

The Soft Collapse of Time

BREAKING: *Sixth Protest This Month Rocks Zimbabwe's South-East.*
Aging Surge Detected in Harare, Masvingo, and Chimanimani. Social
*Stability Index: **Critical**.*

Tatiana felt her stomach sink, slow and deep, as the headline settled in her mind like a stone dropped through still water. Her heart thundered against a chest too tight to hold it, each beat tangled in invisible knots. The air thinned around her, and for a moment, she forgot how to breathe. Her fingers began to shake, her legs weak beneath her, and then the weight of it all pulled her inward. She curled into herself, folding as if bracing for impact. Tears streamed down her cheeks, hot and silent. She couldn't cry out. Her throat was sealed shut by the lump lodged there, thick and unmoving. The world blurred around her, but inside, everything was sharp. Too real. Too much.

Her whole family was in Harare.

When she left home two years ago, her little brother was fourteen. The last time they video called, he looked thirty-five. The skin around his eyes hung heavy. His voice was deeper. Slower. Tired. Like the world had aged faster than his bones could carry.

She hadn't heard from him since.

Her thoughts drifted off to her mother. They had long stopped video calling and all the time they texted, it was too painful.

Talking like before, pretending the heaviness wasn't there became unbearable. She pushed the thoughts of an ailing old woman away as that could never be her mother, it just couldn't be.

Tatiana had left for Japan two years back, when the world still made sense. 2063, before the surge. Before borders closed. Before every headline felt like a countdown to extinction.

Not long after her arrival, the world unraveled. Conflict and crisis began to steal time itself. In unstable regions, people aged up-to five years within a week. It was as if time had turned predatory.

After a few months, developed nations had found ways to geo-lock and protect their countries from getting waves from worse off countries. They deployed magnetic shields, atmospheric dampeners and kinetic barriers, tech advanced enough to contain time itself, but only for those within the borders.

In war-stricken nations like Iran, Israel, and others, accelerated aging tore through entire populations. Conflict didn't just kill, it sped up time itself. Cities emptied. Generations vanished. Entire countries faded from the map, one exhausted heartbeat at a time.

Every country has turned inward. Borders are sealed, travel's impossible. People trapped abroad stay trapped, it's too risky to leave. And the walls aren't just physical anymore. They're digital too.

There's no more international aid. Survival is all that's left.

When Tatiana first arrived in Japan, she clung to the news, story after story, eyes wide with disbelief, fear curling in her chest. Her family was a constant weight, pressing down on every second of her day.



The streets of Zimbabwe, especially in Harare, carry a charge: brittle, burning, alive. Protests erupt daily. Not just calls for change, but acts of desperation. People aging too fast, watched too closely, running out of time.

The government responds with surveillance drones, border lockdowns, state-controlled broadcasts. Whisper a complaint, and you're accused of sabotage. Raise your voice, and you're silenced.

But still, the country endures.

Makeshift collectives, tech-savvy youth, and old township electricians keep the bones of the nation from crumbling. In Chitungwiza, hijacked solar panels light alley clinics. In Masvingo, mothers purify grey-water with hacked filtration rigs. It's not much. But it's defiance.

Only the powerful have access to real solutions, imported hormone suppressants, neurolink slow-aging implants, heat-barrier housing. Deals were struck behind closed doors. Government officials made promises of time-reversal tech, signed secret agreements with wealthier allies. None of it reached the people.

After the Surge, Zimbabwe partnered with China, a last-ditch agreement offering atmospheric stabilizers in return for exclusive mining rights. There was talk of cognitive preservation trials at UZ. For a time, hope flickered. Then it all collapsed- sabotaged, corrupted, buried.

Now, the air holds something heavier than dust.

Resentment.

Especially toward those who left.

People like Tatiana, once seen as brave, are whispered about with suspicion.

Some denounced Zimbabwe to gain asylum. Others called it lost beyond redemption. The world believed them. China pulled out. Borders shut.

Firewalls rose. Foreign aid vanished.

Return became betrayal.

Now, even overseas messages are risky. Every call feels like a confession.

Still, people find ways to connect, coded notes in market stalls, encrypted prayers sent over old TelOne lines. The government can chase protestors, but not grief. Not memory.

To the outside world, Zimbabwe fades, outpaced by time.

Inside, it fights to be remembered.

To be human.

To survive without forgetting what life means.

Western media speculate it won't last.

Here, children don't grow up.

They age.

In a collapsing world, there's no youth .

Only time and what it steals.

In contrast, her current environment, a far cry from her country, bustled with clean labs, glass walls and chrome surfaces, Japan had not only controlled aging, but was beginning to reverse it in some cases through aggressive innovation and experimentation. Scientists monitored life-signs, memory graphs and emotional pulse charts. Multiple groups worked on extending breakthroughs to Japanese nationals trapped abroad and suffering.

Tatiana felt the weight of surviving. While her family aged rapidly, she remained untouched, suspended in this sterile polished country where everything was in order. The quiet calm of Japan only deepened her despair. It made her feel defeated. Hopeless.

Every day she saw tech-enhanced youth walk past her, their skin smooth, time preserved, and she thought of her brother, wrinkling in her memory.

She had everything she needed to survive, but no one to survive for. Her life in Japan felt as emotionally barren as the digital walls that kept her apart from her family. And there was the guilt, not just for them, but for something else too.

She had always imagined falling in love, building a life, even in a broken world. It felt wrong to want those things now, she couldn't help it. Three years before Japan, she had met someone, not in the traditional way. Online. Still, it had felt real. They had called it love. Maybe it was.

But that love, too, had vanished. Their last call had been two months, one week and four days ago. He had been distant then. Now he was just... silent.

They had never met, and yet he had become her emotional anchor, her only home. Now he was gone. No word. No goodbye. Just absence, cold and echoing.

He had stopped video calling. Then texting. At first, she understood. But the silence had stretched too long. It wrapped around her throat like a scarf she couldn't take off.

Which is what made this moment so difficult. She battled the ethics of what she was thinking of doing. With tear-filled eyes and blurry vision, she wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, blinked at the advert again and pressed ***Apply.***

Emotional Teleportation is here!

One application. Two connected minds.

No matter the distance: share space, emotion and presence in real time.

Even if you've never met.

Even if you're worlds apart.

This isn't Virtual Reality. This isn't memory.

This is something else entirely.

Exist together in a shared emotional reality.

That's what the ad said, the one Tatiana clicked on three weeks ago. She hadn't really believed it. But she also didn't want to lose what little love she had left.

"If it's over, let me see it end. If it's real, let me feel it." She had whispered to herself.

Now her name echoed through the lab. It still startled her, the way they said it in Japanese never felt like hers.

She still wasn't sure this was real. Glass-walled corridors. White, polished floors. The sterile scent of disinfectant.

She'd passed through ID scanners, retina checks and pulse verification.

Everything buzzed and blinked in quiet mechanical rhythm, a sharp contrast to her racing mind.

She hadn't read the terms. No briefing either, just a few wall posters and the auto-translated fragments from the day she signed up.

“だいじょうぶ,” she whispered. *It's okay.*

They gave her an hour to decide.

Do anything. Go anywhere.

She chose stillness.

Did she want to be alone in this world forever?

Could she live with herself after this?

She hadn't chosen her mother. Or her brother. That truth sat uncomfortably inside her. But this wasn't about saving anyone. It was about feeling something before everything went cold.

It felt wrong. But she had to know, if something that lived only in messages and memories could still carry weight in a world falling apart.

She watched couples laughing on trains. School kids giggling in clusters.

At night, she spoke to no one.

Only scrolled, his old texts, the last video call, his voice still echoing.

Dating in Japan had felt impossible, the language, the culture, the ache of being foreign.

There were men. Smiles. Conversations.

But none of them were *him*.

He was the one who made her laugh when the world felt like it was splitting open.

The one who steadied her in the dark, even across oceans.

Her constant.

She hadn't seen his face in weeks. Not live. Not in motion.

Only his profile photo, a decade-old smile untouched by time.

The version of him the world hadn't weathered.

Her heart hurt constantly, not just for him, but for her family, her home and the childhood still buried in Harare's soil.

She got up before she could change her mind.

They fitted her with an EEG head-cap. The tech muttered something about neural interface gel and AI-generated landscapes. At one point, her emotional data was flagged as “*too volatile.*” The technician, maybe half-Japanese, said nothing. Just kept tapping away at the monitor, pretending not to understand.

Tatiana sat in the reclining lab chair, the chill seeping into her skin.

The technician moved silently, securing nodes to her temples.

Everything gleamed: glass, chrome, pristine floors untouched by human footsteps.

Consent confirmed.

Identity matched.

Pulse stable.

Her breath hitched when the screen blinked:

Emotional Teleportation Session Ready.

Target: Kian (Unverified Connection).

She had almost backed out. Twice.

Once during the consent form when it asked for emotional anchoring data.

And again, when she saw the others leaving their sessions, hollow.

But it was the silence that made her stay. The ache of not knowing. Of loving someone who had become unreachable in every possible way.

What if she could find him here?

Not in a message.

Not in memory.

But in that liminal space between dreaming and waking,

Where feelings stayed warm, untouched by silence and distance.

“Lay back. Breathe. We’ll begin in three...”

The lights dimmed.

Her fingers trembled.

Initiating Emotional Teleportation.

KIAN

It's been exactly two months, one week, and four days since he last tried to reach Tatiana.

Each day its own quiet war, a raw ache not to say something.

He'd typed and deleted more messages than he could bear. Not because he didn't care, but because he cared too much.

He couldn't tell her the truth: that his body was giving out on him, and he didn't want her to see it happen.

At 33, he felt like a ghost inside someone else's dying frame. A leftover from the Age Pandemic, rotting slowly from the inside out.

His bones groaned like old floorboards. His reflection pale, sagging, foreign.

Tatiana, still 29, still untouched, feels like a version of the future he no longer has access to.

They'd never met in person. Their entire relationship bloomed and broke through a screen.

She sent messages he couldn't answer. He knew she was hurting. He knew

every silence was a betrayal.

But he told himself: *She's young. She'll move on. She should.*

He just couldn't say goodbye.

He remembers the night his best-friend Michael died.

It wasn't dramatic. No gasps. No final words full of poetry. Just the quiet folding of a body too aged to keep going.

A candle burned in the corner, the kind of stillness that doesn't ask for attention. It just is.

A few hours before that, Michael had turned to him.

"You still think about her?"

Kian hesitated. "Every day. I want to see her. But what if she wouldn't even recognize me?"

"So you ghost her instead?"

"It's not like that."

"It is exactly like that," Michael said. His voice was tired, but clear. "She's out there wondering why you disappeared."

Kian looked at the wall. “Even reaching out feels like a crime. She’s flagged. One message and they’d trace it back to me.”

He swallowed. “No job. No currency worth anything past this block. They keep us just alive enough. What could I even offer her? A risk? A sentence?”

Michael nodded slowly. “And so your silence becomes her punishment.”

Kian’s voice cracked. “I didn’t want her to watch me fall apart.”

Michael’s breath was shallow, but his words had weight.

“Then let her choose. It’s not your call to make.”

He paused. “Love doesn’t die from distance, Kian. But it does die from silence.”

He swallowed.

Those words had stayed.

Now, in the dark, the candle beside his bed flickers out, almost like it knows.

His phone lights his face: soft and ghostly.

He scrolls through old messages, old voice notes, saved calls; her laugh, the way she said his name like it was only ever meant for him.

His hands rest in his lap: veined, brittle, unfamiliar.

Then:

A buzz.

Not a call. Not a notification.

Just... something.

The room tips.

His vision splits.

Everything goes black.

EMOTIONAL TELEPORTATION EXPERIENCE

He wakes in a dream.

At least... he thinks so.

Everything around him is painfully familiar: the cottage they imagined, tucked into a countryside born of shared longing. The air is fresh. The walls, the exact shade of beige she once said reminded her of peace. A garden blooms. This isn't coincidence.

He wonders if he's died.

But then, she's there.

Tatiana.

Not memory. Not screen.

Real. Alive. Barefoot. Wide-eyed.

She flinches.

The window fogs. A thin crack creeps across the glass. A single petal from the garden falls, soundless.

But she doesn't run. Her breath stutters; her feet hold.

The cottage leans inward, listening.

She feels him before she speaks, the weight he carries, the sorrow logged in every joint, every silence. And he feels her too: loneliness, the pain of being left behind. The ache of not knowing why.

Their dream bodies tremble under the pressure of what's finally being felt.

The air thickens, not heavy, but dense with recognition.

Light bends around their forms, unsure whether to hold them apart or pull them close.

There's no joyous reunion.

Only the slow unraveling of misunderstanding, the stunned stillness of knowing too, too suddenly.

This was never just a dream.

The room hums, quiet but alive, reacting to the charge between them.

This was the Experiment.

Emotional Teleportation.

In her rush to feel something, she hadn't fully grasped what it meant:

A shared dream.

A full-spectrum emotional tether.

And most dangerously, a test.

If the connection fails, the system erases all memory of the other, a built-in
-fail-safe against trauma.

He sees her. Really sees her.

She's real, not a pixel, not a projection.

Her eyes don't match the memory exactly. They're more cautious, more worn.

She's seen things. Waited too long.

And yet, she still looks at him like he's familiar. Like he's someone worth finding.

She sees him. And it takes her a second to breathe.

The lines on his face. The slope of his shoulders.

He looks older than the last video call. But something in his eyes, is unchanged.

He looks at her like she's everything that kept him alive in the dark.

He sees her before he's ready to.

Just an outline at first, standing in the doorway of the cottage they once imagined. Her hair longer than he remembered, softer in the light.

Her shoulders curve, tentative, like she's unsure whether to come closer or turn away.

He doesn't speak.

He can't. His throat closes. His hands twitch at his sides, older than they should be. A body betrayed by time. A heart cracked by silence.

And she looks up.

For a moment, neither of them breathes.

Her eyes widen, caught between recognition and something harder to name.

She steps toward him, then stops. He thinks she flinches.

Shame rushes in like a tide.

He's taller than she imagined. More worn.

The man standing in front of her could pass for her father: grey streaks in his hair, the tired sag beneath his eyes, the tremble in his jaw as he tries not to break.

She doesn't speak. Not yet.

But her expression says everything.

You came.

You're real.

You look nothing like I remembered, but exactly as I dreamed.

He tries to speak, but the words catch in his chest. It's been too long. Too many things unsaid. Too many things left unsaid.

"I didn't think this'd be real," she whispers.

His voice cracks. Confused, he still manages, "Is this... not a dream??"

The stillness between them is thick, alive. Even the wind holds its breath.

She steps forward again. Slowly. Deliberately.

He doesn't stop her. Can't. His legs feel like stone.

When she's close enough, she reaches out, hesitantly, and touches his face.

Just her fingertips. Light. Barely there.

But the effect is immediate.

The dream shifts.

The sky brightens. Color returns to the garden. The air warms. Her touch travels through him like lightning: gentle, healing. The kind that mends instead of burns.

He closes his eyes.

He hasn't been touched like that in years, not kindly, not intentionally, not by someone who meant to stay.

"You're... warm," she says, surprised.

"You're real," he answers.

Their foreheads touch. Just briefly. A breath shared in the middle of an impossible moment. Neither of them speaks. They don't need to.

She pulls back, just slightly, to look at him again.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asks.

He swallows hard. "I didn't want you to see me like this."

"I wanted to see you, Kian. I didn't care..."

"I did." His voice sharpens, but not with anger. With pain. "You were still... untouched. Bright. You hadn't lost anything. I'd already lost everything."

She looks at him like he's wrong.

“I lost you.”

The words sit heavy in the air. And the dream darkens just slightly. A breeze picks up. The candle on the table flickers again, like a warning.

He sees it too. “We can’t lie here, can we?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Then I have to say this. Even if it makes the world fall apart.”

He steps closer now. Really looks at her. The small scar on her lip. The slight unevenness in her smile. The way she’s holding herself up with every ounce of strength she has.

As he moves, the floor pulses with his uneven, fragile heartbeat. The garden’s flowers tilt slightly away, petals trembling like they’re waiting for a choice.

“I love you,” he says. “I loved you when I left. I love you now. But I was afraid you wouldn’t love... this.”

His words hang, a breath held too long. The sky dims, shadows flickering, as if the dream weighs the truth.

She exhales, as if something inside her cracked open. The garden’s color deepens, soft light returning where it had dimmed.

“I didn’t know what I loved, Kian. Not fully. Not until now. You were always behind a screen. A voice. A shape. But now...”

She steps into him again, arms wrapping around his middle, burying her face in his chest.

He exhales shakily, arms unsure at first, then closing around her like a lifeline. Their bodies sync, breath for breath, pulse for pulse. The dream pulses with them, light spreading slowly back into the corners.

The grass glows green again. Warmth fills the space between their skin.

He pulls back only to say, “Are we allowed to want this?”

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “But I do.”

He smiles, and something about it makes him look younger. Not dramatically, but the lines near his mouth soften. His eyes sharpen again, less glazed by grief.

Time slips around them, fragile, unpredictable. The garden blooms bright, then a petal falls, a reminder that this moment could shatter.

They sit on the bed beneath the window, talking for hours, the sun never moving.

They talk about the time she thought he hated her.

The nights he cried with his phone pressed to his chest.

The dream they built together.

The one she rebuilt, alone.

The light holds, but the garden beyond the window sways uncertainly. A cloud drifts across the sky, veiling the sun like a warning.

Then his voice comes low, hesitant.

“This place is beautiful. But it’s not real.”

She doesn’t look at him yet.

“It’s not fake either,” she says.

He nods slowly, like he wants to believe her. Then:

“Let’s say we wake up and remember everything. What do we do with it?”

The light fades slightly at the edges of the room. The wind quiets.

“I mean... where do you see this going?” he asks. “We’re not in the same country. Borders are still shut. The technology that built this dream doesn’t even exist in Zimbabwe. You have a job, a life. I’m...”

He falters.

“I’m decaying. That’s the truth. My body’s failing faster than time. No medication fixes that. And even if we could see each other... is that something you’d actually want long term?”

The windowpane vibrates faintly, as if the dream is bracing itself.

He turns to her.

“I’m trying to understand what you think this becomes. What does it mean to hold each other here when we can’t even meet halfway out there?”

She closes her eyes. Her chest rises and falls too quickly.

“You think I haven’t asked myself that?” she says.

Silence.

“I didn’t come here to build a fairytale,” she adds. “I came here because you wouldn’t talk to me. I came here because I was desperate to understand if anything we had ever meant something to you. You vanished, and made that my burden.”

Her voice is trembling now, the edges sharp.

The color in the room draws tighter around them, like the rest of the dream is backing away. The flowers outside stop swaying. The air stiffens.

“And now you’re here, asking about sustainability?” she says, laughing bitterly. “You couldn’t even sustain a message, Kian. You disappeared to protect me from what, your face? Your truth?”

A crack blooms in the ceiling. Thin, but deep.

“I was scared,” he says, quietly. “I didn’t want to become someone you pitied.”

“I never pitied you. I waited for you. I missed you. Then I thought maybe I’d invented you.”

The warmth in her tone is gone.

“Maybe the version of you I loved only existed in a signal. In a room that always glitched. In memories you never claimed.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but nothing comes out.

And for a moment, the dream goes cold.

The silence hangs.

And then Tatiana snaps.

“You think you were the only one hurting?”

Her voice slices through the stillness. “You think disappearing made it easier for me? You think I wanted to be the one refreshing old messages, staring at green ticks that never turned blue, wondering what I did wrong?”

The air thins. The dream tightens around them. Light bends, just slightly, and Kian sees it first: the faint gray blooming at her temples, the shallow crease beneath her eyes. Her breath hitches. Her body remembers something it shouldn’t have to carry.

“I planned everything for us. Movie nights, playlists, stupid recipes we could laugh over. Do you know how many weekends I sat with the link open, waiting? You didn’t even cancel. You just didn’t show.”

The floor under her feet hums a low warning.

“You didn’t even remember my birthday. You forgot how to look at me like I mattered.”

Her voice softens but cuts deeper. “You stopped trying.”

Kian’s breath catches. Not just because of what she says but because of her.

She’s fading. Aging. Not just older, but weathered. Like love didn’t just hurt her. It hollowed her.

“I loved you in every version of the world we could build. Even if we never touched. Even if I never saw your face. And you just let it rot.”

The garden outside begins to droop, vines curling inward, colors fading to gray.

He stands, and the years rush in.

The youth the dream had lent him drains. His spine curves slightly. His hair fades to white at the edges. His skin turns papery, his body trembling under the weight of what hasn't been said.

He steps forward. The dream shifts.

His body begins to bend beneath memory. His youth flickers. Shoulders sag. Fingers tremble.

“I didn't forget you,” he says, voice hoarse. “I couldn't.”

He falters, then, as if the words unearth everything at once.

“I was starving.”

The truth tears out of him.

“I didn't forget you. I couldn't.

But I was surviving on powdered meals sealed in foil.

On stolen minutes of power.

On friends who were there one morning and buried by nightfall.”

His knees buckle.

“You had candles for ambience. I had them for light. The grid kept collapsing.

You had playlists. I had silence so thick it felt like a second skin.”

The dream quakes. The air tastes metallic.

“I didn’t stop because I didn’t care. I stopped because I couldn’t bear you watching me rot, pixel by pixel.”

He’s older now. Ancient. Not just sick, stripped.

“You don’t know what it’s like to want to be worthy of someone... while your body keeps proving you’re not.”

Tatiana’s hands tremble. She looks down at them. They’re thinner now, older.

Her joints ache. Her lips quiver.

“You should’ve let me decide that,” she whispers.

“You took the choice from me.”

The words don’t shatter like glass, they rupture, like tension held too long.

The silence that follows doesn’t break.

It gives in.

Like something collapsing in on itself.

The vines stop shriveling. The garden steadies.

Tatiana closes the space between them.

She wraps her arms around him, not gently but desperately.

A trembling embrace between two people trying to catch what time kept stealing from them.

He breathes in, raggedly, and the gray begins to recede from his hair.

His back straightens slightly.

Her fingers grow steadier.

Their bodies soften, their features regaining a shade of now.

“I’m sorry,” she says, into the hollow of his chest.

“I am too,” he murmurs, his arms curling around her. “For everything.”

The air warms. The garden exhales.

A breeze lifts the curtain gently.

Somewhere, the candle relights itself.

And for a moment, they are simply two people holding each other.

A little older than when they began.

But a little more honest, too.

They sit again, not facing the future this time, but simply each other.

The anger fades.

The fear lingers, but it no longer commands the room.

He brushes a strand of hair behind her ear.

Her hands stay on his, grounding him.

No words are needed yet. Only breath.

The candle's glow steadies.

The trees outside lean toward the cottage, no longer resisting the wind.

She says, finally, "Do you think this is real?"

He answers, "I think we are."

The words hang. Tender, but heavy. The dream trembles faintly, not breaking, just reminding them: this isn't forever.

He looks at her. Takes in the way she's watching him now. With all the light and all the shadow.

"I still don't know what happens when we wake up," he says.

"Neither do I," she admits. "But I'm tired of pretending I don't want something just because I might not get to keep it."

He kisses her, not with urgency, with reverence.

It feels like remembering. Like finding something you didn't know you'd lost.

She kisses him back, softly, and the world doesn't erupt, it settles.

The garden breathes. The warmth settles into their skin.

They stay like that, wrapped in quiet, until time remembers it has somewhere to go.

And with it, the end begins.

What Remains...

She opens her eyes to the hum of the lab.

White ceiling. Cold air. The straps at her wrists loosen with a hiss. A voice speaks from somewhere, muffled and distant, about neural recalibration and recovery time.

But she isn't really listening.

Her hands twitch, like they remember something warm. Her lips part lightly, there's still the taste of a name.

She presses her chest. No mark, but something lingers. The ache that joy sometimes leaves behind.

Somewhere across the world, across borders still shut, in a quiet room lit by nothing but a dim bulb, Kian wakes.

The candle beside his bed remains unlit. The phone is silent.

But something has changed.

He swings his legs over the bed. No crack, no wince. His spine moves cleanly, like it remembers how it once stood tall.

He stares at his hands.

They are old. But not wasted.

Not broken.

Not unworthy.

He smiles. Not because he understands, but because, for once, someone saw him.

And Then

They don't talk about what happens next.

Not yet.

But the memory lingers like smoke in fabric, like warmth on skin.

They both know they were real to each other. And that was enough to shift a world.

A week later, she tried to recall the color of his eyes and it took longer than it should have. Just a beat too long.

That night, in Harare, Kian dreamed of a garden he couldn't name, and woke crying for someone he didn't remember losing.

Maybe it was a glitch.

Or maybe the system worked perfectly, protecting them from a memory too heavy to carry back into a dying world.

