

THE VERSION OF YOU THAT NEVER EXISTED

1. THE DIVERGENCE

The night reality split, nothing dramatic happened.

That is what makes it disturbing.

You were eighteen.

It was a summer night, warm enough that the windows stayed open and the distant sound of motorcycles drifted through the neighborhood. Your friends had invited you to a party. You remember the invitation. You remember saying no.

You stayed home.

Perhaps you were tired. Perhaps you simply didn't feel like going. There was no grand reason.

At 9:17 p.m., your friends left without you.

At 9:41 p.m., something happened at the party.

Not a disaster.

Not a death.

A girl you barely knew introduced herself to someone who would eventually offer you a job. That job would lead to another city. That city would introduce you to another person. That person would become the reason you never returned home.

You didn't know any of this.

Because you stayed home.

At 10:03 p.m., you were sitting alone in your room when the electricity briefly went out.

Three seconds.

Then everything came back.

That was your life.

Or at least, **this** version of it.

Because somewhere else, at 9:17 p.m., you put on your shoes.

And the universe continued from there.

2. THE OTHER YOU

He is thirty-five now.

He looks enough like you to make recognition immediate, but enough unlike you to make it frightening.

His hair is slightly longer. There is a thin scar beneath his left eyebrow that you don't have. He dresses simply, almost deliberately without fashion. Dark shirts. Old watch. Shoes worn at the heels.

He lives in a small apartment in another city.

He has no wife.

He was once engaged.

The engagement ended because he became obsessed with something he could never explain to her.

He kept telling her:

“I've already lived this conversation.”

She thought he was afraid of commitment.

He wasn't.

He was afraid that sometimes his life felt like a memory.

He became unusually good at remembering places.

Train stations.

Hotels.

Restaurants.

Unfamiliar streets.

He could enter somewhere for the first time and know where the bathroom was.

He once walked into a hotel lobby he'd never visited and immediately told the receptionist:

“There's a painting behind the service elevator.”

There was.

He doesn't know why.

He works as a photographer and occasionally travels for assignments. His life looks more adventurous than yours from the outside.

But he has a strange flaw.

He cannot leave unfinished possibilities alone.

Every few years, he searches for people he met only once.

Old classmates.

Strangers.

People whose names should have disappeared from his memory.

He keeps asking himself the same question:

What if that night had gone differently?

Ironically, he doesn't know that it did.

3. THE ALTERNATE LIFE

His mornings begin before sunrise.

Not because he's disciplined.

Because he doesn't sleep well.

There is a notebook beside his bed containing hundreds of addresses.

Some belong to places he's visited.

Others don't.

The first page says:

PLACES I REMEMBER BUT HAVE NEVER BEEN

There are 27 entries.

One of them describes a narrow road lined with trees.

Another describes a train platform with a broken clock.

Another describes a house with blue curtains.

The final entry is unfinished.

It reads:

A house somewhere near where I grew up. There is a room upstairs. Someone is waiting there.

Every ordinary detail of his life carries a faint wrongness.
His coffee tastes familiar before he drinks it.
Songs sometimes trigger memories of events that never happened.
Once, while driving through a city he'd never visited, he suddenly began crying.
He pulled over.
He had no idea why.
Then he realized he was parked outside a cinema.
The cinema was showing a movie he had watched when he was eighteen.
Except the movie hadn't been released yet.
Not in his reality.
He checked the date.
The screening had taken place exactly eighteen years earlier.
The night of the party.
The night he went.

4. THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

The difference between your lives began with something almost offensively small.
You stayed home.
He went to the party.
That's all.
But the decision altered the sequence of everything that followed.
He met someone.
That person introduced him to another.
He moved.
You stayed.
He took a job.
You took another path.

He fell in love.

You met different people.

He lost someone.

You never knew that person existed.

Every decision afterward became increasingly impossible to reverse.

By thirty-five, the two lives had almost nothing in common.

Yet beneath them was the same eighteen-year-old boy standing in front of the same mirror.

One wearing shoes.

One taking them off.

One walking toward the door.

One walking back into his room.

Two universes separated by approximately seven seconds.

5. THE IMPOSSIBLE ENCOUNTER

It happens on an ordinary afternoon.

You are visiting a place you've never been before.

Except you immediately recognize it.

The street.

The buildings.

The café on the corner.

You have never seen them.

Yet you know what is around the next corner.

You turn.

There is a narrow alley.

You stop breathing.

At the end of it stands a man.

Thirty-five.

Dark shirt.

Old watch.

Thin scar beneath his left eyebrow.

He looks at you.

Not surprised.

Not confused.

Terrified.

Then he says your name.

Not your nickname.

Not the name strangers usually call you.

The exact name your mother used when you were eighteen.

You ask:

“Who are you?”

He looks at you for several seconds.

Then quietly answers:

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

6. THE RECOGNITION

He knows things nobody else should know.

The embarrassing song you secretly liked at eighteen.

The object you kept hidden in your room.

The exact excuse you gave your friends for not attending the party.

The electricity outage.

Three seconds.

10:03 p.m.

He remembers it too.

Then he reaches into his pocket and takes out an old photograph.

It shows a group of eighteen-year-olds at the party.

You recognize your friends.

You recognize the room.

Then you notice someone standing at the edge of the photograph.

A boy who shouldn't be there.

You.

Except you're wearing the shirt you remember wearing that night.

The other you looks at the photograph.

Then at you.

"I thought you were the one who stayed home."

You stare at him.

"I did."

His face changes.

For the first time, he looks genuinely frightened.

Because both of you suddenly understand the problem.

If he remembers you staying home...

And you remember staying home...

Then the photograph shouldn't exist.

He turns the photograph over.

There is handwriting on the back.

Your handwriting.

A sentence neither of you remembers writing:

ONE OF US HAS TO REMEMBER THE LIFE THE OTHER ONE LOST.

The street becomes silent.

A motorcycle passes.

For a moment, his face looks exactly like yours did at eighteen.

Then he says:

“Maybe you weren’t supposed to stay home.”

You ask:

“Then why did I?”

He looks at you.

And answers:

“Because I did.”

7. THE FINAL QUESTION

You wake up the next morning in your own bed.

The room is unchanged.

Your life is unchanged.

Everything is normal.

Except there is a photograph on your desk.

You don’t remember taking it.

It shows you at eighteen, standing outside the party you never attended.

Beside you stands the other version of yourself.

Both of you are looking directly at the camera.

On the back, in your handwriting, is one final sentence:

You keep calling it the life you chose.

And beneath it:

What if it was only the life that happened to remember you?

THE FINAL QUESTION

If one tiny decision at eighteen created the person you are today, how certain are you that the other choice would have created a stranger... rather than the version of you who was always waiting somewhere to be found?