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In the Here and Now

He switched realities whenever he found something inconvenient. Say, when he got into the shower, expecting warm water, receiving an icy rush, he would switch to one where his hot water heater hadn't run out. If he ran a traffic light and a cop pulled him over, he switched to a reality where he was being notified about a broken headlight.

He was always careful that he didn't return to a reality he'd already left behind, otherwise, he might have experienced the consequences of his departure. He had never seen what a world without him looked like, and he didn't want to imagine it. Maybe those worlds collapsed because his disappearing atoms displaced everything, or maybe he replaced the body of his alternate self. He decidedly never worried about those sorts of things. He was here and now, and he only wanted to care about that.

He made sure he visited his mother every few years. He believed he was going consistently, but she argued otherwise and complained that he didn't come enough, that he'd always been away. "You were never afraid of going off on your own. I thought that part of you would've mellowed out by now." He had left the house at fourteen, promising her that he would fare well, and she had worried for him every day since.

His childhood home was always fairly clean, but in his mother's old age, she had trouble keeping up with everything that needed to be done. Dishes abandoned in the sink, dust coalescing in corners, and misaligned items that she didn't have the eye to detect anymore. So she asked him if he could help tidy up. Maybe dust the living room cabinets.

"Can't Olivia do it? She hasn't done chores in a while," he asked absentmindedly.

"Who's Olivia? Stop speaking nonsense—" So he switched. The house was cleaner, and he even made a comment on how her skin radiated more than usual. Later, she asked him to drive her to yoga, so he switched to a reality where she didn't take classes. He wondered how the version of her that he left would fare and if she would get to her classes. He told himself that she wasn't his responsibility now. Someone else would take her. She would find a way.

The next day, he woke to her cries. "It's a wreck," she said. "You were supposed to clean it."

"Don't you see I did?" He looked around the house, but it was exactly as she said.

"I came back from yoga and expected you to listen to me for once. I thought you wanted to help your old mother out. I thought that's why you came."

"Of course I want to help you," he said, switching until his mother was out of his room. He composed himself, figuring he switched in his sleep. He went downstairs to look for his mother, seeing her asleep on the couch. He sat down, relieved, promising himself that sort of thing wouldn't happen again, that he wouldn't switch for something as small as chores. He worried he might run out of good realities to go to if he constantly avoided manageable tasks.

He watched television for a few hours, and she still hadn't woken up. He called to her loudly before going over to shake her. She wouldn't wake. He felt a rising panic, switching frantically, only to see his mother passed out on the couch. He traveled to realities where his

sister existed, but her presence changed nothing. “Won’t you wake up?” he asked her. He shook her again and even switched to a reality where the city hadn’t been created. Yet, despite all of this, he couldn’t find one where she was well. Switching laterally wasn’t the solution, but he couldn’t go back in time.

He traveled back to the previous reality and took her in his arms and to his car. He asked if it was his fault, asked if it always bound to happen.

At the hospital, he switched back and forth, but his mother always lay before him motionless on a sterile bed. Doctors explained a different situation each time, getting his hopes up for a change, but it was always terminal. He began to switch realities in his mind, remembering times his mother was annoyed or frustrated, angry with him, times she was nagging. But also times she was gentle and kind even when he was ungrateful or despicable, when she would put her hand on his back while he was sick. He told himself to stop thinking. He switched, switched again. She died before him in every reality he could find until he escaped to one where he didn’t have a mother at all.