No One Else Was in The Dream Where it Happened

The man goes to bed early, but he cannot fall asleep. He lies still, counting the radiator's ticks and watching the clock hands circle, waiting for his mind to quiet. Instead, it slips sideways, like a window unlatching in a storm, and he awakes beneath a different sky.

The air smells of oranges and ash. Children chase paper kites that turn into birds, mid-flight. A woman on a balcony hums a song he knows but has never heard. When she looks down at him, her lips move around his name.

"Juniper" she mouths.

He wakes up in his own bed.

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The next night, he closes his eyes and arrives somewhere else: a city made of mirrors. Streetlamps glow white as bone; people pass silently, their faces shifting like disturbed water. Everywhere he turns, different versions of his own reflection wait ahead of him: older, younger; fatter, thinner; smiling, frowning. He keeps walking until he reaches a red door standing by itself in the square. Its handle pulses faintly, as though breathing.

He doesn't touch it.

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In the morning, he writes what he remembers in a notebook:

- "*the woman on the balcony*"

- "*the mirrored city*"
- "*the red door*"
- *his name*

He starts carrying the notebook around, adding fragments after lunch, on the bus, before bed. He tells himself it's only habit, but he checks it more often than the clock. He keeps it by the bed now. When he's awake, he reads it like a stranger's diary, searching for himself in the handwriting. "*The boy with the glass bird.*" "*The lake shaped like an eye.*" "*The ferry that never stops.*" Each dream seems to know the last.

One night, he stands on a platform inside the dream. A whistle sounds far down the tunnel, though no train arrives. A man beside him hums the balcony tune and says, "You'll catch it when you're ready."

"Catch *what*?" Juniper asks.

The man only smiles; *Juniper*'s own smile, copied perfectly.

He wakes with his heart running fast. The alarm clock digits blur, unfocused red digits bleeding into the darkness of night. The notebook lies open on his chest, the last entry written in unfamiliar handwriting: *They're all you*

He stops sleeping for a few nights after that. The body resists, but the mind eventually drags him back. Now the dreams overlap: the mirrored city reflects the station; the balcony overlooks the lake; the glass bird perches beside the kite-bird on the red door's handle. Everything folds together until he can't tell which version came first.

He feels watched. ...Though, not by others, but by other *selves*.

Tonight, he finds himself before the red door again. There's a hum behind it, low and constant, like a vending machine sitting in a quiet hallway. When he grips the handle, the air bends. He sees his reflection in the paint, but it isn't mirrored; it's simultaneous. Dozens of *him*, all in different rooms, all standing before identical doors. Understanding flickers, then slips away before he can hold it.

The door opens: Inside is a dim carriage rocking gently. The train. Rows of passengers stare out windows that show only more doors. Some wear his face. Others, faces he once imagined for people he never met. The whistle blows again, distant and endless. He steps aboard.

He steps forward, and all the reflections breathe in unison.

When he wakes, morning light lies across the bed like something folded neatly. The radiator ticks, the clock hand circles: everything is ordinary.

He sits up, meaning to write, but the notebook on his nightstand is already open. A new line waits in the margin, written in the same unfamiliar hand: *You came home*

He turns toward the mirror above the dresser. His reflection stands in the middle of the room, where *he* should; patient, quiet, almost smiling... as though relieved Juniper finally made it home.