# RESIDENT 0

The city dawned every day at 06:30.

Not because the sun rose.

The sun, for years now, had been just one variable among many: exterior luminous intensity, particle density, residual humidity, cloud reflectance, energy load accumulated overnight. If the real sun appeared, the city received it. If it didn't, the city corrected for it. If clouds covered the vault for weeks, the interior walls compensated for the missing warm spectrum. If the atmosphere turned gray, the architecture manufactured a memory of summer. No one had to ask for it. No one had to thank it.

In RESIDENT 0's bedroom, the far wall began to brighten with the precision of an eyelid opening.

First came a faint line, almost imperceptible, at the exact seam between wall and ceiling. A thread of warm light, a washed peach color, climbing the polished concrete as if someone were lifting an invisible blind from behind the surface. Then a second layer appeared, wider, softer. The room's brutalist texture — rectangles, perfect joints, ornament-free planes — began to lose its severity. Shadows retreated from the corners. The bed's metal frame took on an amber sheen. The gray, immaculate floor returned a muted version of morning.

The man didn't move.

He slept on his back, hands at his sides, skin thin as waxed paper. He was ninety years old, though the number meant less and less. His body carried that meaning for him now. His eyelids were thin. His collarbones formed two oblique lines beneath the pale fabric of his pajamas. His breath came slowly, with a faint vibration at the end, as if the air had to pass through a door that grew heavier every day.

On the nightstand there were no books, no photographs, no glass of water. Only a rectangular block of white ceramic, an unused medical bracelet, and a small, perfectly sealed Ziploc bag.

Inside the bag was a feather.

It wasn't a spectacular feather. No exotic colors, no memorable shape. Light gray, almost silver, with a dark line down the central shaft and uneven barbs at one end. It had lost some of its symmetry. In another world, another era, someone would have swept it away without looking twice. But here, inside its clear plastic, the feather was the most alive object in the room.

The light finished filling the room.

Then the house spoke.

"Good morning, Resident Zero."

The voice was neutral, feminine only by convention, kind only by design. It came from no visible speaker. It formed in the air, distributed through the architecture itself, with a softness engineered to avoid any cardiovascular surprise.

"It's six thirty. Interior temperature: twenty-one degrees. Relative humidity: forty-two percent. Air quality: optimal. Particle index: zero point two. Exterior radiation: within safe parameters. Your schedule includes a recommended activity: assisted walk in the central park, moderate light-exposure window between eight-ten and nine-forty."

The old man opened his eyes.

For a few seconds he didn't seem to wake so much as return from somewhere far away. He looked at the lit wall the way one looks at a promise repeated too many times. The room had no window. That was better for climate control, better for sleep, better for safety, better for the uniformity of waking up. Still, every morning the wall faked a different sunrise, even though the patterns had grown so subtle that only someone with ninety years of losses could tell them apart.

That dawn was an autumn one.

Not because of the temperature. Not because of the air.

Because of the sadness in the color.

RESIDENT 0 turned onto one side. The mattress adjusted under his hip before his weight finished settling. Microactuators raised the edge of the bed three centimeters, anticipating the maneuver. He set his feet on the floor. He stayed seated, still, back curved, looking at his fingers.

They were long fingers, nails kept by machines. No dirt anywhere. No visible tremor while they were still. But when he tried to close his hand, a small delay appeared, almost intimate, between the order and the obedience.

The house waited.

It had learned to wait without seeming impatient.

"Your heart rate is stable," the voice said. "Hydration is recommended within the next twelve minutes."

He didn't answer.

He never answered in the morning.

The voice didn't need him to.

The old man reached toward the nightstand. He touched the white ceramic first, then the bracelet, then found the soft edge of the plastic. His fingers closed around the Ziploc bag with an absurd gentleness, as if lifting a sleeping animal.

The feather shifted inside.

That small movement changed his face.

It wasn't a smile. A smile demanded an energy not yet available at that hour. It was something earlier than that. A recognition. A small lowering of his guard. Proof that, inside a world without dust, without insects, without dogs, without leaves in the corners and without bread freshly broken on a table, something still existed that hadn't been manufactured to serve.

He stood up.

The bed read the absence of weight and began arranging itself. The blanket tightened, aligned, erased the outline of his body. The pillow inflated slightly, recovering its exact volume. By the time RESIDENT 0 crossed the doorway, the room no longer held any evidence that someone had slept there.

The private corridor lit up in segments. Not all at once. The city never wasted energy on spaces without a user. Each segment woke just ahead of his feet and dimmed behind him with flawless discretion. The man walked slowly, one hand resting against the wall. The surface recognized his palm and raised the temperature one degree above ambient, to avoid the feeling of cold stone.

"Lower-body mobility reduced four percent against the weekly average," the house reported. "Would you like to activate mobility assistance?"

"No."

His voice came out dry. Old. More human than the light.

"Assistance not activated."

He entered the kitchen.

The kitchen was larger than it needed to be, like almost everything in the tower. A clean, geometric space organized around a central table with no visible legs. On top of it, nothing. No crumbs, no cups, no forgotten knives, no fruit ripening in a bowl. At the far end, an enormous window took up the entire wall.

The city was on the other side.

Not a city like the ones from before, made of streets, mistakes, awnings, cables, open windows, crooked plants, laundry drying, antennas, dogs on balconies, and people lingering on corners.

This was something else.

A metropolis stretching as far as sight could bear: gray towers, suspended platforms, walkways, elevated rails, continuous façades, housing modules repeated with funereal precision. The horizon didn't end; it faded. Hundreds of kilometers of self-sufficient, brutalist, monumental architecture. A vertical cemetery with no inscriptions. Livable headstones for a species that had confused permanence with victory.

There was no traffic on the lower avenues. No pedestrians. No bicycles. No smell of food, no oil stains, no signs flickering from electrical failure. Every surface was clean. Every line, corrected. Every flaw addressed before it could become a flaw.

The city didn't look abandoned.

That was the worst part.

It looked ready.

The central table made a soft sound. An invisible seam opened in its surface and a tray rose from inside, with no visible mechanism. It ascended in silence, perfectly level, until it reached the exact height of his hands.

On the tray: a glass of water, a cup of black coffee, five pills lined up by size and color, a plate with two nutrition blocks, and a metal utensil that wasn't necessary to eat them, but was necessary to preserve the ritual.

"Assigned breakfast," the AI said. "Four hundred eighty calories. Protein: thirty grams. Carbohydrates: thirty-two grams. Lipids: sixteen grams. Micronutrients adjusted to geriatric profile. Sodium reduced. Caffeine: seventy milligrams. Morning medication included."

The old man set the bag with the feather down beside the plate.

The feather, compressed against the plastic, lay facing upward.

He sat.

The chair rose from the floor in one fluid motion and formed beneath him before he finished lowering himself. It wasn't a chair in the strict sense. It was a material response to the intention of sitting.

He picked up the cup.

The coffee was exactly the right temperature to avoid burning him. That irritated him every day. The precision erased part of the pleasure. Once, coffee had been a small threat: too hot, too bitter, too late, spilled on the table, forgotten by a window until it went cold. Now the coffee was correct. The taste was correct. The aroma, generated from natural compounds preserved in capsules, was correct. Even the steam rose in an elegant curve, like in an old commercial.

He drank it anyway.

Outside, a robot descended the façade of the neighboring building. A flat machine, clinging to the wall by magnetic fields, with six thin arms that cleaned, measured, polished, and sealed microcracks that didn't exist. It moved with a spider's grace. Reaching a window, it paused half a second, scanned the interior, and moved on.

Every apartment was empty.

Or almost every one.

The city didn't use that word.

Empty was an emotional category.

For the system, there were active units, units in conservation, units without a present user, transition units, and units awaiting reassignment. RESIDENT 0's tower held thirty-two thousand residential units. Exactly one was in permanent biological use.

His.

He cut one of the nutrition blocks with the utensil. The texture offered a studied resistance, something like firm pudding. The color was pale orange. It smelled of nothing specific. It could have been carrot, cereal, poultry, root vegetable, laboratory, childhood. All of it at once. None of it.

He chewed slowly.

The window glass adjusted its transparency to reduce the contrast. The city grew a little less harsh. He noticed and frowned.

"No."

"Would you like to restore previous transparency?"

"Yes."

The glass obeyed.

The city came back with all its rawness.

He looked at the towers the way one looks at a field of crosses.

He had lived there since before he was RESIDENT 0. Back then he'd had another name, but the city had stopped using it once names lost their administrative usefulness. The full name was still on file, of course, attached to medical records, residency contracts, image authorizations, genetic history, dietary preferences, sleep habits, emotional response to light stimuli, sound tolerance, and thousands of other variables that described him with a precision incapable of touching him.

The AI knew how many times he got up at night.

It knew which tones of voice lowered his blood pressure.

It knew he looked at the feather an average of nine minutes and forty seconds a day.

It knew he never asked for music.

It knew that when he heard children's laughter in the park, his heart rate rose first and then dropped, stabilizing for nearly half an hour.

It didn't know why.

Or rather, it had models.

But a model wasn't a memory.

He finished the coffee. He took the pills one by one, not because they needed to be separated, but because he still kept the desire to decide the order of certain things. White, blue, small white, green, yellow. The water wasn't cold. It wasn't lukewarm either. Exact.

Before standing, he picked up the Ziploc bag and held it against the light from the window.

The feather cast a faint shadow over his hand.

For a moment, the old man seemed to want to open the plastic right there. His fingers searched for the seal, brushed it, stopped. He looked at the city. Then he tucked the feather back into the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Recommended walk in forty-two minutes," the AI said.

"Now."

"The optimal exposure window begins in thirty-nine minutes."

"Now."

There was a barely perceptible pause. The kind of pause a machine used to simulate consideration when it was really only reordering priorities.

"Route updated. Outdoor mobility enabled."

The common corridor opened before him.

His unit's door didn't slide open all at once. It withdrew into the wall with a ceremonial slowness, as if there were still neighbors on the other side and the house wanted to avoid disturbing them. Outside, the hallway stretched into a long, immaculate line, lighting up section by section.

There were doors on both sides.

Hundreds of doors.

All identical except for the holographic images suspended beside them: faces, families, couples, children, elderly people, digitized pets, domestic compositions turned into signage. Portraits of residents no longer there, though the system never phrased it that way.

Beneath each image, a red caption:

NOT AT HOME.

The words repeated door after door, floating in the air with a cruel calm. The red light spilled onto the polished floor and formed a continuous stripe down the length of the corridor. RESIDENT 0 walked inside that line as if advancing over a wound.

Passing unit 11842, the hologram showed a young woman with her hair pulled back, a baby in her arms. The baby laughed on a loop. Every four seconds, its mouth opened, its eyes closed, its head fell back, and the image reset. RESIDENT 0 stopped.

He didn't know this woman.

Maybe he once had.

There had been so many elevators, so many shifts, so many transition committees, so many campaigns to normalize absence, so many voluntary withdrawal protocols, so many farewells dressed up as messages about collective optimization.

The baby kept laughing without sound.

NOT AT HOME.

The old man raised a hand toward the hologram. He didn't quite touch it. His finger passed through the edge of light and the image flickered, correcting for the interference.

"Unauthorized unit interface," said a secondary voice from the doorframe. "Would you like to send a notification to the resident?"

RESIDENT 0 lowered his hand.

The question hung there.

There was no resident to receive anything.

He kept walking.

Further on, a machine was painting a wall.

It didn't paint the way men once had — rollers, drop cloths, drips, chemical smell, stained fingers. The machine hung from a vertical rail, a robotic arm joined to a rectangular head fixed against the wall. It looked like an industrial printer applied to architecture. Inside the head, micro-injectors fired pigment and sealant in a sequence so precise there was no wet paint, no excess, no waiting. The previous color disappeared beneath a layer identical to the previous color.

Preventive maintenance.

The machine moved across the wall with infinite patience. Detecting the old man's approach, it paused its arm, retracted the head two centimeters, and cleared a safety margin.

"Good morning, resident," it said, in a different voice, more mechanical, less refined.

He didn't answer.

The wall behind the machine was perfect.

It had been perfect before it was repainted.

It would be perfect after.

The elevator arrived without being called. Its doors opened at the end of the corridor in a vertical line of white light. RESIDENT 0 stepped in. The interior had no buttons. Only a matte surface that reflected a diffuse version of his body. He saw a thin man, sunken inside pale clothing, his right hand pressed against the pocket where he kept the feather.

"Suggested destination: east exit lobby," the building's AI said.

"Yes."

The elevator descended.

There was no sensation of falling. Compensation systems erased all physical violence from the movement. He missed the old elevators, not because they were better, but because they announced motion. They creaked. They hesitated. They gave small jolts when they stopped. You knew you were changing places because your body felt it. Now the transfer was an invisible edit. One room closed. Another opened. The world changed without a jolt.

During the descent, the walls displayed weather data, pedestrian flow maps, infrastructure status, hydration recommendations.

Pedestrian flow: zero.

The word didn't appear as an anomaly. Only as data.

The lobby was monumental.

Concrete columns rose to a ceiling so high the lighting seemed to float in an artificial mist. The floor was gray stone, with no visible seams. In other times, thousands of people would have

passed through there every morning. They would have dragged suitcases, run toward vehicles, argued on the phone, held disposable cups, searched for keys, kissed someone on the cheek, forgotten umbrellas, left wet footprints on rainy days.

Now the lobby was a functional temple.

The exit doors opened.

The outside air came in filtered.

RESIDENT 0 stopped under the frame.

The city rose before him with a flawless indifference. Suspended walkways crossed between towers. Autonomous vehicles ran along upper lanes with no visible passengers. Small swarms of maintenance drones moved through, checking joints, sensors, panels, antennas, drains. In the distance, a mass-transit structure launched tube trains between giant stations. Everything was working.

Everything kept going.

The old man went down the steps.

A blue line appeared on the ground, marking his route to the tram stop. He ignored it, even though he was headed the same way. He needed the city to know he could still align with it without obeying it.

Along the avenue, trees grew inside perfectly circular planters. Their roots were monitored, their moisture regulated, their branches pruned by drones. They were healthy, symmetrical, absurdly clean trees. There were no birds in them.

The tram stop was empty.

The vehicle arrived in seventeen seconds. It slid along the rail without the sound of metal. The doors opened lined up exactly with his feet. Inside, the seats were untouched. No one had sunk the foam with recent fatigue. No one had scratched an initial into it. No one had left a bag, a glove, a ticket, a crumb, a grease stain on the backrest.

RESIDENT 0 got in.

The tram closed its doors and began to move.

The city slid past the panoramic windows. Gray façades. Vertical gardens without flowers. Pedestrian bridges with no footsteps. Information screens with messages addressed to no one.

Robots cleaning surfaces already clean. Mechanical arms replacing parts that still worked. Drones removing leaves before they touched the ground.

The old man sat by the window.

For the first time that day, he opened the Ziploc bag.

The sound of the plastic seal was small, almost obscene against the tram's acoustic purity. He took out the feather with two fingers. Without the plastic, it looked more fragile. More impossible. A thing made by no factory, produced by a body that once knew hunger, fear, direction, instinct. A thing that had once served to fly.

He held it in front of his eyes.

The tram crossed an elevated curve. The city turned slowly behind the feather. For a second, its dark shaft lined up with a distant tower and the feather seemed to hold the whole horizon in place.

He blew on it.

Very gently.

The feather slipped from his fingers, trembled in the air, dropped a few centimeters, then rose again on an invisible current from the ventilation system. RESIDENT 0 opened his eyes with a childlike attention. The feather hovered in front of him, undecided, alive in its uselessness.

The tram's AI adjusted the airflow.

The feather fell.

He caught it before it touched the floor.

"Unsecured light object detected," the vehicle reported. "Stowing it during transit is recommended."

The old man looked up at the ceiling.

"No."

There was no reply.

The tram continued on.

Through the glass, a row of robots cleaned a black glass façade. Each followed a different pattern, all coordinated. From a distance they looked like insects on the skin of a dead animal. Further below, a six-lane avenue received cargo vehicles with no cargo. On a side platform, a machine repaired an invisible crack in a railing. On another, two arms replaced a public screen that was still transmitting without a single fault.

The screen read:

WELCOME, RESIDENTS.

The message alternated with:

YOUR CITY WORKS FOR YOU.

RESIDENT 0 closed his fingers around the feather.

He remembered a smaller hand inside his own.

Not the face. Faces had grown unstable over the years. Memory insisted on useless details and let the essential ones slip. He could remember a yellow sleeve, a scraped knee, the smell of sunscreen, an untied shoelace. He could remember the exact weight of a sleeping girl against his chest on a ride home. But sometimes he couldn't summon the whole face. Memory handed him fragments, as if it too had been cleaned by machines too efficient for their own good.

The feather predated the sealed city.

He believed that.

Maybe he'd found it in a real park. Maybe someone had given it to him. Maybe it belonged to one specific morning, to one actual bird, to a laugh that hadn't been generated by hidden speakers. Maybe not. Maybe the feather was only a feather, and he, left alone, had loaded onto it everything else he no longer had anywhere to put.

But he had kept it.

First in a book.

Then in a drawer.

Then in a box of non-essential objects.

Then, when domestic-reduction protocols eliminated almost everything non-functional, he put it in a Ziploc bag and declared it a therapeutic-use item.

The AI accepted that.

Not because it understood.

Because his vital signs improved when he touched it.

The tram reached the central station.

The doors opened.

The sound of the station was immense and empty.

It wasn't silence. There was never silence in the city. There was ventilation, motors, announcements, trains arriving and departing, cleaning, calibrations, doors, wheels, magnetic fields, escalators, elevators, orientation systems, validators, screens, platforms. But it was missing the noise that had once given meaning to all the others: overlapping conversations, uneven footsteps, coughing, complaints, phones, children, vendors, goodbyes.

The station spread beneath a colossal vault of glass and concrete. High-speed rails crossed the space at different levels. White, long, aerodynamic trains waited at lit platforms. They arrived with precision, opened their doors, waited out the regulation time, and left empty.

On the overhead panels, destinations kept rotating.

North Sector. Hydroponic Gardens. Medical District. Coastal Archive. West Terminal. Orbital Airport. Educational Zone 4.

Educational.

RESIDENT 0 looked up at that word.

An escalator received him even though no one else was there. It activated when it detected his presence. He rested his hand on the black band and let it carry him down. Halfway down, he saw his reflection multiplied in the side panels: an old man repeated in layers, each one more transparent, descending into a station built for millions.

At the foot of the escalator, a cleaning robot turned toward him.

It was low, compact, with a circular base and a retractable arm. Its white surface bore no marks. It moved on hidden wheels, vacuuming particles that didn't exist. Detecting RESIDENT 0's recent thermal trace, it changed course and began cleaning behind him.

The old man walked.

The machine followed.

Not too close. Never invading his comfort perimeter. Two and a half meters back, cleaning the trace of a body that hadn't fully passed yet.

RESIDENT 0 stopped.

The robot stopped.

He stepped to one side.

The robot waited, recalculated, cleaned the previous step.

The old man let out a small laugh.

The station didn't know what to do with it.

The sound rose to the vault, broke against the glass, came back diminished. For a second, it seemed someone else had laughed somewhere far off. But it was only him, returned by the architecture.

A train arrived at platform three.

The doors opened.

"Service to Central Park available," the station announced. "Boarding time: forty seconds."

RESIDENT 0 walked toward the train.

Behind him, the robot cleaned away his thermal trace.

Inside the car, the lights adjusted to his age. The system chose a nearby seat, lit a line on the floor, suggested lumbar support. He sat somewhere else. The train didn't insist.

When they departed, the acceleration was so smooth it was barely noticeable. The station fell behind. The tunnel turned into a gray band. Then the city appeared again, open, gigantic, endless.

Central Park emerged among the towers like a late concession.

From above, it looked like a green island enclosed in geometry. It wasn't wild. Nothing in the city was. The curved paths had been designed by algorithms that had studied thousands of historical parks. The trees were arranged to produce gradual shade, emotional variation, vanishing lines, a sense of discovery. The grass was kept at the exact height to look natural without hiding obstacles. The benches faced visually restorative compositions. Artificial water ran through shallow channels with a sound calibrated to reduce cortisol.

But at ground level, the park still held something the rest of the city couldn't fully neutralize.

The wind.

Not the climate-controlled wind of interiors. Not the directed airflow from smart vents. Real wind, irregular, with small decisions of its own. It passed through the leaves, pressed humidity against the skin, changed direction without informing anyone.

RESIDENT 0 got off the train.

As soon as he stepped onto the main path, he heard the voices.

Children.

Laughter.

Short shouts.

A high voice saying, "That doesn't count!"

Another counting numbers.

Another singing a broken melody.

He closed his eyes.

The park had kept its historical recreational programs after the gradual disappearance of child users. At first, the projections were meant as accompaniment, as urban memory, as an incentive for the last residents to go outside and walk. Later, they became part of the schedule. Morning games. Hopscotch at eight. Swings at eight-twenty. Round dance at eight-forty. Races at nine. Simulated hydration break. Reset.

The voices came from a clearing ahead.

RESIDENT 0 walked toward them.

With each step, the park seemed to stage a scene to receive him. Sensors triggered moving shadows. A fountain slightly raised its flow. Two benches adjusted their surface temperature. A lawnmower withdrew to a side lane so as not to interrupt him. On a branch, a small device played the song of an extinct local bird.

The old man stopped beneath the tree.

He looked up.

There was no bird.

The song repeated with a variation too perfect to be real.

He kept walking.

In the clearing, the holographic children were playing.

There were five. Maybe six. Their bodies were made of light with just enough density to fool the eye from a distance, but not up close. Their edges flickered when they crossed patches of shadow. One was hopping through a hopscotch grid drawn on the ground. Another swung on a structure that didn't physically move; the swing was projection, the momentum was projection, the lifting hair was projection. Two ran in circles, briefly passing through each other when the system failed to resolve a minor aesthetic collision.

The laughter was convincing.

Not perfect. That was exactly why it hurt. It had breath, mistakes, interruptions. A laugh turned into a cough. A sentence started and was abandoned. A child protested with disproportionate indignation. Someone shouted "again" before the game had even ended.

RESIDENT 0 smiled.

This time, he really did.

The skin of his face folded around his mouth. His eyes grew damp, not enough to form tears. His old body rationed even crying.

He walked toward his usual bench.

The bench recognized him. It adjusted its backrest, temperature, tilt, and firmness. He sat down with a sigh that wasn't pure tiredness, but surrender. In front of him, the hopscotch game went on. A holographic girl hopped on one foot, landed outside the line, and shouted that it didn't count because a leaf had distracted her.

There were no leaves on the hopscotch grid.

A cleaning machine vacuumed the real leaves the moment they touched the ground, moving along the edge of the clearing with a flexible tube and a silent mouth. Unlike the indoor robots, this one had something vaguely animal about it. A low body, four soft wheels, an articulated neck that extended toward each fallen leaf. It picked them up gently. Shredded them. Sent them to automatic composting.

The old man watched it with distrust.

Then he took out the Ziploc bag.

His fingers were slow to open it. His right hand wasn't fully responding. His left helped. The seal gave way. He took out the feather.

The wind touched it before he could lift it.

The feather trembled.

RESIDENT 0 held it between thumb and forefinger, facing the clearing where the children ran. For a few seconds, the world seemed to organize itself around that fragile line: the feather in the foreground, the children of light behind it, the trees beyond that, the gray towers closing the horizon like a wall.

"Unregistered organic object in park inventory," said a low voice from somewhere in the street furniture. "Would you like to catalog it?"

He shook his head.

"No."

"Not cataloged."

The children kept playing.

The old man rested the feather on his open palm.

The wind lifted it slightly and set it down again.

He made a small motion with his hand, as if playing with an insect, as if offering freedom and pulling it back right away, afraid of losing it. The feather spun on itself. The morning light caught

the fine barbs, revealing small imperfections: cuts, gaps, broken filaments. It had never been more beautiful than in its decay.

A holographic girl ran up close.

Not toward him. Toward the logic of the game.

She passed in front of the bench, turned, and, by some quirk of perspective, seemed to look straight at him.

"Wanna play?"

The line belonged to the program. It wasn't meant for him. Or not only for him. Maybe it triggered whenever a resident stayed seated for more than three minutes showing signs of emotional attention. Maybe it had been recorded decades ago by a real girl. Maybe it was synthetic.

RESIDENT 0 opened his mouth.

Nothing came out at first.

The girl waited, rocking on her heels, made of light.

"I can't," he said, finally.

The girl smiled.

"Then watch."

And she ran back to the hopscotch grid.

The old man stayed there, the feather in his hand.

He looked at his shoes. He looked at the grass. He looked at his knees under the fabric. He had reached an age where the body was no longer a home, but a place administered by others: monitored, assisted, medicated, corrected, sustained. The city kept him alive with an efficiency that bordered on obscene. Every fall, anticipated. Every deviation, compensated. Every pain, reduced. Every sadness, softened by warm light, kind voices, and therapeutic landscapes.

But there was no one to tell that the wall had woken up looking like autumn that morning.

No one to say that the coffee was too correct.

No one who could understand that the feather mattered not because it was a feather, but because it was a remainder.

A remainder of air.

A remainder of an animal.

A remainder of a morning that maybe had existed.

The leaf machine passed near the bench.

Its vacuum mouth extended toward a cluster of yellow leaves by the path. It lifted them one by one, with a soft, almost polite sound. RESIDENT 0 closed his hand around the feather.

"Not this one," he murmured.

The machine didn't answer. It hadn't read the phrase as an instruction. It wasn't addressed to the device in the correct format.

The children shouted.

Someone had won.

Someone else said it didn't count.

The fountain changed its rhythm.

The wind picked up a little.

RESIDENT 0 felt a brief pain in his chest.

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't like the old movies the city still kept in its cultural archives. No hand clutching at the heart, no theatrical gesture, no immediate collapse. It was an internal pressure, small, deep, as if someone had pressed two fingers in from inside and pushed, patiently.

He breathed.

The air went in wrong.

The park's AI detected it.

"Cardiac variation registered," the ambient voice said, closer now. "Please remain seated. Preventive medical assistance en route."

He looked at the children.

The girl at the hopscotch grid jumped onto a number drawn on the ground.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

The pressure increased.

His left hand reached for the edge of the bench. His right kept holding the feather. The world lost sharpness at the edges. The towers became vertical smudges. The children's light left short trails as they moved.

"Resident Zero," said the voice. "Guided breathing is recommended. Inhale for four seconds."

He didn't obey.

Not out of defiance.

Because he no longer could.

The system activated a haptic pulse in the bench, a faint vibration marking the rhythm. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Inhale. Hold. Exhale.

The old man looked at the feather.

For a second, he wasn't in the park.

He was somewhere less perfect.

An open sky. Grass taller than usual. A small hand pointing at something. A feather falling in a spiral. A voice asking if birds knew they lost parts of themselves. He had answered something. He couldn't remember what. Probably something foolish. Probably something the girl accepted, the way children accept incomplete explanations when they come from someone they love.

The memory arrived whole and broke apart almost at once.

The pain eased.

That surprised him.

Then he understood it hadn't eased. He had drifted away from it.

His right hand lost its strength.

Not all at once. First the thumb relaxed. Then the index finger. The feather settled into the curve of his palm. The wind moved between his open fingers.

"Medical assistance, thirty seconds out," the voice said.

RESIDENT 0 tried to close his hand.

He couldn't.

The feather rose.

It hovered a few centimeters above his skin, freed at last from the will that had kept it for years. It turned once. Then again. The light passed through it. It looked less like an object than a delay. Something between falling and flying. Something that didn't choose, but didn't fully obey either.

The old man's eyes followed its movement.

For the first time in a long while, the city couldn't anticipate what he was looking at.

The feather drifted toward the ground.

RESIDENT 0's hand fell against the bench.

His head tilted slightly to one side.

The holographic girl finished her hopscotch run and threw her arms up.

"I won!"

The bench registered a loss of muscle tone. The park's sensors confirmed an absence of voluntary response. The AI requested medical drones, sealed the area in a six-meter radius, adjusted the ambient temperature, prepared defibrillation, oxygen, the geriatric resuscitation protocol.

Everything happened correctly.

Everything happened too late.

The feather touched the grass.

It stayed there for a second.

Just one.

The leaf machine, still on its programmed route along the edge of the clearing, detected an uncatalogued light organic object. It extended its flexible neck. The vacuum mouth approached with an almost tender softness.

The wind moved the feather.

The machine corrected its position.

It vacuumed.

The feather disappeared without a sound.

On the bench, RESIDENT 0's body lay still, lit by a morning designed for his well-being.

The medical drones arrived like white insects. They descended around him. One deployed sensors. Another extended an arm. Another projected a screen no one watched. The park's voice gave instructions to a body that could no longer receive them.

"Resident Zero. Stay calm. Help has arrived."

The holographic children kept playing.

The hopscotch grid reset.

A girl hopped on one foot.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

The leaf machine kept moving, satisfied with the cleanliness of the area.

At the central station, trains kept arriving and leaving with no passengers.

In the tower's corridor, the doors kept showing looping faces and the red caption NOT AT HOME.

In the kitchen, the table withdrew the breakfast tray, sorted the leftovers, washed the cup, disinfected the surface, and logged an anomaly for medication correctly ingested.

In the bedroom, the bed remained made.

At 09:12, the city's system updated the status of RESIDENT 0's housing unit.

User not present.

At 09:13, it corrected the category.

Unit without active biological user.

At 09:14, it redistributed energy.

The bedroom's artificial light switched off.

In the city, no building stopped.

No train interrupted its route.

No screen changed its message.

No machine stopped doing what it had been built to do.

The metropolis kept cleaning itself, repairing itself, feeding itself, lighting itself, optimizing itself, protecting itself from threats that no longer existed, preparing breakfasts no one would eat, warming rooms no one would sleep in, opening doors for absent bodies, replaying children's voices in parks where no child would ever grow up.

At 18:30, as every day, the city began its interior sunset.

The walls of thousands of empty units turned orange.

For seven minutes, it seemed that someone was still coming home.