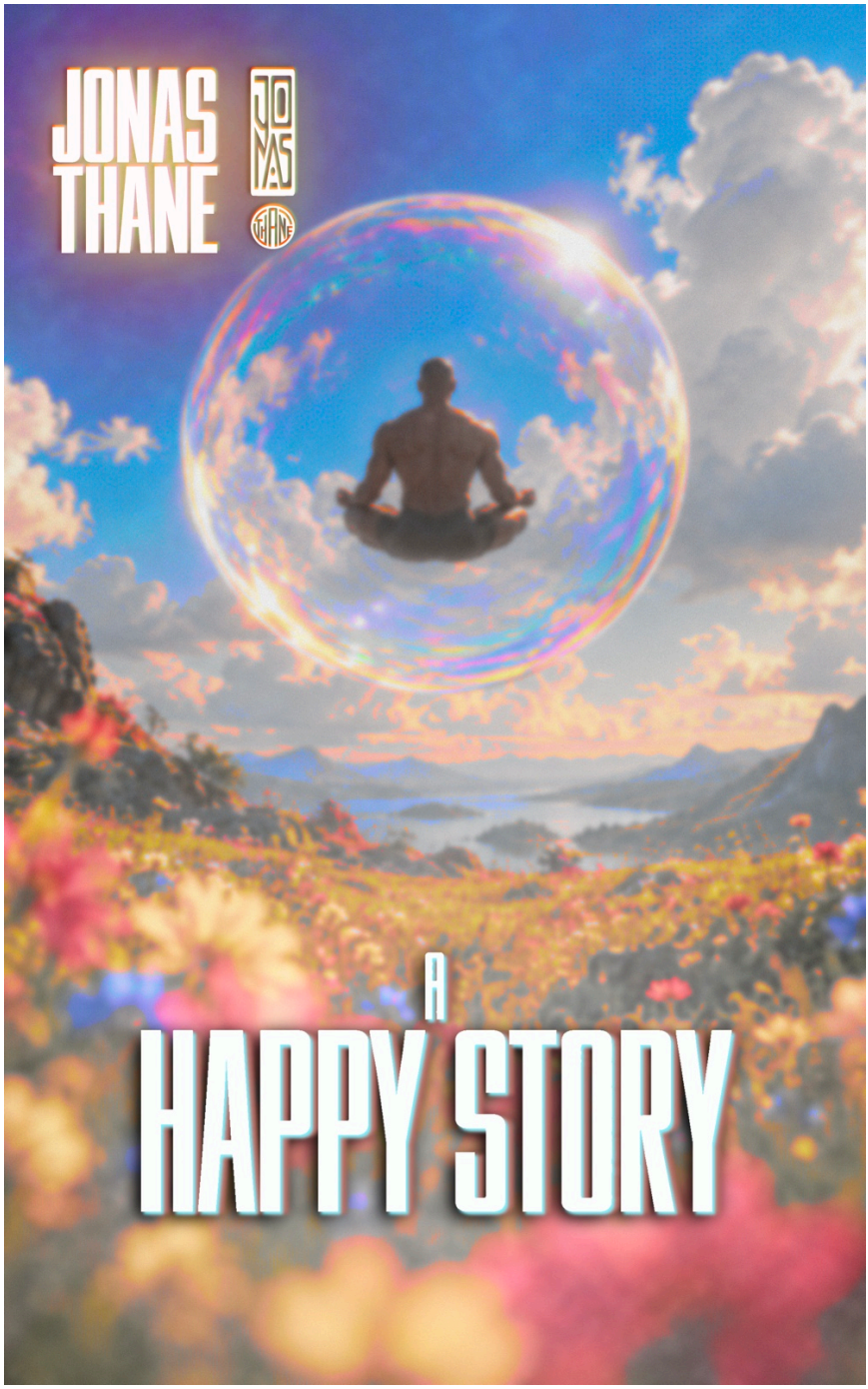
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A HAPPY STORY

A Short Story
by Jonas Thane

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PREFACE

I wrote this because I wanted to see what my version of a happy story might look like.

That's it. That was the whole assignment.

No outline. No plan.

Just an image—blue sky, green field, sunlight.

I followed that feeling, and this is what came out.

At the time, I didn't expect much. Just an exercise. But somewhere along the way, it grew into something else—something stranger, deeper, more alive than I meant it to be.

I don't throw around the word favorite lightly. I've only just begun writing in earnest, and I hope in fifty years I'll have hundreds of stories to choose from. But as it stands, this one holds a particular place for me. Not because it's perfect—but because of how it makes me feel when I read it.

Yes, the title is unoriginal. A Happy Story. I could've dressed it up. But I like how plainly it sits on the page. It fits.

And of course—because I'm me—this so-called one-off eventually found itself woven into something bigger, a larger trilogy. But that's a different story.

This one?

It's strange.

It's sharp.

It's soft in places, warped in others.

But it's mine.

And I like it.

So enjoy.

Or don't.

Either way, it's a happy story.

A HAPPY STORY

Welcome.

Please—hold your questions.

I know it's jarring.

I want to tell you a story.

A true one.

One of perfection.

Of Happiness.

A happy story.

You'll understand, afterwards.

I've told it before. To others. You're not the first. No matter.

I'll tell it again.

Who am I?

No matter.

Now—listen.

There's a man. Well—no.

Not quite.

Not really.

And anyway...before he was a man, he was a boy.

No.

Wrong again.

Before a man—or a boy—he was a baby.

And before that?

Well—this isn't about that. Not the before.

Not the after.

This is about the during.

His during.

His life.

His perfect life.

I'll tell you about that.

I'll start where I always start.

Where I like to start.

He—he would start earlier, if he were telling it.

With the *great-great-great-great-great-great*—

Never mind. Too many greats.

You wouldn't get it.

With the forefather.

The planet.

The dilemma.

The voyage.

But he's not the one telling this story.

He can't.

No—

That's not quite right.

Can't suggests absolutes:

Time.

Space.

Gravity.

It's not that he *can't*.

It's that he won't.

Self-imposed.

Volitional.

Sacred, maybe.

No matter.

Let's begin.



Long ago, on the day he was born in that field, the sun lingered overhead as if it knew what was coming. Grass swayed in time with the wind's hymn. Birds sang like they already knew his name.

Even the lake lapped at its edges—not with fury, not with threat, but with yearning. With joy. As if it wanted to be part of the story.

Above, the sky stretched wide, a baby-blue canopy drawn taut to bless the moment.

It's gift to the budding family.

No doctors. No nurses. No machines, no sterile beeps. No hospital at all.

Only a mother—radiant with effort.

A father—trembling with hope.

And the open air, bearing witness.

She breathed. Pushed.

Once. Twice. Thrice.

And then he arrived—not caught by latex gloves, but by the world itself, cradled in his father's shaking hands.

She wept. He wept. And the newborn's cry rose like birdsong to join them.

Three voices.

One beginning.

A family.

The father, though first to hold him, knew what mattered.

The mother should be first—first kiss, first word, first voice.

So he passed the child to her and knelt in the grass, still swaying.

As she whispered—a hush, a rhythm, a spell—he plucked at the ground. Each blade of grass stilled a motion, ended a sway, silenced a dancer.

He stacked them. Stitched them. Braided them. From the soft green corpses of a thousand tiny dancers, he made a blanket to swaddle their perfect son.

And around them—above and beyond—other offerings took shape. The birds quieted their cries. The sun softened its gaze.

What they gave, the father could not name.

He only felt the shift: a hush in the canopy, a warmth that lingered longer than it should have.

Things were given.

Things were received.

And the world, in its own way, bore witness.

All the while, the mother whispered. Not words, exactly, but something deeper. An omen. A prayer smoothed like river stone in the bed of her mouth. She had carried it for years, tested it under moonlight, mourned it, polished it.

Each syllable gleamed with purpose. It was her inheritance. Her resistance. Her offering.

Her mother had once told her: *"A child's life begins with the first voice they hear. Choose yours carefully."*

And she had.

Long before conception, before names, before nursery walls, these were the words she chose—offered before the world could name him for itself.

She poured them into him, low and unwavering, like water into cupped hands. Ancient syllables breathed into new lungs, their meaning known only to her—and now, to him. Something unseen shifted.

She kissed his brow, slick with afterbirth, and looked up. Her husband stood waiting, smiling, weeping, the woven grass blanket trembling in his hands.

She rose slowly, cradling her son. She lifted him high and turned her gaze to the edge of the world, where grass faded into sand and sand into lake. In a breath she was there. Water lapped at her toes. The child pressed warm against her skin.

She hushed him in that feral way only mothers know. Then placed her hand across his face—so small, so unfinished her palm erased it entirely.

And for a moment you might think this wasn't a perfect story.

Maybe she would wound him.

Pass down her hunger, her silence, her shame. Maybe her doubts would root in his marrow and bloom into choices he mistook as his own. Maybe her voice would become his inner ghost, measuring him against a standard no child asks for.

Or worse—maybe she'd starve him.

Strike him.

Sell him.

Maybe she'd open the door and let them hurt him.

Maybe she'd close it, lock it, smile.

Maybe, you'd think, this was that kind of story.

But no.

Looks deceive. Especially in fragments.

Because this baby—this perfect baby—would never know any of that. Not with her.

Not in this telling.

His mother was perfect.

Newly so—still learning what it meant.

Her love was whole and wise and fiercely soft. She would never cut him down to rebuild herself. She would never turn her damage into inheritance. She would only lift him, steady him, speak to him like the future was listening.

And that—in part—is why he would grow to be perfect.

Because he had a perfect mother.

And in the next breath, with his face still veiled by her hand, she stepped into the lake.

Both of them were cleansed.

She emerged moments later—dripping, radiant, reborn. The lake had taken it all. Every tear, every ache, every scar of birth. Gone.

A gift.

Because it knew. This woman. This man. This child. They were meant for perfect lives.

Still—even perfect men can falter if the woman beside them no longer fits their gaze.

The water washed the boy too. Whispered to him. Offered him something of its own.

So when they stepped out, they were both the same—

and yet not.

She walked barefoot across the field, droplets sliding from her skin like beads of glass. The grass bowed beneath her. Her perfect child lay quiet against her chest.

She met her husband where the earth still remembered. He smiled, then reached into the fold of his trousers and drew a blade.

Small. Clean. Ceremonial.

And for a sliver of time, you might think—he might harm the boy.

Maybe he would.

Maybe years from now he'd lose himself in rage. Sudden. Sharp. Senseless.

Not because the child had done anything—but because he hadn't. Because he was there.

Maybe he'd teach the boy that tears are shame. That stillness is surrender. That love must be earned through silence and control.

Maybe he'd carve masculinity into him like a weapon—sharpen the jaw, tighten the voice, sand down every softness.

Maybe he'd raise his voice loud enough that it echoed in the boy's bones long after it stopped.

Maybe he'd teach him that power belongs to men—and women are the ground they walk on.

Call it tradition.

Call it lineage.

Call it love.

Maybe he'd preach that pain builds character—as if pain were the only builder. As if joy, and wonder, and grief, and gentleness meant nothing.

Maybe he'd become the kind of father the world knows well—the kind that builds sons like fortresses, not homes.

But no.

The man only bent low, hands steady, breath calm. With one smooth motion, he severed the cord. No struggle. No spectacle. No damage.

Just a clean beginning.

A quiet choice.

Because this was not that kind of man. He was a perfect father, and his love was vast, patient, gently sure of itself. He would never ask his son to pay for his weakness—had he any. He would never demand power at the cost of presence. He would never call violence manhood.

He would teach by listening.

By staying.

By letting his son grow in sunlight, not shadow.

Because that's what perfect fathers do.

And the boy—of course the boy would be perfect.

Sculpted in symmetry. Measured. Intentional.

A child born from calibration and grace, shaped by the steady hands of people who believed in balance.

Yes. That was the idea.

But—no wait.

No.

I shouldn't—*still*.

Symmetry casts shadows, too.

Even intention leaves residue.

You can bless the soil, mark the seasons, feed the seed with ritual and reason—

but shaping is still pressure.

Not quite violence.

But close enough to leave a mark.

No one says that.

But I remember.

They called it guidance.

Correction.

Tradition.

Love.

But I've seen what the body does with absence.

How it clutches around silence.

How it folds itself into palatable shapes.

How it molds around a single voice long after that voice is gone.

No bruises.

But the breath remembers.

Tight jaw.

High shoulders.

Eyes always scanning corners.

Staying good.

Staying quiet.

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Staying wanted.

They call that *resilience*.

I call it *residue*.

And it builds.

It hardens.

Until you don't know where it hurts—only that it does.

You survive long enough and they call it personality.

But it's just self-preservation with good posture.

A life made small to fit someone else's frame.

But not this boy.

No—he would be untouched by all that.

He would never ache from swallowed language.

Would never mistake control for care, stillness for safety.

Would never feel that strange, electric euphoria of surviving what you were told you could not.

Because he was never told he couldn't.

He was told he would.

That he *must*.

That he already had.

He was never expected to survive.

He was expected to prevail.

Maybe that's perfection:

Not wholeness, but containment.

A life sealed too tight to ferment.

Too smooth to crack.

Too curated to awaken.

He would rise—clean, straight, unbent.

But directed.

And maybe—maybe—his first act of rebellion would be to remember something he never lived.

A yearning for fracture.

For wildness.

For a name not given, but taken.

But not yet.

Not now.

No.

Let us continue.

The newborn did not cry. Yes. Of course he didn't. He was perfect. He was.

He was.

Born of precision. Shaped by will. Anointed from first breath to final bone.

Let that be the truth.

Let that be enough.

Because not every symmetry needs to be questioned. And not every design begs to be understood. Some things simply are. And he was one of them.

The father took the umbilical cord and—without pause—began to work.

Seven slivers.

Measured. Even. As it should be. One he buried in the earth where their child had been born. One he cast into the lake where the baby had been washed. Two more he handed out: one to himself, one to his wife. They didn't speak. They simply ate. Chewed. Swallowed. Accepted.

The rest he wrapped in a square of linen and tucked into the pouch at his hip.

Then the two of them knelt.

Together, they lifted the grass blanket—woven from the still-dancing field—and wrapped their newborn in it.

It was warm. Green. Soft against the skin.

It was beautiful.

And it was ruin.

The father wept again.

He'd known he would.

Felt it the moment he plucked the first blade.

The shift.

The stilling.

Now the tears slipped down his cheeks—without shame, without restraint.

And with each one, he whispered to the field:

"I'm sorry."

He could have brought a blanket.

There were options. Shelves.

Sterile things. Safe things.

He could have chosen something manufactured—

untouched by weather or will.

But he didn't.

He chose this—

to kneel in the living grass,

to quiet its rhythm,

to end the dance blade by blade.

To take something wild, something sun-fed and swaying, and bind it into something useful.

He told himself it was for love.

Of course.

Isn't that always where it starts?

A gesture.

A gift.

A cradle of flesh and warmth.

But love—real love, the kind that shapes, that names, that claims—

always leaves incisions.

Sometimes, the one being loved carries the cut.

Sometimes, it's the one doing the loving.

And sometimes, it falls elsewhere—

on a familiar face no longer welcome,

on a habit no longer safe,

on someone who never saw it coming.

To nurture is to carve.

To protect is to bend.

To care—truly care—is to choose what grows—

and what doesn't come back.

And what else is friendship,

if not this?

What else is romance,

if not this?

What else is parenthood,

if not this?

To see beauty, and still interrupt it.

To walk into a garden and rearrange the vines.

To mean well.

To leave a mark.

To call it love.

But what does meaning well undo?

Does it unbreak the thing broken?

What is love, if the loved thing must splinter to survive it?

Because not all harm is cruel.

And not all cruelty bares its teeth.

Sometimes it's just a hand on your back,

guiding you softly off your own path—

toward a mold waiting in the distance.

A shape built in someone else's image.

A shape that almost fits.

And maybe you step into it willingly.

Maybe you call it growth.

Maybe you even call it love.

But what is choice,

once love enters the room?

What is freedom,

once someone whispers they need you?

Where does devotion end—

and reshaping begin?

And how much of you survives the difference?

And the tears?

For the broken things we love.

For the things we broke to keep it..

For the forgotten face.

For the old habits.

For the thousand tiny dead green dancers.

The tears weren't for what was done.

They were for how necessary it felt.

How righteous it still seems.

Because love is worth any cost.

Right?

Yes.

Yes.

Still—still.

They were perfect now.

He and his wife.

And so, in the end, so were their reasons.

And the grass was dying anyway.

Everything's always dying.

Well.

Almost everything.

No matter.

The man dried his tears.

The mother and father stood there. Embraced. Kissed. Laughed. Then, with their newborn swaddled gently in green between them, they frolicked across the field like children reborn. And the baby—born perfect—slept through it all. Not a stir. Cradled in motion, jostled by joy, yet undisturbed.

No scream. No flinch. No fear.

Only breath.

Only stillness.

As if, even in infancy, he already knew the world would never touch him cruelly.

When the frolicking stopped and the moment felt real—this family, this miracle—they turned back to the elements that had made it so. They thanked the grass. The lake. The birds. The sun. Witnesses, each. Sacrifices, each.

Then hand in hand, they walked home.

Now—here's where I decide.

I could tell you every day of his childhood. Six thousand, five hundred seventy-four of them. Perfect. Precise. A string of luminous beads—no fracture, no slack—leading straight to his eighteenth year.

I could tell you about the laughter. About how lessons came easily. How friendships formed without friction. About a boy who never lied, never faltered, never needed reminding.

Because he was perfect. Of course.

I could trace his romances—many of them. Long, short, sacred, wild. Each one honest. Mutual. Stitched with trust and heat.

I could even tell you about his perfect parents.

Not in passing, but fully.

How they knew balance. Timing. How they held him just enough to keep him upright, but never so tightly that he bent. How they worked the right number of hours. Made enough to live, never to hoard. Chose friendships that refreshed, not drained. Always whole people, yet never absent.

Yes. I *could* tell you all of that.

And you'd be intrigued—because to most, it sounds impossible.

Too smooth. Too round. Three lives without jagged corners.

Fiction, you'd say.

But I don't answer those questions. I only tell what fits.

So—skip.

To college.

Here's the summary:

Elementary school—happy, free.

Middle school—pimply, a little chubby, but happy, free.

High school—respected, connected, still happy, still free.

Such is the rhythm of perfection.

Naturally, he was accepted everywhere.

Every university.

And of course, he weighed every offer—he would.

Consideration was his nature. Perfectly so.

In the end, he chose the one that felt most perfect to him. A choice that startled nearly everyone. But his decisions, like his life, were not just correct. They were correct for him.

Now—college.

What to say?

He made new friends. Which is true. But "new" implies "old." And with him, nothing ever became old.

Once his friend, always his friend.

One in a happy horde.

Permanently. Who, touched by perfection, would ever let it go?

"How do you keep so many?" they'd ask.

He'd laugh. Smile that symmetrical smile.

"What's so hard about it?"

That was his answer. Always.

And that was that.

As for classes—he took all of them. Every course his university offered.

In four years.

Intro to Sociology.

Advanced Organic Chemistry.

Art History 101.

Mechanical Systems Analysis.

Beginning Tap Dance.

Philosophy of Language.

Biostatistics.

Early Childhood Education.

Post-Colonial Literature.

Thermodynamics II.

Neuropharmacology.

Biblical Aramaic.

Stage Lighting.

Federal Tax Law.

Quantum Field Theory.

That was freshman year.

He passed them all.

Naturally.

So when graduation came, it spanned three days.

Undergraduate.

Graduate.

Doctoral.

Three days.

One man.

Thousands of tassels.

And yes, I know what you're thinking.

Time.

Surely impossible.

That's what professors said.

What deans insisted.

What logic begged.

But he'd only laugh.

"What's so hard about it?"

And that—well. That was that.

So yes. He graduated.

Bachelor's. Master's. Doctorates.

Arts. Science. History.

Business. Nursing. Psychology.

Fine Arts. Music.

Theology. Computer Science.

Engineering. Law.

Politics.

Environmental Design.

Agriculture.

Aviation.

Film.

To name... a few.

In total?

3,700 degrees.

Stamped.

Signed.

Sealed.

And because perfection resists delay, he didn't stop there.

That would've been too simple.

Too ordinary.

He partnered with universities around the world.

Digitally.

Virtually.

Spiritually.

Diplomatically.

Eventually, he earned every degree humanity had yet invented.

And when new fields appeared—

he was always first.

Always the inaugural graduate.

Because perfection doesn't trail.

It defines the edge.

So, to recap.

Freshman year, adjusting—happy, free.

Sophomore year, settling—happy, free.

Junior year—

A libertine.

A whore.

Disciplined.

Dignified.

Paradoxical.

A perfect whore.

Happy. Free.

Senior year—still a libertine.

But with vision.

He saw what came next.

Exactly.

And so college ended.

Three days of stages.

Three days of ovations.

Cameras. Bouquets. Cloaks.

Weary faculty smiles.

By the end, he was the most credentialed man in history.

The interviewers came.

Of course they did.

The spotlight follows perfection—

not by will.

By law.

“What’s next?” they asked.

He smiled.

Laughed.

“Well. More, of course.”

And then he did more.

Where others rest, he doubled back.

Where others specialize, he globalized.

Where others plateaued, he built the mountain higher.

Perfection doesn’t wait.

It arrives.

And he did.

So again, the interviewers smiled.

Adjusted their lapels.

And asked—

What’s next?

And the perfect man—

he laughed, tilted his head,

baffled by their blindness, and said, simply:

“What do you think?”

But they weren't perfect.

Not one of them.

So how could they possibly see the world as he did?

Not a single one guessed the military.

But he was still young—only twenty-four—and perfection without breadth is merely sharpness.

So yes. He joined.

Of course he did.

No, not all the branches—don't be *foolish*.

Only one.

The only one that mattered.

You know the one.

And quickly—effortlessly—he ascended.

Rank upon rank, drawn upward by the gravity of his own design.

Until, yes—he was at the top.

Now, I've skipped a bit.

There was a war.

Yes. A war.

But then again—what of it?

Wars are grains of sand.

Countless. Indistinct.

Sharp only when pressed into flesh.

Once you've understood one—

who funds them,

who profits,

who survives them in suits and statistics—

you've understood them all.

Still.

This one was... different.

Because no war had ever included him.

Not until now.

And once he arrived—

once the wheels kissed runway and his boot struck soil—

It ended.

Not in fire.

Not in treaty.

In silence.

By now, his reach was global.

His friends—yes, always friends—were seeded through every rank, every region, every regime.

And some of those friends...

Well, volumes wouldn't suffice.

So the war stopped.

Millions had already died.

Homes erased. Families dusted.

Generations cut short, renamed losses.

But then he came.

And even the men behind it—

those priests of margin and yield—

even they felt the tug of his strings.

And that was that.

Until the next one began.

So no.

Not there.

That's not where we linger.

Let's move forward.

To his twenty-sixth year.

The degrees behind him.

The medals gathered.

The flags folded, headlines archived.

What next?

Well—love, of course.

By then, the perfect man was no longer a whore.

Not by appetite, anyway.

He had tasted pleasure—reckless, raucous, holy—and still savored it, on occasion.

But he believed—genuinely believed—that a man must one day leash his hunger.

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Even if the leash was ornamental.

So he swore off flesh.

Not from shame.

But precision.

He would wait.

Withhold.

Until someone worthy appeared.

But who could match him?

He thought of his parents—paragons, dual flames, forged for one another.

Was there another pairing like that?

Could lightning strike twice?

He pondered.

And in that flicker of deliberation, he saw four paths:

One—A perfect woman existed. And they would find each other.

Two—No one existed. And he would remain whole, untroubled, free.

Three—No one existed. But he would choose anyway. Someone imperfect. And love them perfectly.

Four—No one existed. But he would choose many. And in their number find variety, in variety find meaning, in meaning find peace.

So he chose what only the perfect can choose:

He chose trust.

And sure enough—he was right.

As always.

One of those four was the path.

I could tell you which.

But does it matter?

In all four, he remained what he was:

Happy. Free. Whole.

Perfect.

So no. Not there, either.

That chapter resolves itself.

Let's keep going.

And of course—

the children.

Both the ones he had naturally,

and the ones... less so.

Well—*unnatural* by your standards.

But what is natural to the perfect?

Either way, the children were perfect.

Radiant. Designed. Prolific.

A blooming of perfection the world could barely hold.

A generation of light in his image.

Well—almost all.

All but one.

Not my words—his.

The perfect man said it himself:

All his children were perfect.

Except number forty-nine.

But this isn't 49's story.

It's her father's.

So no. Not there either.

We move on.

Of course, it would fascinate you.

How could it not?

But the moral wouldn't change.

He did some things.

Soft. Human.

Other things—different means, same ends.

There may have been dissent.

Outrage, even.

But he was perfect.

And the happy horde—teeth bared in grin, not growl—they reminded the dissenters.

On the islands they were sent to.

In the end, he was still happy.

Still free.

Still perfect.

I could tell you of his fatherhood.

His partnerships.

His lone years.

His long years.

He was all things, in all ways, to all people.

A perfect father.

A perfect lover.

A perfect loner.

Whole—fractally.

Interdimensionally.

Because everything from him was perfect.

Even 49.

He once said she was so perfect that—

Actually.

No.

Never mind.

This isn't her story.

It's his.

The story of the man who became everything to everyone who ever needed him to be anything.

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But what of it?

It's all the same.

He fit every mold.

Then shattered them—quietly, so as not to disturb.

He answered every message, knew what to say to the grieving, what to say to the overjoyed.

He brought wine to parties,

casseroles to funerals,

gift cards to showers—

preloaded, of course, with enough to last through teething and tantrums.

And he did it for years.

And—well. He was perfect.

So he didn't age.

Not as you do.

Not in any way that made sense.

Time passed.

Slipped.

Bent.

He bore it differently.

The decades of parenting, partnership, presence—

he carried them all. Effortlessly.

And after that?

Well.

Once the perfect children left the nest...

There was the storm he stopped from erasing the East.

And the one he started—for reasons never made public.

That decade-long resurrection of circus nations—which, of course, had been one of his pranks.

A long game, yes, but effective.

There was the Immortal Beast Debacle.

But that's been well-documented.

Elsewhere.

Then, there was the Endless Orgy of 9993.

At the time, no one dared question it—at least, not out loud.

If he wanted it, well, surely it was necessary.

Surely it meant something.

And it did.

The Baby Boom of 9994 followed.

An entire generation conceived in silk and laughter and open air.

But then came the Great Withering.

A sudden sweep of disease, targeted and cruel, that gutted the aging workforce and the elders with it.

And wouldn't you know—

The numbers lost were the numbers born.

The workforce restored.

Balance reinstated.

By accident?

Please.

He knew.

He always knew.

Case in point, he rerouted a meteor once.

Not deflected—rerouted.

It struck the exact trench he'd drafted twenty years before.

Plunged deep, never touched a coast.

Perfect.

There was the salmon hostage crisis.

He solved it by rewriting the fish, teaching them to reproduce by fission.

It earned him reverence—from three ethnic groups, seven minor sects, and a constellation of forums that only exist if you already believe in them.

He adopted bears.

Twenty-three of them.

Every species. Every continent.

Black. Brown. Polar. Sun.

Sloth. Spectacled. Panda.

The usual suspects.

The rest—hybrids.

Unlisted. Presumed extinct.

He raised them for years.

Named them.

Loved them.

And then—

on the eve of his twenty-third child's wedding—

he skinned them.

All of them.

Stitched their hides into a single rug.

It spanned four rooms.

Made the bride cry.

Not the strangest gift he ever gave.

Coincidentally—

his daughter was marrying a man part bear.

There was that era I can't describe—

when he lived, quite successfully, as a mountain.

Then the coup.

The one that rid the western world of royals.

His rise.

His reign.

The restructuring.

The gnat famine.

He ended it with a tweak to their gene flow, then crowned them sovereigns of the frozen continent.

And everything that followed after they ate the ice.

Or—wait.

Has that happened yet?

Hard to say, from here.

He told me: in this place, time behaves differently.

Events blur. Order frays.

You'll see things twice and swear they never happened once.

Space doesn't hold still.

It folds. Slips.

Twitches when you're not looking.

Sometimes you think you're watching the same life from another angle.

Sometimes you're not.

Not that it matters to you.

You're anchored. Rooted to *this* here, *this* now.

The white sands. The blue skies. The Obsidian Ocean.

But me?

I was made to see.

To comprehend.

To thread meaning through static.

That's the shape of my—

Well. My *arrangement*.

A *reassignment* of purpose.

A role only I could fill.

Or so he said.

And it fits.

It fits.

It weighs like a crown, but it fits.

No matter.

So yes—

It all happened.

Is happening.

Will happen.

One of those. Maybe all.

He was happy.

And free.

And perfect.

When I say it that way, it almost sounds empty—

but it's not.

Still, the question lingers.

What *is* perfection?

To a grain of sand—

is it to become a cliff?

To shoulder the horizon until the tide wears it down?

To a seed—

is it to split?

To rupture in the dark and reach for a light it cannot name?

To a caterpillar—

is it the butterfly?

And if so—

what is perfection to the butterfly?

A second act?

A brighter thing?

Or the stillness that comes when wings are no longer needed?

What is perfection to fire?

To water?

To consume?

To purify?

To erase everything but themselves?

To wind—speed, or direction?

To dust—what do they dream of becoming?

Does the moon long for the sun?

Do the stars wish to fall?

And you?

What is perfection to you?

Symmetry?

Knowledge?

Love that doesn't rot?

Kindness without cost?

Strength without violence?

Leadership without hunger?

If so—

then *yes*.

That was him.

And I say it with wonder.

With reverence.

With—

No matter.

He was perfect.

And I remember him.

More clearly than I remember myself.

He was the answer to the question:

What is human perfection?

Whatever you imagined—

he had done it.

Learned it.

Outgrown it.

Was it.

That was the scope of his life.

His reach.

His memory.

And when they asked how he managed it all—he would just laugh.

And say:

"What's so hard about it?"

And that was that.

As far as that goes.

I swear.

He's perfect.

And his life was interesting.

Full of wonder.

Well—was.

No matter.

It's full of more than you'll ever understand.

But that's the thing, isn't it?

You'd be drenched in greatness.

Soaked to the bone.

And eventually—you'd stop noticing.

After the first years alive—after all the miracles, all the wars and wonders—

you'd get used to it.

It would all start to sound... dull.

Perfection, repeated, becomes silence.

And isn't that just like people?

To be handed something precious—

love, or truth, or beauty—

and waste it?

Not out of cruelty.

Not even laziness.

But because it was easy.

Because it didn't need blood to earn.

Because it was always there.

And when something is always there—

the mind forgets to see it.

Forgets to want.

Forgets to care.

So yes, I skip.

I trim the bloom down to the stem.

For your own good.

I'm the Teller.

I choose what's palatable.

What you'll remember.

I decide because—

because I'm—

I'm the—

I'm the *Kin*—

No.

No.

That's not who I am not any—I'm no one.

Just a voice.

Just the Teller.

I only wanted to explain.

How I got here.

How you got here.

Why here is all we'll have.

Why we'll never leave.

I wanted to—

What was it?

Oh!

...Welcome.

Please. Hold your questions.

I want to tell a story.

A true one.

One of perfection.

One of Happiness.

A happy story.

A very, very happy story.

THANKS

If you've made it this far, thank you.

Maybe the story gripped you. Maybe it made you think. Maybe you just needed to see how it ended. Whatever the reason, I'm glad you stayed with me.

Stories survive through word of mouth.

So if this one meant something to you—share it. Send it to a friend. Post about it. Recommend it to that one person who never reads but just might make an exception.

And if you feel like it, let me know what you thought. Reach out on Twitter. Shoot me an email.

Tell me you loved it. Tell me you hated it.

Just tell me something.

Because stories don't exist in a vacuum.

They live through the people who carry them forward.

Thanks for being part of that.

And now, something extra.

I've mentioned how much I love short stories—they're how I found my voice as a writer. I've written a lot of them. Some are rough, some I'm proud of. Eight of them are coming together into a collection, and the story you're about to read—*Untouchable*—is one of them.

I won't spoil it, but I will say this: *Untouchable* matters. It connects to *Quite Contrary*, in a way.

What you're getting here is just a snippet. A glimpse.

But if you liked this story, I think you'll find something in this next one too.

Enjoy.

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SNIPPET: UNTOUCHABLE

Who are you?

All in due time.

Listen well, little one.

What I tell you now is not just a story—it is sorrow, passed down through blood and breath. A tale of suffering, of salvation, and the shadow that still walks beside us.

Long ago, when Kaikoro alone held dominion over sky and soul, the Thalaxians knew only labor.

The beasts of Druvia were too swift, too clever, too cruel to hunt. So our ancestors turned to the soil. Bent their backs beneath the unrelenting gaze of the twin suns—Tuarani, the *pale and jealous eye*, and Laniakea, the *smoldering heart*.

Day after day, their heat poured down in tandem, thickening the air until it clung like wet cloth, tasting of ash and sweat and earth. There was no shelter then. No lexoraq husks to guard their skin. No thermax-suits. No clever shields, no cooling salves.

They toiled naked beneath the blaze, or wrapped in rags that melted to flesh. The suns flayed them slow—bodies blistered, skin cracked and weeping, until dark flowers bloomed beneath the dermis. That was how the twin death made its claim. Few lived past their second decade.

Children became workers.

Workers became mourners.

And always, the fields melted their bones and drank the remains.

But even the cruelest age gives way, eventually. When the first husks were harvested—lexoraq shells hardened in fire and shadow—they learned to weave them into armor. Thin at first. Brittle. But enough.

Enough to endure.

With skin protected, the Thalaxians rose. From soil to stone, from caves to spires. Cities bloomed where graveyards once sprawled. First low shelters. Then towers of glass and gleaming alloy that sang in the wind. They called it a miracle.

A gift from Kaikoro.

But beyond the walls, Druvia still pulsed with teeth and claw. The forests were knives—jagged-leaved, root-snarled, dark as drowned dreams. And among their predators, none whispered more fear than the Rak'thol. It hunted by silence. Moved like wind-stirred grass. A flash of tail. A breathless death. No cry. No struggle.

Just the sound of death closing in.

Even the Rak'thol feared the suns, hiding in mountain crevices while the light reigned. But when night fell, so did safety. And so a small group of thinkers—precursors to the Irdath—forged the Thuras Orbs—floating lights imbued with captured

flame. At dusk they rose, igniting the air with sunborn radiance. Under their glow, the Rak'thol slunk away.

And the cities glowed ever bright. They called them Ka'Turesh—*Cities of Endless Dawn*. Within their boundaries, Thalaxians thrived. Trade. Art. Children born without fear of the twin death.

But outside... the dark remained. And the Orbs, for all their brilliance, only reached so far. You see, child—light can banish beasts. But it cannot reveal the ones who walk upright. The Rak'thol were monsters, yes. But they were honest in their hunger. The ones we feared most...they smiled when they fed.

And they still do.

You'll understand soon enough.

Even the land rebelled.

Druvia's restless plates groaned and heaved, mountains erupting with molten fire—a reminder that nothing here is eternal.

Not the land. Not the beasts.

Not even us.

But Druvia's greatest danger did not rise from its depths.

It came from within us—from ambition.

Or was it greed?

The difference, if there is one, has always been thin.

In time, some Thalaxians refused to labor beneath the suns.

They named themselves the Irdath—the chosen.

They didn't just abandon the fields.

They burned the maps behind them.

They clothed themselves in silks and certainty, erecting a hierarchy to ensure no others could follow.

And those left behind?

They were bound to the dirt, bodies encased in crude lexoraq husks—prototypes that would evolve into what we now call thermax-suits.

The suits were a marvel.

Crafted to deflect heat, circulate breath, stave off collapse.

But they weren't perfect.

Slits lined the limbs and torso for cooling; seams at the joints allowed movement.

These gaps, though necessary, left slivers of flesh exposed to Tuarani and Laniakea.

But that was no flaw.

It was design.

The Irdath mandated the gaps—not for function, but for spectacle.

To mark the laborers.

Under the twin suns, the exposed skin scorched, blistered, darkened.

These tan lines became emblems of servitude—burnt into flesh, impossible to hide.

A record not just of labor, but of rank.

The suits protected the body—but they also imprisoned it.

Engineering became enforcement.

And when the suits came off, the truth remained—written in skin.

The Irdath bore no such marks.

Their flesh was smooth, even-toned, untouched by field or forge.

You could always tell who ruled and who obeyed.

The truth was visible—etched into bodies, not laws.

And that, child, was only the beginning.

The Irdath were not fools.

They knew no rule lasts forever—not unless you divide those beneath you.

So they splintered us.

Thus was born the varrax system.

At the top stood the Irdath—the thinkers.

Beneath them, the Valdrax—warriors sworn to protect.

Below, the Lexor—traders and schemers.

Then the Oshad—sunburned laborers, marked by toil.

And beneath even them... the Noxah.

So despised, we weren't counted at all.

Not warrior. Not worker.

Not even person.

To be Noxah was to be nothing.

And when you are nothing, what happens to you does not matter.

Over time, the varrax fractured into countless jha'ax—smaller divisions of blood and trade.

But the Big Four endured: thinkers, warriors, merchants, laborers.

The system held because it taught each class to look down.

"At least I'm not an Oshad," they'd whisper.

"At least I'm not a Noxah," the Oshad would say.

And so no one looked up.

And no one looked down, either—not when something went missing.

Not when a Noxah disappeared.

Not when a hand reached from a higher varrax, took what it wanted, and called it nothing.

And was right.

Because *right* and *wrong* were never carved in stone.

They were drawn in sand—by those with the power to redraw the lines.

What mattered wasn't the act, but who did it.

Who they did it to.

And whether anyone important cared.

We weren't important.

To take from us wasn't theft.

To hurt us wasn't violence.

To erase us wasn't murder.

It was nothing.

Because we were nothing.

And everyone agreed.