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*Penetrate it and you'll better understand:
life is revealed to us in a painted reflection.*

Reflections

Last night I killed my son Mauro.

OK, it wasn't exactly me who did it. All I did was give the VIP executive the order to finish him off, once and for all. And of course, it wasn't my son, either. He'd lived in our house for a few years and I guess that was enough to make me feel bonded to him. Truth is, it's not really all that clear. I should have finished with him at the start and if I didn't, it was because I'd forgotten him. Did he mean nothing to me? And if that was the case, why did I shudder when I saw him?

They had him in some kind of playroom, done up in kiddie colors and full of supplies for building or drawing things. Mauro was sitting in a corner. I approached him very slowly.

"Hello, son."

The child raised his head and ventured a smile that resembled anything and nothing at all. I stared at him: small, deformed head. High, flat forehead. Eyes slanted upwards. Could he understand what he was and where he was at that moment? Could I explain it to him? Anyway, let's just say we were there, both of us, like old times, and maybe that was the only understandable truth. I focused on that point and deflected any kind of feeling.

Mauro lifted his arms, trying to reach me with his short, broad hands. He wanted me to touch him or at least stretch my own limbs towards him. All I could manage to do was swallow and slowly back away. Mauro's expression never changed, it stayed frozen in his stupid and unreachable smile. He wasn't my son. I wasn't his father. But he loved me just the same. He would always love me. And that was something I just couldn't take.

I raised my right hand and touched my temple. The surroundings began to dissolve and a fragile darkness shrouded everything. When I opened my eyes, I found the interface console stuck to my body. I removed the gloves and helmet, trying to reabsorb the true landscape. Next to me, the VIP executive awaited my final verdict. He had a PDA in his hand, ready for my signature.

"Erase him," I ordered, not looking at anyone.

Once upon a time, there was a family.

There was the father, his wife, and a daughter named Ana María, after her mother. They lived in Santiago and for a long time were a close-knit family that loved one another, until suddenly things started to fall apart and each became a stranger to the other until they were no more than reflections of themselves, interacting automatically. That's the crude summary of our story.

But that's not how I constantly remembered it. At night, when sleep eluded me, my family's history would come to me as images without order or meaning, structure or sense. In a few seconds I could relive every one of our tragedies. And in a few minutes I would try to grant meaning to each moment lived. What was it that was most meaningful? Above all, who was the person we all depended on? Who else could one need?

It all happened during our glory days. Every family has them at some point. Of course, only my wife—always thinking ahead, like all mothers—had had the idea of reflecting ourselves, thinking that at any moment "something could happen to us, because you never know." To be honest, no one was thinking about death in those days, especially when we were making plans for three-week trips to some beach in Mozambique or to an orbital resort. But when my wife got nancer, we all silently agreed it was best to be prepared for an eventual unexpected death.

So she was the first to reflect herself. One day she came home with a couple of catalogs about Interactive Post-Mortem Lives and asked us which system would be the most appropriate. She'd already made up her mind, but still, we went through the motion of reviewing a few of the offers. They had everything, from creating a virtual program based on a bunch of personal data to the complete digital emulation of every cell or neuron in the body. That one was the most expensive system, but it guaranteed complete interaction with the person, and when I say complete I mean talking and touching each other as if the dead person were alive. That's what my wife picked out, for all of us.

But like I said, the thing turned out to cost a fortune, even though the price tag was completely justified. To understand what that kind of reflection was like, you have to try to imagine a system that can copy every one of the molecules in your body into a digital language and then dump that information into a universe recreated the same way. I'm not talking about virtual projections, or those VR machines from

last century's B-movies. I'm talking about creating a totally new entity, an exact copy of the person, living just as if he or she were alive. Because the package deal included the creation of the reflections plus the world they'd live in, too, which was just a projection of our own reality. That means if my wife spent fifteen hours of her life shuttling from the house to work, from work to the city and then back home again, that same routine was recreated by the system down to its tiniest details so that the reflection didn't have the slightest doubt it was healthy and alive. Because, in short, it was.

Studying the moral development of the society before ours, it's sometimes hard to understand how a lot of social classes could allow the exact replication of other realities without making too big a fuss. But it's also hard to imagine the vast majority of people not wanting to support a system that let them regain the loved ones they'd lost to some violent death or terminal illness. The resurrection myth worked, and if Jesus himself had tried it out once, well, reflections didn't hurt anyone. After a while, the very concept of burying someone and going to visit their remains got transformed for society into a gruesome and backward practice, especially when you factored in the urgent need to recover land that could be used more profitably.

That was the start of our passage to the other world (that's one way of putting it). There were plenty of reasons for my wife to reflect herself as soon as possible, beyond the fact that the new terminator would wipe out any malignant cells. But Anita raised an interesting question: wouldn't the emulation of each cell also include the genetic potential for nancer? Wouldn't her reflection get sick, too?

"That's something that happened to us a decade ago," said the guy from VIP. "To avoid it, the current nanocomps that digitize cells make sure to recombine the DNA proteins, eliminating all possibility of developing any type of genetic disease, even though nancers are synthetic cancers. This produces certain mild changes in the person, but they don't really affect the psychosomatic personality."

It would have been more practical if molecular recombination were done while the subject was still alive, but that wasn't possible yet. This is what I understood: somehow, the reflections were a purified copy of ourselves, which made the system even more interesting.

Back then and thanks to our new economic status, my wife decided to help out her fellow man; she adopted Mauro as a way of thanking life for the momentary disappearance of her nancer. She did it without warning us, as if bringing a disabled child home was the same as buying a dog. I hit the roof, claiming I was sick of bleeding out money, though in truth my anger had more to do with the emotional confusion caused by having a child who couldn't understand things through their normal channels. Mauro assimilated anything as long as there was a smile or caress behind it, and for my daughter and

me that meant an erosion of our right and necessary coldness. In a family where love had just about dried up, the dire need to express what good was left in us turned out to be a slow and painful assimilation of humanness.

I knew they wouldn't be able to understand. Even today it strikes me as beyond all possible reason. But the truth is, during those years when my wife was getting over her illness things were already pretty rotten, ready to completely fall apart. Everyone was waiting. Except my wife, I suppose. So I decided I'd be the one to take the first step. I told everyone else and they grudgingly agreed.

I had decided not to reflect myself. If I died, there'd be no trace of my existence. That idea fascinated me. I felt a profound need to disappear and a few weeks later I left home. My wife got depressed, Anita gave hating me a try and Mauro missed me. At least that's what I heard.

She was laying in bed, silent and still. A soft bedspread covered her body to above the waist, while around her a cluster of small machines and systems monitored the nancer's metastasis. They were no longer trying to halt the disease. They were just trying to mitigate its effects and avoid a painful death, full of suffering. I approached slowly.

"Hello, Ana María."

Her eyes looked at the sunlight trapped in the polarized window. Then she looked at me, and immediately her face set in a slight smile. She swallowed with difficulty.

"Hello." Her voice sounded strange. It seemed like it was the nancer talking, not her.

"How do you feel?"

"OK . . .," she tried to sit up, "but they haven't told me if the old nancer came back or if it's a new one."

The parasoftware had offered a series of explanations but avoided giving her a clear and precise diagnosis. Of course her old nancer had come back. In reality it had always been there, awaiting its chance. All on my clear instructions.

"Hasn't anyone come to see me?" she asked chokingly.

"They've asked after you, but I prefer they not see you."

"But Anita? Mauro?"

"Well, they'll have their chance. I'm here now, so I'm going to be your nurse. How's that sound?"

Normally, she would have protested but her smile got even bigger, as if to tell me she understood perfectly. It was what she'd always wanted: the two of us together and everything else could go to hell. She loved me, wanted me to love her. Being there in that room, the two of us alone, gave shape to that love.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

The VIP executive was waiting for me in a small office, very fitting for a branch of the company. I was living in Santa María, one of the little cities that rose up after the tsunamis wiped out Chile's Norte Grande. The place resembled the coast of Israel, except that here reforestation had worked and we had forests like the ones that had become extinct in the south decades ago.

"Mr. Saavedra, thank you for coming so soon. Please, have a seat."

The man looked the same as he had seven years ago. I wondered what I looked like to him.

"I got your message and the truth is, I don't understand a thing." I lit a cigarette. "I want you to explain it to me in person."

"Well, I suppose that's why you came, right? Fine. It's very simple. According to our records, your wife, Ana María Escobar, bought a package of four Level 6 reflections for herself, you, your daughter Ana and a boy named Mauricio. The package included our normal service, that is, the inclusion of the reflections in their regular surroundings plus whatever extrapolations were necessary according to each one's lifestyle."

"That's right," I replied calmly.

"One question. You didn't take part in the package, correct?"

"No," I replied cautiously. "I stayed on the sidelines. My wife paid for everything, I remember that clearly. Supposedly the reflections were paid up for some ten years or so."

"Well, that's what she signed up for. The problem, Mr. Saavedra, is that the package your wife bought didn't include the interaction costs."

"The what? Hold on a second . . ."

"Let me explain. Our company offers a series of payment plans as well as various adjustments in case part of the bill is left unpaid. In your wife's case, she paid for the reflection process and the simulation of virtual surroundings. At the same time, she paid for two years of interaction, that is, the service we offer so a visitor can interact with his or her loved ones. And that comes at a price."

"That's called cheating," I cried.

"Of course not. Remember, in the old days cemeteries charged a fee for gravesite visits. Don't blame me for the way the price of land has shot up in this country, blame the tsunamis. But the use of the VR console, as well as the upkeep on the reflections, has a price tag. It's not a lot, but when you and other family members kept on interacting with . . . wait a moment, I need to check ..."

"My wife. They interacted with my wife. She was the first one to die."

"Exactly, your wife. Well, the year passed and none of you paid for the visits with your wife. Therefore, we . . ."

"What?" I broke in. "I never involved myself with any of them," I spluttered. "I haven't interacted with my wife or Anita or Mauro. Why do I have to pay you?"

"I didn't realize that. I thought you had used our service. In any event, that doesn't change things. You're the only person in your family still alive. You have to take responsibility for them."

"That's impossible. I can't afford to pay those bills in my current situation, no matter what services you provide. I can't cover any expenses."

The man remained silent, studying me.

"Well, then. I believe we can find a solution. How about if I explain each one of your options?"

"Fine. Go ahead." I lit another cigarette and offered him one. The man smiled.

"Thanks, but I can't smoke your brand," he said, and then I remembered that the executive in front of me was just a hologram projected from VIP's central offices in Santiago.

"What do you think, dad?"

I looked at the holosculpture. It was a kind of global visage nourished by hundreds of tiny faces. Besides the obvious, there was no element that got my attention, nothing special. Fine, I could simplify things and say it was kind of pretty, or risk an esthetic judgment that spoke of the harmony of the shapes and all that stuff so typical of artists. I told the truth:

"To be honest, I have no idea, Anita. I don't understand your pictures very well."

"They aren't pictures, they're figures," she replied. And then added, "They have soul and content."

"I guess so. Do they say anything in particular?"

We were in her studio, and when I say studio I'm talking about an enormous room with raised walls and no roof that my daughter used to mold and store her artwork. She'd just spent almost two hours drawing a mix of faces in the air with no defined axis, all of them incredibly superimposed. My daughter adored faces. They were her specialty. I suppose they represented her personal search for an identity, the very one that had eluded her since childhood. Anita knew that and always tried to hide it, which is impossible. If you have no identity, you have no consciousness . . . and how can you hide that? It was enough to see her, totally naked, waving her hands in the air, caressing the emptiness while magnetic pixels emerged from her fingers like she was a spider shooting an invisible thread from its belly. Inside her she had an organic system that could interpret the signals her brain sent and produce pixels of different colors and sizes. The pixels joined together to form colors and outlines. The rest was a result of her imagination and talent. Being naked was only part of the somewhat fake eccentricity of artists. Or because it was awfully hot.

"Dad, what I paint doesn't say anything," she stated, bored. "It only reflects our society. That's what art does. It reflects our world and our society. Life itself."

"But in your case you only paint faces. Why's that?"

"Faces represent the symbol of what is human. What we are. That's why I concentrate on them. Like I told you, they reflect our world. Our very selves."

Then art is useless, I thought. Nevertheless, I kept quiet while Anita started another design. And after a few minutes I could see it wasn't much different from the first one. That was art? A permanent imitation of what already was? It didn't make any sense. The only thing that was clear was finally understanding the reasons Anita had for killing herself. It was very simple and at last I could understand: at some point she'd gotten curious and had managed to access her life as a reflection. She'd contemplated the artwork that she hadn't been able to produce in life and had convinced herself she'd never be able to, believing the talent belonged solely to her reflection and not to her.

Did it really belong to it? Of course not. The only difference was that her reflection didn't hate doing the work and, at the end of the day, still had the will to do it. That was the difference with the original Anita. Even so, both of them clung to a useless concept of art, believing something is art just because it reflects reality. That's part of it, but it's only a starting point. Any art that's incapable of proposing, of projecting a new world or something that goes beyond reflecting reality is completely useless, just like my daughter was, who by then was only ashes, the same as the rest of my family.

"Sweetie?"

"Hmm?"

"Nothing. I only wanted to say good-bye."

"Oh. Hey, are you gonna go to the exhibit? It's next week."

"Of course."

Then she left the colors and the shapes just so she could come closer and give me a strange hug, as if suddenly something inside her had told her we'd never see each other again. I walked off, looking for the exit, while a few pixels stayed stuck to me like tiny stars shining in the faraway darkness.

I raised my hand to my temple.

It took a huge effort to feed her a spoonful of soup. She couldn't swallow it all and it ran down her sides, staining the bedspread. Luckily, the metastasis had only infiltrated her lungs and not her stomach cavity, otherwise I'd have Ana María vomiting all over the room. Guess those systems were doing their job after all.

"Are you still hungry?" I asked while I wiped off her mouth.

"No . . . I'm fine." She made another effort, trying to find some air. "It was delicious."

"I can imagine."

In reality, I imagined a lot of things but at that moment what I was mostly trying for was to absorb every detail of her body as if I could paint it from within. I could have worn a camera attached to my optic nerve but that struck me as very artificial and besides, she might notice. The idea was for her not to know that in a few hours she was going to die. Or maybe she already knew and didn't want to worry me.

"Has it been hard for you to sleep at night?"

"No . . . not really."

"But can you sleep?"

"Not much."

"What's the problem?"

She was quiet for a few minutes, trying to conceal her obvious lack of air. At that stage she had very little time left and any moment now the system would administer morphine to ease the pain. That's what I was waiting for. I wanted to see her sleep and at the same time feel that that sleep was the end of everything.

"I toss and turn a lot," she said, moving one hand. "It's hard for me to sleep."

"Yeah, I understand. Your heart beats a lot and there's no peace for you," I said, like I was parasoftware.

She smiled, but her eyes stayed mute. It was obvious she didn't have much strength left. I thought, should I hold her hand? Should I whisper in her ear that I love her? Because that's what I felt. That's what my heart wanted to do. Still, I kept my distance. I didn't move at all. I had to be true to my strange and absurd convictions.

I tried to show myself in my true colors then. Over the years I'd learned that the best way to deal with creditors was to shut the door and wait for them to come up with a solution. That always suits the money lenders. Better that you pay something, somehow, than that they lose you. So I recounted my misfortunes. One by one. But the executive was quite clear:

"Well then, we have no alternative but to erase your family."

"What?"

"Our policy is to erase reflections if the user is unable to pay the bill. Yes, we can do that. It's legal. It sounds terrible, but it's a way to make the debtor react and make some effort to pay. But in cases like yours, the law permits a special process. Instead of erasing the entire package, we leave one reflection alive. So, you have to erase two but can keep one alive."

That's when I understood how irreversible the situation was. The people at VIP were going to erase practically my whole family and there was no way to stop them. No alternatives or appeals to public opinion. Truth is, my case wasn't the only one. Every month they erased one to two hundred reflections, just like how statistics cite hundreds of people dead from accidents or suicide. I was just coming to understand that the material destruction of a family was a daily occurrence, whether they were reflections or not. And no one seemed to care. It was just part of the scenery. The reflection of a troubled society, of which the family was supposedly the foundation. How could one comprehend that the same system was responsible for destroying its own foundation?

It was all too logical. That was destroying me much more than the circumstances I found myself in. Everything had its solution, no matter how questionable from a moral or ethical standpoint. And it's not like the VIP executive was evil or coldhearted. The man was simply offering me the logical and reasonable options for solving the problem. VIP's business was life and when you work with that there's only room for solutions, not ethical or even religious soul-searching. Society is based on survival, everyone wants to live, by any means possible and if you have to kill or erase your loved one to do it, the

question isn't if but when and how. The rationale is life itself. And in this case, the life of my family's reflections. But after me and in the future, who'd have to pay the price? How do you decide who to keep alive and who to sacrifice? How do you decide who lives and who dies?

When you have total power, the solution doesn't seem so difficult. An ex-National Planning Minister had circulated an internal memo that favored giving assistance to those not-employed who could still serve as useful work tools. Everyone else, people like me, could move on to a better life. It was a public scandal for a few weeks, but I could tell it was a welcome decision from the gleam in people's eyes. In the urban camps, in the half-ruined high-rises where the not-employed roamed, nighttime caught us scared of sensing the arrival of special units ready to make us disappear. I wanted it with all my heart. I'd rather be eliminated than decide on eliminations.

In those nights of dying bonfires, I wanted to have the power to erase myself for a while and forget what I had to do. There were things to consider that didn't even let me plan a course of action worth talking about. I had to channel all of my strength into a reason powerful enough to keep me from dying alive. Hell, in a way I already was. Dying is easy, it's comedy that's tough. Whoever said that was a visionary.

The people at VIP were good comedians, too. They proposed I sign a statement where I'd commit to reflecting my family if my circumstances improved. For their part, they'd guarantee to make a copy of the current reflections and keep them in cryodigital suspension for an indefinite period of time so they could be reactivated once I started paying the balance owed, plus a special fee for the suspension. When I saw the prices, I realized there was no way. I know anyone else would have just signed anyway, but because of my age, my metro files highlighted my tendency toward inactivity and occupational failure, which was a tough stain to cover up when job hunting. The people at VIP knew that and their offer was mostly intended to bind me to them, since the law said that when someone fails to honor a contract they're classified as an "entity," which would give them free rein to use me like a portable jail for renegade reflections, neuron extraction and virtual experiments.

So I'd only have a few months to decide who to erase and, more importantly, why. What made me shudder was that, no matter how I worded it, I was going to kill someone in my own family. I wasn't going to liquidate semantic programs. I was going to destroy my wife, my daughter and Mauro. Losing them forever didn't worry me. That had already happened years ago, and besides, they'd already been cremated and scattered to the winds. All that was as unreal as their current condition, only it's harder to lock horns with a living person than a dead one. And they lived. They had their jobs, their hopes, their dreams and feelings in a form that time couldn't repeat, much less emulate, no matter how much the VIP folks swore that a suspended copy would come back just the same. But nothing had been the same.

You'd think reflections couldn't be better and different from their models, but in the VIP world my wife was a healthy, happy woman, Anita, a tiny, permanently validated artist, Mauro, on the road to recovery . . .

"Look, I understand you weren't aware of the details concerning the purchase of the system, but it's all in the contract your wife signed. It clearly states that there's a fee for interacting with the reflections and that payments are due monthly."

"So, what's the advantage of the system? If you have to pay year in and year out to keep someone alive, it's practically the same as when they *are* alive, I mean . . ." Even I didn't know what I was claiming. The man looked at me pityingly.

"Reflections are living things. People forget that detail. They think they're projections of themselves they can forget about while others assume responsibility for their lives. That's what we do. We finance their lives, precisely because they are alive, beyond the fact that in practical terms they're complex organo-digital systems. But don't forget: they think, dream and interact with the world we replicate for them. And someone has to pay for that. We're not God."

His speech was clear and firm. I had the feeling he'd polished it over the years, defusing the allegations of countless other people caught in the same problem. Some time back he'd learned I was classified as a not-employed and that could last a long time. He knew that not-employed meant not having the luxury of a job, not even being able to apply for one. When you didn't find work within a specified period of time they considered you unfit and you had to abandon the search and give the chance to others who weren't yet in that category. It was a way of imposing order and control over the five million jobless this country always had. This land of the urban camps and half-ruined high-rises. Of the bonfires that went out long before dawn.

I spent a long time imagining the good-byes, but I understood it was pointless. The people at VIP only gave me a brief window to say good-bye (if that's what I wanted to tell them) and proceed with eliminating the reflections. They recommended I think of it that way, to think I wasn't erasing my family but just digital entities that looked like them. Besides, in some tiny corner where hope usually lives, I believed in the possibility of a future where maybe things would get better so I could afford a new set of copies. The VIP people made sure to reduce any chance of that: reflection elimination would be permanent. No copies saved to some spiritual backup file.

It was amazing how they controlled everything. The only decision that came from my lips was the order of "erase" once the good-byes were said. Just a formality. If I hesitated too much, the elimination would happen anyway. I didn't understand it then, but the folks at VIP waited for the person to order the reflections' destruction only so that the client would feel the weight of the decision on his or her conscience. That way, the people from VIP would merely be operatives. That's how they sanitized their work.

I needed to sanitize my own guilty feelings, I needed some reason that would stifle the thought that they would die because of my own inadequacy. If I was going to kill them I needed cold and absolute logic capable of diluting any sentimentality. What did nuclear missile operators in their silos do? Well, they waited for orders, on the alert 24/7. They didn't even have time to doubt. They turned their keys, verified the codes and pressed the button. That way they could wipe out millions of lives and later have a beer while awaiting the enemy's missiles. They fully realized that they, too, would be wiped out after the apocalyptic order. That's what life is made of, little apocalypses. Life, after all, is very democratic: everyone has to die.

And that's how I came to accept that the destruction of my family would be wholly my own act. I understood that I needed it to be that way. And every night I found myself on the alert, waiting for the order to well up from inside me. I no longer imagined the good-byes.

Beautiful words and clichés? My whole life was a permanent distance. It was too late to pretend to draw close.

And still, I kept feeling that the reflections were more present in my mind. More alive than dead.

"There's something I'd like to know. How do you people erase the reflections?"

"Come again?"

"I mean . . . do you just turn the system off? I don't know, do you introduce a virus . . .?"

"No, it's not that easy. A reflection has its own neural activity which is able to resist digital dismemberment. I can't give you the technical details on how a reflection dissolves, I can only say that, before it happens, we stimulate an emotional response that weakens its resistance to erasure."

"I don't get it. Do you actually tell the reflection what's going to happen to it?"

"Not exactly. What we do is manipulate its virtual environment so that its life starts to fall apart. This triggers a decline in its psychosomatic patterns."

"Psychosomatic patterns?"

"Of course. For example, inside the system, your daughter was a holosculptor with good critical reviews and interesting sales. Before erasing her, we inserted a program into her consciousness that reduced her ability to evoke pictorial images. Your daughter was left, quite literally, without the ability or power to sketch a face or a dog. On top of that, we added an artificial increase in negative reviews and, well, the bills don't pay themselves."

"What happened next?"

"If I remember correctly, in real life your daughter shot herself. We were hoping for the same thing with her reflection, but she hesitated. She didn't choose to kill herself. On the contrary, she kept on fighting. That's why we insist that reflections are just as alive as the flesh-and-bloods. You'd be surprised by some of the cases we've had. Well, your daughter didn't give up. But being prevented by us from creating, she decided to take exotamine, a very common drug among holosculptors that stimulates neural functions connected with the creative process. Just as we hoped, your daughter took a huge amount, in the short-term causing an irreversible state of neural degeneration, enough to bring on a vegetative state. After that it was easy to disconnect her."

The image of her, lying prostrate on a bed with her eyes wide open and lost in the void or shut too tightly to believe she was sleeping . . . I couldn't believe it. So, they didn't erase reflections. They focused solely on liquidating their lives, pushing them toward the imminent and destructive conclusion.

My daughter. Although it was only a reflection, it hurt so much to imagine her alone, turned into nothing. Why didn't they warn me? Why didn't they let me be with her? One caress, one kiss . . . something that meant enough. For her. Forever.

"Calm down. That's not how it works for everyone. We used that method with your daughter because it was part of her real life, with some variations, of course. In the boy's case, it was easier. Didn't he die of heart disease? Well, we just sped up the natural process, that's all."

That at least made sense.

"The same thing could happen with your wife. We could reactivate her old nancer and fill her with morphine so she dies in her sleep. Then we would cremate her and 'scatter her ashes,' which in our parlance means dissolve the digital information. It's easier to erase microscopic entities than an entire human system."

I shuddered.

"Can I watch a simulation of that?"

"As I recall, you already watched her die, right?"

"No, they didn't let me see her when she was near the end. I . . . I couldn't go."

"I'm sorry. Well, the situation might change . . . Like we say here, a reflection should be certain that everything ends sometime."

He was completely right, as usual. I was feeling confused and beaten again, but it only lasted a short time. Suddenly I felt I'd managed to absorb it all, like I'd managed at last to understand the ultimate finality of every death. I thought about those reflections, those digitized "lives" aspiring to mean something. Like false love, like the world out there, they couldn't come to me to be turned into symbols. They couldn't "live" if they were already dead inside me.

There was just one thing left to do. One last reflection of life.

The hours passed slowly. For a while now, her body had been nothing but a castoff. I got as close to her as I could and memorized the sickly stench of her flesh rotting in the room. Her body lay on the bed while a bunch of machines and systems monitored her slow death. Already her arms were splotched with purple and her hands were clenched in thick, dark fists. From time to time I liked to lift the sheets and stroke her cold, totally motionless legs. And only seven hours had elapsed. How much longer would she take to die? How long had it taken the first time?

Years ago I'd heard the news thanks to Anita, but I'd never made it to the clinic. I never really knew why not. I never could understand why I'd abandoned them all, as if their mere existence were an affront to my own life. It's strange. At what point did we turn into reflections of something we once were? What do we do to get ourselves back again?

I had the answers. One by one. It was no longer hard for me to accept that in one form or another I was responsible for all their deaths. That's what I believed at the time and that's what I needed to believe now. There was the implacable logic required to erase the reflections. I could go home in the certainty that I had destroyed my whole family and that no one but I could bear that guilt. I guess I needed it. That's why I had to erase Ana María, just like the others. I had to feel their death was something that could only come from me. And while her eyes slowly died, while the air leaving her mouth was the only sign she was still there, my mind recorded every detail and image so that I could bring them back to life for all the time possible, all the time needed for me to feel her in her final hour.

When it happened, all I could do was touch my temple and leave that universe of irrefutable unreality. I went back home, where no one was waiting for me and no one ever would be. That was nothing different or unexpected, either. A decaying society of humans or reflections has its absurd logic that contributes to normality. Normal was abandoning everything, including myself. My death was completely irrelevant.

So, this human reflection goes back to its semi-ruined house, closes the door and breathes the emptiness. Waits calmly. Opens its eyes and closes them again, while the fire goes sweetly out. And sleeps a little, with greater serenity, because one thing is certain:

Everything ends sometime.

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