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THE LAST DAYS

The air is darkening into dusk, and I am standing at the rear of the house, looking out through the full-length windows. The backyard slopes down towards the fence of wood palings, the last evening light seeping away into the earth. Beyond the fence, between gaps in the foliage, a lighted window is visible. Behind the window, the figure of a person, dressed for the evening, moves about inside a room. The enclosure of walls with its one pane of glass, filled with soft-toned light, gives me the feeling that I am looking into some kind of animated diorama.

I hear a car engine approaching, somewhere behind me, then idling at the front of the house. I glance again to the window and the illuminated scene beyond it. I turn and head for the front door, treading quietly down the hallway. I lock the door behind me and step into the warm, heavy, sweet-scented air. The bushy green creepers clustering over the side fence have a sprinkling of white jasmine flowers.

Stuart's car waits at the end of the driveway, the engine a low hum. I open the door, manoeuvre into the passenger seat.

"Ehh," mumbles Stuart. He is wearing his suede jacket; the car reeks of his cheap aftershave that smells like window cleaner. Anyone would think we were going out to meet girls.

"Greetings."

"No one home at your place?" he asks, peering across me at the curtains, the long folds of drapes hanging shroud-like behind the windows.

"No one at all." My parents, my brother, my sister, have all disappeared on outings of their own. "And you?"

"Same." Stuart looks away, his fingers twitching on the steering wheel. He has greased his hair, which slides like a shadowy black film around the uncertain edges of his forehead. He does his grooming after watching Neighbours on TV, clumps of hair caught in his brush, the tangled strands of Friday night all knotted together. He shifts the car into gear. The headlights throw long shadows up the street, illuminating a white brick fence and the green, soft-looking strip of grass in front of it.

We arrive in Stuart's driveway. He handles the car gingerly, creeping along the bitumen under the dark trees. The driveway curves around like a boomerang in front of the large house. Stuart pulls the car to a stop in a thick patch of shadow. A human figure, vaguely female, flickers at the window, then vanishes.

"Won't be long," Stuart mumbles. He gets out, throws the door shut, and hurries off up the steps to the lighted vestibule. I step onto the driveway. Stuart shoves open the door and strides off somewhere. I walk up to the vestibule, the opening of light from the doorway, then step inside.

The lounge room is empty, but the feeling of someone in here lingers like steam in a bathroom recently vacated. The piano stands in the corner near the window, the lid open. The black and white keys gleam in their stark brightness. I walk over to the piano. A small table stands next to it, and on the table I notice a CD cover. The cover is grey, grey like a cloud that has drifted out of a dream. The title lettering looks like moonlight etched in the clouds, a paler, silvery colour: TORI AMOS UNDER THE PINK. Tori Amos stands in a white robe, red-haired, looking at me from her world amidst the grey shards of broken ice lying strewn around her.

I can feel someone watching me. I look up to see Stuart's sister standing in the doorway to the hall. Her gaze is soft; her face has a pallor that is almost translucent.

"Hello Remy," I say.

She steps into the room. Her feet are bare.

"Hi." Her eyes are a pale blue luminescence. Curiosity hovers there, veiled by the shyness in her voice.

She is holding a book. The cover of the book is exactly the same as the CD cover on the table. It looks like a book of sheet music. Remy sees my eyes moving from the book to the CD and back again, as if between two mirrors facing each other.

"Is this what you're playing these days?" I ask her. I know she has been getting piano lessons for years. She smiles a little.

"Yes," she says. "I love to play Tori." Her smile has a hint of an actress's smile, like I have seen her do in the end-of-year school dramas. I have heard of Tori Amos, of course, but I don't know any of her songs.

Remy sits down at the piano. She opens the book and places it in front of her. She takes a breath and reaches for the piano keys with her light, strong fingers. She begins to play. A melody stirs into life.

I listen, watching the lithe movements of her hands, the concentration in her face. Remy is a girl both pretty and not pretty at the same time, but there are moments—like now—when out of that mixture some other quality emerges, and I think she is beautiful. I usually see her only at Stuart’s house or at school, and towards me she is pleasant and polite and little else. There is something fascinating about her. The notes of her music hang in the air like droplets of water the moment before they evaporate.

Remy glances to the hallway. A thumping on the stairs, muffled by carpet. It can only be Stuart’s hurried footsteps. Remy stops her tune and switches to “Here Comes The Sun.”

Stuart bustles into the room in his shiny black boots, heading for the doorway. He glances over but doesn’t stop. His hair is parted differently than it was before. He flashes his sunglasses, the black lenses folded over his hand.

“Forgot these.” His voice is curt. “You ready?” He slows down, but not much. He glares at me as he reaches the door, or maybe at Remy. I turn to her; Stuart’s boots make a noisy clatter on the front steps. She looks amused.

“Well,” I say. “See you round.”

“See you.” Her glance is soft, her smile delicate, lingering. When I look at her, when I look away, I feel a confusion of surprise and pleasure and excitement. It comes rushing into me, throbbing in my chest, tensing my limbs as I step out the doorway, the night billowing out all around me.

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Stuart’s dim form sits hunched in the car, sunglasses arranged on his face despite the dark. He has started the engine. I click the seat belt into place. Stuart hits the accelerator, revving out the driveway with an unnecessary squeal. He has never liked me talking to his sister. I remember the screaming fights they used to have for the front seat in the car, when their parents dropped me home from primary school. Even then, after the hair-pulling and slaps and tears, when Stuart won the position he coveted, he could not stand even a few words between me and the girl his victory had placed beside me. He would glare and sulk, and refuse to speak even when I left the car, and not until the next day would he be ready to talk to me again.

The car winds out into the night, past a network of familiar streets. Soon we are on a longer stretch, the road rolling along under us, unravelling like a long spool of black silken ribbon. Stuart guides the car into a curve, where the suburb’s outer regions grow denser. House lights glimmer through bushes.

We have been making these trips ever since Stuart got his licence, earlier this year. Nearly every Friday or Saturday night, we take his car and drive through some part of the suburb, travelling the streets and avenues, the laneways and crescents. We look for houses with lighted windows, rooms we can see into from the street. It is a fascinating thing—gazing into other houses, into other lives. It hardly even matters what there is to see. One time, I sat staring into an empty room for five minutes—as long as Stuart could tolerate—gazing at the freshly-painted walls, the bare white bulb in the ceiling, the light gleaming on the floorboards. The whole point of watching, for me, the peculiar pleasure of it, is in the watching itself.

Stuart has told me, enough times, that his one aim is to get a look at a girl undressing or naked. Of course I'd be delighted if, by some chance, I glimpsed a naked girl through one of these windows. But a night contains many things, and erotic possibility—however alluring—is only one of them.

Stuart eases the car to a stop on a quiet kerb, tyres navigating the gutter, pressing into the grass. Across the road, a block of units stands in a neat concrete row, each with a modest garden in front of it. In the nearest one, a lighted window faces us.

Inside the room, a man is sitting at a table. His head is bent over a magazine open in front of him. A crossword is visible on one page, rows of clues on the other. I watch the man linking up the spaces of interlocking words. He will, after a while, complete the puzzle, and then what? A pile of magazines rests on the table next to him. His placid face has a look of undistracted, unhurried contentment.

Stuart leans closer.

"They're crossword magazines." He sounds disgusted. I keep trying to read what is on the pages, but we are too far away, the clues and answers beyond the reach of our eyes.

Stuart sniggers and tells me about a movie he has seen where a girl is doing a crossword in the nude. He goes into some detail, but the more he adds to his description, the emptier it seems.

"Why in the nude?" I ask.

"Fucked if I know. The whole movie was just an excuse to get her to walk around naked in front of a camera." He revs the engine. "Fuck this. He'll be there all night. Let's piss off." He spins the wheels off the kerb. The man doesn't even look up from his crossword.

Stuart urges the car down a network of roadways, an enclosed delta of winding streets that twist around one another in planned contortions without ever quite touching. He takes

turns without warning, lurching off in different directions whenever the whim takes him. Stuart slows the car, peering all around him. His concrete-grey eyes float behind the dark glass portals. The suburb, these days, has become an architected labyrinth of cul-de-sacs, passageways adjacent yet not linking up; for anyone approaching by car, there is only one way in and one way out.

The car comes to a stop near the end of a cul-de-sac. Beyond the footpath, a park spreads wide between the houses. Stuart sits in silence, hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead. His face has a blank look.

"Come on," I tell him. "Let's take a walk."

I stride ahead through the park; Stuart follows at a dull pace. The air is warm all around us, filled with a grassy fragrance. The springy grass muffles our footsteps. The shapes of play equipment abandoned in the night loom ahead of us. Stuart clambers up into a wooden tower, taking up a sentinel's post. He folds his arms across his chest, turning his view to where the houses cluster. The moon is a glowing shard of white.

"Can you see anything?" I ask.

"Fuck all," he says in a blasé voice. The words echo back, then disappear, swallowed up in an empty blackness.

The park takes us through to another cul-de-sac. We follow its contour through the night. We have never walked on this street before, though we have visited many others like it. Streetlights hang in the sky, the night deepening around the stark white globes. Each time I glimpse a window with a light inside, I begin to feel I might see something surprising, or curious, or even something remarkable, though mostly it is just people watching TV. I ignore Stuart's footsteps tensing with impatience. Some of our wishes can never be forced into manifesting, in the same way a thin moon cannot be coerced into fullness. What I believe in is luck, and opportunity, and... timing.

We find our way back to the car along the curving streets. Stuart pulls the door shut; the windows shudder. He jams the key in the ignition. I notice a lighted space in a tall house nearby. The room looks like a bathroom, visible above the fence line. The brightness glances off the cool white porcelain surfaces. Traces of steam still cloud the window edges. I tap Stuart on the shoulder.

"Over there." I point.

A girl steps into the room. Her hair is red, her skin nearly as pale as the white towel wrapped around her body. Her eyes have a peculiar red tinge.

"I think we have a genuine albino here," I say. The girl is not attractive at all, but in her rarity, she is more than interesting. The only albinos I have seen until now were the caged guinea pigs that Remy kept when we were small, before (thanks to Stuart) their less than natural death. Stuart appears not to hear, staring up at the window, all his senses contracted into the visual. The girl examines her pimples in the mirror. The towel shifts a little; she moves her hands to tighten it.

Stuart lurches forward in the seat.

"Take it off!" he shouts, his eyes riveted. He can shout as loud as he likes. Sealed off by glass and distance in alternating layers, the girl will never hear him. His hands clutch the steering wheel. The girl squeezes the pimples between her fingertips. Stuart's aftershave wafts off him. The girl picks up a sponge and washes her face. Stuart adjusts his sunglasses. I recall him standing in the tower in the park; suddenly, the light vanishes. He strains out a thwarted grunt, punching the dashboard with his fist. He twists the key, stamping on the pedals, tyres cutting up the grass on the nature strip, then spinning off down the road.

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The morning is warm and luminescent, still a bit hazy at the edges. I stretch to wake myself. My fingertips shift around my eyes, scraping the crusted night-residues. I get out of bed and draw back the curtains and wind the window open. The brightening warmth of late-morning sun presses through the glass. My religious education folder is a green rectangle on my desk, like the lawn at school. I search through it for the copies of the notes that Stuart has asked for. Classes have finished; exams will be soon. I shuffle the notes around, putting them in order of the dates inked in black at the top corner of every page, until they are all assembled.

I turn to the book beside the notes. It is an art book that I have borrowed from the local library: *Hieronymus Bosch*. Heaven forbid that the school library should hold such blasphemies. I open the book and the front cover hides the notes beside it completely, like a total lunar eclipse.

The page I come to shows a reproduction of *The Last Judgment*, almost my favourite of Bosch's paintings. It is a marvel of horror: the world incandescent with destruction, people being tortured, hideous creatures running amok, the end of everything. What spoils the painting for me is the Jesus figure, suspended in its sickly white bauble in the upper space like some cheap mantelpiece figurine, presiding in smug condescension over the scene beneath. It looks out of place, unnecessary, as if tacked on after the painting was already finished. If the book were mine, I would take some scissors and cut the shape out, leaving only an opening to the back of the next page, the white circle shining over the final night on earth. But the book has to go back in a few weeks, and I leave the tacky Jesus there so other people can hate it too. If that's what judgment is, judgment can go to hell.

I turn the pictures over to the one I prefer—*The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Its three panels show the simple beauty, the teeming richness, the grisly ending of possibilities in the world. They unfold one into another, all part of the same picture. They are more than a prophecy, more than a chronology. The past, present and future meet in this remarkable moment that the painting is. It's not about judgment—it's about transformation. Even in the final dark mayhem, a small doorway opens, white light beaming through.

Stuart has said he likes only the middle part, because of all the boobs, because it looks like an orgy.

I clip the notes together and tuck them into an envelope. In a kind of afterthought, I write on the front of the envelope a quotation that I found somewhere recently: "The rare moment is not the moment when there is something worth looking at, but the moment when we are capable of seeing." I can't remember the author's name, but to me the phrase comes closer to religion than most of the religion I have heard or read in six years at St. Anthony's Co-educational College.

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The morning light is strong in Stuart's driveway; the background of air glistens with moisture. I walk through the faint dampness, towards the house. The climbing roses tangle their green vines around the window edges, the flowers a lovely pale pink. I step up to the vestibule. Stuart opens the door. I enter the lounge room, passing him the envelope.

"Here it is," I tell him. "The Book of Eschatology. All you need to know about the Last Days."

He takes the envelope. His eyes travel over the quotation on the front of it.

"Thanks." Stuart looks surprised at the weight of the envelope, or at the words, or both. Doubt lingers in his voice. His hair is a bit dishevelled. His suede jacket has been tossed on one of the couches in a black heap. There is no sound of anyone else in the house.

"Two weeks to go," I remind him. "Five exams. Then goodbye to St. Anthony's. Miserable old prick."

Stuart's hand scratches at the edges of his hair. He frowns. "A school isn't a person," he says. No humour escapes from his concrete-grey eyes. I leave him with the notes.

Walking down the driveway, between the lush patches of garden, I see a familiar car turn in from the street. It is Stuart's father's old car; he is driving and Remy sits alongside him. He

and I nod to each other; he slows the car to let me pass. Remy, by this time, has wound her window down. The sunlight illuminates her dress: a shimmering flash of green. Her hair, blonder in the glow, seems to be a softer, thicker texture of the light itself.

“Hi Remy.”

“Hey.” Her gaze turns towards me with the car’s slow movement, as warm and lovely as the day. The smile she gives me is a smile no other girl has given me before—and it sets my heart pounding in a way it never has before. Beyond her, through the roses, a curtain seems to shift, but I can’t be sure of this; it is less than half a glimpse.

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It is unusual not to hear from Stuart for two weeks. I see him only once in exams; glancing up from the paper, I catch sight of his hair sliding around the back of his shirt collar, some rows away. But his chair is empty when the last bell goes. Religious education is the only exam we have together, except English, which is compulsory. At the end there is a crush, but for me there is no hurry—there is nothing to rush for when you won’t be coming back. The sky is humid, swollen with dense clouds of sultry grey. The air is heavy with the damp heat of held-in rain. There is no downpour—only too-loud voices cutting through the smack of shoes on concrete.

I phone Stuart one Saturday. No answer comes, only the sharp vibration in the earpiece. Yet I doubt the sound reaches into all of the house’s distant, confusing recesses. I have no guarantee of this, only the feeling that I want to go around there.

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I know it is a long walk to Stuart’s house. The road is a black line that doesn’t waver, stretching into the distance. Its far point seems liquefied in a shimmering heat-vapour, as if melting into itself.

Across the intersection, the road borders a long stretch of grassy paddocks. They spread out through the distance. At the paddock fence, the wires are taut as telephone lines, though not electrified. I manoeuvre through, then stand at the paddock’s edge, looking out across the grass.

I feel enveloped in the light, surrounded by the scent of sticky green. Close by, I can see the mass of grass stems pressing close together in dense waves, entanglements of all kinds.

I begin the walk, my shoes pressing through the grass. The scent, the heat, the walking

absorb into them all feeling of time passing, of time yet to happen. From the paddocks, I reach the road, from the road, the crescent where Stuart's house waits, from the crescent, the driveway.

I can hear the piano playing. The sound is faint, coming in small tremors. As I listen, it begins to gather strength, more emphatic, the tune taking on definite shape. In the rose-scented air, the clear floating piano notes mingle with a female voice.

Past the mission... behind the prison tower

Past the mission... I once knew a hot girl

Past the mission... they're closing every hour

Past the mission... I smell the roses...

The voice is Remy's. I have never heard the song before, but I can tell that this must be Tori Amos. I climb towards the vestibule. My feet stick a little to each step, held by the gummy residues of grass. Sunlight fills the lounge room, diffusing around a soft recess of shadow where Remy sits playing the piano. She glances over to where I am standing; her lips curve into a smile.

The last notes of the song are still hovering in the air, ghost-like, as Remy opens the door.

"Hello stranger," she says, pushing loose hair off her forehead. It is the first time that she has called me anything other than my name. Not only that, there is a different warmth in her voice. I want to acknowledge this new touch of familiarity, to reciprocate. I echo Remy's own greeting, adjusting the tone enough to make it mine.

"Hello stranger."

A look of pleasure arches her eyebrows into delicate crescents.

"Come in," she says. I take off my shoes and step through the doorway.

"I phoned before," I tell her. "There was no answer."

Remy waves towards the piano.

"I was having some Tori time," she says. "I couldn't hear anything else." I notice her fingers moving still, playing faintly through the air.

She tells me to take a seat, and then she is gone from the room, before I have even decided where to sit. I choose a couch that faces the piano and the window with the garden beyond. The green leather cushioning that covers the top of the piano stool still holds a crease of Remy's imprint.

She returns with two full glasses of water, and passes me one. A gleam of sweat brightens her forehead. Her hair reaches around her waist, drifting around her bare upper arms, the light cotton of her summery dress. She sits down next to me on the couch. A scent drifts over to me, perfume or shampoo, softer and denser than a summer bouquet. We sip from our glasses.

"Were you looking for Stuart?" Remy asks.

"Is he here?"

"He said he'd be home tonight," she says, turning the glass around in her hands. "At ten o'clock."

"Do you know where he went?"

"He didn't tell me that." She smiles, with some irony. She picks up a length of her lovely hair, knotting the end around her fingers. "He hasn't been around much lately."

Stuart's hair would be about the same colour as Remy's, except for him smearing the black dye through his.

"Mmm... he can be like that sometimes." She takes a sip of water. "You're all finished with St. Anthony's, then?"

"Yes," I say. "Forever." And for the first time, the finality of it hits me. The word is like an incantation, exhilarating, releasing.

"Lucky you," Remy says. "Can't I just skip the next two years?" Her laugh is high, delicate, a little fragile. But her eyes find mine. "I want to be where you are."

Remy's mother comes into the room, in that soundless way she has.

"Are you ready, Rem?" she asks. Her hand reaches for something and there is a jingle of keys. She looks at me and greets me, remote as ever. Remy glances at me, then answers her mother.

"Mum," she sighs. "I've been ready for ages."

We stand at the same time. We turn to say bye and she touches my arm. It thrills me—like a chord of music echoing through an infinite sunlit sky. She has never touched me on purpose before.

"If I see Stuart, should I tell him anything?" she asks me.

"Will you tell him I'll come back tonight?"

"Okay." She smiles. Her look, her gentle voice, feel the same as her touch. "See you round."

"See you."

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Hours later, the black bitumen road is a glistening strip of night, and I am walking along it. The road takes me past the grassy spread of the paddocks now enveloped in darkness, past every intersection up to the one that turns towards Stuart's house. A faint light hovers behind the window ahead of me, but Stuart's car is nowhere to be seen.

My footsteps are quiet in the driveway. If anyone is sleeping, I don't want to wake them. I picture myself going up to the vestibule, sitting there on the steps, waiting for Stuart. But as I approach, the door opens. Remy's slender shape fills the doorway. Her smile is a gentle mix of welcome and amusement. Her hand leans on the door, her summery dress casting shadows around her feet. She says nothing until I reach the vestibule.

"Stuart rang this afternoon." Her voice is quiet. "I told him you were coming. He said that was fine." Her feet shift a little. This is the second time I have walked around here today. My forehead is sweaty. My feet feel tired.

"What time is it?"

She peers at her watch, a silver face on a slim black band.

"Ten-thirty." Her toes are tracing patterns in the shadows. I suspect Stuart has his reasons, but I have never known him to be late. Remy's fingers tense on the edge of the door, then release it, letting me into the house.

Standing inside the room, I can feel the layers of night settling over the house. I hear

Remy close the door behind me. The piano draws the light into itself, and holds it there, the wood gleaming, the heavy lid enclosing the keys.

I feel Remy's hand in mine. I turn and look into her eyes. In the pale blueness, notes of tenderness and excitement sound through each other. We leave the lounge room along the dim corridor, passing the staircase twisting down from Stuart's mezzanine. Remy's room is directly underneath. A tall window faces the dark yard, shielded by a snare of close-growing foliage.

Remy steps into the room and switches on a pink-shaded lamp on a night table beside her bed. The pink-tinged glow draws our shadows out to their fullest lengths, dark silhouettes stretching through the room. A large mirror mounted on the wall, facing the bed, bends and warps them within its silver frame. Remy shuts the door and locks it. A moment hangs suspended in the air between us, as if itself a shadow. We step into that moment, towards one another.

Her kisses are eager, full of delight. We are kissing for how long I don't know. I stroke my hand through her hair, across her cheek. She presses her hand to my chest. She steps back, her hands moving behind her. She unfastens something that I can't see. She shifts out of her dress with quiet, effortless grace.

Remy stands in the lamplight, naked, in all her loveliness. Shadows cup the soft round swells of her breasts. Her triangle is a dense patch of hair, the natural shape. The colour is brownish-blond, like a tangle of golden threads. She gazes back at me, smiling, her silhouette clear in the mirror.

I hold Remy close; our eyes fall shut; our lips touch in soft, tense delight. It feels so wonderful. I kiss her brow, her ears, her hair—how joyful, how lovely to feel their touch, to come to know them as something more than visible. My shirt loosens, and slips away, her piano fingers agile at the buttons. Soon all our clothes are on the floor. We hold each other, kissing again; we press together, skin to skin. My hand traces the outline of the triangle, which doesn't quite cover it—but that is time's work to complete. My fingers reach into it, finding the opening, the soft fleshiness moist with her liquid. The wish, the desire to kiss her there sends a rush of excitement through me. I guide her onto the bed, position myself, and press my lips to those about to meet them. My tongue goes searching, tickling the soft pink ridges, making her giggle. She touches my face, drawing me alongside her. The mirror shows us moving together. She climbs onto me, gliding her fingers through my hair, laying kisses on my eyelids.

There is a point where I glimpse the scene in the mirror, in which I can see the bedroom window, and through it the space of foliage enclosed by the frame. A movement of shadow

seems out of time with our rhythm on the bed. I focus towards it, and in the blur of leaves I see another form. It is a human form, standing in a cramped, awkward pose. It is Stuart, in his sunglasses. And now, as he stands there, the points of another triangle come into view. This time it is a triangle of heads—Remy's, mine and Stuart's—visible only to me, in the mirror.

Remy's body begins to tense, her legs gripping, her hands clasping my shoulders. She makes no sound until the shudders go through her body.

Stuart's face is transfixed, straining towards the window. His mouth hangs half open. His hands rush to the front of his pants, unzipping him of their own volition. He grabs his dick and whips it out, a thin white worm probing towards a scene it cannot reach. He grips it in his fist, pumping it furiously, as if wanting to tear it off his body. He is moving on the spot, his image caught between interlocking panels of glass, the white worm choking on its own thick fluid.

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The moonlight leaves its own traces on the driveway curving away from the house. I think of Remy. I feel as though part of me, a dream-self, is still with her in her bedroom. Stuart's car is parked carefully astride the gutter, some way along the street, shining empty in the moonlight. I can barely imagine what will happen when I see Stuart and Remy again. The possibility occurs to me that maybe I need not see them again. It would be a resolution all too neat. And anyway—even if I did want that—another thought has come to me. It is a thought filling the night as if it has always been a part of it, the thought that—in this world of ours, where all our moments dissolve like moonlight in the morning—every time is the last time.

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