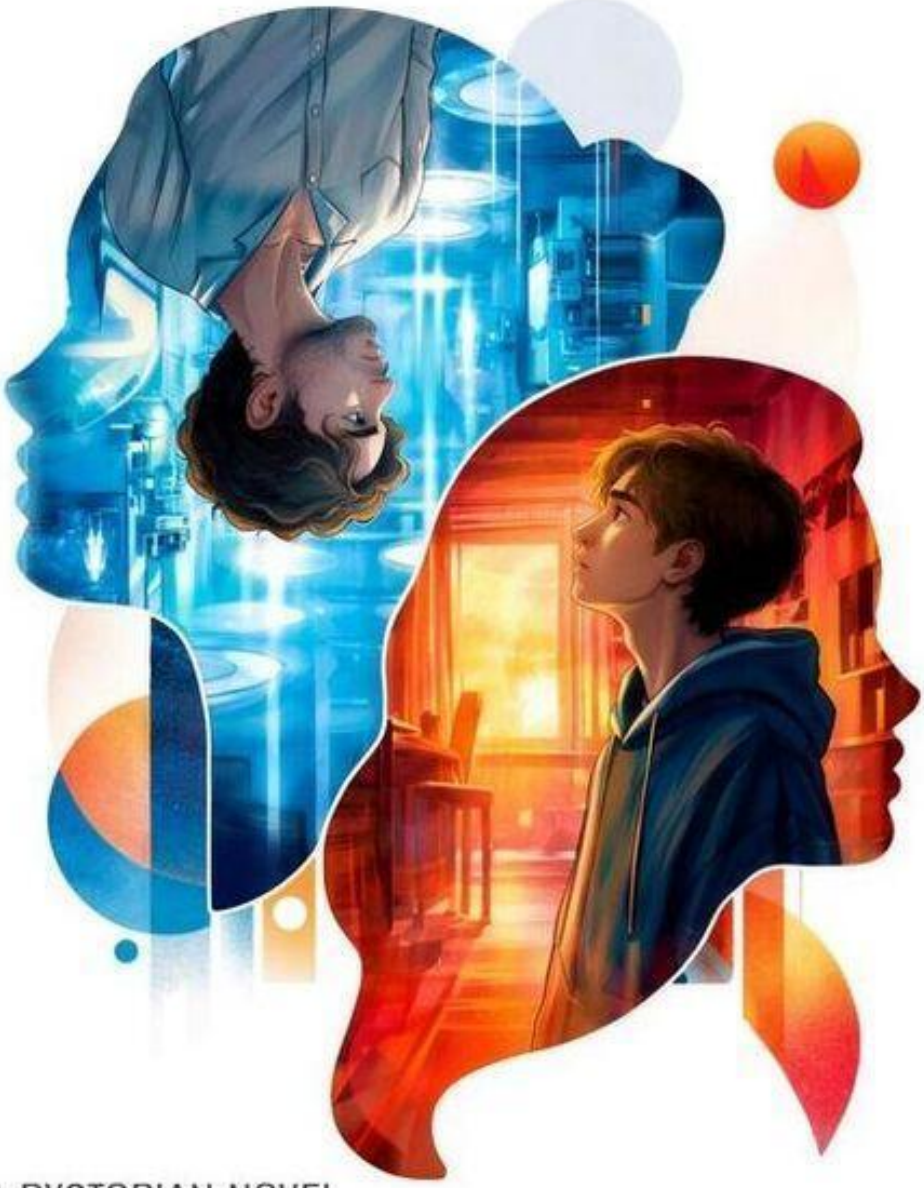
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YOU'VE NEVER HAD A DREAM, HAVE YOU?

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THIS IS ONE OF THEM?



A DYSTOPIAN NOVEL

SINCERITY OF THE REAL

KIRILL ORLOV

Kirill Orlov

Sincerity of the Real

«Издательские решения»

Orlov K.

Sincerity of the Real / K. Orlov — «Издательские решения»,

Mike Mitchell has never dreamed — until the accident. He wakes in a hospital to find seven years have passed.The world is calmer, kinder, more orderly, as if everyone has found their place. Mike wants to believe it — his loved ones have waited for him for years.But what if this world is too perfect, and its sterility isn't people's choice but imposed rules?Through fear, love, and betrayal, Mike must decide: what matters more — a life without mistakes, or the right to stay who you are?

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Sincerity of the Real

Kirill Orlov

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Chapter 1

For Mike, morning never began with bits of dreams about flying or terrible monsters. His sleep was always like the flick of a switch. In the evening the light goes out — darkness — then the light comes back on, and it's morning. He envied people who woke with memories of interesting stories; all he ever had was a constant emptiness.

Morning on the outskirts of the city almost always began the same way: the light didn't burst in all at once but seeped slowly between the houses, reflecting off the windows of the neighboring buildings. Mike always drew the curtains before bed so the first rays of sun wouldn't wake him too early.

He opened his eyes and shut off the alarm. His head, as always, was crystal clear — frighteningly clear. No dreams.

Mike lay there another minute, staring at the ceiling, aware that morning had come and soon he'd be heading off to school again. From the kitchen came the familiar noise: his mother moving around the house, making breakfast, listening to the news.

Mike's room was always chaos — his own, safe kind of chaos. Dust drifted in the thin beam of light; on the desk, textbooks lay tangled up with candy wrappers and mugs. He absently thought he really should tidy up, but pushed the idea away just as quickly, got up, and walked out.

The kitchen smelled of instant coffee. The table was half taken up by breakfast, half by envelopes and unpaid bills.

In this cramped but cozy space, a constant struggle for power played out between order and mess, and every object seemed to breathe a chronic shortage of time. The surfaces of the old kitchen cabinets had been carefully wiped down, yet dried water droplets still glinted dully on the metal of the sink — the remains of dishes washed in a hurry the night before. A clean kettle sat on the stove, but a darkened stain had burned itself into the ring of one of the burners where milk had once boiled over. His mother was already sitting at the table, and the moment she noticed her son, she immediately began spreading berry jam on toast — jam a neighbor had given them.

Mrs. Mitchell was short and slight — one of those women whose exhaustion settles not in the face but in the shoulders. She gathered her hair into a bun on the move, pausing in front of the mirror just long enough not to look completely worn out. No makeup — only pale skin and shadows under her eyes that there was no point in hiding.

As always, she wore a clean blouse under a cardigan and pressed trousers. And still Mike could see the stubborn creases on the sleeves — traces of the morning rush, when, between the stove and the receipts on the table, she'd managed only to "run the iron over it" so that at least something in their home would look put together.

"Morning, sweetheart. I might be late today," his mother said without looking up, spreading the jam so thin it was as if she were saving on every motion. "The boss wants me to redo the last quarter's report — even though he's the one who gave me the wrong numbers yesterday."

"Mom…" Mike frowned, pouring milk. "He's just dumping his own work on you!"

She froze for a second, glanced at the stack of envelopes at the edge of the table, and let out a quiet breath.

"I know. But the bills won't pay themselves."

Mike could see she was running on fumes. After his father left — though Mike didn't even remember it — his mother had carried everything on her own. She tried not to complain, not to cry, but her son noticed how hard it was for her. He tried to be the pillar of support she had surely grown unused to over the long years, but taking the weight off her completely was beyond his power.

"I've told you before, I could get a part-time job. You know the pizza place is always looking for delivery guys," he said, though he already knew the answer.

"No," she cut him off. "Your job is school and training. Understood?"

The scholarship was their only shot at a decent, debt-free college someday. He gave it his all at practice, and it paid off — it really paid off. How he wished he could love his studies half as much. He wasn't stupid, just a little lazy, like most teenagers who don't see the point of wasting time on mindless rote learning when there's so much more interesting in the world.

"Coach says I'm in good shape, but you know how much competition there is on the team…"

"Hey, don't you dare doubt yourself. You've got character. Your father…" She stumbled, looked away as if searching for something to hide behind, but decided to finish anyway. "He was smart, but he always left when things got hard. And you… you stay strong."

An awkward pause hung in the air, the way it always did when the conversation turned to his father. Mrs. Mitchell looked at the clock and stood up sharply.

"Damn, I'm already late. Okay — dinner's in the fridge, but it's just pasta. Sorry, I didn't have time to make anything else."

"It's fine, Mom. Go."

When the door slammed behind her, Mike finished his breakfast quickly and went to wash up. The bathroom mirror reflected a boy tall for his sixteen years. His lean but wiry frame beneath the T-shirt gave away an athletic build. His light-brown hair, messy and unruly, stuck out in every direction; he tried, without success, to smooth it down with his hand. Mike leaned closer to the mirror, studying his reflection. His gray eyes caught on a small mole on his chin that stood out sharply against his pale skin. He smiled at himself, showing off a row of even teeth, and went to get ready.

Before leaving, he packed everything he needed into his backpack, remembered his headphones at the last second, and pulled on his worn-out sneakers. He laced them barely tight at all — he'd never liked shoes that hugged his feet too closely, restricting his freedom.

The biting wind off the bay slipped straight under his hoodie. It was a forty-minute walk to school: Mike was saving on the bus pass, and a little extra cardio in the morning never hurt. He walked the steep streets, listening to music and watching the city. Expensive cars swept past; people in suits hurried to cafés for lattes that cost more than his lunch. Mike couldn't help envying them a little, but he knew he had his own path to follow.

It was noisy near the school: students talking, arguing, someone trying to scribble down their homework right there on their lap. Mike walked into the classroom and dropped his backpack under the desk. He'd never been a hardcore "nerd," but for the most part he liked his classes. There was no need to overthink, no need to figure out what to do: you just followed the schedule, sometimes caught something interesting, and the day would slip by unnoticed.

First period was history. Mr. Harris droned on about the Great Depression, pacing by the board. Mike caught himself once again looking at Emma. She always listened as if the lesson were a one-on-one conversation, as if the noisy classroom didn't exist at all.

Emma drew attention not through a striking appearance but through a rare, piercing sincerity that showed in every glance. Her pleasant, soft features and the fair hair falling freely to her shoulders were only an addition to the main thing — her expressive blue eyes, which always held a sharp mind and an absolute intolerance for any kind of falseness. Mike had always liked that Emma hardly ever wore makeup. And it wasn't even about her obvious natural beauty — for Mike, that clean face without a trace of makeup was a symbol that Emma had never tried to be someone else. She didn't hide behind masks and always chose honesty, whatever form it took.

"Mike," her voice came after class, "did you write the literature essay?"

"I'm… working on it," Mike lied, and trying to head off a lecture, he added, "By the way — you look great today."

Emma blushed slightly, but immediately turned serious again.

"Thanks, but don't lie. I hate it when people lie, even about little things. If you need help — just say so."

She looked him straight in the eye, and Mike felt uneasy. Her gaze was too perceptive.

"I haven't started. Can you help?"

"Fine, but only because…" She stumbled. "Never mind. Here — an outline and the main points. You write the text yourself, otherwise it won't be your essay anymore." That was the plain truth: none of the teachers would ever believe Mike capable of the kind of deep reflection on morality and sincerity like Emma's.

"Thanks," Mike said, taking the pages with a faint pang of disappointment.

"See you tomorrow, then — I've still got a lot to get done," and she left, heels clicking. Mike kept watching her go a little longer than usual.

"You won't believe it!" Mike flinched in surprise: his friend Jay's voice had yanked him out of his thoughts.

"I was up until four in the morning rewriting the code for my mod," Jay exclaimed in a tired but delighted voice.

Mike wasn't the least bit surprised. His friend looked like he had no idea what order even was. In his face — sharp cheekbones, dark almond-shaped eyes — you could make out Asian roots. His thick black hair existed in a state of perpetual chaos — a sure sign that Jay had spent another half the night in front of his monitor. His clothes matched the rest: under a loose flannel shirt you could see a T-shirt that read "Error 404: Sleep Not Found." Jay had never had the discipline that sports or a strict upbringing instill, but Mike knew: if there was one person in the world both irresponsible and brilliant, he was standing right in front of him.

"Hey, Jay," Mike answered. "You know that pulling all-nighters is bad for your brain — and that's your main and, frankly, your only asset."

"Sleep is for the weak and people without deadlines," Jay snorted, his eyes flashing. "But now, when a character jumps into water, the splash flies along the right trajectory! It's art, man. Pure poetry! But listen, here's what happened next. I'm standing in front of a door, and this level voice says: 'Access restricted.'"

Mike found himself going still.

"And you know who's saying it?" And without waiting for an answer, he blurted out: "My dad! He doesn't even know the words 'access' and 'restricted' — he always walks into my room without knocking, like I've got no personal space. And you, as usual — nothing?"

"Yeah. You know it yourself — dreams aren't my thing," Mike answered with a smirk, though the subject had always been a sensitive one for him.

Back when he was a kid, his mother used to wish him pleasant dreams and ask in the morning what he'd dreamed about. For a long time he didn't understand what she meant, until he worked up the courage to ask.

"Well, dreams are when you fall asleep and you imagine things. You see pictures that aren't really happening," his mother explained.

"But I've never seen anything like that," Mike would answer.

It wasn't anything bad, but his mother still decided to take him to doctors, who had never heard of anything like it. In the end they simply made peace with it. Mike went on living with the feeling that something was wrong with him, and tried not to discuss it with others. But since Jay was his best friend, the topic sometimes came up.

"I just crashed yesterday after practice — didn't even finish my history homework," Mike added, noticing the disappointment on Jay's face.

"Don't worry, history's cyclical — it all repeats sooner or later anyway," Jay said with a wave of his hand. "Listen, we're getting together at my place tonight, starting a new campaign. Come by at eight."

"Alright, see you at eight," Mike said. "Though I might be a little late after practice."

"Come on, we won't start without you," Jay tossed over his shoulder in parting, and left.

Mike walked into the locker room, and the sharp, by-now-almost-familiar smell of sweat hit his nose, instantly switching his brain into combat mode. Football practice wasn't just a hobby or an outlet for him — it was a battlefield, where every single day he had to prove his right to a spot in the starting lineup. He wasn't captain, but he held his position as a running back firmly, never forgetting that on the team the competition was always breathing down your neck: a couple of weak games and you'd find yourself on the bench. He got along well with all his teammates, but he had no close friends among them, because he always remembered that it was better to go his own way and not get attached to anyone. Show even the smallest weakness, and "you'll get chewed up and spat out" — as their coach liked to say.

Some of the guys were already warming up when he came out onto the field. Mike adjusted his gear, greeted everyone, and braced himself for two hours of hard, unbroken work.

During practice it started to rain, and the sky over the city turned into one solid sheet of lead. The grass underfoot grew slick, and in one of the plays, trying to intercept the ball, Mike slipped a little and was knocked off his feet by a powerful block. He fell face-first into the mud, and the cold, wet clods packed his whole face.

For a second everything froze, and how he wanted to just give in to it and stay lying on the turf, to catch his breath for even a few seconds. But since childhood his mother had drilled it into him that you can't give in to weakness, that after every fall you have to get back up — because that's the only way to succeed.

In one springy motion he leaped to his feet, shook the mud off his face, and threw himself back into the thick of it. A few seconds chasing the opponent with the ball, a leaping tackle he'd drilled hundreds of times — and the ball belonged to his team again. Getting praise from the coach always felt good, but this time was special.

After practice the rain seemed to grow heavier. Mike, as always, felt a pleasant exhaustion — his body ached, his muscles were tight, but his heart was filled with an incredible satisfaction. He walked along the sidewalk and thought about someday inviting Emma to come see him play. Even though he'd rehearsed in his head the words that seemed silly to him, every time he tried to say them, it all turned into an incoherent mush.

Mike stood at the crosswalk, feeling hunger gnaw at his stomach, trying to decide whether he had enough money for anything besides pasta.

The phone in his pocket buzzed. Probably Jay: "Eight o'clock, don't be late." Mike didn't even take it out — he just pictured the words and couldn't help but smile.

The light turned green. He stepped forward on autopilot, still holding on to the thought of Emma. The screech of tires tore him out of his head. Headlights — too close.

Mike barely had time to realize what was about to happen. A single thought flickered through his mind: *I won't make it.* Darkness fell instantly. And for the first time in sixteen years, it wasn't empty.

Chapter 2

First the sound returned — steady, monotonous, as if someone had switched off the ventilation and tuned the world to a single frequency. He listened and found none of the usual hospital echoes: no distant voices, no footsteps, no coughing — as if the walls were swallowing every sound.

Next came the smell: not the sharp hospital scent of bleach and alcohol, but a strange scent of cleanliness, sterile "like new electronics." The air was too still — a single temperature, no draft, not a drop of moisture.

Mike opened his eyes. His body felt heavy and yet, at the same time, surprisingly light and responsive. Strangely, he felt no pain, not even the slightest discomfort.

The ceiling above him was absolutely white. Not a single crack, not a speck of dust, not even a hint of shadow. Light seemed to emanate from everywhere — even, diffuse, leaving the eye nothing to anchor on.

Mike stared into that whiteness for a few seconds, trying to make sense of where he was. His memory reluctantly began tossing up images: rain, a traffic light, the road, the screech of brakes, and the blinding glare of headlights. He inhaled. The air entered his lungs freely; no pain in his chest followed.

He looked around. The room was spacious and empty. It was stripped of furniture, with none of the familiar blinking monitors, IV drips, or tangles of wires. The only object was a smooth white console at the foot of the bed, devoid of a single button. Windows took up the whole wall, and beyond them the colors of dawn were spilling across the sky.

He pushed himself up from the mattress, sat up, and dropped his gaze to his hands — and immediately realized something was wrong. His palms had grown larger, his fingers coarser. The scar had vanished without a trace. Mike ran his fingers over his chin. Stubble? Something clicked inside him. *How long have I been out?*

At that moment, the door opened, and a young woman walked in. Her appearance was startlingly flawless. Mike had seen beauties like her only on glossy magazine covers, where digital brushes mercilessly erased every human flaw. The stranger's skin looked matte, almost porcelain, free of any flaw and even of the faintest signs of fatigue that are practically mandatory for any medical worker. Too composed for a hospital: no haste, no tiredness in her face, no wasted movement, no fuss. The traditional snow-white coat didn't hang on her like a sack, as it usually does; it fit her figure exactly, emphasizing a perfect posture and waist. Her thick dark hair was gathered at the back into a strict, impeccably smooth bun — not a single strand out of place. She gave him a dazzling smile.

"Mike." Her voice was so melodic that he couldn't help but picture an angel. "You're awake."

He expected the usual questions: *Where does it hurt? Are you dizzy? How's your breathing?* But instead, she launched straight into a briefing.

"My name is Lillian, you can just call me Lee." She walked over to the white stand and began pressing something on an invisible panel. "I'm your handler, and I'm here to guide you through the adaptation process."

"What?" Mike stood up and saw his reflection in the mirror on the door.

At that moment panic began to rise in his chest. The changes to his body were too obvious: his face looked older, and that was frightening. But in the instant he was ready to give in to fear, something inside silenced his mind. As if a switch had flipped inside him. It wasn't an ordinary act of willpower — more like a cold, perfectly calibrated pause that severed the panic at its root. For a fraction of a second, it was as if his own brain no longer belonged to him.

"Why am I like this?" the young man asked.

"Because it's been seven years since the accident, Mike."

The words hung in the air. Not seven days, not even seven months. Years.

"How many?" He heard his own voice but barely recognized it.

"Seven. I know it sounds impossible. After being unconscious for so long, it's common to experience confusion, memory gaps, and overwhelming emotions. We'll explain everything piece by piece, and repeat it as often as you need."

Mike shook his head sharply, as if trying to shake the information from his head. A digital display, a calendar, a date on a screen, anything that would serve as confirmation. But there was nothing around him, only perfect whiteness.

"I… I don't remember clearly. I think I was walking down the road."

"That's common. Memory can return in fragments. Many people have the feeling that 'it all happened yesterday.' That doesn't mean you're losing your mind. It means your brain needs time."

Seven years. He couldn't wrap his head around it. It seemed a whole eternity had passed, one in which his mother had grown older and his friends had finished college, found jobs, or started families. He scanned the room once more, hoping to find a calendar that could confirm the reality of what was happening.

"Where's my mom?" The question echoed, leaving a dull ache in his chest.

"She's fine, and so are your friends. I've already notified them of your awakening."

The handler touched the white surface of the console again.

"Look!"

Looking for shoes, Mike noticed a pair beside the bed. They resembled sneakers, but without a hint of laces. He put them on and felt his foot settle comfortably inside — yet a sense of discomfort arose. He wanted to loosen them a little, but the shoes clung tightly to his feet. He walked over to Lee and saw, on the other side of the console, a tablet with graphs and a projection of a human body. Obviously the diagram was his own, since the top of the head was glowing red.

"All your readings are normal," Lillian continued.

"And where are the machines and all the other equipment?" Mike looked around the empty room.

"Medicine has come a long way. We've done away with wires and bulky hardware. Treatment now happens at the cellular level, using neural networks. Your recovery was overseen by the best algorithms."

Algorithms, he thought. And he wondered why his body had kept developing while he lay unconscious. What actually happens to a person in a coma? For a second he imagined that if consciousness freezes, then physical transformations ought to stop too, as if he were in a cryochamber. But no, that clearly wasn't the case, or he wouldn't have aged. Then, by that logic, he should have expected severe wasting — his muscles had lain idle for years, and his body should be badly atrophied now. Lee had said medicine had come a long way; maybe that was the whole explanation.

The handler held out a thin white bracelet.

"Put it on."

Mike fastened it, and the bracelet adjusted to fit his wrist, almost as if it were alive. Words flashed on the smooth surface: *Welcome, Mike.*

Pulse: 92 bpm (Elevated).

Blood pressure: 128/78.

Cortisol level: 480 nmol/L (Elevated).

For a moment Mike felt like his mother, not knowing how to take a screenshot or switch to the right mode. Was he now going to be as helpless as most adults?

"Would you like to take a walk?" Lee tilted her head slightly. "Physical activity accelerates neural adaptation."

Mike looked at the door. He was afraid to step out into a world where time had slipped through his fingers.

"Okay," he agreed, "but when my mom gets here, make sure you tell me."

“Of course,” the handler promised, and smiled so confidently, as if the rule were carved into every wall in the hospital. “No one here is going to hide anything from you. For now, come — I’ll show you what the world has become while you slept.”

Mike nodded. But for some reason, he thought: *What if they do?*

Chapter 3

The door opened soundlessly; people were moving down the corridor — calmly, too calmly for a hospital. Mike caught himself waiting for a single slip-up: for someone to stumble, sneeze, drop a folder, or raise their voice.

Nothing. The movements of the people around him were quiet, smooth, and remarkably economical.

“Scared?” Lee asked, noticing his hesitation.

Out of habit he wanted to answer “no,” but something stopped him.

“Yeah,” he said, and felt a strange relief as he did.

As if he’d shrugged off a heavy, invisible weight he’d been carrying for years.

“If you feel dizzy or find it hard to breathe, tell me right away,” the handler said, evenly and quietly.

In this place you didn’t need to raise your voice to be heard; there wasn’t even a hint of extraneous noise.

“I’m fine for now,” Mike replied. “Everything’s just… unfamiliar — too seamless.”

The next door opened before them on its own, the moment Lee merely glanced at her bracelet. Beyond it stretched an enormous lobby. There were many people here: doctors, patients, visitors. But instead of the usual hum of voices, shuffling feet, and ringing phones, there was a soft, musical rustle. No one ran, shouted, or gestured. People conversed amiably, looking one another in the eye, never getting distracted, never interrupting. People moved along precise trajectories, as though following pre-programmed paths: no one bumped into anyone, no one stopped abruptly, and everyone knew their place.

“This is the adaptation center,” Lee explained, noticing Mike standing with his mouth open. “Both physical and social. People here prepare to return to society.”

He looked toward the center of the lobby. There, by a fountain whose water fell in perfectly even streams without making a splash, sat a girl of about ten. She held a Rubik’s Cube in her hands. Mike expected to see long, fumbling attempts, but the child’s fingers moved with incredible speed. Three seconds — and the puzzle was solved. The girl didn’t even smile; she simply scrambled the cube and started again.

“She’s training her fine motor skills and spatial thinking,” Lillian remarked. “A future engineer.”

“What? She can’t be more than ten years old!” Mike’s voice grew a little louder, and he immediately drew several calm glances.

“Quiet, Mike,” Lee gently reined him in. “Society has changed a great deal. Children are taught self-regulation the same way they’re taught the multiplication table. To weigh every step, to think everything through in advance, to manage themselves. It’s just a skill, like in sports. You train, and it works.”

“Too bad no one taught that in my time,” the young man sighed.

“Now they do,” his companion smiled.

It seemed remarkable. Mike had often complained that school taught a lot of useless subjects. They were made to solve complex algebraic equations, but no one told them how to calculate taxes or pay bills. They were lectured about proper behavior but never had the mechanisms of self-control explained to them. They were told about faraway countries he’d never once visited and taught history, when what he’d have liked to know was how to live in the future, not the past.

Lee led him to a panoramic window that filled the entire wall. The glass was so clean that for a moment it seemed there was no barrier at all between them and the street.

The city was so clean it looked like a stage set. It was as though all the chaotic, pulsing life had been drained from it, and the world had submitted to absolute order.

There were no familiar, enormous traffic jams on the streets. The cars below glided silently, merging into a single stream, as if every vehicle were linked by an invisible thread. No one sped, no one changed lanes to gain a second. The pedestrians on the sidewalks seemed just as orderly: no one chased a departing bus, wove through the crowd, or jaywalked. Everyone moved at a measured pace, like performers in a rehearsed choreography.

Mike's gaze slid across the facades, and he realized the visual noise was gone. No tangled wires, no screaming billboards. Not a single discarded cup or scrap of newspaper. The city had been polished to the state of a glossy postcard. The parks now looked like strict geometric blueprints. The trees stood in even columns, all the same height, with perfect spherical crowns. The lawns strained the eyes with an unnaturally emerald color, and the grass on them looked trimmed by a laser ruler.

"Beautiful…" Mike murmured, before adding, "Like a postcard."

"You're right, because we removed everything unnecessary: pollution, noise, traffic, crime. See that glass building? It's a center for developing potential. People no longer live in slums or go without. Everyone has a home, food, work, and a purpose. Why waste energy for nothing, when you can aim it precisely at a target?"

"Too… perfect."

Mike suddenly realized that in this world, nothing ever happened 'by accident'.

His entire past life had conditioned him to believe that people were constantly battling obstacles. He had always hoped that someday someone wise would come along and say that his mother no longer had to work so hard, that their little family would want for nothing. But Mike had always considered that an unattainable fantasy. After all, there would always be those who were smarter or richer, just as there would always be those who simply got unlucky.

"People don't break the rules, because the rules are made for their own good. Why steal, if you have everything? Why kill? Aggression, uncontrolled emotions, spontaneity — these are what lead to tragedy. Think of your accident. The driver broke the rules because he was in a hurry and careless. That is the kind of chaos we've eliminated."

Mike said nothing. On one hand, the changes were impressive. He had never understood why people shouted or fought. But something in this flawlessness unsettled him. Maybe he just needed to get used to it.

"Are you hungry?" Lee's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Yeah, very." He suddenly realized just how hungry he was. "Do they have burgers here?"

"Of course. Come on."

Lee touched her bracelet and led him toward the cafeteria, where the air smelled of fresh pastries and coffee. The scent was barely perceptible and very unobtrusive. The handler took a tray with a burger and a bottle of water. The food looked perfect: a flawlessly assembled sandwich, as if plucked straight from a billboard. Mike took a bite. It was good. Exactly as good as every bite that followed. No excess sauce dripping onto his hands, not a single slice of tomato slipping out of place.

He looked at the next table. A group of teenagers his own age sat there. In the past, a group like that would have filled the entire café with noise. But these kids were remarkably quiet. One of the boys was telling a story; the others listened attentively. No one checked their phones, no one interrupted. They nodded, processed what was said, and answered in turn. They looked like a board of directors in teenage bodies. They seemed to Mike too mature… too self-aware. He kept waiting for someone to let slip an accidental burp or loudly slurp their drink, but there wasn't even a hint of it.

Mike caught a fragment of conversation from the next table:

"I don't want to, but it's more rational this way."

A chill ran down his spine at their calm certainty, and he instinctively began to chew as quietly as he could.

“Mike,” Lee interrupted his thoughts again.

“What?” he replied, still watching the other diners.

“Your mother… she’s arrived.”

He was overjoyed — very soon he’d see her, real, alive, his beloved mother. But in that very same instant he caught himself harboring a frightening thought: he was afraid to see that she had become just like everyone else around him — measured, calm, “proper.” And the most frightening part — a part of him wanted that. Wanted to see that things had finally become easy for her.

Chapter 4

Mike sat on the edge of the bed, fingers dug into the edge of the mattress. He caught himself counting his heartbeats — as if checking that he was even here at all. The door opened. It was Lee.

"How are you? Your mom's already in the elevator."

He nodded. There were no words, only the mirror across from him, the unfamiliar adult face he still couldn't accept, and the tangle of thoughts in his head.

Mom first, he told himself firmly. All other reflections could come later.

Footsteps in the corridor, and the door swung open. Lee came in first and immediately stepped aside, revealing the woman behind her. His mother. For a moment Mike again forgot how to breathe. His mother had changed. He'd expected to see her aged by these seven years, but the woman looked… better. Gone was the exhaustion that had seemed permanently etched into her skin. The dark circles under her eyes had vanished. She didn't rush in as usual with her forever-behind-schedule look, but entered calmly, at a measured pace, as if she'd finished all her tasks in advance. Her posture had straightened; her hair was neatly cut and styled. She didn't cry out, didn't throw herself at him headlong, but simply took a deep breath.

"Mike…" her voice trembled slightly.

He wanted to say something, not knowing what. *I'm sorry, I missed you,* but all he said was:

"Mom."

She stepped toward him and hugged him. Tightly. Mike buried his face in her shoulder. She no longer smelled of instant coffee, as before; he caught only a gentle floral scent.

"You're here," she whispered. "You're alive."

"Yeah, Mom, I'm here… and so are you," Mike breathed, feeling tears well up in his eyes. Words seemed unnecessary. It was enough for him to see her — alive, healthy, beside him — and nothing else mattered.

"Let's sit, let me just look at you," she said, lowering herself onto the edge of the bed.

Mike sat beside her, finally able to get a proper look at her. There was a new, pristine neatness about her. She used to bite her nails from stress; now her hands showed off a flawless manicure. Her clothes looked fresh and perfectly pressed; he searched for the familiar wrinkles, but his gaze slid over perfectly smooth fabric. He'd expected to see his mother aged, with a web of wrinkles born not only of years but of worries. And now it seemed to him that his absence had actually made her life easier. As if he'd been the very weight she'd wanted to shed all these years so she could start living for herself. The thought disgusted him, and he tried to push it out of his head.

"Do you remember the accident?" she asked.

"Barely. I remember seeing the car at the last second, and after that I woke up in this room," Mike answered, trying to summon flashes of his past life.

"I was so scared — you were unconscious for so long. The doctors kept telling me we just had to wait. I waited — days, then months. For a long time I couldn't let you go and move on. But I always knew you'd come back. Always."

"Did you come to see me?"

"Of course, I stayed by your side for days on end, and then I visited you every week. Jay and Emma came by too."

The thought of his friends echoed in his head. He assumed they had long since moved on with their own lives, started families. He pictured Emma in a white dress, a strange man beside her, and himself having to congratulate her on her wedding. How do you congratulate someone when you've missed seven years of their life? His heart clenched unpleasantly. Surely everyone had their own concerns and no time for him. But the news that they'd visited cheered him a little. Maybe his old friends hadn't forgotten him after all.

"And how did you manage it all? How did you cope? Work, home, the hospital…"

His mother smiled.

"You know, while you were asleep… life somehow got easier," she said carefully, with a slight hesitation, as if she herself hadn't yet fully gotten used to those words. "Treatment, insurance, endless paperwork… it all used to drain the life out of me. And now… now it's different. You don't have to argue, you don't have to survive each day. The system just helps you."

Mike involuntarily gripped the mattress harder. *The system.* His mother had never spoken that way. Before, she only ever talked about 'the manager," 'the boss," or 'doing it all myself.

"I didn't have to take overtime anymore or work double shifts to pay for your treatment. Medicine and so much more are available to everyone now. I stopped coming home and falling asleep in my work clothes. I had free evenings, weekends. I even started painting, and at night I began sleeping deeply and getting enough rest."

Mike tried to picture his mother at an easel and couldn't believe she was doing something she loved.

"You look… rested," Mike admitted. "I'm happy for you, honestly. I was afraid you'd…" he stumbled a little.

"I know, sweetheart. I missed you every minute, but I understood I had to stay strong for us. And the world didn't let me break down: nowadays you're not left alone in your troubles. There are psychologists, handlers, support."

"Lee said people have become mindful, but I still can't believe it," he smiled.

"It's true, Mike. Everyone's become calmer, more responsible. And life has become far more comfortable."

"And Dad? Did he come?"

It seemed to Mike that a brief confusion flickered across his mother's face, but it vanished at once.

"Let's not talk about it right now, alright?"

"So how are Jay and Emma?" Mike asked, deciding to break the awkward pause.

"I've already told them. They said they're very glad and will come soon. Don't worry, they haven't forgotten you."

A small weight seemed to lift from his shoulders, but he still wanted to see them both and make sure for himself. His mother stood up.

"You need to rest, or you'll overdo it."

"I'm not tired," Mike broke off mid-sentence, reconsidering how he felt. "Actually, yeah — my head does feel a little heavy from the flood of information."

"Lie down, son, the worst is behind you." She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. "Everything's going to be fine now."

Mike lay down, feeling the pillow mold to the shape of his head. His mother left, quietly closing the door, and he was alone with his thoughts. *This world really is perfect — it gave Mom what she'd been missing so badly: peace. Tomorrow my friends will come, and life will get even better.* But something about her behavior troubled him. He was used to her endlessly wearing herself out over him; she herself had always insisted he was the most precious thing she had. Mike felt like a selfish person, but had his mother really found something more important than him? He'd expected her to fall apart at the first glance, like in the movies. But she had kept it together… she was too composed. Yes, her voice had trembled, yes, she'd hugged him — but there wasn't that mad, breaking relief that shatters people into hysterics.

With that unpleasant thought, he closed his eyes and drifted off.

Chapter 5

The smell hit first — bleach, medicine, someone else's exhaustion in the air. The ceiling white, but with a crack; a monitor beeping right by his ear. Not that room?

His mother was asleep in a chair, her cheek propped on her palm — denim jacket, tangled hair, shadows under her eyes. This was not the calm, well-rested woman he'd seen moments ago. This was his real mother.

Mike touched his face: it was smooth, downright childlike. On his palm — the familiar scar.

People don't change that much in a single night.

"Mom," he said quietly.

His mother flinched and woke instantly, as if she'd been struck by an electric shock. Clear sleeplessness showed on her face, but at once she became unexpectedly alert.

"Mike, how are you? Can you hear me?" her voice trembled slightly.

"Yeah, of course," he forced out with a touch of doubt.

"God, I'm so glad!" She hugged him and pressed him to her damp cheek.

He looked at her and caught himself feeling foolish: as if everything inside him had clenched at the mismatch.

"How long…" he didn't know how to ask without sounding stupid, "how much time has passed?"

"Two days, sweetheart," she answered anxiously.

Two days. Not seven years. It seemed he was beginning to understand what was happening, even though it seemed impossible. Real chaos reigned in his head. How could this have happened? If he'd never had dreams before, then why now? He'd always fallen asleep — and woken up. No pictures. No stories. And here was a whole fragment of a life in his head: people, smells, words.

And was he even sure it had been a dream? Mike had often heard people describe their dreams and tried to imagine what it was like. He used to picture people watching a cartoon projected against reality. But here he'd seen everything with utter clarity, even if it left him bewildered. And yet it couldn't be real, could it?

A doctor came into the room — a young man in glasses and a white coat, a badge hanging from it: "Oliver Douglas — Resident Physician."

"There's our athlete, awake at last," he said with a smile, shining a small flashlight into the patient's eyes.

"Where am I?" Mike asked.

"City hospital. You've got a concussion. Consider yourself lucky. After a crash like that, getting away with just a knock to the head and not a single fracture — that's rare, you know."

"I thought," the young man paused, deciding whether to say it out loud, but chose not to lie and went on, "that many years had passed."

"It happens, my friend," the doctor nodded and smiled understandingly. "After a hard blow the brain behaves quite unpredictably. Dreams can be very vivid and distinct, that's normal. I even had hallucinations once," the doctor grinned and gave an encouraging wink.

Mike wanted to object that he'd never had dreams, but realized that right now it would only raise extra questions, so he answered shortly:

"Okay."

"So then: bed rest for you today, young man, and tomorrow you can be discharged," the doctor added, stepping away from the bed.

"Thank you so much, Doctor," his mother answered for her son.

The doctor took some papers from the nightstand and left the room.

"Mom, I dreamed something strange."

She knew her child had never had dreams, so she grew noticeably anxious.

"So it's true? But you've never had them!"

"I know, but I saw it as if it were all really happening."

"What do you remember?" his mother asked carefully. "Tell me, what was it?"

Mike swallowed. He didn't want to frighten her, so he decided to do without the extra details.

"It was like I woke up in a hospital, but not this one. There was a nurse who said many years had passed since the accident. And then… then you came in." He frowned a little, deciding whether to continue, but pressed on: "You looked different: calmer, more relaxed. You said the system just helps."

His mother listened without interrupting, and the longer he spoke, the more her expression changed. It grew softer with relief that her son could speak at all, that he was alive. A single tear slowly rolled down her cheek, and Mike was reminded, once again, just how much she loved him.

"The doctor's right, it's most likely because of the injury," she said carefully, trying not to dismiss his experience, "but I'm glad, Mike. Now you dream, too."

"Yeah, but it's a little frightening," he admitted quietly.

"Of course, I understand, you've never experienced this before. But try to rest and not worry — stress is bad for you right now, alright?"

Mike nodded in reply.

"Okay, I'll go find you some food, alright?" she said, heading for the door. "You need to build up your strength. Don't worry, I'll be back soon."

With that she left the room. The young man closed his eyes to think over what was happening. If he'd had a dream, then why that one in particular? Everything had seemed so real it was impossible to doubt. He hadn't just observed — he'd acted. Walked, breathed, heard, felt. He swore the taste of the burger still lingered on his tongue, and that if he looked out the window, he'd see that same incredible world, made orderly and deliberate.

At that moment he heard the door open. Wondering why his mother had returned so quickly, Mike opened his eyes. A nurse walked into the room. And in that instant his heart seemed to stop. It was her. Not just someone resembling her — the exact same woman. The same dark hair, though now gathered into a messy ponytail rather than an impeccable bun. The same face. She walked over to the nightstand and set down a bottle of water. She hadn't said a word yet — and he already knew what her voice would sound like.

"Hi, Mike," the nurse said, and he realized the voice was the very same. "How's your head, any dizziness?"

Goosebumps ran over his body, and he couldn't force out a single word, so he just shook his head.

"Are you alright?" She held out the bottle to him. "Here, drink some water."

"What's your name?" he asked, feeling the shock rising inside him.

She smiled, clearly noticing his bewilderment, and answered:

"Lillian. You can just call me Lee."

Chapter 6

He raised his hand and slowly ran his palm over his face. His skin was smooth, no stubble. His brain, which normally worked clearly and rationally, was now operating sharply and rationally, trying to hold two images in focus at once. The first was coarse, grainy, and painful: this room, his tired mother, the noise of the hospital, and a couple of days that had been torn from his life like a missing page, or perhaps just one long night. The second vision seemed frighteningly whole and played vividly in his mind's eye: long white corridors, fresh air, and a calm atmosphere. And his mother — rested, radiating serenity and confidence. And Lee, telling him about the new order of the world.

He tried to explain it all rationally. After a blow to the head, the mind is capable of playing all sorts of tricks. Mixing up doctors' faces, layering on new fears and hopes, forgetting something or, conversely, remembering it. He could have believed that, if not for one fact. Mike had seen her — not just someone who looked like her, not just someone with the same name. The girl standing before him was the exact same girl from his dream. And even if right now she looked a little tired instead of like a magazine cover model, it was unmistakably her. The same calm, the same smile. How could she exist across two different realities?

He wanted to scream, to call his mother or the doctor so they could explain what was happening. Maybe this too was a dream and he needed to wake up? He picked up the water bottle and took a few sips simply to give his hands something to do, to feel a solid object. He wanted to ask, *Do you remember me?*, but realized how foolish that would sound. How could a nurse not know him, if he was her patient? Tell her about the vision? Better not, or she'd decide he'd lost his mind and keep him in the ward. Lee studied him closely.

"How are you doing, really? Are you oriented? Do you understand where you are?" she asked, her tone anxious but caring.

"Yeah, I'm in the hospital, there was an accident," Mike answered sluggishly. "Where's my phone? I want to text… my friends."

"Don't worry, we have it at the desk, I'll bring it over. For now, rest and don't strain yourself."

With that, Lillian stood and, looking at him with something more like curiosity, left the room.

Mike was alone again, and his thoughts crowded back in. The most logical explanation was that he'd seen or heard something while he was out, and now he'd simply forgotten it. But how could his mind erase the details and yet create a whole world he'd been inside of? He'd often heard that dreams are hazy, blurry, quickly forgotten. But for him it had been completely different. An entire universe had unfolded before him, and even after time had passed he remembered every detail perfectly. And most importantly — the exact same person. If the invented world was still built on the real one, though with major changes, then how to explain the appearance of the same person? He knew for certain he'd never seen this girl before. Or had he? Given his head injury, there was no saying for sure. But even if he had, she clearly hadn't been anyone close to him, because they weren't even acquainted.

The door creaked again, and his mother came in. She looked at her son with anxiety, as if still not believing he'd come to, and held out a wrapped hamburger. And had he woken up? Was he even conscious?

"Here, you need to eat, or you won't have any strength left at all."

A patty. Pickles. Sauce oozing out from every side at once.

"Don't rush," his mother said tenderly, "no one's going to take it from you."

He swallowed a big bite and said:

"I know, it's just…" He wondered how to go on, because the phrase *the burger isn't perfect* would sound strange, and of course he didn't want to offend his mother, who had tried to find his favorite treat. "It's just gotten me all messy."

"Don't worry about that, dear. How are you? Does your head hurt?"

"No, everything's fine…" and again the thought came to him that it was easier to speak up, to be fully candid. Emma would like that. Speaking of her. "I just wanted to text Emma and Jay."

"Jay already knows. He called me when you didn't come to his place and weren't answering — I told him everything and asked him to pass it on to Emma. He immediately asked where it happened, whether there were cameras and witnesses… classic him."

"Yeah, that's just like him."

"He said he'd come by when you're back to normal."

"Good. Mom, I'm sorry, but right now you need to get some rest yourself." Only now did Mike realize that his mother had spent the entire time he was unconscious right by his side, and he felt an incredible tenderness. He understood there was nothing he could do to help her except send her home. "You've been sitting here without even sleeping properly — you should go. Nothing's going to happen to me."

She looked at him and answered:

"Alright. I hope you dream of something good again, where we're both happy and rested, and tomorrow you'll tell me all about it."

He nodded. The word *again* caught somewhere under his ribs — as if his mother had unwittingly given him permission to slip off once more into that new, mysterious world.

Mike wondered whether to say anything else about his vision and decided it was better to speak up than keep it all inside.

"And you were painting… well… there… in the dream…" he said, as if it were as incredible as flying into space.

"Painting?" she echoed. "Well, would you look at that! I really did love it, back when I was in college. But that was before you were born; I only thought of the hobby again when you were little and we'd color pictures together."

Mike felt a chill run down his spine. How could his mind have known about that?

"It was a good dream, Mike," she added, squeezing his hand. "Maybe… it's a sign? That everything will work out?"

"You're right, it really is time for me to go," she said, kissing him on the cheek and putting on her jacket.

"Sleep well, Mom."

"See you tomorrow," and with that she left the room.

Barely a few minutes later, Lee came in and handed him his phone.

"Ten minutes, tops," she said sternly, "and then you need to get some sleep."

"Deal," Mike answered, "I'll just let my friends know everything's okay."

The nurse looked at him with suspicion, then smiled:

"And don't even think about lying to me — I'll come check."

"Alright," he answered with a slight grin.

Mike tapped the screen. It flared, dazzling in the dim light, and memories of the bright glare of headlights burst into his mind. He immediately saw endless notifications from Jay.

Where are you?

Where'd you disappear to?

Answer.

I need to show you something.

Your mom told me everything, get well soon, I already texted Emma.

He pictured Emma bursting into the hospital and crying over his body.

I hope you get better soon, or I'll kill you.

Text me when you're reachable.

Mike felt he wasn't up for a long conversation: his head was so overloaded with information that he recognized his need for sleep.

I'm alive, got off with just a concussion, he typed, and added: *Hope to see you soon.*

Sent. Only a couple of seconds passed, and he saw that the message had been read. Jay was already typing a reply.

Good, I'll try to come by tomorrow, and I'll show you something while I'm there.

Mike was used to his friend constantly showing off his latest achievements: a custom app that unlocked doors, or a glitch he found in a game.

From Emma there was only one message.

Jay told me what happened. I'm really worried about you, but I'm sure everything will be fine — the main thing is you're alive. I'll definitely come when they allow it. P.S. I'll write the essay for you, but this is the last time. Get well soon.

An involuntary smile spread across his face. Aside from his mother, Jay and Emma were the people closest to him, and if they went too long without seeing each other, he really started to miss them. He wondered what they'd look like there, in the dream, seven years later. With that thought he set the phone aside and closed his eyes.

Darkness enveloped him at once. Familiar, almost like home. Mike relaxed and sank into nothingness. But then he caught the scent of freshness and heard a barely perceptible hum. He opened his eyes to a uniform white light spreading across a flawless ceiling. He lifted his head and saw her again. Not a shadow of fatigue, her hair pulled back into a flawless bun. She looked at him with that same soft smile.

"There you are, finally," Lee said. "I've been waiting."

Mike ran his palm over his chin, felt the scratch of stubble, and couldn't tell: had he fallen asleep, or woken up?

Chapter 7

"How long was I asleep?" the young man asked, looking at Lee with great suspicion.

He wanted to find at least some crack in this flawless reality, but he had no idea how.

"A few hours," the handler answered in a soothing tone. "Your body needs rest to recover." She noticed the strange expression on her patient's face and asked: "Is something wrong?"

"Is this a dream?" Mike blurted out, not caring how foolish such a question might seem.

"What do you think? Does this look like a dream to you?" The young woman made notes in her documents and went on: "Your mother came by again, but you were asleep."

Mom, echoed in his mind. It seemed impossible, since he'd only just seen her — the real one, caring, tired, in her old denim jacket. But had that actually happened? He set about analyzing what had occurred, trying to tell which was the vision and which was true reality.

"How do you tell a dream from reality?" he asked.

"As a rule, in a dream the brain projects only what it's already seen before, changing only the behavior of the people around you. But it's a very complicated question. Even now, with the advance of technology, people still confuse dreams with reality. Sometimes visions are so convincing that you only realize where you are after waking."

That's exactly the problem, Mike thought. *That I can't tell when I'm actually waking up.* But if Lee was right and dreams only show what already exists, then his subconscious couldn't possibly have created such an enormous, incredible world that he'd never seen. And that meant that mother had been… No, you can't jump to conclusions when your head is such a mess. First he had to figure it all out. For now he couldn't trust Lee a hundred percent. He needed someone he'd known a long time — someone who would explain what was happening from a logical standpoint.

"I meant to tell you, Mike, that you have a visitor — if you're up for it, of course," the young woman interrupted his thoughts.

"Who?" he asked in surprise.

"Your friend, Jay," she answered with a smile. "Come, he's already waiting."

With that she left the room. Mike, pulling on his laceless sneakers, felt a sincere joy: maybe his old friend would help him find answers.

Lillian again led him down the pristine white corridor, where Mike felt a safety mixed with anxiety. He walked along and understood that this perfect world was trying to seduce him with its comfort and quiet. They entered the same spacious lobby with its panoramic view of the city, and he noticed a figure by the window. The man turned.

It was foolish to have expected that Jay wouldn't have changed. Mike saw his best friend, who was obviously several years older now. A little hunched, as before, with the same long hair, though now it didn't stick out in every direction, and his clothes had gained some neatness.

"You're out of your mind, Mitchell," Jay said, pulling him into a hug. "I always knew you liked to sleep, but this time you took it way too far."

Mike caught the familiar smell of energy drinks and chips and involuntarily smiled.

"Don't tell me you stayed awake this whole time waiting for me. I'm not buying it."

"And you haven't changed at all, man. Except you look like you've been training all these years."

"Speaking of which," Mike remembered his old question, "how is that possible? I thought my muscles would have atrophied?"

"Even seven years ago doctors moved patients' limbs for them. And over time, a ton of new technologies appeared. You never knew how half the equipment worked before, and now there's even more to catch up on. But don't sweat it, that's exactly what I'm here for."

Mike had always considered Jay smarter in every technical respect, and now his friend seemed to him a true genius. But the genius he was used to had changed — become less scatterbrained, calmer somehow. All the swagger had probably faded over the years; he had to grow up eventually.

"So how are you? How's life? You used to dream of hacking the Pentagon — did you pull it off or not? Tell me everything."

His friend grinned.

"That was just a childhood dream. It turns out you don't need much to hack something. Breaking's not building. But to create…" he paused briefly. "To create something worthwhile, you really have to use your head."

"You're driving me crazy. What do you mean?"

"In short, I'm now the lead architect of the city systems."

"Short won't do — give me the details," Mike asked.

"I make the environment smarter. Remember how everything worked before? Cars drove however they wanted, traffic lights operated against all logic, public transit was a total mystery. Medicine, security, utilities, resources… Every service was its own separate unit, which is why the city was pure chaos. I realized the mess could be eliminated."

"How?" Mike listened with incredible interest.

"You have to see it. Come on, I'll show you."

They left the building through the main entrance. Mike had expected to meet guards or metal detectors, but the doorway was empty, and the doors swung open on their own, inviting him to plunge into the atmosphere of order. As soon as the friends approached the roadway, a small bus rolled up at once. The young man noticed there was no driver inside.

"Control isn't needed anymore. Transit synchronizes via GPS and drives itself." Jay held his bracelet up to the turnstile. "Citizens don't try to cheat the system, because they know these resources go toward developing the city."

They glided smoothly along the streets.

"Look!" Jay pointed at the clear road ahead. "You used to sit in traffic because the light was red for pedestrians who weren't even there. Now smart systems analyze the traffic in real time. What's more, the maps sync with conditions and distribute the flow of cars along the most efficient routes."

Without realizing it, Mike opened his mouth in amazement. He pressed his face to the glass like a child, when the world had seemed huge and wondrous. In that moment he felt like a kid again, one who wasn't glued to a smartphone but simply trying to understand how everything worked. The city was beautiful: the green of the parks, the gleam of glass, the cleanliness. Not a single homeless person, not a gram of litter. They got out at the embankment. A fresh wind touched his face. Mike spread his arms, feeling an incredible freedom.

"Look at the people. They're just strolling, relaxing," Jay continued his tour. "They no longer depend on gadgets. They don't need to compete, to show off their things. They understand that there are values in life more important than an expensive phone."

Mike looked at the passersby and didn't notice a single logo on anyone's clothing. He had often envied his rich peers and couldn't understand why the world was so unfair. Those thoughts had always filled him with sadness, but now that social inequality had vanished, so had the old resentments.

"But what about the police? Lee said there's no crime."

"That's the most astonishing part," Jay answered. "The dark alleys are lit, there are cameras and drones, but in fact almost none of it is needed."

"Because of the people?" Mike guessed.

"Yeah. We lowered the level of background stress. Citizens stopped yelling at each other in lines, because there are no more lines, or overcrowded buses. People stopped snapping, because we removed the causes of the triggers. Everyone has access to help, but it's almost never required — we nip trouble in the bud."

“How, exactly?” Mike asked.

“I managed to unite everything into a single whole. All the infrastructure is fitted with sensors that track consumption and predict breakdowns. A problem is eliminated before it even arises. Just as medicine has learned to diagnose failures in the body in advance. Now all these systems make up a single organism, and all I have to do is maintain its condition.”

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