

Last Instants

This tea is really bitter.

I have always been amazed at how small gestures, small habits, can together build a life.

Waking up, drinking tea, taking the subway, working, another subway, another tea, sleeping, a perfect balance.

I am one of those for whom this rhythm works.

Yet this life of habits, unchanging over time, does not at first glance match the image I give off: Mark, 19 years old, a New Yorker since birth, you would more likely imagine me studying or starting a revolution, maybe both at once. No, instead I spend my days in front of a screen, watching numbers for the SGMP.

What is that? We will get to it.

* * *

About fifty years ago, a small company called Kalikau developed the first nanotechnological patch. The principle? Once applied, any degeneration or virus in the body is corrected or eliminated by our little robotic friends. Immortality.

* * *

I turn on my screen from the SGMP open space and immediately see thousands of counters scrolling across the surface, like spotless rain falling over the night.

* * *

The topic aroused obvious fascination. Quickly overwhelmed, the governments imposed a clause: to cope with the looming overpopulation, the Service for the Management of Programmed Deaths had to append an expiration date to each patch. Once reached, it would stop working, causing the individual's death within the following hours. Your life, bounded by two random lines of code.

That is my job: to monitor the countdowns, to warn when one of them approaches its deadline, so that the person receives a dark envelope in which to record their will. The machine does the rest, which no one would want to deal with anyway.

Some will rise up to protest, why? What could be fairer than the randomness of an algorithm? Two hundred years earlier, your life ended with one drink too many, a bad bend in the road... Have things really changed?

I live with the woman I love, Amanda. She works for several humanitarian organizations. She helps with life, and I with death, so to speak, a delicate balance on which we live and love each other.

"Hey, Mark!" calls a voice behind me.

It is Morgan, a colleague who works in data management. A small guy with a pointed goatee, friendly, the kind who makes a day go by faster if you feel like chatting. Always in a good mood, or almost. This morning, though, he seems troubled, uneasy. Strange.

I reply with a vague expression, expecting him to lean over and lose himself in his screen as usual. But he stays still, pale as death.

I start to worry a little. What is wrong with him all of a sudden?

"You okay?" I ask hesitantly.

He takes a moment before answering, rather quickly, "Yeah, yeah, don't worry, I just realized that... it's cool working with you."

A brief silence fills the air for a second, then he continues, nervously, "Well, well, I'd better not stand around, back to work!" and sits down at his station.

* * *

Back home after that long day, I slip quietly into the living room. Amanda doesn't notice me, busy planning a relief operation for a developing country. I sit down silently, watching her tenderly as she energetically sifts through her files, her delicate red hair falling over her shoulders. The gentle light of dusk bathes her face.

Nothing is more beautiful to me than this moment.

"Oh! I didn't see you there!" she exclaims, surprised, a few moments later.

We spend the rest of the evening quietly, eating on the couch in front of a movie, falling asleep peacefully and forgetting the little worries of the day.

* * *

The next day unfolds in a strange atmosphere. I have the feeling that I am being watched by passersby while I work. The thought is ridiculous, I know, yet I could swear I hear whispers behind my back.

In the morning, I report sixty-three cases that have fallen below the two-day mark, a record since I started this position a few months ago.

The day promises to be dull, without a single word exchanged, only that strange feeling of being watched, which seems to haunt me. I'm imagining things. To shake off those thoughts,

I go chat with a few colleagues and Morgan over coffee. Conversations follow one after another without transition, ranging from international politics to the best way to cook an egg, always steered cheerfully by Morgan.

After a while, a heavy silence sets in, the topics having been completely exhausted, and we unanimously decide to get back to work.

* * *

In the evening, exhausted, I collapse onto a chair, almost paralyzed. A whirlwind of indistinct numbers echoes through my skull. Amanda joins me, pale as the moon, silent. I try to find out what is wrong, but she avoids my questions, as if she too now feels uncomfortable in my presence.

I am starting to really worry.

The evening passes in the coldest silence. We eat and go to bed without a glance at each other. What is happening? Why is everyone acting this way toward me? I try to reassure myself, to repeat that it is all just an illusion, but the more I think about it, the more this discomfort irritates me. What have I done to deserve this invisible wall between me and the world?

* * *

I start the next day with my throat tight. Still those whispers, those silences, that dull sense of exclusion. A fear begins to wander through my mind, moving back and forth inside me, sending chills through my body and making my heart leap in fright at times. I work in a place where everyone's date of death is displayed on a screen. Am I going to die? What else could it be? This waking nightmare would explain all the silences, Morgan and the others already mourning me while I am still alive. It is not impossible, someone could have seen my name appear in their countdowns, and from there warned the others.

On the verge of tears before my screen, I begin to understand. They must have told Amanda yesterday afternoon, which would explain our empty evening. She probably does not dare tell me what is about to happen, because it is forbidden to reveal someone's death in advance. She does not want to spoil my last, those words make me tremble, days. What should I do?

* * *

I cannot stand it anymore. That very evening, consumed by doubt, I ask her the question. She immediately refuses to admit anything, but for half a second I catch a glimpse of her reaction, terribly disturbed. We do not speak for the rest of the night.

Yet, in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, I am startled by a sound from her side of the bed. A muffled sob. I want to hold her close, to comfort her, but apprehension keeps me frozen in place. Thinking I am asleep, I feel her turn toward me and press herself against my back in the thick darkness of the night.

Good God, what is going to happen to me?

I can no longer bear this pressure; it is poisoning my life, sending the same question back at me every hour, every minute, every instant: is this my last breath? How long before... I cannot take it anymore. I am sure of it now, my days are numbered and no one even has the compassion to tell me. Why have I not yet received the means to write my will? A mystery. But this dull thought is driving me insane. There is only one way to banish it forever. I get up and walk through the open space.

"Tell me!" I shout, in a voice I never thought myself capable of. "Tell me that you know! Tell me that I am going to die! Give me my death date!"

Morgan stares at me to my right, his complexion waxier than a candle, stammering, "B-but... you know the... rules... It's private and..."

How dare he? He knows, I read it in his cowardly, contemptible eyes now, he never dared, he never wanted to admit what he knew. Is he the one who discovered it? Probably. How could I have treated him as a friend?

Suddenly, I lose control.

My hand seems to move on its own and my fist sends Morgan flying several meters away. I knock over the nearest chair, followed by the nearby screens. I let out a howl of rage through the workspace, I run, overturn tables, throw objects within reach. The other employees flee, terrified, through the corridors while I tear down posters from the walls and stomp on every fallen keyboard. Do they already believe I am dead? It is up to me to prove them wrong! A gigantic cacophony now sets the place alight, and I am even struggling to grasp that I am its sole cause given the chaos that seizes the room. I have overturned the silence, that look above me. Nothing will stop me until I know.

* * *

But security intervenes, and I am dragged by force into the director's office, obviously to discuss the terms of my dismissal. For the first time, I see the face of the SGMP director—wrinkled and weary, without the slightest spark in his expression. Cold as death. He presents a file; I sign it without reading, drained by my anger. He signals to the security guards to escort me out of the building, but just before they turn away, he gives me a cold look and points to a screen on the wall. A counter, with a name.

I still have 84 years left to live.

I go home, expelled from my peaceful routine, exhausted but happy. A mistake! A tremendous mistake of judgment on my part! Ah, what price would one not pay to live!

The apartment is empty, a black envelope lies on the table.