort, not for truth.

After the service, Yusuf found me. We stood in the courtyard, the spring sun warm on our faces, and we talked about nothing in particular. The weather. His grandchildren. The life we had both built after the project ended.

Then he said: "Do you ever regret it? Leaving?"

I thought about the question. I thought about my cabin, my mountains, the years of silence and healing.

"No," I said. "I regret a lot of things. But not that."

He nodded. He didn't press. That was Yusuf—always knowing when to let things be.

"She asked about you," he said. "Maya. Near the end. She wanted to know if you were okay."

I felt something shift in my chest. A loosening, maybe. A release.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her you were on a mountain somewhere. That you seemed at peace."

“Was that true?”

He smiled. “I hoped it was. Was it?”

I looked at the chapel, the flowers, the small crowd dispersing into the afternoon.

“I think it was,” I said. “I think it finally was.”

---

The project is gone now. The Chen Building has been repurposed—offices for some other department, research into some other question. The equipment has been decommissioned, the data archived, the staff dispersed.

But the signals remain.

They’re still out there, streaming through the cosmos, passing through the Earth at every moment. The Chen Process still works; anyone with the right equipment could detect them, could add new signals to the catalog that already contains hundreds.

No one is listening anymore. Not systematically, not with the resources and the hope that the project once embodied. The world has moved on, as worlds do.

But the signals don’t care. They’ve been traveling for thousands of years; they’ll travel for thousands more. They carry meanings we can’t decipher, from minds we can’t comprehend, across distances that make our largest ambitions seem small.

They’re still singing. They’ll always be singing.

And somewhere, in a garage in Oakland, an old man is writing about them. Trying to explain what they mean, knowing the explanation will fail. Singing his own small song into the void, hoping someone might hear.

Tomorrow I'll write about my mother. The last chapter before the end.

Tonight I sit with the project's memory. With Maya, with Yusuf, with all the people who believed in the dream of cosmic conversation. They weren't foolish to believe. Hope is never foolish, even when it's wrong.

The project failed. That's the truth. But the failure was not a waste. We tried. We reached. We sent our own signals into the universe, through radio and spacecraft and the simple fact of our attention. We said: *We are here. We are listening. We want to understand.*

The universe didn't answer—not in any way we could understand. But we asked. And the asking mattered.

It mattered.

I have to believe that. After everything, I have to believe that the asking mattered.

---

The fog is coming in. The afternoon light is fading. I close my laptop and watch the world disappear into grey.

Tomorrow, the last full chapter. The death of my mother, the meaning of all this, the final attempt to say what cannot be said.

Tonight, I rest. I let the silence hold me. I listen for the signals I cannot hear, the songs I cannot understand.

They're out there. They're always out there.

And I'm still here. Still listening.

That has to be enough. That has to be everything.

---

## Chapter 24 - The Vigil

I haven't written about the last night.

I've written around it—the days in Kraków, the conversations we had, the moment she stopped breathing. But I haven't written about the vigil itself. The hours I sat beside her bed, holding her hand, waiting for the end.

I think I was saving it. Keeping it in reserve, the way you keep the last piece of bread when you don't know when you'll eat again. The most precious thing, held back until there was nothing else.

Now there's nothing else. This is the second-to-last chapter. Tomorrow I'll write the ending, whatever that means. Tonight, I'll write about my mother's death.

---

It was the fourth night after I arrived.

Ewa had gone home to sleep. The hospice nurse had come and gone, leaving instructions I barely heard. The apartment was quiet—that deep silence of late night, when even the city holds its breath.

My mother's room was dark except for a small lamp in the corner. The light was soft, golden, the kind of light that forgives everything. Her face on the pillow looked younger in that light, or maybe I just wanted to see her that way.

She was unconscious by then. The nurse had explained it: the body shutting down, withdrawing from the world, preparing for its final journey. She might hear me, the nurse said. She might feel my presence. But she wouldn't wake.

I sat beside her and held her hand. It was small, light, the bones visible through the skin. Her fingers didn't curl around mine—they couldn't—but I held them anyway.

And I talked.

---

I told her things I had never told anyone.

I told her about the night in the lab. About Pattern 7 and Pattern 12 and the moment I understood that translation was impossible. I told her what it felt like to see the gap—the terrible loneliness, the end of the dream of connection. I told her how it had broken me, how I had lost Daniel, how I had run to the mountain and hidden there for years.

She didn't respond. She couldn't. But I talked anyway, because talking was all I had left to give.

I told her I was sorry. For leaving Poland. For leaving her. For all the years I had stayed away, too absorbed in my work to come home. I told her I understood now that I had been running—from her, from Kraków, from the weight of being someone's son. I had run all the way to the stars, and I had found only more loneliness.

I told her about Daniel. How we met, how we married, how I had failed him. I told her I knew she had never fully accepted my life—the American husband, the choices that took me so far from her. But I told her I had loved him, truly loved him, even if the love wasn't enough.

I told her about the signals. About the minds out there, singing into the void. I told her what I had learned on the mountain: that singing was enough, that reaching was enough, that the gap didn't diminish the value of the attempt.

And I told her I loved her. I said it over and over, in Polish, the language of my childhood, the language she had given me. *Kocham cię, Mama. Kocham cię.*

---

Did she hear me? I don't know. The nurse said she might. The science is uncertain—how much the dying perceive, how much reaches them through the veil.

But I choose to believe she heard. I choose to believe that somewhere, in the darkness she was traveling toward, my words found her. Not the content—the content was words, and words can't cross the gap—but the sound. The presence. The knowledge that her son was beside her, singing his small song into the void.

That's faith, not science. I've never been good at faith. But in that room, in that light, with her hand in mine, I found it.

---

I talked for hours.

I talked until my voice was hoarse, until the lamp burned low, until the first grey light of dawn began to seep through the curtains. I talked about everything and nothing—memories from childhood, stories she had told me, the garden where my father used to sing. I talked about the future she wouldn't see, the world that would continue without her. I talked about death itself, about what I believed and what I hoped and what I couldn't know.

And then, around 4 AM, I stopped talking.

Not because I had run out of words—I could have talked forever—but because the silence felt right. The vigil had its own rhythm, its own needs. Some of it was words. Some of it was presence. Some of it was simply being there, breathing together, two people at the edge of the gap that no one can cross.

I sat with her in the silence. I held her hand. I watched her face, looking for signs—of pain, of peace, of anything that would tell me what she was experiencing.

Her face was still. Her breath was shallow. She was beyond pain now, beyond peace, beyond any category I could name.

She was just leaving. Slowly, gently, like a boat drifting away from shore.

---

I thought about all the things I hadn't said.

There were so many. A lifetime of conversations we hadn't had, questions we hadn't asked, truths we hadn't shared. We had maintained a careful distance, my mother and I—polite, affectionate, but never deep. The gap between us was old, older than my discovery in the lab, older than my leaving for America. It had been there since I was a child, since I first realized that she couldn't understand the things that burned in my mind.

I had blamed her for that, once. Blamed her for not seeing me, not knowing me, not being the mother I thought I needed.

Now, sitting beside her as she died, I understood that the blame was foolish. She had seen me as well as she could. She had known me as well as anyone can know another person. The gap wasn't her fault—it wasn't anyone's fault. It was just the nature of things.

Minds are islands. Parents and children, lovers and friends, colleagues and strangers—we're all islands, calling across the water, doing our best to reach each other.

My mother had reached for me, in her way. I had reached for her, in mine. The reaching had never fully succeeded. But it had happened, and it mattered.

---

She died at 5:37 AM.

I know the exact time because I looked at the clock. A strange thing to do, to check the time when your mother dies. But I wanted to remember. I wanted to fix the moment, to give it coordinates in time.

Her breath simply stopped. One moment she was breathing—shallow, ragged, but breathing. The next moment, she wasn't. The pause stretched, became permanent. And she was gone.

I sat with her for a long time after. I didn't call Ewa, didn't call the nurse, didn't do any of the practical things that needed to be done. I just sat there, holding her hand, looking at her face.

She looked peaceful. Everyone says that about the dead, and it's usually wishful thinking. But in her case, it seemed true. The tension had left her features. The struggle was over. What remained was just a body, emptied of whatever had made it her.

*I thought: This is what it looks like. The gap, made visible. The person gone, the body remaining. The final proof that we are more than our matter, and that the more cannot be kept.*

*I thought: I will be here someday. On this side of the gap. Everyone I love will sit beside me, and I will go where she has gone, and the distance will be complete.*

*I thought: I'm not afraid.*

That surprised me. I had always been afraid of death—not the pain of it, but the ending. The cessation of consciousness, the permanent silence. But sitting there, in the grey dawn, with my mother's hand growing cold in mine, I felt no fear.

We are all going to the same place. The gap that separates us in life will close in death. That's not a comfort—I don't believe in reunion, in souls meeting on the other side. But it's a fact. And there's something peaceful in the fact.

---

I stayed with her until the sun rose.

Then I called Ewa. She came, and we cried together, and the practical things began. The nurse, the funeral home, the paperwork of death. The rituals that give shape to grief, that carry us through the unbearable.

I've written about all of that already, in other chapters. The funeral. The return to California. The ongoing work of this memoir.

But I wanted to write about the vigil itself. The hours I spent beside her. The things I said, and the silence that followed. The moment she left, and the moment I understood that leaving was not the worst thing.

---

The gap remains. It will always remain. But there's something on the other side of it—not understanding, not connection, but something. The knowledge that we tried. The memory of reaching. The love that couldn't cross but existed anyway.

My mother and I never fully knew each other. We never fully bridged the distance between Polish mother and American son, between her life and mine. But we loved each other, across the gap. We reached for each other, knowing the reaching would fail.

And in the end, I was there. I held her hand. I sang my small song into the void, and she drifted away, and the singing continued.

That's the story of the vigil. That's the story of my mother's death. It's the story of all deaths, I think. The story of all loves.

We reach. We fail. We keep reaching anyway.

And somewhere in the reaching, something happens. Something that isn't understanding, isn't connection, isn't the bridging of the gap.

Something that might be called grace.

---

Tomorrow, I'll write the last chapter. I don't know what it will say. The ending hasn't come to me yet—maybe it never will.

But tonight, I sit with my mother's memory. I sit with the vigil, the quiet hours, the hand in mine.

I sit with the gap, and I don't try to cross it. I just acknowledge it. I just let it be.

The signals are singing. My mother is gone. The world continues.

And I continue too, writing these words, reaching toward whoever might read them.

*Kocham cię, Mama.*

I love you.

I always did.

---

## Chapter 25 - The Song

This is the last chapter.

I've been sitting here for an hour, not writing, just looking at the fog. It's thick today—the thickest it's been in weeks. The world ends at the edge of the garage, grey and formless, and I am alone with the blinking cursor and the question of how to end.

A memoir should have an ending. A shape, a conclusion, a final note that makes sense of everything that came before. But lives don't end that way—they just stop. And this memoir is not about my ending. I'm still here, still alive, still waiting for whatever comes next.

So what do I write? What do I say to close a book about the impossibility of saying things?

---

Let me start with what I know.

The signals are real. They come from minds we cannot comprehend, carrying meanings we cannot decode. They are songs, sung into the void, reaching across distances that make our lives seem small.

They will never be translated. The gap between minds—between human minds and alien minds, between any mind and any other—is real and unbridgeable. We can build approximations, imperfect bridges, structures of language that carry some weight. But the full transmission of experience from one consciousness to another is impossible. It has always been impossible. It will always be impossible.

This is not a tragedy. Or rather, it is not only a tragedy.

The same gap that isolates us also individuates us. The same unbridgeable distance that makes perfect understanding impossible also makes each mind unique, each perspective unrepeatable, each experience singular. We are alone because we are ourselves. The price of being is solitude.

And yet we sing anyway.

---

I think about the minds that sent the signals.

I don't know what they were. I don't know if they had bodies, emotions, anything we would recognize as life. But I know they made something. They took whatever they experienced and they shaped it into patterns, into information, into signals that would outlast them by millennia.

They must have known, on some level, that their songs might never be heard. The distances involved are staggering; the probability of reception is vanishingly small. And yet they sang. They offered their existence to the cosmos, without guarantee, without expectation, simply because offering was what they could do.

This is what I've learned, in twenty years of living with this knowledge: the offering is the point. Not the reception, not the understanding, not the bridge successfully built. The offering itself—the act of reaching, the gesture toward connection—that's what matters.

My mother understood this. She told me, in her last days, about my father singing in the garden. He sang for himself, she said. Not for an audience. Just for the joy of it.

Maybe that's all any of us are doing. Singing for the joy of it. Reaching toward each other because reaching is our nature, because we cannot help ourselves, because the alternative—silence, isolation, the refusal to try—is worse than failure.

---

I want to tell you what this memoir is.

It's not a translation of my experience. I've tried, in these pages, to convey what I saw that night in the lab, what it felt like to understand the gap. But I know I've failed. The words create a picture, and the picture is wrong—not because I lied, but because words always create wrong pictures. That's their nature.

What you have, reading this, is not my experience. It's a set of symbols, patterns, signals that your mind will interpret according to its own structures, its own history, its own unbridgeable uniqueness. You will understand something—some version, some approximation—and it will not be what I meant.

That's okay. That's all communication ever is. We send signals; they are received and transformed; something passes between us, even if it's not the something we intended.

This memoir is a song. My song, offered to the void, hoping for resonance but not requiring it.

---

I think about Daniel.

He's out there somewhere, living his life. Married again, happy, I hope. He built the bridges I couldn't build. He found someone who could meet him in the space between, who could do the work of connection that I was too broken to do.

I don't regret him. I regret my failures, the distance I created, the years of silence that could have been years of imperfect communication. But I don't regret loving him, or trying, or failing.

The failure was honest. The reaching was real. And somewhere, in the space between our islands, something existed—love, or its approximation, or something we don't have a word for. Something that mattered, even though it wasn't enough.

---

I think about my mother.

She's gone now. Her body is in the ground in Kraków, next to my father, in the cemetery where I stood three weeks ago. She can't hear me anymore—couldn't hear me even when she was alive, not really, not across the gap of language and generation and distance.

But I sang to her anyway, that last night. I told her everything I had never told her, knowing the words couldn't bridge the gap, offering them anyway.

And something happened. Not understanding—she was beyond understanding by then. But something. A presence. A reaching.

Maybe that's what I mean by grace. Not the miraculous bridging of unbridgeable gaps, but the presence that persists despite the gap. The love that reaches even when it can't arrive.

---

I think about the future.

I'm sixty-two years old. I have some years left—how many, I don't know. I'll keep teaching at the community college, keep walking the hills above the bay, keep writing things that no one may ever read.

The signals will keep singing. New ones are being discovered all the time, by the small teams that still listen, the hobbyists and the

dedicated few who haven't given up. The catalog grows; the silence of each signal remains unbroken; the songs accumulate.

Someday—a thousand years from now, ten thousand—maybe someone will find a way. Maybe some future mind, human or machine or something we can't imagine, will build a bridge I couldn't build. Will decode the signals, translate the songs, prove that the gap can be crossed after all.

I don't think so. I think the gap is fundamental, structural, woven into the nature of mind itself. But I've been wrong before.

And even if I'm right—even if the gap is eternal—the singing will continue. Because that's what minds do. That's what existence is: a song, sung into the void, hoping for resonance, beautiful regardless of reception.

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Let me tell you how this morning began.

I woke at dawn. The fog was thick, as it is now, pressing against the windows, erasing the world. I made coffee. I sat at my desk. I opened this document and stared at the blinking cursor.

And then I heard something.

It wasn't a signal—not the kind from the cosmos, not the kind that requires radio telescopes and computational filtering. It was simpler than that. A bird, singing outside the window. A small thing, invisible in the fog, offering its song to the grey morning.

I listened. The bird didn't know I was listening, didn't care. It sang because singing was its nature, because the morning had arrived, because existence demanded expression.

I thought: *This is it. This is the whole story.*

A mind, singing. A listener, receiving. The gap between them, unbridgeable. And yet the singing continues, and the listening

continues, and something passes through the fog, imperfect and transformed but real.

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I don't have a conclusion.

I don't have a final truth, a neat resolution, a lesson that makes sense of everything. I have only this: I am here. I have lived. I have seen things that changed me, and I have tried to put those things into words, and the words have failed, and I have written them anyway.

The signals are singing. The bird is singing. I am singing, in my way, with these words that will reach you, transformed, across the gap.

I don't know if you understand. I don't know if understanding is possible.

But I know that you are there, somewhere, reading this. And I am here, writing it. And between us, something passes. Something imperfect, inadequate, transformed by your own mind into something I didn't intend.

That something is enough. It has to be enough.

Because that's all there is. That's all there ever was.

Minds, singing into the void. The void, singing back through other minds. The gap remaining, and the singing continuing, forever.

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The fog is beginning to lift.

I can see the neighbor's fence now, the trees beyond it, the first hints of blue sky above the grey. The world is reappearing, piece by piece, the way it always does.

I'm going to close my laptop. I'm going to walk outside, into the morning, into whatever comes next. I'm going to be alive, for as

long as I'm alive, and then I'll be gone, and the signals will keep singing, and someone else will sit in a garage somewhere, listening, trying to understand.

There is no they. There are only us—minds, islands, songs. Each one separate. Each one reaching. Each one a miracle of existence, offered to the universe without guarantee.

This is my song. These are my words. This is what I saw, and what it cost me, and what I found on the other side.

Thank you for listening.

The singing is enough.

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—Tomasz Kowalski Oakland, California 2063