

**I Am a Relentless Headache
and I Will Never Leave You Alone**

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For whoever runs as fast as me

*“When I see a photograph
Of a place that is familiar to me
The house where I am staying for example
The place always looks strange
And more complete than it feels
As I live inside it. This strangeness
Has to do with the air; the atmosphere.
It’s right here. I cannot see
What it is doing to me.
I am afraid of the accumulating
Strangeness of this thing that “it”
Is doing to me and I know I cannot
Help it so I am not afraid. I am afraid
Of having nowhere
To go again, like the times before
When I thought I could save her
By becoming her, when I thought
I could absolve myself of my big
Emotions by humiliating them.
I don’t know what I think tonight
But I know where I am”*

— Ariana Reines, *Coeur de Lion*

conceived and born under the indirect guiding influence of:

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The following story takes place on the 21st Street. The world beyond the 21st Street is unknown and irrelevant to both the narrator and the main character.

* * *

The 21st Street has two gates: Low Gate and High Gate.

The 21st Street consists of two parallel lanes — Upward Lane, spanning from Low Gate to High Gate, and Downward Lane, spanning from High Gate to Low Gate.

Upward and Downward are separated by a long and lush grove of elm trees, making one Lane inaccessible and invisible from the other, but they meet at both Gates.

Upward and Downward are each divided into twelve equal sections, called Spans.

Spans count 7AM through 7PM on Upward Lane, during the Sun cycle, and 7PM through 7AM on Downward Lane, during the Moon cycle.

The Low Gate is located in the 7AM Span and the High Gate in the 7PM Span.

The Sun rises at Low Gate and sets at High Gate.

The Moon rises at High Gate and sets at Low Gate.

Nero lives on the 21st Street.

Wherever Nero goes, Sun or Moon follow his steps, shining their light.

To commute between different Spans, Nero can either walk or take the Tram, both forward and backwards on both Lanes, making time move forward as he goes, but never backwards.

Nero can move between all 24 of the AM and PM Spans freely and stay in each of them for however long he wishes. Time doesn't move as long as he is in the same Span.

The borders between Spans are not very distinct. They flow into one another, just like your usual hours and minutes do.

Everything on the 21st Street shifts, morphs or alters each time Nero leaves his house.

Those changes happen outside of his field of vision: either while he's asleep or just the moment before he steps out of his building.

Therefore it is impossible for Nero to find a specific place he's been to before in a certain Span, but the ambiance of what's there instead, would likely be close to what Nero remembers being there before. Therefore, each Span could reasonably be expected to accommodate a certain kind of establishment, just never the one same twice.

Nero's apartment, and the building it's in, is the only place on the 21st Street that doesn't shape-shift, but its location isn't fixed.

The building appears at whichever Span Nero is. The moment he subconsciously or actively wishes to go home, and while he's asleep, it moves again according to the Span that the Alarm is set for.

By setting the Alarm to a number from 1 to 12 and choosing between AM and PM, Nero is free to decide in which Span he wants to wake up, which makes time move forward.

By entering the High Gate, Nero would exit through Low Gate, which makes him age a little.

The Gates are believed to be able to lead to other Streets but it is not certain.

* * *

Nero was finishing his porridge when he noticed a sleepy wasp throwing itself against the dirty kitchen window. Once every few moments it would back up a little and fly into the glass again with seemingly more eagerness. Nero wondered whether it was genuinely not acknowledging the glass in front of itself, or just committing to breaking through it. Eventually the wasp gave up, distracted by the smell of rotting nectarines on the table. Nero was childishly terrified of wasps, so the moment it flew towards the table he abandoned his porridge and jumped out of the kitchen, shut the glass door behind him, and watched the wasp munch on his nectarines. He stood there for a while, getting annoyed at himself for being so paralysed by this small creature, but he knew he wouldn't be able to peacefully finish his meal sharing the table with an insect. He eventually lost sight of it, and thinking the porridge must've anyways gotten too cold to be enjoyed, went to shower.

The Sun at the 10AM Span was blindingly white, shooting right through Nero's tiny bathroom window. He finished up showering, put on his robe and went into the kitchen to check on the wasp. He stood behind the glass door for a bit trying to spot the thing before entering; the window was fully shut, so the wasp must've still been in the room, yet he couldn't spot it. "Damn it..." Nero whispered to himself, and carefully went into the kitchen to speed wash his dishes. He threw away the nectarines and his sticky cold porridge.

Everything felt long. He had woken up with a light headache and decided to take it slow at home before meeting a good friend of his at the 3PM Span. He made coffee and laid down on his unmade bed staring at his phone for a while, choosing the texts he wanted to return. He looked up what the lifetime of a wasp was. "Twenty days...?" he mumbled, struggling to understand what a *day* meant and whether it was short or long for a wasp in his opinion.

Nero's apartment was quite small. His bedroom was connected to the kitchen with a narrow hallway. The entrance door of the apartment was in that same hallway. The lightbulb in the chandelier had been dead since Nero moved in. He never got around to fixing it and never really found a way to make use of the hallway space, so it stayed dark and almost empty, aside from his countless pairs of shoes scattered along the wall. Through the hallway behind a glass door was the kitchen, where he would spend most of his time. Its heart was one of the walls, painted bright red by Nero's grandfather. So red. Aggressively red. If one would mix the ripest cranberries with blood. When Nero moved in, he thought he'd immediately repaint it white, the colour was driving him insane at breakfasts, but it seemed to have grown on him as it stayed untouched. It was the

aggressively red wall that carried the wasp window, under which the dark wooden and wax-stained dining table stood, sort of extending the wide stone windowsill. The table only had two chairs around it — both of them very old, squeaky and unstable. On rare occasions when Nero had guests over he would bring over a stack of stools from his room; an unexpected amount of which the kitchen would somehow always fit. Originally, all the cabinets and cupboards of the kitchen were finished in dark lacquered wood, similar to the table, which in Nero's opinion made the small room even more claustrophobic and the wall more aggressive, so he took all the doors off and replaced them with curtains. They would become greasy and dirty very quickly, but he thought their look was worth the frequent washing. The floor was stripped off of its old linoleum and left as bare concrete, making it constantly unbearably cold and resulting in Nero never taking his shoes off anywhere in the house, aside from his bed. But he also considered wearing any decent outfit with no shoes on pointless and ill-looking.

His bed was just a mattress on the floor. He had always wanted to buy a frame for it or at least put it onto some pallets, but never got around to it, just as with the dead chandelier in the hallway. The bedroom ceiling was crowned with a very odd plaster cornice; instead of a classic leaf pattern, the ornament consisted of something that looked like knobs and knots of roots, or even snakes. One of the corners was pretty damaged because of a water leakage from upstairs and coloured the white knots with pale yellow stains. Nero really loved the strange cornice and tried to find out about the story behind it, asking his grandfather and ever-changing neighbours, but no one knew anything.

Nero's phone died. He plugged the charger in and stared at the stains on his ceiling for a while, listening to his breath. His mind was completely blank. He heard the sound of the phone turning on and got up to get dressed. The friend Nero was supposed to meet later was Joe; they recently met at a birthday party and found commonalities through gossip and love for documentaries. Nero agreed to help Joe with a project he had been working on — a short film about jealousy, consisting of five interviews, one of them being Nero's. He'd just seen the latest edit of their conversation and emailed his thoughts to Joe before going to sleep. Nero's phone rang, he waited for a bit to not seem like he's been on his phone, and then picked up.

"I think the camera cracked you open in some new way, at least to me..."

"Good morning to you too, I'm so tired, my headache is out of hand", interrupted Nero.

"I don't know. Something of a different scale in you, something greater than just you, or your feelings, opinions and thoughts, it's some kind of a bare nerve that got exposed in you", said Joe, who sounded like he was smiling wide.

"Are we still meeting at the 3PM Span later?" mumbled Nero, biting the skin around his pinkie nail.

Joe laughed — "It's like you're sharpening my bleariest senses, it's good for me, I think. It's definitely good for my work. Yeah, let's definitely see each other later, there aren't really any nice bars I can think of at the 3PM and maybe it's too early to drink, but we'll figure it out."

"Ok, kisses" replied Nero in a skittish high-pitched voice.

“Fuck off, you!” Joe laughed and hung up.

Nero got dressed and stepped out on his balcony to check the weather. It was colder than he'd expected, so taking a Tram seemed more sensible than walking, even though he loved his slow walks alone up the Upward Lane. He left his apartment and ran down seven flights of stairs, skipping two with each step. Pushing the front door open, he thought he saw a slight ripple in the exterior of the building in front of his. He was about to go into the sketchy corner shop right beside his doorstep, where he'd gone for milk and butter before breakfast, but it wasn't there. Instead of it — an empty nail salon, that looked like a money laundering coverup more than anything else. He got confused for a moment. He could swear he saw the shop from before in the corner of his eye, that very moment he crossed the doorstep. He stood there and stared at the nail salon for a while, biting his pinkie again, suddenly becoming very conscious of it and hiding his hand in his pocket. He took a painkiller. A little girl with a massive backpack smiled at Nero walking by, he thought she looked familiar but didn't smile back, lit a cigarette and set off towards the 10AM Tram Stop.

He liked his Tram rides like he liked his music videos. Dramatic, short, laced with the feeling of not being over something that never happened. Generally, he found transit to be his state of complete invisibility and invincibility. It was a bit like tricking time itself; going from one Span to another while making no effort whatsoever gave him a strange delusional sense of power and confidence. It was like being nowhere, or not being anywhere. Every thought that ran through his mind could be a line in a bad pop song. He never writes them down because everything that happens in transit shall not penetrate the still world. That way he didn't need to confront them. All his senses would get accelerated in transit — he would come up with his greatest ideas and get overwhelmed by his worst insecurities. But none of it mattered once he would step out of the Tram. The ride was longer than expected and he was starting to get impatient, turning his mobile data on and off.

The Tram had stopped and Nero walked out, almost getting run over by a very old lady on an electric bike. He cursed at her in whisper and pulled his phone out of the pocket to call Joe, when he waved at Nero from across the tramway track. Nero waved back and smiled, crossing the tracks, looking up at the Sun and hurting his eyes.

“How are you?” asked Joe, fixing the wrinkled collar on Nero's shirt

“Been better, I haven't been sleeping very well, don't know what's up with that.”

“Sorry to hear! I feel like you never sleep well though, do you?...”

“Right? It annoys me. I can't tell what it is that's stressing me out...” — Nero looked up at the vicious Sun again — “Whatever. Forever whatever. Also, why don't we just walk to the 4PM Span, I like it way better there, 3PM is always a bit empty and sad, don't you think?”

“I like it actually! It's calm.”

“Everything you like is excruciatingly calm and stable. Too grounded. I remember you once said you don't like the Downward Lane. That is a completely preposterous statement! What a dull life would we all be living if our world consisted of the Upward Lane only?”, said Nero,

speeding up his pace, to go ahead of Joe and walk on his right side instead. He thought the left half of his face was more attractive.

“Huh? I never said that!” Joe exclaimed, punching Nero’s shoulder gently. “Let’s find a place to sit down, I have to go film another interview in a bit.”

They decided to continue walking to get to the 4PM Span. Last time Nero was there, he discovered a very quiet jasmine garden, that some people from the Span took care of and opened up for others to enjoy. He went there alone once to read the news and enjoy the weather and ended up talking to a stranger and sharing a bottle of cider with her. She was going to go on a second date with someone, bought the cider, and on her way to this guy’s place she changed her mind last minute, ghosted him and sat on the bench in that garden, watching people, contemplating, chain-smoking and crying a little. Nero noticed her because she was wearing the same loafers as him, not because she was crying. They talked forever about commitment and trust, drank cider and peed in the same bush every now and then. He never asked for her name. Once they were both too fucked up to talk he walked with her to the High Gate and watched her go through it.

* * *

In the 4PM Span, Joe and Nero wandered up and down the Upward Lane peaking into courtyards, looking for that garden; at one point Nero swore he could smell the thick jasmine aroma, but the place seemed to have vanished into thin air. He got into a very irritable mood and told Joe to just pick a spot. They walked up the Lane a bit further, almost entering the 5PM Span when Joe pointed at a small cafe with a terrace of three tables and a large polished steel sign above the entrance, that said “Cafe Verve”. As they were walking up to the cafe, the sunlight, bouncing off the metal surface, hit Joe’s and Nero’s faces, and they glanced at each other squinting and smiling. Nero snatched the sunglasses off of the top of Joe’s head and put them on, running off towards the cafe, and sat down at one of the tables outside. They were made from the same steel as the sign above. Shiny and slippery. Nero swept away the bread crumbs from the perfect surface, which immediately attracted two pigeons, both with one missing claw. He watched them feed on the bread crumbs, occasionally stomping his foot on the pavement to scare them off. He couldn’t really tell why he was doing it. Everyone does it.

Cafe Verve turned out to be a never-closing bar and snacks type of establishment. Run by an old couple, it was a quiet spot with a nice wine selection, bad appetisers, — such as extremely overpriced soggy olives and supermarket bread — and a vast collection of fantastic vinyls that the owners were in charge of. They were also the ones working behind the bar — both in their late sixties, with beautiful grey hair and deep wrinkles cutting through their kind faces. Joe went inside

to use the bathroom and Nero thought of texting his grandfather. In their chat the last message was from him, unanswered. “Coming Around Again” by Carly Simon started playing. He wrote:

hey, sorry for not getting back to you sooner, your last message got lost, sorry!
the pictures from the terrace are very sweet, crazy how many daffodils there are everywhere, very pretty.
how is grandma’s arthri...

Joe came back from the bathroom, rambling enthusiastically about how good the soap was and Nero locked his phone with the unfinished message. They ordered a bottle of wine and bruschettas, and got into a long talk about Joe’s documentary project, discussing its latest edit again. Joe was making a point about jealousy and resentment, how they come from the same egocentric place; Nero was disagreeing and calling jealousy “a symptom of a big heart”. “If you never feel jealous, you must be in an emotional hibernation”, he said. Multiple times in different words. He always did that when he was making a point. Cafe Verve played Mazzy Star, Claudine Longet, Shuggie Otis and Nick Drake. The waiter came with the order. Tall, with blond curls and very cute dimples. He was the grandson of the cafe’s owners, helping them out with managing the place every now and then. Nero poured the wine and took two gulps, spilling a little on his sweater, rolling his eyes in irritation.

“Handsome”, muttered Joe to Nero.

“Right?”—exclaimed Nero, immediately catching that Joe was referring to the waiter,— “He also reminds me of someone, but I really can’t place it. I have such a bad memory for faces.”

“And names,” —interrupted Joe— “and places.”

Nero smirked. “That’s untrue. I remember everything I want to remember.”

He went inside to request some music. “I Can’t Quit You Baby” by Led Zeppelin was playing. He browsed through the shelves of vinyls, knowing that something he’d wanted to hear was just there, and he’ll know it when he sees it. “It’s an extraordinary collection!”— said the waiter from behind him, proceeding to tell Nero how it was his grandparents, who collected records their whole life, and made the archive public at Cafe Verve recently. Nero asked the waiter about his family and he went on rambling about how music runs in his blood and his childhood was spent with Grieg and Rachmaninoff in the background.

“They just love music, my parents. I was left with no choice but to inherit this love!” said the waiter. “Who doesn’t love music?” thought Nero. “How is that signifying of anything? It’s like saying that your family loves oxygen.” he said, looking the waiter right in the eyes and trying to reduce the damage of his snappy remark by giving him a coy look, but starting to feel like this conversation won’t get past such oblivious statements and growing weary of the waiter’s shallow enthusiasm. The waiter ignored Nero’s remark. They chatted for a while, pointing at records and sharing their favourites with each other. He lied to the waiter about loving Chet Baker. Nero had no idea who

that was. He had a brief moment of doubt before pretending to know what the waiter was talking about, but decided to not be honest and eagerly nodded in agreement every time he was told about an artist new to him. Nero picked a Portishead record and brought it to the player. He set it up and wrote his phone number on an old Tram ticket with a note "*to the waiter with cute dimples from the guy in a brown jumper*", leaving the ticket by the record player. He walked out, anticipating telling Joe about the note and the conversation with the waiter, but Joe wasn't at the table. "Must've rushed off to his interview", thought Nero. He sat down and finished Joe's glass of wine, then poured himself another one. He was watching the pedestrians, imagining what their homes look like, picturing them in detail. He imagined their lovers and parents. This woman in a grey coat, "she is definitely in love", he could tell by the way she carried herself. He could see her at home, rearranging the library, while her husband makes quiche in preparation for a boring dinner party. This kid with a big brown spaniel, pulling the leash, he must've begged for a dog for his birthday and now his parents make him walk it alone to teach him a responsibility lesson. Nero finished the bottle of wine. He sat there for a long time, staring at the elm trees, wondering how it was on the other side, on the Downward Lane. It's been a while since he's seen the Moon.

The Sun in the 4PM Span was too much to handle without Joe's sunglasses so Nero closed his eyes for a moment. The light poking through the thin skin of his eyelids was his favourite colour. Always the same deep, warm orange, almost slightly pixelated, or noisy, like an old TV. Me and Nero both have a very vivid memory of seeing this light, or recognising this sensation for the first time as kids. We were playing with ants out at a park in the Sun, closing our eyes when the light was too much expecting nothingness and darkness and instead being mesmerised by this pulsating swarm of orange, red, hot pink particles, that got darker and more dynamic, the stronger we would squeeze our eyelids together. Somehow now it wasn't the same. But the closest to that colour, or the feeling it came with, were the last glimpses of Sun at the 8PM Span, when most of it is way behind the buildings, but here and there, you could still catch the thick, vibrant splashes of that same fiery light. The few times me and Nero met on the 21st Street were in the 8PM Span, just because of that. Nero crossed the street to be on the shadow side, by the elm trees, and walked to 8PM, dragging his feet and whistling. He was thinking about the waiter and the note he left by the record player earlier. "What a waste of time", he thought. The headache kicked in again.

* * *

In the 6PM Span his headphones died and it suddenly struck him how tired he was. He noticed the porch of his building further up the Lane and smirked to himself; he never really wondered how it works, his place changing location throughout the Spans according to his needs, but it did give him some kind of reassurance every time. He opened the front door, turned and glanced around himself, suddenly feeling the need to acknowledge and memorise his surroundings. Across the Lane was a store that repaired shoes and made copies of keys. He

thought he should go there later and bring them his pair of leather boots that needed some fixing. Nero pushed his front door open and slowly crawled up the endless stairs to his 7th floor apartment. He struggled with the key and, when his door finally gave in, walked straight to the bedroom. Without turning any lights on he undressed completely, threw his clothes on the back of a chair, fell onto the bed, set the Alarm for 9 and AM and knocked out immediately.

Nero woke up to the sounds of construction outside. Even though his bedroom was facing the elm grove, the noises were loud enough to come from all the way in the kitchen, where he had left the window wide open in paranoid attempts to get rid of the wasp which he was convinced was still hiding somewhere in his dear kitchen. His phone buzzed. It was a text from an unknown number.

hiii!! it's the waiter from Verve :)
very sweet of you to leave your nr! i would like to invite you for a drink, are you free soonish?
i was thinking somewhere at the 7PM Span, let me know x

Nero remembered the message to his grandpa that he never got to finish.

..tis? how is the garden shed going? miss you both
why don't we have dinner soon? you choose any restaurant you want :))
see you soon <3

He threw his clothes off the chair and sat down, staring at the phone, hesitant whether he really wanted to go on a date with the waiter. The construction was driving him crazy so he stood up and walked into the kitchen to close the window and saw the sleepy wasp, crawling on the table. He froze. For a moment he thought about whether the wasp could recognise his nakedness. He caught himself feeling shy in front of it. "How miserable, a naked murderer," Nero thought. It was his chance. He grabbed a book from the nearest shelf and made the jump, slapping the wasp rather gently. He didn't want to smash it too hard, to not feel guilty about his violent act, having to scrape what's left of it off the table. The murder weapon turned out to be the book "The Goalkeeper's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick".

Back in his bedroom Nero sent a text to the waiter, saying he would love to meet up, put on his robe and went out on the balcony to have a simultaneously celebratory and a mournful cigarette. He would usually sit on the windowsill looking out on the street, but he didn't want to be near the wasp's corpse. The Sun hadn't fully risen yet, it was peeking out from behind the elm trees. Earlier he'd put on some classical music, wanting to feel what it was like for the waiter to grow up in his unspeakably musical household. Nero felt like it was all way too performative — smoking, looking out on the trees in his robe to the sounds of Grieg's sonatas, and turned off the music, appreciating the rest of his nicotine, accompanied by the construction noise.

He wasn't really looking forwards to the date, but couldn't think of anything better to do with his time otherwise. He picked an outfit and squeezed out a pimple, leaving a huge red mark on his

forehead. Nero watched himself staring at the mirror, thinking his face was ageing, like he wasn't in touch with himself physically. He was touching and stretching the skin on his temples and his cheeks, studying the lines and shapes of his face, as if it was the first time he'd seen it, even though I know Nero has these moments rather often. He brushed his teeth, slicked his hair back with some gel and put on a white shirt with a baby blue vest over it. He wore it on almost all of his dates, because it made his eyes seem bluer.

When Nero was about to leave, he remembered about the boots he wanted to repair and took them with him, but outside, instead of the shop he saw before, was the massive construction site of a soon-to-be banking office — a cold glass facade with a revolving door entrance and a gigantic logo above. “The Bank of Twenty First Street”. Nero chuckled disbelievingly, puzzled. Sometimes he would notice these shifts in the 21st Street, but pay no mind to them. It usually never affected Nero, this relentless flux, that he semi-acknowledged. He took it as a given and never questioned whether all those places actually change or it is him, who forgets and makes things up. But this time he felt like an idiot, standing with a pair of destroyed leather boots at an entrance of this bank. Nero felt very small and, for a moment, scared. “Excuse me”, he said to a woman walking by, “How long has it been since this construction is here?” She said they've been working on it since she can remember herself. “Since when can she remember herself?”, Nero wondered. The Tram came and Nero hopped onto it, anticipating the ride. On the tram his composure was restored. Nero's mind was running fast, in sync with the Tram, he was looking outside the window, tapping his foot to Sade's “Nothing Can Come Between Us”. I never understood Nero's obsession with transit, but I imagine it had something to do with being in control of moving forward, for everything is in constant movement, being in the Tram made him feel like he's claiming this motion and taking charge of it, while also letting go of control over himself. He would often just get on the Tram for the sake of being in it, and exit when something catches his attention at a Stop.

* * *

Nero waited for the waiter at the 7PM Tram Stop bench, feeling tense and still unsure of why he'd agreed on this date. A young boy was dragging two massive bags of groceries up the Street, visibly struggling, and Nero thought of giving him a hand, but the consideration took too long and the boy got too far. Nero felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around to see the waiter's face. He was panting and had rosy cheeks, like he'd been running.

“I was going to say you scared me, because you say that when someone approaches you from the back suddenly, but then I realised you didn't scare me at all, so I will just say “hello” and that you look nice, love the scarf, and I was staring at this kid earlier carrying heavy bags and didn't help him, it made me feel...”

“Hi!” — the waiter interrupted Nero’s rambling — “I only understood half of what you just said, but I’m glad you’re not scared and it’s good to see you!”

“Likewise”, Nero muffled, lighting a cigarette.

“How are you? What have you been up to?” asked the waiter, starting to walk up the Lane.

“Not sure, had a very odd moment earlier, confusing a place near my house for something it wasn’t, I felt like a mad man”

“What are those?”, the waiter asked, pointing at the pair of boots Nero was holding in his hand.

“Oh god, yeah, those are a remnant of my moment of madness, don’t mind it, I will give them to a homeless person or something.”

They walked in silence for a while. The waiter kept trying to start a conversation, but Nero was constantly distracted. He was looking into the lit up vitrines of shops and ground floor windows, and whenever he’d realise ‘I haven’t been listening’ he’d stare at the waiter’s mouth, hoping that would heighten his attention to the words that came out of it. Nero heard all about the waiter’s shifts at Verve with all the freaks he’s encountered at the bar, his emotionally unavailable parents, his unlucky nature, and bad experiences with dating apps. But somehow none of it mattered to Nero, or it almost didn’t sound real, he couldn’t respond to anything, which strangely didn’t bother the waiter and he went on telling stories, even though Nero clearly seemed to be somewhere else. At one point he let go of the boots and they dropped on the ground without the waiter noticing.

“And then I thought about writing a novel about it, I always thought I should try writing when I’m in love, it just feels right, but I’m generally not a romantic person, you know...”

“Do you feel like cocktails?”— Nero cut him off — “That place up the Street looks like they would have some.”

“Definitely! I know that place, it’s quite posh but they really know what they’re doing: the best margaritas I’ve ever had!”

“Good, love that”, Nero said, looking the waiter directly in his left eye.

The waiter was finishing his first margarita, when Nero ordered his third. He looked up and saw the Moon. He didn’t realise they’d passed by the High Gate and reached the 9PM Span of Downward Lane. The bar was loud, conversation picked up. Nero started a game he always played when he’d get tipsy — watching his fellow drinkers and guessing what their personality traits are and where they are in life. I always found it very annoying that he doesn’t realise in these moments, for just how drunk he is, that he might sound very obviously offensive to whoever he’s talking about and they eventually notice. But the waiter was on board. Both their faces were red from trying to contain the laughter; the boys speculated about people’s lives for a long time, finding each other’s snap judgements hilarious.

“Oh my god, look at her. The shoes are really something... Unprecedentedly hideous shoes. She must have children”, loudly whispered Nero. “She loves her daughter way more

than her son, the first child syndrome. He knows it deep down, poor thing. Look how sad he seems.”

The waiter said he was invited to a party somewhere in the 11PM Span and asked Nero if he would like to come along. Nero couldn't think of a reason not to and agreed. They didn't pay for the margaritas and ran off. Nero thought he wouldn't be able to find this bar again anyways and it felt good — the idea of never coming back there again. No responsibility, no commitment, no attachment, no guilt. They walked the Downward Lane holding hands, which started as a joke but became earnest eventually. Nero said he needed to play some music from his phone.

“Why?”, asked the waiter.

“Literary purposes”, Nero answered in a weird accent.

“Huh?”

“For when you write your stupid novel, I'm enhancing the romantic undertone of this moment with an appropriate soundtrack, so that you would feel more in love with me and write something decent.”

Not able to tell if Nero was joking or not, the waiter pinched him under his ribs and pointed somewhere in front of them and said they're almost there. They were singing along to “Say What You Want” by Texas, dancing down the Lane. “It's here”, said the waiter pointing at a marble entrance of a tall apartment building. The waiter leaned in for a kiss, Nero dodged it and gave him a peck on the forehead. They took the sketchy old elevator up to fourth floor and heard loud music coming from behind one of the doors. Nero rang the doorbell and stood there waiting, biting the skin around his pinkie nail. He bit off quite a chunk of his cuticle, it hurt and bled. The waiter took Nero's hand and put it in his pocket.

Inside, the waiter got busy catching up with his friends, and Nero sat on the sofa watching him jump between small talks. He thought switching between small talks was similar to transitions between songs in a DJ set, trying to catch a moment when the waiter and the DJ would actually sync their transitions up. Nero poured himself a drink and went into the bathroom to be alone for a moment. He always did that at parties. He downed a glass of vodka, looking at himself in the mirror. He felt he was finally drunk enough to meet some people. Loose enough, oblivious enough, fun enough.

“What are you on?” someone asked Nero from behind. He turned around and saw a girl the waiter was chatting with earlier.

“Nothing, thanks for asking. Love your outfit!”, said Nero.

“How come you're here?”, she wondered, trying to take a sip of her drink, but missing the straw with her lips repeatedly.

“I'm with that guy!”, Nero pointed at the waiter.

“Oh? I don't think I know him either.” She hiccuped and walked away.

Nero went back into the bathroom. He leaned onto the sink and mumbled to himself in the mirror “I like parties. I like people.” Then downed another vodka and decided to find the waiter. Nero saw him in the living room dancing, seemingly enjoying himself. Nero started walking towards him but suddenly changed his mind and turned towards the kitchen. People were smoking out of the window, he lit a cigarette and listened to a group discussion of coke buddies about the fact that climate change is inevitable and the cocaine prices are rising, which he found entertaining. He stayed with them for a while. The headache kicked in. Went into the bathroom again to pee. He thought about how funny it is that all house parties are exactly the same. Same characters in different bodies. The dancers, the cokeheads, the couch talkers, the loud drunks. He tried to recall the last time he had been to a party but couldn’t think of any in particular. Perhaps, too many.

Nero was tired and restless, feeling like any conversation he could think of starting would be bland and pointless, getting to know anyone would be a waste of his time and energy. He wanted to be at home in company of himself only. He told me many times, how he felt most content when he was alone, and we argued about whether his relationship with solitude was healthy or not. I used to try to get him out when he’d be stuck at home for too long, because he would get so deeply detached from his surroundings, neglecting people and commitments while in his mind everything was peaceful and quiet. He only needed to take care of his own mind, and it gave him all he needed in return — self-confidence and tranquility. I genuinely believe he could live like that his whole life. Alone in the kitchen, just polishing his thoughts, rearranging them, creating sequences and solving puzzles of his own emotions, questions and answers, ideas. This always frightened me out about him.

* * *

Nero left the party, took the elevator down and went out of the building. The wind outside was piercing cold and he hunched his shoulders tensely. He looked right and left, searching for his porch, and spotted it just a little down the Lane towards the 12AM Span. He was thinking about all the time spent with the waiter and the party and it made him feel repulsed by himself: disappointed. He felt like he wanted to shed his skin off, or take a cold shower, or get a haircut — something that would give him a sense of a blank slate. He started walking towards The High Gate, back to the 7PM Span. Once there, he lit a cigarette and stepped through the Gate, which felt a bit like going through a warm wind flow at a mall entrance. A very brief moment of pitch black darkness, lightheadedness and tingling up the spine, and Nero walked out of the Low Gate at 7AM. There was nothing but the filter left of his cigarette and the wounds around his pinkie nail were all healed. He felt lighter.

Up the Lane Nero saw a small church and, thinking that some serenity would be good for him, decided to check it out. He walked in slowly. The echo of his footsteps was loudly bouncing off of the stone surfaces, so he tiptoed to the nearest bench to restore the silence. He sat down and looked up at the ceiling frescos — a bunch of angels with giant ears instead of wings. Gory but very beautiful. Some of the angels were whispering into each other's ear-wings. Some were trying to tear them off, ripping out bits of their own flesh. Nero caught himself biting his pinkie again. He was looking up at the painted dome until his neck started hurting. An organ started playing. It was just Nero and a couple others in the church. He wondered what they were praying about, or if they were praying at all. He tried to imagine the worst thing every person in that room had done. The music was putting him to sleep and his eyes shut. He sat there for a while, every inch of his body was fully relaxed, which almost felt concerning and he moved his fingers slightly to make sure he still could. He loved being in that moment: so consumed by the space and the music, so alone that even he himself wasn't fully there. All of a sudden, his peace was disrupted by a low male voice. He opened his eyes and saw that the room had filled up with quite a crowd, and a priest was at the altar starting a liturgy. Nero immediately felt uncomfortable, as if he was pretending to be religious, which must've been a sin, and carefully sneaked out.

* * *

Hello, darling!

Me and your grandma were thinking of meeting you at the 6PM Span in a bit, we know a lovely restaurant there, let's meet at the Tram Stop in a bit, we need some time to get ready, so don't rush.

Looking forward,
grandpa

"Crap..." mumbled Nero, reading the text. He's been walking the Upward Lane, passing through the Spans, listening to music and enjoying the Sun. He would stop to have one cigarette in each Span and write something down in his notebook. Either a building he liked, or a shop, a courtyard — something that would pin this moment down in his mind, either just his thoughts or descriptions of that setting. But every time he wrote something, he struggled with feeling like he was either throwing words around too irresponsibly without saying anything, or loading them with too much meaning. He tried hitting the sweet spot between descriptive verbal diarrhea and big wordy truths, but wasn't satisfied with the results. He completely forgot about initiating that dinner with the grandparents and felt burdened by the commitment to it. By the time he had reached the 12PM Span, Nero thought of taking a nap. At home he soaked his dirty dishes in lukewarm water and set the Alarm for 6 and PM.

Nero woke up from a bad dream. He saw his mother shooting him in the back as he was running down the Downward Lane, away from home and his family. He took a painkiller to get the

headache away and showered. His notebook was on the desk and he remembered the writings from his walk through the Upward Spans, so he flipped through it and found his writing lousy, shoved it in the drawer and went into the kitchen to make coffee. He noticed the curtains covering his shelves needed a wash and took them off to later load a laundry. Nero felt immensely empty and weak, like he was deflated. His usual carelessness and self-sufficiency felt heavy.

on my way, can't wait to see you two

He slammed his door shut and walked down seven flights of stairs. They seemed endless this time and he kind of wished they were. Outside he could see the Tram Stop of 6PM from his porch and his grandparents were already waiting there. He lit a cigarette and smoked it slowly, standing on his porch, observing them from behind. Once done, he put on a smile and ran towards them.

“Ah, dear, it's so good to see you, it's been forever”, exclaimed his grandma, not letting go of a long hug. His grandfather stood behind her, so Nero was looking at him while being squeezed by her. Grandpa didn't say anything but winked.

“I missed you both so much! You look good, healthy! How are you feeling?” asked Nero, incapable of deciding who to look at, while also avoiding too long of an eye contact.

“Well, you know, my body is a rusty truck these days, it's so unbearable”, complained grandma.

“And I'm as good as new”— said Nero's grandfather, putting his arm around grandma's shoulder —“We just got back from the country house, I finished building the hut for tools, remember, the one I told you...”

Nero didn't remember.

“Oh, stop it, you prick! As good as new, you aren't. He was complaining about his headache all day yesterday!” grandma interrupted.

“Seriously?”— Nero exclaimed —“Mine has been terrible lately.”

“You get it from him, runs in the family”, she said, somehow simultaneously concerned and charmed.

“Fancy a painkiller?” asked grandpa, doing the wink again.

“Oh, I've got plenty, thank you.”

“Oh, and the new puppy we got is so savage. The other day she ruined that lovely doormat I got from your godmother, when we bought the house, imagine!” complained Nero's grandma, disregarding the headache bonding.

They walked down the Upward Lane, heading to the restaurant. Grandma was talking most of the time, telling Nero which friends of hers recently passed away, with such content that it scared him a

little. Every time it wasn't him talking, his deflated sense of self came back, and he would try to snap out of it by bringing up another topic of conversation. Grandpa gazed at him weirdly.

At the restaurant grandma paid no mind to the others' wishes and ordered on behalf of the three of them. It was awkward as they waited for the food. Nero's grandparents ran out of casual life updates and asked Nero how he'd been, and he just couldn't put a sentence together. He was telling them about some things he changed at the apartment, about killing the wasp, his recent sunburn from being on the balcony for too long, but he didn't feel like it would be natural to share the story about his night out, or Cafe Verve. He couldn't reason it in his head. The puzzles of his thoughts were not coming together and Nero started panicking. He remembered his childhood with his grandparents; picking raspberries with grandpa and getting his face all scratched by thorny bushes, learning how to sew on buttons and patch up socks with grandma. But it wasn't those same characters at the table. They were an old couple who brought into this world a woman who in her turn gave birth to him. This feeling scared him. They weren't strangers, but they didn't feel close either. He was about to start telling them about those sweet memories from when he was a kid, but that too felt like holding on to something that wasn't real anymore, creating a bond over the past instead of forming a new one, but it felt like it was too late for the latter. The grandparents were looking at the wine menu, arguing about the right choice. Nero was alternately looking at both of them and started biting his finger again. Grandma noticed it immediately and shouted "Do not!" without taking her eyes off the menu.

Nero excused himself from the table, went to the bar, inserting himself between the elbows of two big men, and ordered a vodka. He took it to the bathroom and locked himself in. He peed, then looked at himself in the mirror and downed the drink. "What?" he said, staring at his reflection. He went out and joined the table again, the food was already there. He told his grandparents he wasn't hungry and had to run an errand he'd totally forgotten about. Grandma expressed her disappointment and desire to see Nero more often, so he apologised, trying his best to make it sound as sincere as possible. He had walked out of the restaurant and pulled a cigarette out, when grandpa called from behind:

"Mind of one, lives of many, am I right?" he said.

"Do you know what's off? Because I don't."

"I do."

"And?"

"Diamonds crack diamonds, you will figure it all out eventually." said grandpa and lit Nero's cigarette.

He stood by the restaurant's entrance, confused. Grandpa went back inside before Nero could gather himself. He finished smoking, looking in front of himself but not at anything. He had to go through the High Gate and lose the weight of his thoughts. He jumped onto a tram at the 6PM Stop and got off in the next Span. Right by the Stop was a trashy souvenir store with a bunch of cheap

21st Street merchandise and other gimmicky things. In the window display he saw a doormat that said "Not You Again" in Comic Sans. He thought of his grandma complaining about her old one having gotten destroyed by the puppy and, thrilled with his attentiveness, went in and bought it. He rushed to the Gate and ran right through it.

Coming out of the Low Gate In the 7AM Span Nero felt less uneasy. Having gone through the Gate, he knew his grandparents must be home from the restaurant already, and he thought he should go over to theirs and give grandma the doormat to make himself feel better. He got onto the Tram and rode through the Spans, alertly looking out the window to spot the building his grandparents lived in. He knew he'll recognise when he sees it. He went to the 7PM Span and back. No luck. He was growing weary of the Tram, but didn't want to give up and felt too ashamed to call them to confess not remembering where they live. He thought it must be in the 2PM Span. He knew them, he believed he knew them, they were totally the kind of people to buy a flat in the 2PM. He took the Tram again, went out at the 2PM Stop and slowly walked up and down the Lane, vainly forcing his mind to give him a hint. Eventually, he gave up and went to the nearest cafe for a coffee. It tasted bad. He asked the lady behind the bar if they wanted the doormat, but she politely declined. He asked if they have alcohol. She said they didn't.

Nero didn't finish the coffee and didn't tip. His headache was so unbearable, that he couldn't keep his eyes open and the painkillers were all out. He wasn't feeling like himself, there was nothing left of him, like he was about to faint. He got onto the Tram again, and stayed in it until it was nearing the 1AM Stop, where he suddenly remembered that he could go home.

* * *

It was freezing cold in the 1AM Span. Nero sat on the kitchen windowsill until he couldn't feel his feet anymore. He was squeezing his eyelids together, whirling the cogs, wheels and springs of his memory machine as hard as he could, trying to picture Cafe Verve, or the church from the 7AM Span, or the footage of Joe's documentary or the waiter's face but he couldn't. He went into the bedroom, hitting his small toe against the corner of a plinth, letting out a quiet scream. He turned on the light and laid down on the bed, looking at the stained cornice in the corner of the ceiling. The stain hadn't gotten bigger, It looked the same, it felt nice. No leaks from above. Good. He thought he should text Joe. He thought Joe cared about him a lot.

wanna meet now?

He took a painkiller that was laying on his bedside table and downed a glass of water. He made coffee, put on warm socks and returned to the windowsill, looking out on the Downward Lane.

There wasn't a soul outside. The vicious wind was howling, tossing around lots of small pieces of styrofoam, pigeons were hiding in every crevice of the facade. He saw light in the windows across his. He tried to imagine the family inside, but nothing would come up in his mind. He thought of his favourite songs, failing to play them in his head. Then he thought of starting to cry, because of how miserable he felt; but no one was around, so it would've been worthless. He only cried when seen by others. He smoked a cigarette and it didn't taste good. He threw it out of the window and went into the bathroom. He looked in the mirror and touched the new wrinkles on his forehead, stretching them, smoothing them out, and closing his eyes. He saw his mother breastfeeding him. Then himself, slapping a friend very hard. Nero saw himself buying a book with his first money; doing drugs for the first time; going to the dentist to get fake teeth; watching things get ugly; lying to his children. Honesty. Pleasure. Delusion. Death. He washed his face, raised his eyebrows and smiled. Back in the kitchen, he found old champagne in the fridge. He reached for the tall glass and a few of them fell down, shattering against the concrete floor. He ignored it, popped the bottle and poured the hissing drink. The bubbling foam sounded just like a snake. He sat down at the table, lit a cigarette and wrote a letter, trying to formulate his thoughts with surgical precision.

He got dressed and left, with the champagne glass in hand. Running down the stairs, his feet bled into his shoes from the broken glass. Nero pushed the entrance door, seeing that rippling movement in everything outside again, more clearly than ever. The apartment with the lights on that he saw out of his kitchen window wasn't there anymore. The family living in it did not matter anymore. He started running through the Downward Lane, towards the Low Gate. The wind was blowing against him and he liked the tingling of the cold air on his face. It felt like it was smoothing out his wrinkles. He ran and ran and ran, almost bumping into street lights, getting out of breath, the Moon was following him and dimming as he got further. It was taking forever to get to the 7AM Span, and by the point he reached 6AM he had to stop running. He leaned against an electricity pole and took a painkiller, swallowing it dry. There was a man on the bench across the Lane. He looked at Nero, concerned, from above his glasses.

"How are you doing, you?" screamed Nero to the man.

"We don't know each other", he replied.

"Now we do"—shouted Nero, catching his breath—"And you do have a familiar face!"

Nero's heart was beating way too fast and he sat down by the pole, closing his eyes, scared that he was going to faint. When he felt better and opened his eyes again, the man on the bench wasn't there, nor was the bench. He laughed, got up and slowly dragged his feet further down the Lane. He could see the Low Gate already. He never went through it before, only out of it after entering the High Gate, but in that moment it felt like going into it was the only thing, the right thing to do. It was a monumental marble arch, with countless carvings all over it—depicting hundreds of people fighting, working, dragging something in carriages, trading, burning something in big pits, celebrating and mourning. He studied those carvings for a while, trying to make sense of them or find a sequence of events. He wondered if all those people have lives of their own, people and

things they care about, or if they only matter in the context of this image. Whoever made that Gate must've considered that, he thought. That each tiny stone-carved person must be concerned with something other than dragging shit in carriages and trading it, or dancing drunk around the fire pit. Nero thought he wanted to try stone carving and went through the Gate. No one has seen or heard from him since.

Epilogue

This morning I found a small package in my postbox. Inside was a key and a used tram ticket with something written on it. *"from my place on the 21st Street, the building is in the 1AM Span, you'll recognise it when you see it"* it said. I was confused, but knew I had to go pay a visit. I haven't heard from Nero in quite some years and never really wanted to see him ever again, to be completely frank. We didn't leave it on a good note back then. I also fucking hated being on the 21st Street; it was always drowning in chaos. I couldn't grasp how time works out there. How people deal with it, how they meet each other on time, how they find their homes, develop routines. Freaks me out. So disordered. But this key didn't leave me any choice, it felt too important.

I took an Uber to the North Gate, a friend told me that it's the one leading to the High Gate of the 21st Street, which was the quickest way to get to the 1AM Span. I went through it and hated the feeling. I felt like it mentally stripped me off. Destabilised me. From that Gate I took the tram to 1AM, where I immediately recognised Nero's building. I remembered the last time I visited Nero, the second I saw that heavy metal door. I pushed it open and went up the seven flights of stairs. His door was on the right, I remembered it like it was yesterday and my headache kicked in. I knew he wasn't there though. He wouldn't want to confront me directly after what happened with us.

I went inside. The apartment hasn't changed a bit, it was almost eerie how exactly the same it has stayed. I saw an envelope on the kitchen table, it said *'For Ilya'* on it. Inside was a letter, a bunch of used tram tickets and a dead wasp. The letter read the following:

Dear Ilya,

Sorry for not being in touch for this long. You should be too.

I haven't really been with it lately, feels like everything around me started to crumble and I needed to leave. You should watch "The Box" music video by Orbital, I think it elaborates on my state of being better than I ever could using words. But I will add a few anyway.

I feel like I've been growing backwards, and understanding myself only gets harder and harder as time goes by. I tried stopping it but that only made it worse. Time is ruthless. Don't fuck with it. I've been thinking about you and me, how and why we parted ways when we were younger. I just really wanted to understand myself to the highest extent, be better than myself and better than you, there was always space for better and more, I always strived for it. Because isn't that everyone's ultimate goal? To try and be better than yourself. To build everything around yourself like castles in a sandbox, give them names, and make futile things meaningful by deciding so. I don't know. I don't think I know anything.

I want you to move into my place, take care of it. Things need to move forward on the 21st Street while I'm not there, you know? You must know. I left you my phone, so you could talk to my grandparents and other people I've been spending time with. They need it. You will certainly handle it better than me. You're good at telling minutes apart from meters, I never grasped the difference.

Maybe you could even figure out a way to stop this fluidity and irregularity in how everything changes on the 21st Street. Maybe you could make it your own. That would be insane. Imagine!

I think some people have this gift. To suddenly and uncontrollably grab others by their earlobes and drag them out of their reality, their consciousness, and gently put them up against their most vulnerable thoughts. And you serve this gift valiantly, with no hesitation and little words. Plenty of doubts about yourself, but none about how to serve this gift of yours. That's your weakest, faintest, twitchiest link.

I want you to find that guy I was helping make his film about jealousy. His contact must be somewhere in my phone. I think he would like your take on it. He's great.

Yours,
truly or falsely,
Nero

The next story takes place on a Street of your choice.
The world of the 21st Street is now known but irrelevant to both You and Me.

"... mouth on fire ... stream of words ... her ear ... practically in her ear ... not catching the half ... not the quarter ... no idea what she's saying ... imagine! ... no idea what she's saying! ... and can't stop ... no stopping it ... she who but a moment before ... but a moment! ... could not make a sound ... no sound of any kind ... now can't stop ... imagine! ... can't stop the stream ... and the whole brain begging ... something begging in the brain ... begging the mouth to stop ... pause a moment ... if only for a moment ... and no response ... as if it hadn't heard ... or couldn't ... couldn't pause a second ... like maddened ... all that together ... straining to hear ... piece it together ... and the brain ... raving away on its own ... trying to make sense of it ... of make it stop ... or in the past ... dragging up the past ... flashes from all over ... walks mostly ... walking all her days ... day after day ... a few steps then stop ... stare into space ... then on ... a few more ... stop and stare again ... so on ... drifting around ... day after day ... or that time she cried ... the one time she could remember ... since she was a baby ... must have cried as a baby ... perhaps not ... not essential to life"

— Samuel Becket, *Not I*