

Imagine Me and You

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Prologue

It was an ordinary afternoon.

Light rested gently on the windows,
soft... almost absent.

Mila hadn't meant to come here.
Or perhaps—
she had,
in a way she couldn't trace.

There was a pause in her that day.
A subtle widening...
as if something had stepped back inside her,
making space.

Lucian was already there.

Not waiting.
Just... sitting.

A cup untouched beside him,
his gaze somewhere between the world
and something just behind it.

He had been noticing that lately—
those small distances opening
where things no longer fully held him.

Not loss.

More like...
a quiet loosening.

Mila entered.

And for a fraction—
less than a moment—
everything aligned.

Not in the room.

But through it.

A recognition
that had no direction.

No “from.”
No “to.”

Only—

there you are

They did not smile.

They did not speak.

And yet something unmistakable
had already moved.

Not attraction.

Not curiosity.

Something... prior.

Mila chose a place by the window.

Lucian remained where he was.

Nothing happened.

And still—
the space between them
was no longer empty.

Chapter One

For a while, ordinary life continued around them.

Cups touched saucers.

A chair moved softly across the floor.

Someone laughed near the counter.

The city passed beyond the tall café windows in muted afternoon light.

Mila opened the folder she had brought from the museum and spread several exhibition photographs across the table.

She had meant to review them quickly before returning to work.

Instead, her attention kept softening.

Not drifting exactly.

Widening.

As if the room had become quieter without becoming silent.

Across the café, Lucian turned a page in his notebook, then stopped writing.

He did not look at her.

And still, somehow, Mila felt the quality of his presence.

Not directed toward her.

Not asking anything.

Simply there.

A kind of stillness that did not withdraw from life.

That was what unsettled her gently.

People could be quiet in many ways.

Absent.

Defended.

Tired.

Closed.

But this was different.

This was quiet without absence.

Present without reaching.

Mila looked down again at the photographs.

Three images from the upcoming exhibition lay slightly uneven before her.

She adjusted them once.

Then again.

Something in the arrangement refused to settle.

She frowned lightly.

Across the room, Lucian lifted his cup, noticed it was cold, and smiled faintly to himself.

The smile was so small Mila almost missed it.

But something about it moved through her unexpectedly.

Not charm.

Not flirtation.

Recognition again.

As if he too had noticed how often life revealed itself in almost nothing.

A misplaced photograph.

A cold cup.

A pause that stayed.

A few minutes later Lucian stood to leave.

He gathered his notebook, placed a coin beneath his cup, and moved toward the door.

As he passed Mila's table, his gaze fell briefly on the photographs.

He slowed before he seemed to decide whether to speak.

Then he said, almost reluctantly,

"You're curating the light badly."

Mila looked up in surprise.

"What?"

A faint smile touched his face.

He gestured lightly toward the images spread across her table.

“The third one should be closer to the window. It changes the whole rhythm.”

Then immediately he looked almost embarrassed.

“Sorry. None of my business.”

But Mila was already looking down at the photographs.

And annoyingly, he was right.

She moved the third image slightly toward the light.

Immediately the whole arrangement softened into coherence.

She looked back up.

“You noticed that in passing?”

He shrugged slightly.

“I work in architecture. We become difficult around spatial relationships.”

Mila laughed unexpectedly.

The sound surprised both of them.

Because it carried something warmer than politeness.

The man smiled too then.

Not pushing further.

Not lingering artificially.

Just present.

“I’m Lucian,” he said.

“Mila.”

Again that small quiet pause.

Not empty.

Almost aware of itself.

Then Lucian nodded lightly toward the photographs.

“The light really matters.”

And with that he turned and disappeared into the late afternoon street.

Mila remained motionless for several seconds afterward.

Then slowly she looked back at the arrangement before her.

The third photograph now rested exactly where it needed to be.

Nothing dramatic had happened.

No promise.

No explanation.

No reason to make anything of it.

And still—

something had shifted.

Not in the photographs.

In her.

As if some inward space she had unconsciously closed long ago
had opened one small crack again.

Outside, the city continued moving through its ordinary rhythms.

And yet somehow,

nothing felt entirely the same anymore.

Chapter Two — Something Remains

The meeting should have ended twenty minutes earlier.

Lucian glanced briefly toward the clock on the wall while someone across the table continued explaining a problem that no longer seemed connected to anything real.

Budgets.

Adjustments.

Deadlines shifting again.

Words moving in circles.

Around him people nodded, interrupted, defended ideas already half exhausted before they were spoken.

Normally Lucian moved through meetings like these almost automatically.

Today something felt different.

Or perhaps more honestly:
something no longer fully worked.

His attention drifted briefly toward the window beside the conference table.

Pale evening light rested against the glass towers across the street.
Far below, bicycles moved through the city in quiet streams.

Life continuing.

Meanwhile inside the room everyone still spoke as if urgency itself created meaning.

Lucian suddenly remembered Mila moving the photograph closer to the window.

The light really matters.

A strange stillness entered him for a second.

Not distraction.

Recognition.

As if something essential had quietly revealed itself in that small moment at the café—
and now refused to disappear completely again.

“Lucian?”

He looked up.

Someone had asked him a question.

“I’m sorry,” he said honestly. “Can you repeat that?”

The room paused almost imperceptibly.

Not because of the question.

Because he had answered without pretending he had been listening.

Something about the simplicity of it changed the atmosphere slightly.

A few people relaxed.

Others looked irritated.

The meeting continued.

And still,
something remained.

—

Across the city, Mila stood in the museum storage room surrounded by unopened crates from an upcoming exhibition.

The air smelled faintly of wood, dust, paper, old fabric.

Usually she loved this part:
the hiddenness before things entered the public space.
The quiet care of arranging beauty.

Today she felt strangely absent inside her own movements.

Not unhappy.

Just slightly removed from herself.

She opened another crate carefully and lifted out a framed photograph wrapped in protective paper.

A landscape.

Winter trees reflected in dark water.

Nothing extraordinary about it.

And yet Mila suddenly stopped moving.

Because the light in the photograph felt alive somehow.

Not visually.

Present.

The same strange quality she had sensed yesterday in the café.

Not in Lucian exactly.

Through him.

Or perhaps through herself while near him.

Mila exhaled softly and sat down on one of the unopened crates.

For several quiet moments she simply remained there holding the photograph loosely against her knees.

Listening.

Not for answers.

For herself.

The realization came gently:

something in her no longer wanted to move through life half absent.

The sentence formed without drama.

Almost obvious once felt.

And once it appeared, she could suddenly see traces of it everywhere:
the exhaustion after social evenings where no one had really arrived,
the constant subtle rushing,
the endless low-grade pressure to remain functional,
interesting,

productive,
available.

So much movement.

So little presence.

A sound near the doorway startled her lightly.

Her colleague Emma leaned inside the storage room holding two folders.

“There you are,” Emma said. “I’ve been looking everywhere.”

Mila smiled faintly.

“Sorry.”

Emma glanced at the photograph in Mila’s hands.

“That one’s beautiful.”

Mila looked down at it again.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “It really is.”

Emma hesitated a moment longer.

Then:

“You okay?”

The question was ordinary.
Automatic almost.

And still, Mila noticed something strange.

For the first time in a long while, she did not want to answer automatically too.

She could say:

just tired,
busy week,
fine.

Instead she paused.

Long enough to actually notice herself.

Emma waited.

Not impatiently.

Just there.

Mila gave the smallest honest smile.

“I think so,” she said slowly. “Just... noticing some things lately.”

Emma laughed softly.

“That sounds either very wise or very dangerous.”

Mila laughed too then.

“Probably both.”

Emma shook her head lightly and disappeared again down the corridor.

Mila remained seated a while longer afterward.

The photograph still resting quietly in her hands.

And gradually another realization emerged underneath everything else:

nothing extraordinary had happened in the café yesterday.

No dramatic encounter.

No obvious beginning.

And yet somehow,

life itself felt slightly more visible now.

As if one unnoticed moment of real presence had illuminated how absent she had quietly become from her own life.

Outside, evening light slowly faded across the city.

Inside the storage room, Mila closed her eyes briefly and breathed.

Not trying to become someone new.

Only returning,

a little more honestly,

to someone already there.

Chapter Three — A Different Kind of Attention

The city looked strangely clear lately.

Mila noticed it while waiting at a crossing on her way to work.

Morning sunlight rested against tram rails still wet from the night before. A cyclist passed balancing flowers loosely beneath one arm. Somewhere nearby, someone laughed openly through an apartment window left slightly ajar.

Ordinary things.

And yet they no longer passed through her awareness quite the same way.

It was not happiness exactly.

Not even inspiration.

More like...

life itself had moved slightly closer.

The pedestrian light changed.

People immediately surged forward around her, already half absorbed in messages, schedules, conversations waiting further ahead.

Mila walked with them for a few moments.

Then gradually slowed.

Not intentionally.

Because something in her no longer wanted to rush past everything quite so quickly.

A breeze moved lightly between the buildings, carrying the smell of fresh bread from a nearby bakery.

For one strange suspended second she felt herself fully there.

Not thinking about later.

Not rehearsing conversations.

Not carrying yesterday.

Just—
walking.

The simplicity of it almost startled her.

Then someone bumped lightly into her shoulder while passing.

“Sorry,” the woman said automatically without looking up from her phone.

Mila smiled faintly.

The world returned to movement again.

And still,
something remained.

—

Across the city, Lucian stood inside an unfinished building while morning light moved slowly across bare concrete floors.

One of the construction managers was explaining delays again.

Numbers.

Materials.

Adjusted timelines.

Lucian listened.

Or tried to.

But his attention kept drifting toward the quality of the space itself.

The openness near the eastern windows.

The way sound changed near the stairwell.

How differently people moved in rooms with natural light.

At one point the manager stopped speaking abruptly.

Lucian looked up.

“You disappeared for a second,” the man said.

Lucian smiled apologetically.

“Sorry.”

The man shook his head with a tired laugh.

“I envy it honestly. Everyone’s exhausted lately.”

The honesty of the sentence entered the room quietly.

Lucian looked at him more carefully then.

For the first time he noticed the shadows beneath the man's eyes.
The slight tension in his jaw.
The effort it took him to remain composed.

And suddenly something became strangely obvious:

people carried entire invisible worlds through ordinary life while pretending not to.

The realization felt almost overwhelming once seen clearly.

Not tragic.

Tender.

The manager rubbed a hand across his forehead.

"My wife says I haven't fully arrived home in months."

Lucian remained quiet.

Because something in the sentence landed painfully close to his own life.

Or perhaps his former life.

He was no longer entirely sure.

Outside the unfinished windows, sunlight rested against the river cutting through the city.

Life everywhere continuing.

And for one brief moment Lucian sensed with startling clarity how many people moved through their days only partially present inside them.

Not because they did not care.

Because they had forgotten another way existed.

—

That evening Mila stopped at the small café again almost without deciding to.

The moment she entered, she noticed him immediately.

Lucian sat near the back this time, notebook open beside an untouched cup of coffee.

He looked up as the door closed behind her.

And then both of them smiled.

Small.

Natural.

As if something in each of them had quietly expected this.

Mila removed her scarf slowly.

“I was beginning to think this place only existed during rainstorms,” she said.

Lucian laughed softly.

“That would explain the lighting.”

She moved toward his table before fully deciding to.

“May I?”

He nodded.

And as Mila sat down across from him, something inside both of them relaxed slightly.

Not because they knew each other.

Because neither of them felt required to become someone else in order to enter the space between them.

For a few moments they simply sat there while late afternoon light moved slowly across the café walls.

No urgency to impress.

No performance of interest.

No carefully managed self.

Just presence.

Lucian glanced lightly toward the window.

“The light is better today,” he said.

Mila smiled.

“Yes.”

Then after a pause:

“I’ve been noticing strange things since last week.”

Lucian looked at her with immediate recognition.

“Me too.”

Neither tried to explain immediately.

Because somehow both sensed that what was happening between them could disappear under too many words spoken too quickly.

So instead they remained there quietly for a while,
allowing the conversation to arrive naturally.

Outside, bicycles moved through the fading golden evening.

Inside, something subtle and unmistakable continued opening between them.

Not romance.

Not certainty.

A different kind of attention.

And once felt,
neither of them seemed fully able to return to living without it anymore.

Chapter Four — Stay

Mila checked her phone three times before realizing she was waiting for something.

Not a message exactly.

More the possibility of one.

She exhaled softly and placed the phone face down on the table.

Outside, evening moved slowly across the buildings opposite her apartment.
A few windows glowed warmly against the early dark.

Inside, her tea had gone cold again.

She smiled faintly at that.

Lately she seemed to forget small things more often.

Or perhaps she was simply paying attention to different ones.

She leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes for a moment.

Immediately, Lucian appeared in her awareness.

Not intentionally.

Just there.

The calmness in the way he listened.
The quiet pause before he answered questions.
The strange ease she felt around him.

And beneath all that—

a growing restlessness.

That part was new.

She opened her eyes again.

“Seriously?” she murmured softly to herself.

Because now she noticed it clearly:

she cared.

Not only about seeing him again.

About what happened in herself when she did.

That felt far more unsettling.

She stood and walked toward the kitchen, restless suddenly.

Halfway there, she picked up her phone again without thinking.

No message.

Immediately she felt the impulse to distract herself.

Not so much from disappointment—
but from the restless openness moving through her.

The strange inner agitation of wanting something real,
without yet knowing what that would ask of her.

Her thumb hovered above the screen.

Scroll something.

Watch something.

Disappear into noise for a while.

The familiar movement away from tension.

Away from not knowing.

Away from the unknown stirring just beneath the surface of her ordinary life.

Then she stopped.

Not because she judged the impulse.

Because she recognized it.

And with that recognition came another realization,
quieter but deeper:

the impulse to escape had appeared
before she even fully understood
what she was trying not to feel.

She lowered the phone slowly.

The restlessness remained.

But now she stayed with it.

Not comfortably.

Just honestly.

And beneath the nervousness, almost hidden inside it,
she sensed something else too:

aliveness.

As if something unknown
was trying to enter awareness.

The thought moved through her with surprising softness.

Not threatening exactly.

Only unfamiliar.

And perhaps that was what frightened her most.

—

Meanwhile, across the city, Lucian sat at his desk pretending to read an article he
had already reread twice.

The words refused to settle.

Every few minutes, his attention drifted elsewhere.

Toward the café.

Toward Mila's voice.

Toward the way she had laughed after he mentioned the light.

He leaned back and rubbed a hand across his face.

This was becoming undeniable now.

And not only emotionally.

Physically too.

He remembered the warmth of her sitting near him.

The way she looked down before speaking.

The awareness he had of her body when she moved one photograph closer to the window.

The attraction was real.

Very real.

Usually attraction simplified things.

Created direction.

Fantasy.

Desire.

And part of him wanted to move there now too.

Into imagining.

Into wanting.

Into the familiar relief of turning tension into certainty.

But something in him hesitated.

Because he had begun to notice that whenever he remained present instead of disappearing into fantasy,
something unexpected happened.

He became more aware.

More honest.

More present inside himself.

As if wanting her and becoming more himself
were somehow intertwined.

That frightened him slightly.

Because he was beginning to understand that this connection might ask something
from him beyond romance.

Something harder.

Realness.

And with that realization came another layer underneath it:

caring.

Not only attraction.

Not only curiosity.

Caring.

And immediately another reflex moved through him almost instinctively:

Careful.

This is how people lose themselves.

This is how freedom disappears.

He stood and walked toward the window.

Below, people moved through the street carrying groceries, backpacks, tiredness.

Ordinary life continuing everywhere.

And suddenly a thought rose so clearly he could not push it aside:

What if I cannot return fully to who I was before this?

The question remained in the room long after it appeared.

Not dramatic.

Quietly life-changing.

And for the first time, Lucian did not immediately move away from that fear.

He simply stood there with it.

Breathing.

Wondering whether freedom had perhaps never meant
avoiding care—

but remaining real enough
to stay present within it.

—

Back in her apartment, Mila stood barefoot in the kitchen holding a spoon she had forgotten to put down.

The restlessness inside her had softened slightly now that she had stopped running from it.

Not disappeared.

Softened.

And with surprising clarity she realized:

the feeling she longed for around Lucian
was not entirely coming from him.

Around Lucian,
she seemed to remain closer to herself.

The spaciousness.

The softness.

The strange sense of returning.

Something in their presence together
made it harder to leave herself unnoticed.

The realization moved through her slowly.

Almost tenderly.

And suddenly she understood why this felt both beautiful and frightening.

Because if the feeling did not truly belong to him,
then her life could no longer remain organized around waiting for someone else to
complete it.

That changed everything.

She sat down at the kitchen table again.

Very quietly now.

Not lonely.

Not fulfilled either.

Something more honest than both.

And for the first time in many years, Mila allowed herself to wonder:

what might life become

if she stopped abandoning herself

whenever something real began to open?

Chapter Five — More Visible

Three days passed before they saw each other again.

Not long enough to forget.

Long enough to notice.

Mila noticed it first in the quiet moments.

Making coffee.

Waiting at a crossing.

Looking up suddenly from work without knowing why.

Lucian entered her awareness now not as interruption,
but as a subtle undercurrent moving through ordinary life.

And with that came another realization she could no longer avoid:

she wanted to see him again.

The honesty of that felt strangely vulnerable.

Not dramatic.

Just... visible.

—

Meanwhile, Lucian found himself walking more slowly through his days.

As if something in him no longer wanted to rush past experience before actually inhabiting it.

At work he listened more carefully.

Spoke less automatically.

Paused before agreeing to things he did not fully mean.

Small changes.

But enough that one colleague finally asked, half joking,

“Who are you and what have you done with Lucian?”

He laughed.

Yet the question stayed with him afterward.

Because something was changing.

Not his personality exactly.

More like the effort required to maintain it.

—

Late Friday afternoon, Mila returned to the café.

Not entirely by accident this time.

The realization embarrassed her slightly as she opened the door.

The warmth met her immediately.

Coffee.

Low conversation.

The soft scrape of chairs across wooden floorboards.

And there he was.

Near the same window as before.

Lucian looked up almost at the exact moment she entered.

For one brief instant, something openly human passed between them.

Relief.

Then both smiled,
almost surprised by it.

“Well,” Lucian said as she approached, “either this city is very small...”

“...or we’re becoming predictable,” Mila finished lightly.

The moment settled easily around them.

And yet beneath the ease,
Mila felt nervousness moving again.

Not because she felt unsafe.

Because she suddenly mattered here.

That was new.

Lucian motioned toward the empty chair across from him.

“You staying?”

The simplicity of the question touched her unexpectedly.

No performance inside it.

No strategy.

Just genuine invitation.

“Yes,” she said.

And sat down.

—

For a few moments they spoke about ordinary things.

Work.

The changing light in the city.

A woman near the counter reading with such concentration that neither of them wanted to disturb her.

But something had shifted since their last meeting.

The pauses between sentences no longer felt accidental.

They felt inhabited.

At one point Mila looked down at her cup and said quietly,
almost before she could stop herself,

“I’ve been thinking about you.”

The words entered the space between them gently.

No demand.

Just truth.

Immediately she felt heat rise in her chest.

Too direct, part of her thought instantly.

Too revealing.

She almost moved to soften it somehow,
to turn it into a joke.

But Lucian's expression stopped her.

Not because he looked triumphant.

Because he looked relieved.

"As strange as this probably sounds," he said slowly, "I'm glad you said that."

Mila let out a small nervous laugh.

"That bad?"

"No." He shook his head lightly. "Just honest."

The word lingered between them.

Honest.

Neither seemed in a hurry to move away from it.

—

Lucian leaned back slightly in his chair.

“There’s something different about this,” he said finally.

Mila met his eyes.

“Yes.”

Not asking what he meant.

Because she already knew.

Lucian searched briefly for words.

“Usually when I’m attracted to someone...”

He stopped.

“Usually I stop paying attention to what’s actually happening and get carried away by where I think it should lead.”

Mila stayed quiet.

Not rescuing him from the unfinished thought.

That too felt new.

“And now?” she asked softly.

Lucian exhaled.

“Now I feel more here instead.”

The simplicity of the sentence moved through Mila almost physically.

Because it named something she had been sensing too.

Not losing themselves in each other.

Becoming more present within themselves.

And somehow,
paradoxically,
that created more intimacy instead of less.

—

Mila traced one finger lightly along the rim of her cup.

“I’ve noticed something too,” she said quietly.

Lucian waited.

Not leaning forward.

Not anticipating.

Just present.

“The feeling I have when I’m with you...”

She hesitated briefly.

“It doesn’t disappear afterward.”

Lucian said nothing.

But something in his face softened.

“As if,” Mila continued carefully, “whatever opens here keeps breathing into the rest of my life.”

The words hung between them.

Delicate.

Potentially frightening.

Because once spoken aloud,
neither of them could fully return to the simpler story of coincidence and attraction
alone.

Lucian looked out briefly toward the late afternoon street.

Then back at her.

“That feels true,” he said.

And for a moment neither moved away from the quiet depth opening there.

Not solving it.

Not defining it.

Only allowing it to become
a little more visible.

—

Later, walking home through the cooling evening streets, Mila noticed she was not
replaying the conversation the way she normally would.

Not searching for mistakes.

Not measuring herself against what had been said.

The nervousness was still there lightly.

But underneath it was something steadier:

a quiet sense of having remained present inside herself.

That felt new.

And strangely precious.

She pulled her coat closer against the evening air and realized with sudden clarity:

she had not once tried to become more interesting,
more careful,
more desirable around Lucian.

The thought almost stopped her walking.

Instead of leaving herself in order to connect,
she had stayed.

Not perfectly.

But enough to feel the difference.

And now something in her quietly,
deeply wanted to stay.

—

Across the city, Lucian sat in the tram watching reflections move across the darkened windows.

People around him scrolled through phones,
stared ahead tiredly,
leaned silently against seats.

Ordinary evening life.

Yet inside himself,
something remained quietly awake.

He thought again about Mila saying:

“The feeling I have when I’m with you... it doesn’t disappear afterward.”

And what moved him most was not the tenderness of it.

It was the truth.

Because the same thing had been happening to him.

The spaciousness remained.

The honesty remained.

The strange sense of being more fully inside his own life remained.

And for the first time,

Lucian allowed himself to wonder whether intimacy had perhaps never been about
losing oneself in another person—

but about becoming real enough
that two people no longer needed to disappear
from themselves in order to meet.

Chapter Six — Giving Space

The message arrived late Sunday afternoon.

Mila read it once.

Then again more slowly.

*I think I need a little quiet tonight.

Not distance.

Just space to settle some things in myself.

— Lucian*

Immediately something tightened inside her.

Small.

Fast.

Almost physical.

Before thought even formed,
another movement had already begun:

What did I do wrong?

She stood motionless in the kitchen holding the phone loosely in one hand while evening light rested softly across the counter.

Nothing in Lucian's message sounded cold.

Nothing accusatory.

And still,
the old reflex had arrived instantly.

The subtle fear that closeness could disappear unexpectedly.
That openness had been too much.
That something fragile had already begun collapsing.

Mila exhaled slowly and placed the phone down.

Then picked it up again almost immediately.

Part of her wanted to answer carefully.
Reassuringly.
Wisely.

Another part wanted to withdraw first before rejection could arrive more fully.

The movements crossed through her so quickly she almost missed them.

Almost.

Then something quieter appeared underneath.

Awareness.

Not removing the discomfort.

Illuminating it.

Mila sat down slowly at the kitchen table.

And for the first time,
instead of immediately solving the feeling,
she gave it space.

Not indulging it.

Not fighting it.

Simply allowing it to become visible.

Outside, evening drifted quietly through the city.
A bicycle bell sounded faintly somewhere below her window.

Inside, Mila noticed something surprising.

Underneath the fear,
there was sadness.

Not only about Lucian.

Older than that.

The sadness of how quickly she had learned to leave herself
whenever connection felt uncertain.

The realization moved through her gently.

Not as self-criticism.

More like recognition finally becoming conscious.

And with it came another shift:

Lucian asking for space
was not necessarily rejection.

Perhaps it was honesty.

Perhaps space itself could also be part of intimacy.

The thought changed something immediately.

Not because the discomfort vanished.

Because the perspective widened.

Mila looked again at the message.

This time different words became visible:

Not distance.

Just space.

And suddenly she realized how rarely human beings allowed each other that honestly.

Usually people disappeared without clarity.

Or stayed connected while quietly abandoning themselves underneath it.

Lucian had done neither.

He had remained present enough
to tell the truth before disappearing.

The realization softened her completely.

Not because she now felt certain.

Because she suddenly felt more real.

After a while she picked up the phone again and answered simply:

*Thank you for telling me honestly.

Take the space you need.*

Then she placed the phone aside and stood quietly near the open window.

The evening air felt cool against her skin.

And gradually another understanding began unfolding inside her:

giving something space
did not always create distance.

Sometimes it allowed deeper truth
to become visible.

—

Across the city, Lucian sat alone on the floor of his apartment, back resting lightly against the couch.

His phone lay beside him unanswered for nearly twenty minutes before he finally picked it up again.

When he read Mila's message,
something inside him relaxed immediately.

Not because she had said the "right" thing.

Because he felt no pressure inside her response.

No hidden demand.

No emotional punishment.

No attempt to hold him closer through guilt or fear.

Only openness.

Lucian closed his eyes briefly.

And suddenly he understood something about himself too.

All his life,
space had felt dangerous inside relationships.

Either space meant withdrawal.

Or punishment.

Or the beginning of losing someone.

So he had learned to stay connected through adaptation instead.

Through managing.

Explaining.

Remaining emotionally available long after he had quietly left himself.

But this felt different.

For the first time,
someone had allowed him space
without making him feel guilty for needing it.

The realization touched him unexpectedly deeply.

And underneath it,
another truth became visible:

perhaps intimacy was not the absence of space.

Perhaps real intimacy
allowed breathing room for truth.

Lucian looked out toward the darkening windows across the street.

Ordinary evening life glowed quietly everywhere:
lamps turning on,
people cooking,
someone watering plants on a balcony two floors below.

And suddenly he felt an almost overwhelming tenderness for how difficult human closeness had become for so many people.

Not because they did not long for love.

Because fear had slowly taught them
to confuse closeness
with the inability to remain separate sometimes.

He picked up his phone again.

Then stopped.

Not because he wanted to withdraw.

Because for once,
he wanted to remain honest.

So instead he stayed there quietly,
allowing the space between them
to breathe.

And strangely,
for the first time in his life,
space did not feel like losing connection.

It felt like respect.

Like trust.

Like something real enough
not to collapse
inside a single evening of silence.

Chapter Seven — What Opens

Mila woke earlier than usual the next morning.

For a few quiet seconds she lay still beneath the blankets listening to soft morning sounds drifting through the open window:

a bicycle passing,
someone pulling garbage bins across pavement,
birds moving somewhere between rooftops.

Ordinary life beginning again.

And then she noticed something surprising.

The discomfort from yesterday evening was gone.

Not suppressed.

Not solved.

Simply changed.

Or perhaps more truthfully:
understood differently.

Mila remained still for a moment longer, feeling into that carefully.

The fear had not really come from Lucian needing space.

It had come from everything her mind immediately made that mean.

Rejection.

Distance.

Loss.

The realization felt almost embarrassingly obvious now.

And yet she knew most people moved through experiences like that constantly without ever truly noticing the interpretation happening underneath them.

She sat up slowly.

Then another thought appeared:

What if discomfort was not automatically a problem?

The question moved through her with quiet clarity.

Not intellectually.

Experientially.

As if something in her had already begun living the answer before words arrived.

She smiled faintly to herself.

Discomfort as information.

Not punishment.

Not proof that something was wrong.

Just... information.

The thought opened something unexpectedly gentle inside her.

Because if discomfort could simply be information,
then perhaps curiosity could enter where fear normally took over.

The realization softened her completely.

Not because she suddenly felt beyond fear.

Because she no longer needed to immediately run from it.

—

Across the city, Lucian stood barefoot in his kitchen waiting for coffee while pale morning sunlight slowly moved across the counter.

He felt calmer too.

Not because everything between him and Mila suddenly felt certain.

Strangely,
certainty mattered less this morning.

What remained instead was trust.

Not even trust in outcome exactly.

Trust in the honesty growing between them.

He thought again about Mila's response from the night before:

Take the space you need.

No hidden punishment.
No emotional negotiation.

Just openness.

Lucian leaned lightly against the counter and closed his eyes briefly.

And for the first time in years,
he became aware of how exhausting it had been
to constantly manage the emotional atmosphere around other people.

Trying not to disappoint.
Trying not to withdraw too much.
Trying not to create tension.
Trying not to lose connection.

So much effort.

So little room to simply be true.

The realization settled deeply into him.

Perhaps real closeness did not require the endless prevention of discomfort.

Perhaps it required enough presence
to stay open inside it.

He poured coffee slowly into a cup and carried it toward the window.

Below, morning life moved quietly through the street:
deliveries arriving,
people walking quickly toward work,
someone laughing while locking a bicycle beside the canal.

Ordinary life.

And suddenly Lucian noticed something else too.

Yesterday evening, when discomfort appeared between him and Mila,
neither of them had disappeared from themselves completely.

That was new.

No manipulation.

No silent punishment.

No dramatic retreat.

Just two human beings becoming aware
of what moved inside them.

The simplicity of it felt strangely profound.

Because now he could see how much suffering had entered relationships not
through discomfort itself—

but through the immediate unconscious movements away from it.

Defending.

Pleasing.

Withdrawing.

Controlling.

Disappearing.

He exhaled slowly.

Then laughed softly to himself.

All this from one honest message asking for space.

And yet somehow,
it felt as if something much larger had quietly shifted.

—

Later that afternoon, Mila sat on a bench beside the canal eating an apple between
museum meetings.

The city moved around her in bright spring sunlight now.
Water reflected shifting patterns against old stone walls.
A boat passed slowly beneath the bridge ahead.

And for no dramatic reason at all,
she suddenly felt grateful.

Not happy in the exaggerated sense.

Just deeply present.

Present enough to notice life again.

The crisp sweetness of the apple.
Warmth against her face.
The movement of light across water.

Simple things.

Things she had lived beside for years while hardly entering them fully.

Her phone vibrated lightly beside her.

A message from Lucian.

Thank you for last night.

Nothing more.

Mila smiled softly.

Then, before answering, she paused.

Not from uncertainty.

From awareness.

She noticed the small excitement moving through her body.

The immediate desire to respond perfectly.

The subtle fear of saying too much or too little.

And instead of obeying those movements automatically,
she simply watched them for a moment.

Curious now.

Almost affectionate toward her own humanity.

Then she typed:

I think we both understood something important.

A few minutes later, Lucian answered:

I think so too.

Mila locked the phone and slipped it back into her bag.

No urgency remained after the exchange.

No need to prolong it artificially.

Because something deeper than reassurance had quietly begun growing between them now:

space.

Breathing room.

Trust.

And perhaps most importantly—

the growing willingness
to remain present long enough
for deeper truth
to reveal itself naturally.

Chapter Eight — Strangely Familiar

By the time Mila arrived at Lucian's apartment, the sky had already softened into early evening gold.

She stood outside the building for a moment longer than necessary, suddenly aware of the quiet excitement moving through her body.

Not nervousness exactly.

Anticipation.

Warm.

Alive.

She smiled faintly to herself before ringing the bell.

A moment later Lucian opened the door.

And immediately something inside both of them relaxed.

Not because uncertainty had disappeared.

Because neither of them felt the need to hide it anymore.

"Hi," Mila said softly.

"Hi."

For one brief second they simply stood there smiling slightly at each other like two people surprised by how much another human presence could affect the atmosphere of an ordinary evening.

Then Lucian stepped aside.

“Come in.”

—

The apartment was simple.
Warm without trying too hard.

Books stacked unevenly near the windows.
Music playing quietly somewhere in the background.
The faint smell of garlic and olive oil drifting from the kitchen.

Mila removed her coat slowly while looking around.

“This feels very you,” she said.

Lucian laughed softly.

“I’m not sure if that’s reassuring or concerning.”

She smiled.

“The books make me trust you more.”

“That’s disappointing. I was hoping for mystery.”

“You already have mystery.”

The sentence entered the room lightly.

Neither moved away from it.

Lucian shook his head with quiet amusement and disappeared briefly into the kitchen.

“You’re helping,” he called.

Mila followed him.

And somehow, almost immediately, the evening became easy.

Not performatively easy.

Not first-date carefulness.

Something calmer.

Vegetables being cut.

Wine poured.

Music drifting through open windows into the cooling spring air.

At one point Mila leaned against the counter watching Lucian search unsuccessfully for a wooden spoon he had apparently lost inside his own kitchen.

“You live here, right?” she asked.

“In theory.”

She laughed openly then.

And the sound of it moved through the apartment with surprising warmth.

Lucian looked up at her.

Noticing.

Not only her laughter... her.

The softness around her eyes when she forgot to protect herself.
The way presence changed her whole body when she relaxed fully into a moment.

And suddenly he understood something with startling clarity:

beauty became far more visible
when people stopped abandoning themselves internally.

The realization entered him quietly enough that he did not speak it aloud.

Still, something in his gaze must have changed.

Because Mila looked back at him differently suddenly.

More aware.

And for a brief second the atmosphere between them deepened almost physically.

Neither moved toward it too quickly.

Neither away.

The wooden spoon remained lost somewhere in the kitchen.

Eventually Mila shook her head lightly.

“You know we’re never actually finding it now.”

“Probably not.”

“And neither of us seems very concerned.”

“That may be the real issue.”

Again the laughter came easily.

Not covering tension.

Releasing life.

—

Later they carried their plates to the small balcony overlooking the canal.

The evening air had turned cooler now.

Lights shimmered softly across the water below.

Somewhere farther down the street people sat outside a café talking loudly over glasses of wine.

Ordinary city life.

And yet everything felt strangely vivid.

Mila pulled her legs loosely beneath her chair and looked out across the canal.

Then after a long comfortable silence, she said quietly:

“This feels strangely familiar.”

Lucian turned toward her.

“How do you mean?”

Mila searched for words carefully.

“Not familiar like we’ve known each other before.” She smiled faintly. “At least I don’t think so.”

Lucian laughed softly.

“Good. That would complicate dinner.”

She smiled again, then became thoughtful.

“It’s more like...” She paused. “Something about this feels closer to how life is supposed to feel.”

The sentence settled softly between them.

No dramatic reaction followed.

Only recognition.

Lucian leaned back slightly in his chair.

“I know exactly what you mean.”

Mila looked down at her glass.

“When I was little,” she said slowly, “ordinary things used to feel... enormous somehow.”

Lucian stayed quiet.

Not interrupting the memory as it formed.

“I could spend hours watching light move through trees. Or completely disappear into building something or drawing or just lying in the grass doing nothing.”

She smiled faintly.

“Everything felt alive then.”

The evening breeze moved softly between them.

“And then?” Lucian asked gently.

Mila exhaled.

“Then gradually life became about functioning more than experiencing.”

The honesty of the sentence lingered.

Not bitter.

Simply true.

Lucian nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

And suddenly both became aware of something almost painfully obvious:

how much human life was organized around leaving direct experience behind.

Not intentionally.

Gradually.

Quietly.

Until presence itself became rare enough to feel extraordinary.

Below them, a bicycle passed over the bridge.

Someone laughed somewhere along the canal.

Life continuing everywhere.

Mila looked back toward Lucian.

“But this...” she said quietly, motioning lightly between them and the evening around them, “feels closer to something I remember than something new.”

Lucian felt the truth of that immediately.

Not discovery.

Return.

And perhaps that was why this connection felt so abundant already.

Not because either of them completed something missing in the other.

Because less energy was being lost leaving themselves behind.

The realization moved through both of them almost wordlessly then.

The warmth of food.

The softness of evening air.

The simple intimacy of shared presence.

Nothing extraordinary.

And yet life itself felt fuller somehow.

Richer.

More available.

As if abundance had less to do with acquiring more—

and more to do with finally remaining present enough
to receive what was already here.

Chapter Nine — Little Returns

Saturday morning unfolded slowly.

Sunlight moved across Lucian's apartment floor in long warm rectangles while Mila stood barefoot in the kitchen making coffee.

Neither of them had spoken much yet.

Not from distance.

From ease.

The kind of quietness that no longer demanded filling.

Lucian leaned against the doorway watching her search through unfamiliar cupboards with growing suspicion.

"You organize things strangely," she said.

"I organize things creatively."

"You hid the coffee filters behind the pasta."

"I had my reasons."

"You absolutely did not."

He laughed softly.

And again Mila felt that small inward warmth she had begun recognizing lately: how easily life opened when neither person was trying so hard to manage themselves.

The coffee finally finished dripping.

Mila carried two cups toward the open balcony doors while Lucian disappeared briefly into the living room searching for music.

Outside, the city was already waking fully now:
bicycles crossing the bridge,
someone calling to a child below,
the distant sound of market vendors setting up along the square nearby.

Ordinary morning life.

And yet both of them felt unusually present inside it.

Not because they were trying.

Because less attention was being pulled away from the moment constantly.

Lucian returned holding his phone loosely.

“You realize,” he said, “we’re becoming dangerously domestic.”

Mila smiled over the edge of her cup.

“There are worse tragedies.”

“True.”

Then after a pause:

“Although we should probably buy actual coffee filters at some point.”

She laughed quietly.

And somehow even that felt nourishing.

Not the conversation itself.

The absence of performance inside it.

—

Later they walked together through the crowded weekend market near the canal.

People moved everywhere between flower stalls, fresh bread, vegetables stacked in wooden crates.

The air carried warmth, spices, coffee, sunlight against old stone.

Lucian reached automatically for Mila's hand while crossing between two crowded aisles.

Neither commented on it.

The gesture felt simple.

Natural.

And strangely, Mila noticed something almost immediately:

her body relaxed.

Not dramatically.

Just enough to feel the difference.

Around them conversations rose and disappeared constantly.

A man arguing loudly into a phone.

A tired mother negotiating with a small child.

Two tourists standing in the middle of the walkway trying to understand a paper map.

Life everywhere.

At one point they stopped near a fruit stand while Lucian compared peaches with absurd concentration.

“You know they’re all basically identical,” Mila said.

“That’s objectively untrue.”

“You’re choosing fruit like someone selecting architecture materials.”

Lucian glanced at her seriously.

“Texture matters.”

Mila laughed again.

Then gradually her attention shifted toward the people moving around them.

And suddenly she noticed something she could no longer entirely ignore.

So many people seemed elsewhere.

Bodies here.

Awareness somewhere ahead,

behind,

inside phones,

inside pressure,

inside unfinished conversations.

Rushing while standing still.

She felt it physically now because she recognized the contrast more clearly.

Not judgment.

Recognition.

At one point a woman nearly collided with Lucian while typing rapidly on her phone.

“Oh sorry,” the woman said automatically without really looking up.

Then she disappeared immediately back into the moving crowd.

Lucian watched her go quietly.

After a moment he said softly,

“It’s strange how absent people are expected to become.”

Mila looked at him.

Not because of the sentence itself.

Because she had been feeling the exact same thing.

“Yes,” she said quietly.

They continued walking.

And after a while Mila realized something else too:

before meeting Lucian,
she herself had moved through entire days like that constantly.

Half present.

Always leaning toward the next thing.

She suddenly remembered how often she used to eat lunch while answering emails,
walk while mentally rehearsing conversations,
listen while already preparing responses.

Always slightly ahead of herself.

The realization felt both sad and strangely liberating.

Because now she could see it.

And once seen,
something naturally began changing.

Not through discipline.

Through awareness.

—

That afternoon they sat outside a small café near the water eating bread and olives from a wooden board between them.

Neither spoke for several minutes.

The silence felt alive.

Nearby, a little boy crouched near the canal completely absorbed in floating leaves beneath the bridge.

Mila watched him quietly.

Then smiled faintly.

“What?”

She nodded toward the child.

“He reminds me of something.”

Lucian followed her gaze.

The little boy remained utterly focused on the slow movement of water carrying leaves beneath the stone archway.

Completely there.

Lucian smiled softly.

“Yes.”

Mila rested her chin lightly against her hand.

“I think children start out knowing how to inhabit life naturally.”

Lucian stayed quiet.

Not because he disagreed.

Because something in the sentence touched him immediately.

“They disappear into things completely,” Mila continued. “Light, insects, drawing, rain puddles... whatever is here.”

“And then gradually,” Lucian said quietly, “everything becomes about functioning instead.”

The words settled softly between them.

Not bitter.

Only honest.

Mila looked out across the water.

“It’s strange,” she said after a while. “This way of being with you feels new sometimes...”

She smiled faintly.

“...and then suddenly it feels older than everything else.”

Lucian felt something open quietly inside his chest when she said that.

Because he understood completely.

Not new.

Remembered.

As if both of them were slowly recovering some more natural intimacy with life itself that had been buried beneath years of adaptation and speed.

The waiter arrived with fresh coffee.

The little boy finally stood and ran laughing toward his parents.

Around them the city continued moving through its ordinary rhythms.

And still—

something inside Mila and Lucian kept returning.

Again and again.

Little returns into presence.

Into aliveness.

Into themselves.

Not perfectly.

Not permanently.

But enough to begin changing the texture of everyday life itself.

And perhaps, both of them sensed now,
that was where real transformation had always quietly wanted to live.

Later that afternoon, Mila stood alone in the museum corridor outside a meeting room holding a folder she had already read twice.

Inside, voices moved behind the closed door:
deadlines,
budgets,
adjustments,
small tensions disguised as professionalism.

Normally she would already be half inside the meeting mentally.
Preparing responses.
Organizing herself.
Leaning ahead into what was coming.

And suddenly she noticed it happening.

Not intellectually.

Physically.

The subtle forward tension in her body.
Breathing becoming shallow.
Attention narrowing.

The familiar movement away from herself.

Mila stopped walking.

Only for a second.

Then another.

People passed behind her carrying papers and coffee without noticing anything unusual.

But inside her awareness,
something had become visible.

The impulse to leave the present moment before it even arrived.

Immediately another reflex appeared too:

Just go inside.
Don't overcomplicate this.
Function normally.

For a moment she almost obeyed it automatically.

Then she remembered something.

Not a sentence exactly.

More a feeling.

Stay.

Not forcing herself to relax.
Not trying to become peaceful.

Simply staying present long enough
to actually feel what was happening.

At first the discomfort increased slightly.

Restlessness.

Pressure.

A strange vulnerability in not immediately moving away from herself.

Mila remained there quietly beside the closed meeting-room door.

Curious now.

As if she were listening to something subtle underneath the tension instead of fighting it.

And gradually the experience began changing.

Not dramatically.

More like a soft widening inside her body.

Breathing deepened naturally.

The pressure in her chest loosened.

Sound returned fully:

footsteps,

voices farther down the corridor,

the faint hum of lights overhead.

And suddenly the moment no longer felt oppressive.

Just alive.

Mila blinked softly.

Because nothing outside her had changed.

Only her presence inside it.

The realization moved through her almost physically then:

what she had always called stress
was often the experience of leaving herself
while life continued moving.

The meeting-room door opened.

Someone smiled automatically while passing her.

“You coming?”

Mila looked up.

And for one quiet second,
everything appeared strangely clear.

The light against the polished floor.
The warmth of the folder in her hands.
Her own body standing there breathing.

Ordinary reality.

Unmissed.

Mila smiled softly.

“Yes,” she said.

And this time,
when she walked into the room,

she arrived with herself.

Chapter Ten — Earlier

Traffic slowed almost to a standstill just outside the city.

Lucian loosened one hand from the steering wheel and exhaled softly while brake lights stretched endlessly ahead in the fading evening light.

Normally this part of the highway exhausted him.

The impatience.

The constant stopping and starting.

People forcing themselves into impossible spaces half a car too small.

Already, irritation had begun moving through him automatically.

He felt it in his jaw first.

Then in the tightening across his shoulders.

And immediately another impulse followed:

Come on.

Move.

A car cut abruptly into the lane ahead of him.

Lucian felt the reaction surge upward almost instantly.

But this time something happened earlier.

Awareness.

Not removing the irritation.

Illuminating it.

For one brief moment he simply noticed the experience directly:
the pressure in his body,
the forward-driving tension,
the strange unconscious belief that life itself was being obstructed by the traffic.

And because awareness entered before the reaction fully became him,
space appeared.

Small.
But real.

Lucian exhaled again.

The irritation softened slightly.

Not forced away.

Seen.

Outside the windshield, evening light rested softly against rows of unmoving cars.
A child in the back seat of the car beside him pressed both hands against the
window making faces at passing drivers.

Lucian laughed unexpectedly.

Just seconds earlier he had been disappearing entirely into frustration.

Now suddenly life was visible again.

The shift felt almost absurd in its simplicity.

Nothing outside him had changed.

Traffic remained traffic.

And yet his experience had changed completely.

Not because he controlled himself better.

Because awareness had arrived early enough
that unconscious reaction was no longer inevitable.

The realization moved through him quietly while the line of cars began slowly
moving forward again.

Freedom, he suddenly understood,
might begin much smaller than most people imagined.

—

That Sunday afternoon, Mila sat at her mother's kitchen table while three
conversations unfolded simultaneously around her.

Her aunt discussing health problems.
Her younger cousin showing videos on his phone.
Plates moving back and forth between hands automatically.

Ordinary family life.

Warm.
Familiar.
Slightly overwhelming.

Mila listened while helping carry dishes toward the sink.

And gradually she noticed something old beginning to return.

A version of herself.

The agreeable one.

The attentive one.

The one who adapted quickly to everyone else's emotional atmosphere.

So automatic she almost missed it entirely.

Almost.

Then awareness entered.

Earlier.

Noticing.

The subtle tension in her stomach.

The way her attention had already moved outward toward managing everyone else's comfort.

The slight disappearance of her own body underneath habitual responsiveness.

Mila stood quietly at the sink holding a wet plate while voices continued behind her.

For a second she did nothing.

Not withdrawing.

Not correcting herself.

Simply remaining present enough
to feel the old pattern happening.

And suddenly another layer became visible underneath it:

how exhausting it had been for years
to unconsciously abandon herself in order to maintain harmony.

The realization landed softly this time.

Not as blame toward her family.

Not even toward herself.

Only truth becoming visible.

Her mother appeared beside her holding another stack of dishes.

“You okay?” she asked automatically.

Mila looked up.

And for the first time in years,
she answered from where she actually was instead of where she thought she
should be.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I just needed a second to arrive again.”

Her mother blinked slightly,
surprised by the honesty.

Then something unexpected happened.

She nodded.

“I know that feeling,” she said quietly.

The words moved gently between them.

Simple.

Real.

And suddenly Mila understood something else too:

presence did not only change her own experience.

It changed the quality of reality available between people.

Not always dramatically.

Sometimes through one honest sentence.

One pause.

One moment of not leaving.

—

Later that evening Mila and Lucian sat beside each other on the floor of his apartment eating takeaway noodles directly from the cartons.

The windows stood slightly open to the cooling spring air.
Somewhere outside, music drifted faintly upward from the street below.

Mila rested her head lightly against the couch behind her.

“I noticed something today,” she said.

Lucian glanced toward her.

“What?”

She twirled noodles absently around her fork while searching for words.

“I’m starting to catch myself earlier now.”

Lucian smiled immediately.

“Yes.”

The recognition between them felt instant.

Mila laughed softly.

“It’s strange. The patterns are still there...”

“But they don’t fully take over anymore,” Lucian finished.

“Exactly.”

For a moment neither spoke.

Because both of them could feel how important that actually was.

Not perfection.

Not becoming endlessly peaceful.

Simply awareness entering experience early enough
for different possibilities to exist.

Lucian leaned back against the couch.

“I think I always imagined freedom as escaping something,” he said quietly.

Mila looked toward him.

“And now?”

Lucian smiled faintly.

“Now it feels more like staying.”

The sentence settled into the room almost physically.

Staying present.

Staying honest.

Staying aware enough not to disappear automatically from experience.

Mila felt warmth move quietly through her chest.

Because she understood exactly what he meant.

Outside, city life continued in ordinary evening rhythms:

voices,

traffic,

music somewhere farther away.

Inside the apartment,

two people sat on the floor slowly discovering that presence,

lived quietly enough and often enough,

could begin changing an entire life.

Chapter Eleven — What Becomes Possible

By the time Mila and Lucian arrived at Eva and Thomas's apartment, the evening had already softened into that relaxed hour where dinner was finished but no one seemed eager to leave the table yet.

Empty wine glasses stood between bowls of olives and candlelight.
Music drifted quietly through the background.
The windows remained slightly open to the warm evening air.

Eva hugged Mila first.

"You both look different," she said almost immediately.

Lucian laughed softly while removing his jacket.

"That sounds either very good or very concerning."

"I haven't decided yet," Eva said.

Thomas appeared from the kitchen carrying another bottle of wine.

"No, seriously," he said, looking between them. "You both seem... calmer somehow."

Mila glanced briefly toward Lucian.

Not performing modesty.
Not claiming wisdom.

Just noticing the truth of it.

“We’ve been noticing some things lately,” she said simply.

Thomas pointed toward the table.

“That sounds dangerous already. Sit down.”

Everyone laughed.

And the evening continued easily at first:
work stories,
traffic complaints,
a disastrous vacation rental someone had recently survived.

Ordinary conversation.

Warm.

Familiar.

And yet gradually something subtler began happening too.

The pauses lasted slightly longer.
People interrupted each other less.
Someone would say something honest almost accidentally,
and instead of immediately moving past it,
the conversation stayed there a little while.

Not heavily.

Just long enough.

—

At one point Thomas leaned back in his chair and rubbed both hands across his face dramatically.

“I swear,” he said, “I spend my entire life reacting to things now.”

Eva laughed softly.

“That’s because your phone vibrates every twelve seconds.”

“It’s not even the phone anymore,” Thomas replied. “It’s like my whole nervous system expects interruption constantly.”

The sentence settled unexpectedly deeply into the room.

Nobody answered immediately.

And because no one rushed to fill the silence,
Thomas suddenly continued more honestly than he probably intended.

“Sometimes I get home and realize I haven’t actually felt present once the entire day.”

His voice softened slightly near the end.

Almost embarrassed by the admission.

Eva looked toward him with surprise.
Not because she disagreed.

Because she recognized it too.

Lucian remained quiet for a moment before speaking.

“I’ve been noticing something similar.”

Thomas looked relieved immediately.

“Thank God.”

Everyone laughed again,
but softer this time.

Less defensive.

Lucian rested one hand loosely against his glass while searching for words.

“It’s strange,” he said slowly. “I used to think stress mainly came from how much was happening.”

He paused briefly.

“Now I think a lot of it came from constantly leaving myself while it was happening.”

The room became still.

Not dramatically.

More like everyone’s awareness quietly moved inward at the same time.

Eva frowned thoughtfully.

“What do you mean exactly?”

Lucian hesitated.

Not because he did not know.

Because he wanted to stay close to the actual experience instead of explaining it abstractly.

Mila noticed him searching and smiled faintly.

“The other day,” she said, “I was standing outside a meeting already stressed before it even started.”

Thomas pointed immediately.

“Yes. Exactly.”

“But then I suddenly noticed something.” Mila touched lightly against her chest. “My body was already somewhere ahead of me. Preparing. Tightening. Reacting.”

Eva grew very still listening.

“And instead of immediately pushing through it,” Mila continued, “I stayed there for a moment and just... noticed.”

“What happened?” Eva asked quietly.

Mila smiled softly.

“At first? Honestly? It got slightly more uncomfortable.”

Everyone laughed knowingly.

“But then something changed,” Mila said. “Not outside me. Inside the experience itself.”

She searched briefly.

“My body softened again. Breathing returned. The room stopped feeling like an attack.”

Thomas stared at the table for a moment.

Then slowly nodded.

“I know that feeling.”

The words came almost quietly enough to miss.

And suddenly the whole atmosphere of the evening changed.

Not because anyone had delivered wisdom.

Because everyone was recognizing themselves inside the conversation.

—

A little later Eva stood in the kitchen refilling glasses while Mila dried plates beside her.

“You know what’s strange?” Eva said softly.

“What?”

“I thought becoming more conscious would feel... bigger somehow.”

Mila smiled.

“Yes.”

Eva laughed lightly at herself.

“But this feels almost smaller. Simpler.”

Mila placed another plate carefully into the cupboard.

“I think that’s why it’s so easy to miss.”

Eva leaned against the counter thoughtfully.

“Or why it suddenly becomes unmissable.”

The sentence moved through Mila deeply.

Because something in it felt completely true.

What had always been there...

now

unmissed.

Not new.

Not added from outside.

Simply visible again.

—

Back at the table, Thomas was describing an argument he'd had earlier that week with a driver who cut him off in traffic.

"I was furious for like twenty minutes," he admitted. "And halfway through yelling alone in my car I suddenly realized..." He stopped laughing softly to himself. "I didn't even care about the traffic anymore. My whole body had just become the reaction."

Lucian nodded immediately.

"Yes."

"And the weird thing," Thomas continued, "was the moment I noticed that, something loosened."

He looked around the table almost apologetically.

"Not because I became spiritually evolved in traffic," he added dryly.

Everyone laughed loudly.

“But because awareness entered before the irritation fully became reality.”

The room became quiet again afterward.

Not empty.

Alive.

Because now the conversation was no longer moving around ideas.

Everyone present was beginning to feel directly how awareness itself changed the quality of experience.

And even more strangely—

how openly sharing those experiences
allowed deeper recognition to emerge in everyone else too.

No one at the table had become wiser than human.

More honest than defended.

That was different.

And somehow,
that difference changed everything about the evening.

—

Later, after dessert plates sat mostly forgotten between them, conversation drifted into softer rhythms.

Nobody seemed eager to leave.

Not because the evening had been extraordinary from the outside.

Because something real had become possible inside it.

Listening without preparing responses.

Speaking without performing certainty.

Pausing without discomfort immediately rushing in to fill space.

The safety in the room had not come from agreement.

Or positivity.

Or perfection.

It had emerged gradually through presence itself.

Through enough honesty

that people no longer needed to protect themselves quite so quickly.

At one point silence settled across the table again.

Warm now.

Restful.

And Thomas suddenly shook his head softly.

“It’s strange,” he said. “I feel more rested after this conversation than after most vacations.”

Eva laughed quietly.

“Maybe because nobody spent the evening pretending.”

The truth of the sentence moved gently through everyone.

And for a few moments more,
the conversation simply breathed there naturally:

open,
unfinished,
alive.

Like reality itself had become slightly larger
through people remaining present enough
to truly enter it together.

Final Chapter — Unmissed

Saturday sunlight rested softly across the city.

Windows stood open.

Laundry moved lightly between balconies.

Somewhere below, someone played music while unloading groceries from a bicycle basket.

Ordinary life.

Mila and Lucian walked slowly beside the canal carrying bread, fruit, and flowers from the morning market.

Neither spoke for a while.

Not because silence was needed.

Because nothing inside either of them hurried to escape the moment anymore.

A boat moved lazily beneath the bridge ahead.

Two children leaned dangerously far over the railing watching the water.

An older man sat outside a café reading the newspaper with complete concentration.

Life everywhere.

And somehow,
more and more often now,
it felt enough.

Not complete in the fantasy sense.
Not permanently peaceful.
Not untouched by difficulty or uncertainty.

Simply real.

Inhabited.

Lucian adjusted the paper bag beneath one arm before glancing toward Mila.

“You know what’s strange?” he said.

“What?”

“I think I spent most of my life waiting for life to begin properly.”

Mila smiled faintly.

“Yes.”

Not agreeing politely.

Recognizing.

Lucian looked out across the water.

“I always thought there would be some future version where everything finally aligned enough for me to fully arrive.”

“And now?”

He laughed softly.

“Now I think life was mostly waiting for me.”

The sentence settled quietly between them.

Not dramatic.

Just true enough to remain.

—

Later they stopped at a small bakery crowded with weekend customers.

Inside, warmth and conversation wrapped around everyone in soft overlapping rhythms:

coffee machines steaming,

plates touching,

someone apologizing while backing into another chair.

Near the counter, a woman stood visibly tense while trying to calm a tired little girl pulling impatiently at her sleeve.

“We have to go now.”

“Just a minute.”

“No, now.”

The frustration in the woman’s voice rose sharply.

Immediately guilt appeared afterward too.

Mila saw it happen across the woman’s face almost instantly.

The little girl became quiet.

For one brief second,
everything tightened.

Then something unexpected happened.

The woman exhaled softly and crouched down fully beside her daughter instead of pulling her forward again.

Not performing patience.

Arriving.

Mila watched the woman place one tired hand gently against the child's cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I disappeared for a moment there."

The little girl nodded solemnly as if she understood completely.

And just like that,
something softened between them.

No miracle.

No perfect parenting.

Only awareness entering early enough
for another possibility to appear.

Lucian looked toward Mila.

She looked back at him.

Neither spoke.

Nothing needed explaining.

Presence itself quietly changing the quality of reality available between people.

Again.

—

Outside, they walked home slowly beneath rows of trees moving lightly in the afternoon wind.

The flowers Lucian carried brushed occasionally against Mila's arm.

Somewhere nearby church bells rang through the city.

Mila breathed deeply once,
almost unconsciously.

Then smiled.

"What?"

She shook her head softly.

"Nothing."

But after a few more steps she added:

"No... not nothing."

Lucian waited.

Mila looked ahead toward the sunlit street stretching quietly before them.

"I think what moves me most," she said slowly, "is how ordinary everything still is."

Lucian laughed gently.

"Yes."

Mila smiled too.

"All this time I thought something extraordinary needed to happen."

“And?”

She looked toward him.

“What had always been there...”

She stopped briefly,
feeling the truth of it move through her body before the words fully arrived.

“...now feels unmissed.”

The city continued around them:
traffic lights changing,
someone watering plants from a balcony,
a dog barking somewhere farther down the street.

Nothing extraordinary.

And still,
life itself felt luminous somehow.

Not because the world had changed.

Because they were no longer leaving themselves behind while moving through it.

And quietly,
without announcement,
without final conclusion,
ordinary life kept opening around them
from within.

Epilogue

Tomorrow morning,
people all across the city will wake again to ordinary lives.

Coffee cups.
Traffic.
Children searching for missing shoes.
Messages answered too quickly.
Meetings.
Loneliness.
Laughter.
Waiting rooms.
Supermarkets.
Small tendernesses almost missed.

Nothing extraordinary.

And yet—

beneath all of it,
life continues quietly offering itself.

In pauses.
In discomfort.
In beauty.
In exhaustion.
In the simple moment awareness returns
before experience fully hardens into reaction.

Most people will not notice every moment.

Neither will Mila.

Neither will Lucian.

That was never the point.

The point was never perfection.

Only presence entering life
often enough
that what had always been there
could gradually become unmissed.

A breath fully felt.

A body softening again.

One honest sentence.

One moment of staying.

One human being truly arriving
while another human being is there to meet them.

Quietly,
everything changes there.

Not through force.

Not through becoming someone else.

But through less and less leaving.

And somewhere,
perhaps already inside the reader's own life,
ordinary reality waits patiently too—

ready to become luminous
the moment it is fully inhabited from within.

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Let it remain free —
in cost
and in spirit.