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Descartes Comes out of the Closet

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Boarding the Cartesian Plane

Aurora stands in the plaza in front of Notre Dame Cathedral. She looks up at its towers, and she thinks: *is this it?* The behemoth before her is no different than the image from the flat paper brochures in the tourist shops. She half-closes her eyes, hoping to alter the way light is mirrored in her mind. Nothing changes.

The sky is the bright blue of found robin's eggs, and the sun shines through the gap between the towers. People crane their necks and point cameras at the sight. The group, she considers, would be called a *crush* like a group of crows is a *murder*. As she walks, she cannot avoid the press of bodies. The sun's rays shift with her, and the gargoyles seem to move with her too. That is something that a camera can't capture; parallax belongs firmly to the third dimension, beyond what can be expressed on paper.

Aurora sits down on an iron bench next to a woman with silver hair and a deeply creased face. The stones of the plaza before them are made of sharp lines and right angles. She imagines the stonework to be a coordinate plane, but she cannot locate an origin.

"C'est beau, hein?" The woman nods at the cathedral. Her palms rest on a cane, fingers bent in strange disjointed curves.

Aurora's French is rudimentary. She can barely ask for the bathroom. "Pas – pas d'anglais," she stumbles over the phrase. "Desolée."

The woman laughs. She wears black even in the heat, and her makeup does not attempt to cover her age. She could be a statue, another relic for the crush to photograph. Her fingers tap a pattern on her cane. Aurora cannot see how the twisted fingers are similar to her own.

The towers shimmer in the heat, a mirage in the plaza's Cartesian desert. Aurora pushes up her sleeves. The woman doesn't move.

“I speak English,” the woman says. She speaks it with a thick accent. She closes one eye and peers up at Aurora through her silver bangs. “Lovely, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Aurora says, automatically. “It looks just like the photos.” She studies the stone, unable to find a truer compliment. Her camera is at home. No photo she could take would be unique, a duplicate of duplicates.

The sun beats down on them, and Aurora’s scalp crawls under the heat of her heavy hair. She shivers.

The woman says, “Merde... you say bullshit, no? This is bullshit. All these tourists and atheists walk around and don’t even try to respect God.”

Aurora lets the silence hang as she pulls the collar on her shirt straight. “It’s art too,” she points out. “A church, yes, but a beautiful one.”

“Art.” The old woman says it like a curse, and she spits on the ground, close to Aurora’s feet, then gets up and walks away. The crowd doesn’t touch her as it swallows her.

Aurora stays seated on the bench. She looks up at Notre Dame one more time, and then at the people swarmed around it. She doesn’t bother to go inside, but the eyes of the gargoyles watch her as she walks away. The pressure inside her head subsides when she is out of their sight.

In the Montmartre district, Aurora meets a young woman who insists on going to La Basilique du Sacré-Coeur. The young woman’s name is Elise, and she has lived in Paris her entire life. She steps lightly and speaks quickly, her voice soft. She reminds Aurora of a fairy or a butterfly or some similarly ephemeral creature.

“You have to go to Sacre Coeur,” Elise says. “It is magic, I swear. True magic.”

Her black curls bounce as she speaks, and Aurora watches their movement. That is the true magic, she thinks. Aurora agrees to go.

They walk up the streets together, up the hills in Montmartre. The slope burns Aurora’s calves. Elise takes Aurora’s elbow with cold fingers and guides her to back roads. They pass countless buildings that are tall and narrow and so long they might be endless, shops filled with faulty rosaries and outdated maps, and a statue of a man emerging from a wall, one bony hand rubbed to a shine. Buildings rise with the hills, and below the sky all they can see are walls. It feels like a labyrinth, a wide countryside that someone has crumpled into a town.

“It’s Sunday,” Aurora says. They are standing in front of a wall of graffiti. The domes of Sacre Coeur rise above the maze in front of them, almost flat against the gray sky. “I can’t go to mass — there will be a mass, right?”

“Bien sûr,” Elise says. “But the mass, the building itself, everything: it’s all magic.” She gestures toward the graffiti.

The wall has the image of a strange yellow creature with large lips and lopsided green eyes. “Wouldn’t it be disrespectful?” Aurora reaches out and traces the creature’s mouth. The paint forms ridges underneath her fingers, and she thinks that a blind person could read the painting by touch alone.

Elise covers Aurora’s hand with her own, the lines of her palm as fluted as the landscape around them. “Come to church with me,” she says.

The bells start to ring. Aurora lifts her hand from the head of the beast. Elise doesn’t let go.

When they walk up the steps of the basilica, Aurora drops Elise’s hand. Elise laughs loudly, drawing the gaze of a family gathered on the pale steps.

“Don’t worry,” she tells Aurora.

“It’s a church,” Aurora says.

Elise walks into the large stone building, leaving Aurora no choice but to follow.

Inside, it is cool and dark. The light filters through the stained glass, transforming images of saints and dragons and women into misshapen colors on the floor. The lights shift more than the setting sun would suggest. An old man plays a concertina until the father chases him out, the instrument abandoned in the back of the church. The two young women sit on one of the wooden benches lined along the side. A row of stone columns blocks their view of the altar, and Aurora wonders if this seating is a punishment for the non-believers.

More people sit in their pew. Aurora has to press into Elise, who smiles and leans into the touch. They are both damp with sweat. Aurora can’t understand what the father is saying, and they slip out before he finishes.

When the two of them are back at Elise’s tiny apartment, Aurora asks, “What do you mean when you say magic?”

Elise smiles, feral, with all her teeth. She doesn’t use words to explain.

On the last day of her trip, Aurora finds a small church half a mile from the even smaller apartment she has been renting. The church is empty when she enters, and she sits in a pew near the back on the left side. She wonders what it feels like to pray.

She said goodbye to Elise that morning. She figures this completes their encounter: Aurora went to a church before they met, when they were together, and now after. She rubs circles at the root of her skull, trying to alleviate her headache. Tomorrow she will return home, where she will not go to any church. She will kneel at no altar.

Another person, a woman, enters the church. She sits in the front row and holds a rosary between frail fingers. Aurora can hear the rhythmic muttering of prayer.

Suddenly, she feels out of place. She slips from the back row and pads toward the back. Above the doorway is a panel of stained glass, but she cannot lift her eyes to view it. When she pulls open the heavy oak doors, the light is too bright and the noises of the Paris morning hurt her ears.

Who is the Third Who Walks Always Beside You?

A week after Aurora returns from Paris, she meets her sister Maria and her friend Boris at the coffee shop. The three of them sit at one of the high tables, stained white mugs and a box of sugar packets between them. Boris's toes touch the floor. Maria makes a show of swinging her feet, and she says that she feels like a little kid. Aurora leans back in her chair, and it rocks back with her movement.

"Tell us about Paris," Maria says.

This is their first meeting since Aurora's return. She has shared some parts over the phone. *Beautiful*, she had said. *Most people spoke English. I've never had better baked goods.* She shared a few concrete images (the windows in the Sacre Coeur, the gargoyles at Notre Dame, the taste of fresh baguette and a good cappuccino) but no stories. Even now, she's not sure if she made up the strange sequence of impressions that make up her memories of Elise.

"It was full of strange churches," she offers. Strange churches and beautiful women, she thinks, but that last part is not something she can say out loud.

"Strange churches?" Boris repeats. He dumps the ceramic container of sugar packets onto the table and begins to sort them by color.

"Yeah," she says, and then she explains what happened with the old woman at Notre Dame. As she retells the story, she realizes that she has no point to her story. It does not go over well.

Boris tries to help her. "I do love old people," he says. Pushing the reorganized packets away, he turns to Maria and laughs. "That's why we're friends."

Maria is ten years older than the other two. She scowls for a moment, and then she offers, “Speaking of strange, you wouldn’t believe what happened to me the other day.”

Aurora leans forward, and the edge of the table digs into her forearms. Her coffee is warm in her hands, the mug large enough in circumference for her long fingers to wrap around. “Do tell,” she says. She still tries to think of the right words to represent the story of the woman at Notre Dame.

“I saw someone who looked exactly like Dad,” Maria says, “but he was about your age, or younger.”

Aurora pushes away her mug and her thoughts of Paris at the mention of their father. She doesn’t say a thing in response to her sister’s vision. How long has it been since she she saw him? It must be going on ten, maybe fifteen, years now. The idea of a decade seems like an epoch.

Maria continues, ignoring the strained silence, “I even talked to him. Same name. There was so much similar between him and Dad. It was like time travel.”

The thing that Aurora has always hated about the place she lives now is that, despite its distance from her childhood home, it is an old haunt of her father. Strange reminders of him pop up unexpectedly, remnants from stories he would tell his daughters when they were younger. More often than not, he feels like a silhouette, a dark, priestlike figure against a bright window. Other people fill out his features more reliably than her own memories.

“Maybe it was time travel,” Aurora suggests, reaching out for the box of sugar packets. She places it in the center of the table, equidistant from each person. “He did live here before either of us were born, after all.”

That idea does not register as serious among the other two. Boris laughs. He says, “But imagine if that were what really happened.”

They sit there for a few silent moments. Maria tips her head back and finishes her coffee in one long gulp.

“I want to go to Paris,” Boris says.

“You’ve been to Sweden,” Maria points out.

He just gives her a look. “Sweden isn’t Paris,” he says.

“Paris isn’t Sweden,” Aurora attempts to tautologize.

Maria suggests that the three of them go to Paris. Boris and Aurora immediately agree, but they all know that it is just a fantasy. On their stipends, Boris and Aurora really can't afford even the idea. Aurora can't even afford the journey she just took.

They lapse into silence again. It seems to Aurora that the air has been overlaid with television static. The world is pixellated, and she rubs her eyes and leans back in her seat, and the chair rocks on its uneven legs. The movement feels like a drop off a cliff. The sensation of the world moving, its angles shifting impossibly around her, does not stop with the chair. Her breath is caught in her throat, and she struggles to remember how to breathe.

Maria reaches over and places a steadying hand on her sister's arm. "You all right?" she asks.

"Fine," Aurora says. She presses at her chest with the heel of her hand, just above her racing heart. Everything still feels like it's swimming around her. "That was terrifying," she says, and then she laughs. She thinks she might be a bit hysterical from sleep deprivation.

"Your eyes are jerking back and forth." Maria lifts a hand.

Aurora sees only the smudge of pale skin.

"Are you okay?"

She feels as if she is on the deck of a lurching ship in the middle of a storm. The world around her feels flat like Notre Dame did. "Mm," she says, closing her eyes, but that only makes it worse. "I'm really, really dizzy."

"She doesn't look good," Boris says, and his voice sounds far away. "What should we do?"

It takes Aurora a long moment to figure out that he sounds a bit panicked. She wonders why.

She forces her eyes open again. "I think," she says slowly, "that I need to go home."

"Or," Maria suggests, "to the doctor." She is standing right next to Aurora, and she helps her younger sister stand up. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

Aurora leans on Maria as she stands. As she rises, her vision begins to go dark. Everything looks like the grey static of a television tuned to a dead channel. Her hands refuse to grab anything steady, her fingers curling in the empty air. Before she can say anything, the darkness descends.

Est et non

Aurora walks down the path to the library of her alma mater. She hasn't been here since graduation, she thinks, and she reaches up and rests her fingers on the low-hanging branch of the sycamore tree. The wind blows hard enough to sway the limb above her fingertips, a branch thicker than her waist. She sways too, held up only by her feet and her tenuous connection to the tree above her.

When the wind subsides, she sees her father on the path before her. He holds a pocket watch in each hand; she can hear the ticking. Her father looks younger than her ten-year-old memories. No grey in his hair, fewer worry lines, though the same dark depression still pools in his eye sockets. She can't look there for too long. Her arms drop to her sides.

Her mouth won't open. Even if it could, what would she say? *Thanks for being such a great father*, she could say sarcastically. It wouldn't bite as much as she imagines, wouldn't bite as much as the wind or the light that threads into her eyes.

Her father opens his mouth, but the wind steals his voice. Debris fills the air and blocks her view of him. It spins her round and round like a top on a table, and when the wind subsides, she is dizzy and lying on the rough ground. A stone is poking into the back of her skull. Her eyes are open, and the boughs of the sycamore swing above her. She can hear voices beyond her field of vision. They come closer, like they are walking down the path, and soon enough she can make out words.

"So," Maria says, her impatience like shards of glass, "Tell me what happened."

The other voice is male, young, unfamiliar. Deep. Aurora imagines that this voice could belong to the old tree. "It was a pineal gland tumor," he says, and Aurora knows that he couldn't be the tree, because why would a tree care about anatomy?

His voice gets farther away as he continues, "We had no trouble removing it."

Aurora makes herself sit up. The wind has died down. No one is on the path. The grass is short and clear as if the wind had disturbed only her. The sun has begun to set, casting her long shadow on the ground before her. Despite the oncoming darkness and the bloody leaves on the trees, Aurora does not feel cold.

"Ma chérie, ma chère Aurore. . ." The voice that calls is Elise's.

Aurora staggers to her feet and looks around. She cannot see the other woman. "Elise?" she calls out, but she does not hear her own voice. She does not know enough French to understand what Elise said.

“Oh, Aurora,” Elise says, her voice from directly behind Aurora. Her cool fingers touch Aurora’s hair and run through the long locks before coming again to rest where neck slopes to shoulder. “What happened?”

Aurora turns around. Elise is not there.

“What happened?” Aurora repeats.

It is her father who replies. “Don’t you *know*?” he asks, with a muted sneer on his face. She is twelve again, and he is telling her that he is going to leave. Snow begins to fall, cool on her face and bare arms.

I don’t know anything, she wants to say but the words will not come. There is a Latin phrase on the tip of her tongue.

The scene changes, not as if it melts but as if she blinked and one world was replaced with another in the infinitesimal second that her vision was gone. *God blinked*, she thinks, and she wants to laugh. Instead of her college campus before her, instead of standing, she is propped up in a bed in a white room. She cannot move her neck, and a pressure on her wrist reveals an IV. The Latin phrase comes to her and spills out her mouth before she can stop it: “*Ignoramus et ignorabimus*.” We are ignorant and we will remain ignorant. It presents a knowable future, she reminds herself. But who wants that one?

“Considering why you’re here,” Boris says from her bedside, “I think you’ve got the wrong mathematician.” His fingers trace the grid lines of her quilted blanket. He shifts in his seat, leans and peers at the back of her head. “Descartes. ‘Which path in life will I choose?’ It’s *quod vitae*... I forget the rest.”

“They’re the same,” Aurora says, and she reaches with her free hand to feel the maze of bandages running from the base of her skull. Where in this labyrinth is the entrance to her soul? Her hand drops, and she wishes to unask the question.