

# Where Crossroads Hold Their Breath

**F**rom her earliest days, Nia could hear them:  
the murmurs of other lives she might have lived.

When she laughed, she could almost hear a version of herself who had stayed silent.  
When she wept, she sensed another self who had turned away and felt nothing.  
At every fork in the road, a thousand shadows arose —  
not to frighten her,  
but to whisper:

“What if you had turned left instead?”

“What if you had stayed?”

“What if you had never spoken?”

Her gift was not prophecy.  
It was memory unmoored —  
reflections of futures she hadn't chosen,  
but somehow still belonged to her.

She became a hunter of ephemera,  
chasing wisps of paths not taken.  
Her journals filled with sketches of unlived lives.  
She grew intimate with futures —  
and a stranger to the present.

One day, walking in the forest,  
she came to a clearing  
where the path split into seven,  
each marked by a carved stone.

Each path called Choose me! —  
with a song both insistent and tender.

One path sang of love.  
One of solitude.  
One of security.  
One of danger.  
One of happiness.  
One of sorrow.  
One of longing.  
Nia stood at the crossroads and wept, unable to move.

Every step forward was a betrayal of the other six.  
Every chosen life meant the death of six others.

But as she wept,  
she saw someone in the distance:  
a stranger cloaked in grey, silent,

striking a path that cut through the undergrowth —  
not one of the seven carved roads.

A trail that was neither marked nor named.

The stranger did not hesitate.  
Did not glance left or right.  
Did not carry a map.  
Did not mourn the paths not taken.

Nia called out:

“Wait! Don’t you wonder who you could have become?”

The stranger paused. Then turned.

The face was neither old nor young.  
Neither male nor female.  
And the eyes —  
the eyes bore the ache of all unchosen lives...  
...yet shimmered with peace.

“I did wonder,” the stranger said.  
“But then I walked anyway. And the wondering faded.”

Nia looked down at the seven paths —  
beautiful, tragic, endless.

Then she looked at the stranger’s trail:  
narrow, tangled, raw.

It led not away from choice —  
but through it.

She closed her eyes.  
She took a breath.

And she stepped not onto a marked path —  
but into the unknown,  
where the earth had no names yet.

Behind her, the murmurs quieted.  
Ahead, the path opened with each footfall —  
not predicted,  
not denied.

Just...  
lived.

— *William Zeitler*  
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