

Burn This Letter

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Author's Note: Burn This Letter takes the form of a letter from a "Senior Illusionist" to his apprentice, Kodaka. It is written as a reverse instruction manual: a set of lessons on how a capable, high-achieving student slowly drifts away from truth, duty, and selfhood without ever feeling like she has failed. Rather than depicting moral collapse as dramatic or catastrophic, the poem explores how self-deception arrives disguised as optimization—cleaner narratives, softened language, aesthetic reframing, and the quiet normalization of compromise. The voice of the Illusionist is calm, almost tender, revealing how temptation often sounds less like rebellion and more like mentorship. At its center, the river becomes a metaphor for drift: a gradual surrender that feels indistinguishable from forward motion.

My dear Kodaka,

You still reach for the hammer. Put it down.

A soul is not a fortress to breach; it is a river that has forgotten it was once a river. Your task is never to push her under. It is to sit beside her on the bank, trail your fingers through the water, and convince her the growing cold against her skin is the thrill of forward motion.

Let me show you what I mean.

I. The Drift

Give her the gift first.

Not truth (too heavy), not duty (too knotted), but the bright, weightless alternative.

Slide the polished excuse across the table like a new phone still in its film of plastic.

Watch her thumb trace the edge.

"That feels... easier," she'll murmur.

Say nothing. Let her mistake the lessening resistance for progress.

That is the moment the current first kisses her ankles.

II. The Small Voice

She will hear it, of course, that thin, older voice rising from the marrow.

Do not argue with it.

Simply surround it.

Fill her feeds with strangers who applaud her smallest slidings.

Let her phone glow with heart-shaped fire.

After a while the old voice will sound like a radio left on in another room—distant, irrelevant, the taste of someone else's childhood.

She will reach for the volume knob herself.

III. The Numbness

The first time she lies and feels the sting, then lies again and feels it less, she will panic.

Be ready.

Lean in, gentle: "That fading ache? That's not damage. That's optimization."

Use her language, the one she trusts: "You're refactoring outdated code."

She will exhale, half-laugh, the way people do when an error finally compiles.

Relief looks, to her, exactly like wisdom.

IV. The Surface

She already lives half in pictures.

So give her beautiful rot.

Let the cracked foundation wear climbing roses.

Let the leaking roof catch the golden hour just so.

She will take the photo, add the filter that calls decay "patina," and post it with the caption aesthetic.

Ten thousand likes will tell her the structure is sound.

Never correct them. Beauty is the most obedient narcotic we have.

V. The Dream Box

Do not kill the dream; that only makes martyrs.

Instead, grant it a glass wall.

Let her visit on weekends, press her palm to the cool pane, watch the perfect life breathe inside its terrarium.

As long as the dream stays pristine, the real life can stay pleasantly compromised.

She will stroke the glass and call it "one day."

One day is the softest leash ever invented.

VI. The Quiet Signature

There will come a morning when she wakes and cannot locate the seam between the current and herself.

She will pour coffee, scroll, smile at the curated ruin of her days, and feel—this is the masterpiece—coherent.

No trumpet. No thunder.

Only the small, wet sound of a soul forgetting it ever knew how to swim against anything.

That, Kodaka, is the nod we wait for.

Not a scream.

A sigh that sounds, to her, like arrival.

Burn this letter when you understand it.

Then burn every letter like it.

By the time she notices the smoke, she will call it sunset.

Yours in the art,

The Senior Illusionist