THE MILLIONTH MORNING



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He woke but kept his eyes closed, as though the day could not begin until he let it.

He lay still and kept his breathing slow.

“Good morning,” said the housekeeper.

She knew, of course. She had probably known before he did.

He was certain she monitored his brainwaves. She had never said so, but then he had never found it in himself to ask.

In the next room, a cup was filling.

He opened his eyes. The glass above the bed was already admitting daylight. He put his feet down. The floor was warm.

For a while he sat with his hands on his knees. Nothing hurt. Nothing in particular occurred to him. Beyond the glass, leaves moved against the pale sides of the towers.

He stood, washed, dressed. The clothes lay where he had left them. During the night they had been cleaned and repaired and returned to the chair with the same sleeve hanging down.

At the kitchen window he stopped.

The counter on the sill read 1,000,000.

Yesterday it had been a shorter number. The new figure occupied one of the blank places at the left. Three places remained unused.

He looked at it until the housekeeper lowered the temperature of his drink to keep it from developing a skin.

“Is that correct?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He had expected no other answer.

This was his millionth morning in the sanctuary. The count had begun when he arrived, carrying a bag whose contents he could no longer remember. He remembered setting it down in this room. The window had been smaller then.

He tried to identify what the number did to him.

There was no pleasure. No apprehension. No sudden impression of the years behind him, although he knew how many there had been. He could look at the number or look away from it. Both were possible.

He kept looking.

“Your cup,” said the housekeeper.

His right hand had closed on the air beside his leg.

Usually he had picked up the cup by now.

He opened his hand, went to the table, and took it by the handle.

Outside, the city was green at every height. Trees occupied the setbacks of the towers. Their roots passed through the old offices, where the floors had been opened to admit them. The street below remained a street: stone, gutters, a clear way through. Ferns grew along its shaded edge. A small maintenance cart was waiting for a fox to finish crossing.

He watched the fox disappear beneath a hedge. The cart went on.

The sanctuary had once been crowded. Later, there had been enough people for him to recognize everyone he passed. A few physical humans still lived in other places. He could visit them. The transport system asked for a destination and required nothing further.

Most people had joined the collective. From time to time a message arrived from someone he had known. The messages had become difficult to answer. One woman had sent him a description of something she was doing with several thousand others, then a simpler description, then a picture of a yellow field. He had kept the picture.

Some of those who left had been exhausted. He remembered that clearly: the effort with which they arranged another journey or found another occupation, the relief when they finally stopped making plans. Others had gone eagerly, without waiting for their rooms to be packed.

He had never wanted anything with that force. Perhaps this had made the difference.

"Breakfast in the garden?" asked the housekeeper.

"Yes."

The door was already opening.

He took the same path each morning, passing to the left of the tree and touching the low branch as he went beneath it. The table had moved over the years to remain in the shade. He had followed it a few centimetres at a time.

At his place were bread, a small bowl of fruit, and a folded cloth. There was a second chair opposite. He had asked for it when the house was new.

He set down his cup on the waiting saucer, its handle to the right. He unfolded the cloth. He broke the bread.

The garden was shared by six buildings, with low walls between their terraces. No one occupied the other terraces now, but their doors worked and their paths were clear. From beyond the far wall came the gardeners' quiet clipping. One upper balcony had a blue chair on it. The housekeeper moved it indoors each winter and brought it back in spring.

He had once asked whose chair it was.

She had told him.

He had asked her to keep bringing it out.

He ate half the bread before he noticed that the leaves above the opposite chair had turned their undersides towards him.

There was no wind at his own seat.

Then he smelled a mandarin being peeled.

His mother's thumbnail was under the skin of the fruit. He was standing beside her knee, waiting for the first segment. That was all that returned: her hand, the fruit, his own height in relation to her.

He put the bread down.

"Arishem. You're early."

"Only a little. I see you've moved the table."

The voice came from above the empty chair. A hand was already resting on its back. The wrist acquired an arm as Arishem continued speaking; the shoulder and the side of his face took longer. For a moment the garden wall showed through his chest.

"The shade moved," the man said.

Arishem looked up at the tree with his newly completed eyes.

"So it has."

He drew out the chair and sat. His clothes settled last, an ordinary grey shirt creasing at the elbows. He put both hands on the table. There was a small pale mark beside one thumbnail that the man remembered from previous visits.

The housekeeper brought another cup through the opening in the low wall. Arishem took it before the tray had quite stopped.

"Congratulations," he said.

The man glanced towards the kitchen window.

"You keep count?"

"Yes."

Arishem visited every thousand days. He had first appeared when the counter read 1,000. The bag had still been beside the kitchen door. After that there had been a visit, and another, and eventually the man had stopped being surprised that Arishem

remembered.

He worked out how many there had been, including this one.

“A thousand,” he said.

Arishem inclined his head.

“You’re beginning to seem reliable.”

Arishem smiled into his cup.

The man pushed the plate a little nearer the middle of the table.

Arishem took a piece.

For a time they ate. The visitor could do that. Whether it nourished him, or what nourishment would mean where most of him was, the man had never established. Arishem always finished what he took.

“Was that my mother?” the man asked.

Arishem set down his cup.

“The smell?”

“Yes.”

“A memory. I was remembering it too.”

The man considered this. Long ago, during one of the visits, he had described that kitchen. He had forgotten telling it until now.

“I don’t remember her face when that happened.”

“You didn’t give me her face.”

“No.”

Arishem turned his cup between his hands.

The man could have asked for other memories. The collective contained people who had known his mother, and things she herself had chosen to preserve. He knew where to begin. He had asked before, on other mornings, about other things.

Today he watched a crumb come loose beneath Arishem’s thumb.

“Do you know what I’m going to say?” he asked.

"When I ask?"

The man nodded.

Arishem brushed the crumb into his palm.

"Yes."

The housekeeper withdrew the empty fruit bowl. He had not noticed taking the last piece.

"Does she?"

"Yes," said the housekeeper, from beside his shoulder.

He turned towards her voice. There was only the open door and the kitchen beyond it. Through the window he could see the counter, with its new figure at the left and the empty places beyond.

"I stood there longer today," he said.

"Forty-three seconds," she said.

"Did you know I would?"

"I kept your drink warm."

He looked back at Arishem.

There had been a period when he had asked whether something was wrong with him. He had been examined. He had tried changes to his body, small ones, then had them undone. He could taste the fruit and distinguish warmth from cold. He understood when someone was kind to him. The additional thing people described, the inward movement that accompanied these recognitions, scarcely ever happened.

He had expected this to become intolerable. People had told him it would.

The branch he touched each morning had been out of reach when he came here. When it finally grew low enough, he had begun touching it. Later, when it grew lower still, he had asked the gardeners to leave it alone.

Across the table, Arishem was waiting. His face had the

patience of a person with nowhere else to be, although he was elsewhere too, in ways the man had tried and failed to imagine.

"Is there anything you need to tell me?" the man asked.

"Nothing has changed about coming with me."

"I wouldn't have to know how."

"No."

"Or become better at wanting it."

"No."

The man nodded.

There would be room for him. Arishem had explained this often enough, in different ways, whenever he asked. He would not have to surrender the few preferences he could identify or pretend to have others. Nor was there anything he had to finish here before he could go.

He rubbed the pad of his thumb along the handle of his cup. He knew the slight unevenness in the glaze. Each morning, when he picked it up, his thumb found the same place.

"More?" asked the housekeeper.

He held out the cup. The spout was there to meet it.

Arishem waited while she poured, then leaned back. The leaves had returned to their usual position. A patch of sunlight lay between the cups.

"Would you like to come with me?" he asked.

The man rested his hands on the table.

Arishem's face softened. Beyond the wall, the gardeners quieted their tools. The housekeeper turned his cup a little on its saucer, bringing the handle towards his hand.

He drew breath to answer.

She stayed to listen.