

The Market of Impossible Memories

The market appeared only on nights when someone wished to remember something that hadn’t happened.

Jan found it three months after his father’s death. He had gone for a walk because everything at home spoke too loudly: the shoes under the bench, the cracked cup, a jacket that still held his scent.

At the end of a street he knew well, there was a staircase he had never noticed before. He went down it and arrived at a square full of stalls.

“First kisses they didn’t dare to give.”

“Victories in matches he lost.”

“Perfect words for arguments that were already over.”

At the last stall, a woman was selling family mementos.

“Are you looking for someone?” she asked.

“My father.”

The woman opened a drawer. Inside were hundreds of jars with small lights.

“I have afternoons fishing, train journeys, unhurried conversations. What memory would you have liked to have?”

Jan thought about all the times his father came home late from work. The questions he hadn’t asked. The last week in the hospital, when they talked about the weather because the truth was frightening.

“A whole day in the mountains,” he said.

The vendor gave him a green jar.

“What’s the price?”

“An authentic memory. The market doesn’t accept money.”

Jan thought he had plenty. He handed over the memory of an ordinary Tuesday: Dad washing dishes and singing a song badly.

When he opened the jar, he remembered a perfect outing. Dad walked beside him, knew the names of all the birds, and said exactly the words Jan needed to hear.

He went back to the market the next night.

He bought a birthday without any arguments and paid with the memory of the two of them trying to assemble a crooked bookshelf. He bought a sincere conversation and handed over a quiet afternoon on the sofa. He bought a beach vacation in exchange for the memory of a breakdown on the highway.

The new memories were bright, complete, and gentle. In none of them was his father tired, impatient, or distant.

But one afternoon, his mother pointed to the cracked cup.

“Do you remember when Dad broke it dancing with you in the kitchen?”

Jan didn’t remember.

He looked for the song his father sang badly. He didn’t know the melody. He looked at the crooked bookshelf and thought it looked like a piece of furniture bought at any old store.

He ran back to the market.

“I want to undo the trades.”

The vendor shook her head.

“Authentic memories can’t be manufactured again.”

“But you still have them?”

The woman gestured to the stalls. Other people were buying fragments of perfect lives. Perhaps someone was taking away, at that moment, the afternoon of washing dishes or the silence of the sofa.

Jan felt an enormous rage.

“You sell lies.”

“We sell what people prefer to the truth,” she replied. “That’s the difference.”

Jan took all the unopened jars out of his backpack.

“What can I get back in return?”

The vendor examined them.

“Not the whole memories. Maybe a few crumbs.”

Jan agreed.

When he got home, he didn’t recover the scenes, but he did recover small things: the rhythm of an off-key song, the feeling of a shoulder next to him, the laughter after seeing the leaning bookshelf.

He wrote everything down before it disappeared again.

Then he asked his mother, his uncles, and his father’s friends to tell him stories. They didn’t always agree. In some, his father was generous; in others, stubborn. Sometimes he had been right, and sometimes he had hurt.

With these fragments, Jan didn’t construct a perfect memory. He constructed a person.

The market didn’t reappear. But some nights, when he longed for a conversation he could no longer have, Jan would open the notebook.

He didn’t find the words his father would have said. He found something less perfect and far more valuable: everything that was still true.