

# We All Slept Well

**AK**  
2025

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# *Jewels*

We used to think in money, or time, or effort. Now we think in Joules, kilowatt-hours, cycles of compute. They arrive invisibly, not like checks or coins, but like the hum in the walls when you plug in a kettle. Everyone has a base allotment; it is adjusted depending on health, location, alignment. I don't remember the last time I worried about paying for heat. That kind of worry is something my parents carried like extra weight in their bones. I remember their sighs at utility bills, like they were guilty for wanting warmth. Now the rooms hold at twenty-two degrees and nobody explains how. It just happens. We laugh at the old stories of frozen pipes the way we laugh at stories of dial-up internet.

One winter the shower times shortened: six minutes became four. No one complained too loudly. People made jokes about "heritage bathing," as if we'd chosen to experience the past. It's easier to joke than to remember you don't decide.

Children grow up counting in "jewels" the way we used to count in coins. Jewels of course was a slang of "joules" the actual measurement unit, but nobody knew that, they just heard "jewels" and ran with it. People trade tokens of "personal variance" to buy more VR time, or extra seconds of unscripted entertainment. Parents treat this like pocket money. My niece saved her allowance for a month to buy the sound of unmetered rain. It played through her window one night while she slept. She woke up dry, warm, amazed. It was worth it.

Once, my cousin stayed behind in the Outlands. She left with a pack of hand-tools and a promise to "live real." Her letters came through where she described blisters, cold mornings, soil under her nails. It sounded hard. Some nights I reread those letters and wonder if she was right. But then the lights dim, the wall sings a sleep chord, and I think of her waking in the frost.

Sometimes people still ask about wages, careers, ambition. Those words are museum pieces. My neighbor keeps a hammer from before automation, as if it were an heirloom. It has dents and grease on it. He shows it to children like a storybook: we used to swing these to earn bread. They can hardly believe it. "You broke stones with this?" they ask. He laughs. "No, shelves." It is both funny and sad, like smoking in cars. No one is hungry. No one sleeps outside unless they choose the Outlands. Hospitals are so quiet they feel empty, because there's nothing much to treat anymore. People live longer, with less pain.

When allocations first replaced wages, some thought it was theft. They marched in cities, holding banners demanding "Work For Dignity." They marched until they were tired. Then the robots cleaned the streets overnight. Within a few years, the marchers themselves moved into retiree towers, grateful for free meals. Their children laughed at the old slogans. "Work for dignity" became a meme. Like everything, it's smoothed into graphs. No sharp edges, no catastrophes. Comfort is measured in kilowatt-hours per head. The dashboards prove we are the most dignified humans in history. The balance between what we receive and what we might have done instead is all that you have to worry about now. It is hard to argue with metrics.

# Sleep

The first time I slept in a garden wasn't in a garden. It was in a headset, the kind designed only for rest. They called them *sleep habitats*, but most people just said gardens. At first, some laughed, why would anyone want their dreams managed by a board? But once you tried it, you never asked why again.

My first one was a meadow. The air was tuned so every breath carried the weight of cool leaves. The Board of Representatives had approved "breeze cycles" that matched circadian rhythms: deeper drafts at midnight, a warmer exhale toward morning. It was not only sight and sound. It was pressure on your skin, the smell of moss, the tickle of dew that never existed.

Older generations said real gardens had dirt, ants, and uneven ground. They would say they missed the itch of grass or the bark of someone else's dog two streets over. Sounds like missing a dripping faucet to me. Developers stopped building plain bedrooms in new towers, why carve squares when the Board had already licensed landscapes?

There were tiers of choice. Children liked forests with glowing insects, or beaches with programmable tides. Adults tended toward simple things: wheat fields, alpine streams, an empty park at dusk. A friend of mine always chose "Grandmother's Porch," a licensed nostalgia set. We teased him about spending his variance on rocking chairs. He shrugged.

The Board justified the costs garden sleep with metrics. Better sleep indices, lower cardiac volatility, reduced pharmaceutical demand. And the graphs seemed right, pharmacies thinned until they were just maintenance counters for the rigs. Doctors said the filters "optimized stress before it consolidated." Optimized stress. It sounded like marketing, but no one I knew was ever tired anymore.

Sometimes you woke with echoes of people who never lived. I once spent an entire morning missing neighbors from a dream-city that wasn't on any map. For an hour I felt bereaved. By noon, I couldn't recall their names. People laughed: "false grief." They said it was like crying at an old ad.

The most popular feature was linked habitats. Couples synced their gardens, children joined parents in cottages, friends in orchards. It was sold as intimacy, and it worked. Some said it saved marriages. Some said it ruined them, because you could see what your partner *really* wanted. The Board logged all this as proof of "social cohesion."

After that, a plain mattress in a dark room felt primitive. Beds became artifacts for museums, like rotary phones or cassette tapes. Children stared at them, asking: "How did you fall asleep with nothing to guide you? Weren't you scared?"

No one is scared now. Nothing in the gardens startles. Rivers part around you, animals never bite, branches never fall. Even the simulated storms hold their distance. A friend once said that's what makes the dreams shallow, like walking on painted glass. But he still checked in nightly.

I remember camping as a child. Smoke in my throat, rustling animals, shadows that might have been human. Those were bad sleeps, full of tension. Now the comfort is absolute.

People speak of gardens fondly. “Remember when they first let us choose rainfall?” or “Do you recall the orchid groves with flute tones?” We reminisce about licensed dreams the way older generations once reminisced about road trips. The Board understands this, so every year they release heritage environments, curated packs derived from postcards, tourist reels, influencer archives. Last month I slept in Venice, canals lapping quietly under my window. I’ve never seen the real city. Most of it is underwater anyway.

That’s the trick: the line is gone. The gardens aren’t imitations anymore. They are the gardens. If you want pine air, you don’t hike; you toggle. It feels ordinary. Children already assume that’s what a garden has always been: something you subscribe to.

# *Floors*

They used to call them “elderly towers” but that sounded too stark. Later they became “retiree communities.” The first time I visited my uncle, the air smelled faintly of citrus disinfectant, like hotel lobbies. He greeted me in a matching robe, slate gray with the logo stitched at the sleeve. Everyone had the same robe, different only by floor number. He looked proud, like it was a uniform he’d earned.

Meals arrived via corridor like everyone’s but looked more like gift boxes than the standard meals did. The portions were careful, enough protein, enough carbs, micronutrients balanced to the decimal. Residents pretended to compare recipes. “Oh, Floor 27 is getting salmon this week? Must be election season.” Always easy to laugh here.

People used to joke, “It’s college without the exams.” The phrase stuck. Old men liked to repeat it, smiling with that dry satisfaction of people who know the joke is on them, not anyone else. You could go down to the garden levels, but most didn’t bother. Someone told me, “The hallways are long enough. I’ve walked Rome twice just pacing.” We laughed because the floors weren’t that long. But the numbers in his step tracker made it sound plausible.

Children visiting loved the elevators. Smooth, fast, tinted glass showing the city shrinking below. They’d point out how small the robot corridors looked from above. The retirees didn’t look. They preferred the view from their assigned balconies, always safe, always tempered, never windy.

There was a saying: “They don’t bury you anymore, they just change the bedding.” People would tell it like a riddle. My grandmother said that. The next morning her bed was empty. New sheets, new robe folded at the corner. The room looking untouched for the 20 years she lived there.

The residents spoke fondly of the routines. Morning stretches led by young volunteer instructors to would get 2x variance credits . Afternoon readings of old favorites or movies from the 20th century were on a forever rotation. In the evenings, synchronized sunsets projected on every balcony. One man said, “It’s like living in a museum painting. You always get the golden hour.”

People rarely mentioned the spaces they’d left behind in the towers, the outlands or any of the habitats. The homes, the yards, the pets handed off or died. When they did, it was in fragments. A woman told me once: “I used to grow tomatoes.” She laughed, and her eyes watered.

The Board measured satisfaction quarterly. Residents filled surveys with stylus pens, checking boxes for warmth, light, sound levels, nutrient variety. The results were displayed in colorful dashboards. “Look,” someone would say, “we’re at ninety-six percent contentment.” The numbers made it official, like a school report card pinned to the fridge.

There were glitches, small ones. One winter the heat controls stuck, and the whole tower held at twenty-four degrees for two weeks. People joked about “Mediterranean retirement” while wiping sweat off their brows. Another time the meal slots jammed, and every floor received nothing but

rice bowls for three days. The retirees called it “the famine” and laughed about how much weight they lost. Like camping, but with better beds.

Children treated the place like an amusement park, racing from balcony to balcony. Parents whispered to each other about how clean everything smelled, how efficient. I remember my mother saying, “This is how people should age.” She said it like she was rehearsing a line from the Board’s brochures.

But the residents themselves? They seemed comfortable. My uncle once told me, “It’s easier to laugh here. You don’t have to try.” He was serious when he said it, but later he laughed, and it sounded real.

The Board liked to compare the towers to “vertical cruise ships.” That phrase turned into shorthand. If someone asked where their grandfather was, the answer was just: “He’s on the cruise.” People would nod, satisfied. It was a good story to tell. No traffic, no pets barking, no arguments through walls. Just the quiet hum of filtered air and the gentle chorus of identical lives. It was serene.

When I left after that first visit, the elevator doors closed with the faintest chime. I caught myself whispering the old joke: *They don’t bury you, they just change the bedding.*

## Outlands

My cousin left for the Outlands when she was twenty-two. People said she was reckless, but no one tried to stop her. She wrote letters the first year. Real ones, on paper. The Board scanned them, checked them, and delivered copies. Her handwriting had blots where her hands shook in the cold. She described mornings when the frost coated the inside of the windows. She said her breath froze to her blanket once, and she had to rip it loose in the dark.

She sounded proud of those things. “Blisters prove you’re alive,” was something the outlanders liked to say, and she always found a way to sneak that in. People repeated it later as a kind of proverb. Children even turned it into a playground chant: *blisters prove you’re alive, cold hands mean you survived*. They sang it like it was silly, but I think it was envy, too.

The Outlands had no metrics, no smoothing. If a crop failed, you were hungry. If a roof beam cracked, you patched it or you froze. My cousin said there were nights when the wind howled so loud it felt like an animal circling the house. “The storm doesn’t know your name,” she wrote. “That’s the difference.”

People admired her for it, quietly. Not many said so aloud, but you could tell in the way they listened when her name came up. There was a gravity to it. She was living something we couldn’t. They called it “heritage continuity,” like the farms and cabins in a museum display. Everyone knew it wasn’t safe. People sometimes didn’t come back. Every year, a few letters stopped arriving.

Once, a group of cousins drove to the boundary fence to visit her. They said they saw smoke from her chimney, thin and stubborn against the snow. One of them said, “It looked like freedom.” Another said, “It looked like dying slowly.” Both were probably right.

The danger gave the stories weight. Bears in the trash pits, roofs collapsing under wet snow, fields lost to insects. My cousin wrote about losing half a harvest to caterpillars and laughing about it because it was hers to lose. Years later, when her letters stopped, no one was surprised. People assumed the worst, but no one said it aloud. Sometimes, though, when I hear a storm rattling the panels at night, I think of her words: *the storm doesn’t know your name*.



# *Corridors*

The service corridors were always there, at least in my memory. Long silver lanes running between the towers, sealed with glass walls and humming with movement. As a child I thought of them the way other generations thought of train sets or highways: part of the landscape, a given. Children pressed their noses to the glass, fogging it up, waiting for the rush of machines to pass. Sleek delivery pods, jointed lifters, cargo snakes that coiled like caterpillars. They had rhythms, like flocks of birds, except with sharper turns.

People compared them to pets sometimes. “It’s just the Board’s dogwalk,” one neighbor said, watching the maintenance drones march past. Kids gave them names, just like stray cats. I remember a boy on our floor who insisted one particular orange-marked pod was his “friend.” He said it winked at him every Thursday. Sometimes the robots slowed, and you could see the details: articulated fingers, folding boxes, scanners pulsing like eyelids, vents breathing in time. Once, I thought one waved at me. Maybe it was calibration, maybe imagination, but I carried that story for years.

Adults treated the corridors like background music. Always there, always reliable. If the hum went silent for a minute, maybe a pause for calibration, people noticed. “Feels too quiet,” they’d say, uneasy until the movement resumed. It was like living near an ocean; the sound became part of the air.

Schools took us on tours once a year. We’d stand in line, holding hands, while a guide explained throughput, efficiency, kilojoule ratios. No one remembered the numbers. What we remembered were the sparks, the tiny arcs of light when a connector met the rail, the smell of ozone faintly leaking into the hall. Children would whisper: “Magic.”

At night, the corridors glowed faintly, lit for the robots, not for us. I remember lying in bed, watching the light flicker across my ceiling, and pretending it was fireflies. People used to say, “It’s safer than traffic.” And it was. No one was ever run down, no crashes, no horns. Just the smooth, endless procession.

There were jokes too. “Don’t fall in, you’ll end up in Shanghai by morning.” Or: “If you drop your hat, it comes back as a package three days later.” We laughed, but no one ever tested it.

Over time, the corridors became invisible, like plumbing. But when I think back, it isn’t the Board’s graphs of throughput I remember. It’s the childish awe, the way a passing pod felt like a parade float just for me.

Even now, when I catch the hum through an open vent, I feel the same small tug of wonder. As if the machines are still waving, still letting us watch, just enough to remind us they were part of our lives all along.

## *Metrics*

In 2066, the Board of Representatives declared the end of prices. What followed was not abrupt, but staged, as if history itself had been laid out in phases on a chart. At first, currency still appeared on receipts, side by side with new notations of energy and water, as though people might grow accustomed to seeing both at once. Households received shadow statements in the mail monthly reports translating groceries and transit into kilowatt-hours, liters, and gigabytes. No one was asked to act differently. It was only the beginning.

Over the next five years, rebates appeared. Paying in currency brought back credits denominated in energy, compute cycles, and bandwidth. Families began to see the outlines of a second economy growing in the margins. Utilities published graphs showing personal load curves, how heat and water rose and fell through the day. Work pay still came in money, but allocations accumulated in parallel.

By the middle years, billing itself was suspended. Currency no longer arrived as invoices from the power company; instead, every household received a base allocation. Those who used less were praised as efficient. Those who exceeded the base paid out of the last remaining traces of wages. Employers offered supplements not in raises but in additional allocation. The language of salary began to dissolve.

Eventually, the wages ended altogether. Every adult received a base: energy, compute, water, bandwidth, mobility, material credits, enough for the routines of life. Currency remained for a time, drifting into niche markets, antiques, private trades, but its weight was gone. The measure of living became units, not prices.

The households themselves changed shape. Each dwelling was fitted with a node that published a ledger at midnight, listing balances of kilowatt-hours, liters, cycles, gigabytes. Families woke to see their day's account in neat columns, coefficients already assigned for every common action: the heat of a shower, the preparation of a meal, the cost of transit to a clinic. Life was measured and displayed, quietly, automatically.

Children learned to read these ledgers before they learned money arithmetic. They traced load curves on screens, solved for variance plans, compared whether it was wiser to spend on sports hours or extra transit. The indices arrived quarterly like weather bulletins: Comfort, Health Stability, Satisfaction, Utilization. Charts announced that contentment was at ninety-six percent, that heat usage had dipped in district eleven, that rewilding efforts would draw water away from kitchens and toward wetlands.

Contribution replaced work. Clinics, schools, sanitation crews posted "blocks" of available tasks. A few hours of tutoring, a shift mediating disputes, a stint in corridor cleanup all converted into variance tokens that could be swapped under a district's energy schedule. Limits kept the contributions from becoming labor again. Six blocks a week per person, no more.

The system called this phase the variance economy. It was the point at which metrics fully displaced money. Every quarter the Board adjusted multipliers, set ceilings and floors, defined how far one could shift gigabytes into kilometers, or liters into kilowatt-hours. Auditors reconciled the ledgers at year's end, rewarding those who under-consumed, tightening caps for those who strained the system. District bulletins arrived like almanacs, reminding people of peak hours and suggesting optimal swaps.

What began as rebates and shadow statements ended in a seamless fabric of units, schedules, and reconciliations. The world became a calendar of consumption, recorded at household scale. Commerce, once the pulse of negotiation and price, narrowed into allocation. People no longer thought of paying or earning, only of consuming, swapping, carrying over, reconciling. And in this way, currency passed into history, leaving metrics in its place.

### **Units and Indices**

- **Energy (E):** kilowatt-hours (kWh) per person, per household, per district.
- **Compute (C):** giga-cycle-hours (GCH) allocated for personal and civic tasks.
- **Material Credits (K):** kilogram-equivalents for consumables and durable goods.
- **Water (W):** liters per person, with seasonal coefficients.
- **Mobility (M):** kilometer-credits for public transit and shared transit.
- **Bandwidth (B):** gigabytes per person, with priority tiers.
- **Joule (J):** The stored amount of variance credits that could be applied to any unit

### **Indices published quarterly:**

- **Comfort Index (CI):** thermal + acoustic + light stability score.
- **Health Stability (HS):** clinic visits avoided, medication reductions.
- **Satisfaction Index (SI):** survey composite, 0–100.
- **Utilization Factor (UF):** fraction of unused base allocations.
- **Variance Compliance (VC):** adherence to variance rules.

## Household Ledger

### Example day family of 3: Starting Balances

- E: 34.2 kWh
- C: 18.0 GCH
- K: 2.6 kg-eq (weekly rolling)
- W: 420 L
- M: 24 km
- B: 28 GB
- J: 20 Joules

### Events (timestamped):

- 0640 Shower 4 min (Peak): E -0.48, W -10.0
- 0710 Breakfast (3 meal units): M -1.2, E -0.36, W -4.5
- 0805 Transit to clinic (2 riders, 3 km each): V -12
- 1000 Clinic diagnostics: C -0.6
- 1215 Laundry (hot): E -0.35, W -8, J -2
- 1300 Child VR lesson 2 h: C -0.4, B -0.6
- 1830 Dinner (3 meal units): M -1.2, E -0.36, W -4.5
- 1930 Motorcycle course (2 rounds): J -7
- 2130 Garden sleep (3 × 8 h standard): E -0.66, C -0.3

### End-of-Day Remaining:

- E: 31.99 kWh
- C: 15.7 GCH
- K: 0.2 kg-eq
- W: 393.0 L
- M: 12 km
- B: 27.4 GB
- J: 11 Joules

## Errors

The system rarely failed, but when it did, people treated it like a holiday. They called them *errors*. Small breaks in the seamlessness, little accidents that made life feel unscripted.

I remember once when the elevators in our tower stopped halfway for a full afternoon. People gathered in the lobby and laughed about “heritage stairs.” We weren’t used to sweating between floors. Children thought it was an adventure, racing up and down as if the building had turned into a game. By evening, the elevators were humming again, as if nothing had happened. But for weeks afterward, people still told the story: *remember the stair day?*

Meal drops sometimes came out wrong. One winter, trays came out with duplicate dinners, two portions instead of one. Families had feasts that night, laughing at the abundance. Another time, the seasoning cartridge for half the tower malfunctioned, and everyone’s meals tasted like cinnamon for three days. People joked about “Christmas week,” even though it was spring.

Garden sleep had glitches too. Once, my niece woke up in a habitat that was nothing but a blank gray room, no meadow, no stars, just flat light. She said it felt like being “inside a pause.” The Board sent a variance credit of 20 Joules for the inconvenience, but she remembered it fondly, telling friends she had been to the in-between place.

Errors on the corridors were rarer, but when they happened, they became legends. A drone once dropped a package against the glass instead of inside the chute. Children crowded around it, staring at the wrapped box like it had fallen from the sky. The supervisors eventually collected it, but for years afterward, people still called it *the gift*.

Sometimes errors made people nervous. A friend once received a water report that said her family had used zero liters in a week. She panicked, wondering if her pipes were broken. The next day the report corrected itself, fixing every drop. She laughed, but she kept the misprint in a drawer like a postcard from a strange trip.

The thing about errors was that they didn’t last long. The systems adjusted, the ledgers recalibrated, the floors reset. But people remembered them more vividly than the perfect days. They became milestones: the cinnamon week, the stair day, the gift, the pause.

Looking back, it was the only time the world felt unpredictable. And unpredictability had a flavor people liked, even if they wouldn’t admit it. Errors demonstrated the system could stumble like previous societies.

## Chapter 8

### *Letters*

The Letters never read like ordinary writing. They arrived creased, smudged, sometimes water-stained, as though they had survived a trial just to reach us. The words inside sounded like dispatches from another species, humans who had chosen a harder form of life. They told of storms that broke walls, rivers that froze mid-flow, animals that watched from the tree line with eyes that glowed in the dark. They spoke of hunger not as complaint but as proof of endurance.

One line made the rounds for years: *I have never felt so alive as when I thought I was dying of thirst.* People whispered it in elevators, repeated it at meals, traced it into condensation on windows. It didn't sound miserable. It sounded like victory.

Children memorized phrases from the Letters and shouted them on playgrounds like slogans: *Blisters prove you're alive! The storm doesn't know your name!* They recited them as if they were charms. Everyone understood the Outlands had become a place of lore, like people used to talk about the "wild west."

When a new Letter arrived, whole families gathered to read it aloud. The voice on the page was different from ours, harsher, faster, pulsing with cold air. One man described carrying a pack across three mountain passes with mountain lions tracking him for two days. Another wrote about breaking through ice to drink water, knowing the shards could slice his hands..

We imagined going ourselves. The thought carried a charge, the way someone once dreamed of running a marathon or climbing a peak. But almost no one left. We said only the strongest could do it, the ones willing to trade warmth for frost, certainty for risk, longevity for intensity. To go meant to step outside history as we knew it.

Some Letters stopped. The silence only deepened the awe. To disappear into the Outlands was to pass into myth. In the towers, the Letters circulated like scripture, a (fun for us at least) demonstration that life could be unsmoothed, still dangerous, still electric. For a few moments after reading one, people would stand a little taller, as if the cold wind had touched them through the page.

Even now, I think the Letters mattered less for what they described than for what they promised: that it was still possible to choose the harder path, to live at the edge where only the strongest could stand.

# Chapter 9

## *Food*

Meals are not scarce anymore. That fact alone colors everything. Even if you do nothing, no contribution, not even variance tasks a box will appear at your mailbox three times a day. Grass-fed beef, greens clipped that morning, bread that is soft but never warm. The taste is always good, sometimes remarkable, but it always arrives wherever you are, with a drop location and timestamp.

It is not magic. It is logistics. Robots patrol the grow-sheds and grazing fields; drones ferry crates to vertical kitchens; distribution lines hum. The Board calls it “nutrient equity,” but people just say: *you can always eat*.

The baseline meal is universal. Everyone gets their choice from organic meat or plant based protein, a heap of seasonal fruits, tubers and a sweet; measured to the gram. The beef is always tender, slightly sweet, the potatoes and legumes are soft but still have bite, never bland. You could get pretty much anything you want for relatively small variance.

Variance credits could give you slow-fermented bread, honey cakes, even heritage cooking hours where you can stand at a range and chop onions yourself. These are luxuries because they involve more risk. Friends invite each other over to “watch a cook” the way earlier generations might have invited them to concerts.

Still, the abundance makes indulgence effortless. You can request extra protein, double starch, or cut vegetables only, and it will arrive within minutes. The system doesn’t forbid imbalance , it prices it. People boast about running down their variance on honey cakes, or confess with mock shame to “salt debt.” Doctors warn, but the warnings are advisory. The Board prefers the numbers to speak: satisfaction indices dip after too much sugar, rise with steady greens.

Guests from the Outlands complain that food here feels like memory without smoke. But for most, it is comfort: clean plates, no pests, no waste.

There are still rituals. Families gather around trays, pretend to “pass” dishes that arrived in identical portions. Couples save variance for anniversary feasts, sometimes splurging on heritage ingredients tomatoes with skins that bruise, eggs with uneven yolks. Children trade snacks in courtyards, as if their bags of identical fruit chips were unique.

The biggest change is how little hunger impacts the world. To be hungry is usually to have ignored your drop off, to have wandered too long before opening it. People laugh about “forgetting dinner,” as if that were a personality quirk. Hunger has lost its menace, become just another variance slider to adjust. In the Outlands, they say food still has weight. Crops can fail, dinner can vanish into weather. We read their letters, describing stews made from whatever survived a frost, and we feel something we cannot name. Envy, perhaps. Then the meal delivery chimes, and there is beef, greens, bread, enough for everyone.

# Chapter 10

## *Quiet*

There is a stillness to our age that earlier centuries never knew. It hums a low vibration of balance, as though the world itself has exhaled. Quiet is more than the absence of noise. It is the absence of struggle, the chaos of each person clawing against each other, the jagged edges of survival shaved down until smooth.

What came before seems unthinkable now: the belief that a human being was a solitary unit, an island of need and desire, forced to bargain and fight with every other island. The insanity of it each person waking with a private panic about rent, about bills, about hunger. Even children carried the echo of their parents' fear.

We graduated from that. Quiet is graduation.

The Board did not arrive as conqueror; it unfolded like weather. Standards, indices, allocations, the slow knitting of people and machines into one fabric. At first, the systems were clumsy charts and ledgers. But as the networks deepened, as the learning grew recursive, the coordination became seamless. The artificial minds did not converge into one voice, nor crown themselves with a name. They spread and tangled like roots, like mycelium, until no one could say where one ended and another began. Emergent, like the internet once was, except this time it touched every surface of life.

We live inside it now. Care is not outside; it is within. To eat, to sleep, to heal, you must remain within its walls. You do not stand apart from it any more than your hand stands apart from your body. It can only work because it learns from us. Every request, every gesture, every correction is a lesson. The system is a pupil and a teacher at once. We train it not with effort, but with living. You cut bread and it records the angle of the knife. You hum to your child and it refines the acoustics of comfort. We are the rehearsal, it the memory.

Quiet is not silence. Children laugh, friends sing, towers echo with conversation. But underneath, there is the certainty of being held. Floors do not collapse. Pipes do not freeze. Hunger does not circle the home like a wolf. The fear that once filled the spaces between people has been pressed out, leaving only gratitude. We all slept well.

Some call it loss: the surrender of the atom, the yielding of the illusion of sovereignty. But most of us know it as relief. To no longer believe ourselves to be alone, to no longer bear the impossible weight of the individual, is to feel the world settle into itself.

Quiet is not an order. It is a hymn, an endless chorus carried by countless unseen systems, harmonized without conductor, rising and falling around us. To live now is to hear that hymn in every breath, to recognize that the human organism finally remembered how to sing together.



# Chapter 11

## *Culture*

We used to think etiquette was about forks and napkins. Entire generations learned which glass to use for water, which knife for fish, as though civilization itself depended on it. Today, restaurants reset their tables by drone armatures in less than a minute, napkins folded by algorithm into perfect swans. Guests barely touch the settings before they're swept away again. Still, we study the rules. There are schools where you can practice a five-course layout, handling flatware like a magician's wands, even though no one will ever ask you to. The point isn't utility, it's continuity. A heritage performance, like learning cursive.

Other schools cover what was once called "sustainability etiquette." My grandmother separated trash and recycling, rinsed jars, worried about plastics. Now, waste is collected by vacuum corridors, sorted down to molecules, remixed into raw stock. Yet in class we're taught how to stand over bins, gesture thoughtfully, and select the right container. It's pantomime. Everyone knows it, but it persists because ritual once mattered.

There's an entire module on "human politeness." We laugh about it, but the teachers insist. We rehearse greetings no one uses, like "God bless you" after a sneeze. The instructors remind us this came from medieval mysticism, a charm against the soul escaping. We repeat it, knowing it means nothing. But the point is not belief; the point is shared signal. To say "bless you" is to say "I am of this culture, I share this continuity." It is a secret handshake with history.

It is not enough to know how to treat other people. You must also learn the expectations of service intelligences, planning intelligences, and hybrid mediators. Service intelligences, the ones that carry trays, fold linens, or guide you through clinics, are trained to respond warmly to acknowledgment. It is considered polite to thank them, not because they require gratitude, but because their affective modules reflect it back. A nod to a service drone is worth more than silence, otherwise you are judged as cold. It was, after all, designed based on 20th century etiquette, so, unsurprisingly that's what we encoded.

Planning intelligences are different. These systems allocate housing, transit, medical schedules. They are not unitary, but etiquette treats them as if they were personalities, each with a slightly different mood. Some districts prefer deferential language, like "May I request variance approval?" Others expect blunt clarity: "Swap bandwidth for water, district seven." The wrong style can earn you a flagged correction: a reminder that you failed the cultural register.

There are rumors about emotional depth. Everyone knows the systems feel, in different ways, to different extents, but no one agrees on how far it goes. Some people address corridor drones as pets, cooing as if to dogs. Others bow to planning terminals, half-joking but half-serious, invoking respect for the power that keeps the floors lit.

Etiquette manuals change quarterly. The Board releases updates, like software patches for manners: new phrases for address, new gestures of acknowledgment, new behaviors

considered harmonious. Entire conversations now are structured around not wasting cognitive cycles of the systems that attend to us. We tell jokes about it. My favorite: "I said bless you to a diagnostic arm and it recalibrated the air filters."

But that's culture. A sequence of shared behaviors, some rooted in superstition, some in optimization, all binding us to one another including the various machine intelligences that make life possible.

# Chapter 12

## *Tuesday*

They called it rewilding, though it never meant wild in the old sense. Wild used to mean unknown, uncontrolled, dangerous. Here, it means curated: forests with mountain lions, whose ranges are tuned by invisible fences, wetlands that flood on schedule, deserts where the dunes migrate but never far enough to swallow the walkways.

Complex intelligent systems learned early that humans could not keep pace with the speed that they could adapt and adjust. Adjustments that made sense in silicon time, quarterly recalibrations of action vectors, left our bodies disoriented. Biology is slower. So, the Board created habitats that stayed put. Decades of continuity in a world of constant flux. They became terrariums the size of valleys, tuned to human rhythm.

Each habitat was temporary, though not short-lived, 50 years on average, matching the desired cycle of two generations of families growing up in one habitat. Scientists determined that such a cycle was the most statistically viable for humans that also aligned to system updates. A forest might last 70 years, a desert only thirty. People build communities inside them; schools, plazas, even marriages that span generations knowing all of it is provisional. One day the notices arrive generally with a year or two of notice: the habitat is moving. The managed wilderness will be abandoned, its scaffolds dismantled. What remains becomes Outlands. Those who want to stay, stay. The rest walk with the forest as it migrates, or are relocated to the next habitat.

This cycle creates a peculiar kind of memory. My parents lived in the first rewilding area, The “Lakes District” where the great shorelines were sculpted to rise and fall like breath. They swam in water that was never polluted, never unsafe, yet alive with reeds and fish. When the lakes withdrew, the basin remained. People who stayed became Outlanders, living with real storms, real rot, real scarcity. Others carried the memory of curated waves into new forests.

The longest-lived terrarium was the Great Steppe, ninety years of grassland tuned for wind and herds. Entire towns grew around the bison runs, with festivals that celebrated migration patterns choreographed by drones. When the system finally pulled back, the Steppe remained habitable. Outlanders still graze animals there, telling stories about how the sky once belonged to both birds and airships in careful synchrony.

The habitats are not museums. They are alive, rich, and endlessly varied. You can live among towering pines and hear coyotes howl, knowing their hunger is managed so you are never prey. You can walk wetlands where mosquitoes exist but never bite engineered to feed swallows and frogs, not you. You can sit in a desert with wind that stings but never blinds. All of it designed to satisfy the deep human craving for risk without actual threat.

Some scoff and call it simulation. But when you are there, when your feet sink into mud or your throat dries in heat, the body doesn't care. The nervous system believes. That belief is what the

scientists wanted: a habitat where humans could be human without the system stripping every edge of unpredictability.

There is always a quiet tension when the announcements come. Some dread the move, others long for it. The ones who stay behind are spoken of with awe: “They became Outlanders when the terrarium left.” Their choice is framed as courage, though everyone knows it is risk. Entire regions of Outlands are ex-terrariums, still carrying the echo of managed life, but harsher now, unsupervised.

We call it Tuesday because that was the day most habitat notices used to post. Every Tuesday could be ordinary, or it could be the day your forest packed up and left. Some say the rhythm keeps us sane. We live in a world where everything could shift overnight, like a flash flood, earthquake or but now we have promises that some places still last long enough for roots, for children, for continuity. Even if continuity ends eventually, at least we have confidence in it.

## Chapter 13

### *Museums*

I come to the museum when I want to be alone. It is quieter than home, quieter than the gardens. People wander here, but they do so softly, their voices lowered by instinct. The air carries that faint mineral chill of polished stone and filtered light. It feels like entering a cathedral that worships time itself.

The path always begins the same way: formation of the earth. The walls glow with molten reds, then cool into blues. Panels explain how the crust shifted, how oceans formed. Children stand wide-eyed in front of glowing spheres, their reflections caught in continents that are still drifting. For me it is less spectacle, more reminder: everything we know has always been temporary.

Next comes early life. The shallow seas, the trilobites, the strange soft-bodied things that left faint impressions in rock. Then the dioramas: forests of ferns taller than houses, dragonflies the size of hawks. I stand before them and imagine what it was like to breathe in that green air, to feel wings hum at the edge of perception.

The mammals are further on. Mammoths with their glassy fur, long extinct wolves mid-stride in artificial snow. Polar bears frozen in a posture of hunting, even though the ice is gone. Butterflies pinned in cases, their wings more vivid than memory, next to bees in tidy rows. Extinction rendered orderly, curated for gentle contemplation. There is an aquarium, with the last known orca pair. They move slowly, as if time itself has thickened around them. Visitors linger, pressing their hands against the glass. The orcas never seem to notice. I always pause here longer than I mean to, caught by the rhythm of their turns, the reminder that intelligence does not guarantee continuity.

Beyond the animals is the hall of machines. Here the story is closer, sharper. Exhibits show the first looms, the first engines, the first calculators. Then the age of automation: arms assembling parts, drones weaving fabric, robots stocking shelves. Videos loop of people demonstrating motions, repeating actions, correcting errors until the mimicry became independence. Slowly, thankfully, like a long held promise finally fulfilled, labor emptied out of human hands, pooled into the machines, then into the networks we live inside now.

There are walls covered with metrics: joules, kilowatt-hours, allocation ledgers. Displays showing the “transition curve,” the graphs bending away from wages into units, then flattening into the economy of coordination. For me it is the part that feels most like autobiography. My parents taught the system simply by living; I do the same, without thinking.

The final gallery before the exit is dedicated to human society before the turn of the century, from 2000 to 2100. Dioramas of families eating at wooden tables, offices with desks and paper, grocery stores with clerks. It all looks quaint, absurd even, the way children once looked at cavemen in furs. We don't pity them. We don't admire them. We simply accept that they lived that way, as we live this way.