



KALEB DAWIT

## Stay Inside

“Not all prisons have walls. Not all memories want to return.”

"Stay inside "

He started opening his eyes slowly. A pale, soft light filled his vision like moonlight, but quieter. For a long moment, his eyeballs didn't move. He stared without blinking, lost in that light. For a moment, he forgot his body. All he was, was a man staring at a light that seemed to say death was one step away.

Then, a sharp static sound cut through the silence like old television noise. Suddenly, he realized he was not home. His eyes burned as if he'd stared too long at a glowing forge. He tried to move but his head felt like concrete, heavy and stuck. He blinked hard, again and again, hoping to shake the weight. His eyeballs finally started moving rapidly a blink, a hard move, a blink, a hard move, again and again. Summoning all his strength, he slowly turned his heavy head to the left. He gasped, then froze stopping there, letting the moment hang. He gazed, and the static noise hit him like a laser. His eyes unfroze suddenly; he shut them tight and opened again.

Before him was an old TV set, the kind with thick wooden sides and a curved glass screen, standing alone with no wires. The static sound was real coming from the TV. He looked at it for a while, tilting his head as if meeting a long-lost companion. A strange feeling stirred inside like hope, or maybe fear. Slowly, he brought his head back to the center and tried to see more around him.

He started moving his leg but it felt paralyzed, like shot by a shotgun. Frustrated, he muttered, "Forget the leg, my back's got me." He tried to shift his body left, toward the TV. His leg followed, moving some but the air touched his skin cold and sharp. He asked himself quietly, "Why is this bed so small?" Then, slowly, he bent his left leg backward and curled it around the other like two companions holding each other. Could it be a bed? Then the first real question hit him. Where am I?

His eyes drifted back to the TV. My TV isn't this close, he thought. And it's definitely not this old. But the question faded fast. His focus shifted back to his body. He lifted his leg slowly into the air. It moved. It worked. Relief washed over him mixed with fear. What about my hand? he wondered. He tried to move it but for a moment, it felt gone. Panic tightened his chest. Then, with all his strength, he pointed at the TV as if blaming it. He pushed himself up with his elbow, trying to sit fast too fast. But just like that, he fell back down. A small sigh escaped: "Ohh..."

Lying still, he thought over how to get up slowly, carefully. After a long time, he reached a conclusion. I must be terribly drunk, he muttered. No choice but to rely on the old ways. He spoke to his body like an old companion needing coaxing. He pulled his chest forward, inch by inch. His waist followed slowly, twisting with care. He turned his head to the side, steadying his breath. One leg stretched out, the other pushed gently from

behind guiding his body with quiet patience. Carefully, he lowered himself into a balanced, flat position. He breathed deep, then deeper still. He slowed his heartbeat, steadying the wild rhythm. Focusing his mind, he made a silent promise. This is it, body. Now. He summoned every ounce of strength, muscles fighting to work as one. With a sharp push to the side, he pulled his whole body together, forcing movement where there was none before. He finally did it. Slowly, painfully, he moved into a sitting position.

Relief flooded him like a cool wave. A tear slipped from his eye, tracing down his cheek pure joy, the kind a child feels getting candy after school. But his head hung low, almost touching the floor. He smiled through the tears, feeling like he'd achieved the impossible. He thanked his body silently. His fists stayed clenched, like he was ready to fight. "I know it wasn't my bed," he muttered. Slowly, he turned his head to the right to look for the bed. Instead, he saw a sofa the kind with wide armrests where you rest your hands. He whispered, "Sofa... it's a sofa." Amazed, he added, "Now I know I'm drunk, as usual, and I'm at my friend's place." But wait which friend? He hadn't seen them in a long time. Not like a reunion, not at all. Suddenly, questions flooded his mind. He reached his gaze toward the TV, trying to answer the questions with his eyes. He glanced around the room, but the weight in his back felt like he'd slept for 300 years. His gaze moved from the TV to the rest of the room, searching for a clue. But the room was empty completely bare. He tried to look over his shoulder, hoping for something, anything. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

He wondered if he could get up. At first, it felt like he was stuck like sitting on a magnet pulling him down. He tried to move but stopped before even really trying. Slowly, he settled back down, disappointed by the result. He pushed the questions aside and focused on what he could see and feel. His shoes looked old but elegant, worn with care. His trousers were black, perfectly tailored like they were made just for him. He glanced at his hands and noticed the coat he wore, sleeves covering his wrists. Underneath, he caught a glimpse of a neat shirt, buttoned up. He smirked and said, "Elegant me. Let's see if my elegant personality can handle round two."

Then, tricking his own mind, he pushed himself up quickly before his brain could even catch up. But sometimes, you can trick the body, but not the mind. Before he could even rise, his mind fought back, pulling him down with a force he couldn't resist. He slid to the end of the sofa, collapsing into a curled-up position like a child. It felt like an invisible force pushed him down, leaving no choice but to sit. "Ahaha, how rude," he muttered. Then he realized he needed time. So he decided to take it slow and let his eyes explore whatever they could reach. He looked again and again, waiting for something to appear but nothing came. The only thing that caught his attention was the TV, humming with that endless static noise. For a long time, his eyes didn't leave the TV time passed as



they stared at each other. Then suddenly, he realized this wasn't like any TV he'd seen before in any household. He wondered, "Am I focusing on the wrong thing?" Then, "Wait hold on."

His pupils sharpened, drawing in all the light from the screen. The TV wasn't just any old set it looked like one used in a lab, cold and clinical, not meant for a living room. He whispered to himself, "Is it counting? Is it?" Then louder, "Yes, it is. Yes, it is counting." The words stumbled out, confused, repeating over and over as he tried to make sense of it. He squinted at the screen. "Wait is it counting up? Or down?" His eyes narrowed, trying to catch the rhythm, to figure it out. After a moment, he shook his head. "No it must be time passed." He grabbed a fold of his trouser, held it tight like a signal to his body. "Let me see," he muttered. "Is it time for another try?" This time, his body felt ready. The sharp ache in his back had dulled, and a single drop of sweat slid down his spine. "Body must be up," he told himself. He breathed in deep, steadying. Not quick this time. No tricks. A new method one part at a time. He shifted his waist first. Then his chest. Let the weight flow. Drift, not force. And with one final push, slow but sure, he rose. Upright. Standing.

The dizziness hit hard. It wasn't a slow wave it was a jolt. His whole body trembled like he'd been plugged into a wall socket. A flood of sweat broke across his skin, sudden and cold, like he'd just stepped into a storm. His knees bent. Hands shot to his ears. A high-pitched ringing had taken over everything sharp, metallic, shrill. It was in his skull, not around him. Was it the TV? The static? No this was louder. Thinner. Like a scream only machines understood. He pressed harder, trying to shut it out, palms tight against his ears. But the ringing didn't matter. It just kept cutting through, deeper and deeper. Seconds passed. Or maybe minutes. Time warped in the noise. Then, just like that it stopped.

The ringing vanished, clean and sudden, like someone flipped a switch inside his skull. He stayed still for a breath, maybe two, then slowly turned his head. Like he'd been waiting eager, curious, almost afraid to see what was behind him all along. His eyes scanned the space, but something didn't sit right. The colors... they didn't match. Shapes felt flipped. He squinted. Tilted his head, confused. "My back... front?" he mumbled. "Or—what is this?" He stared harder. "This is the back," he said. "What is this?" Just like the front, nothing. An absolute vacuum.

He took a step. Wobbly, like a baby trying its first walk. Then he fell. Hands hit the floor. He pushed up, tried again. Fell. Got up again. Then he stopped. No more movement. Just standing there, breath heavy, body pulsing. He looked around. The sofa. The TV. Nothing else. Not a single object in sight. He muttered, "I'm a fool... I need the door." A sudden rush to the corner hope in motion. But his leg betrayed him again. He fell hard.

Still, he whispered, "It's okay... I'll crawl." And crawl he did, dragging himself to the edge of the room, right in the TV's view. But near the wall, his knees screamed. His body gave in. Eyes closed. Hands touched flat on the cold floor, elbows locked. Head tilted forward, eyes barely open. "Huh..." he breathed out, almost laughing. "I found it. I found the door." He crawled fast now, almost walking, his upper body low and arms dragging him forward, legs tight and tense behind him. "All this pain... all this, it ends once I'm out," he muttered, breath short. "Ouff... good things always take time, hard to find, easy to make you smile." And just like that, he made it. Right in front of the door.

His smile faded. Eyes dropped. Power returned—but with it, something else. Like manners were forgotten, like something in him cracked. Sadness hit him hard. Not slowly. Not gently. Like a punch. His legs rose without warning. His spine straightened, shoulders pulled back. For the first time, he felt like a full human being—standing. But the joy didn't last. It never does when you look too closely. The door... wasn't. It was just paint on the wall. A picture. A lie meant to look like hope. He touched it. Pushed. Slapped it with his palm. Scratched at the edge. Kicked it once. Twice. He dropped to the ground, palms sweeping the floor, searching for a key. He whispered, "What is this joke? What is this?" A weak smile tried to form but died before it reached his lips. He turned toward the window next to the door. Walk slowly, hope fading with every step. But it was the same as a painted lie. No glass, no light, just shadows. The dark sun on the windowpane held him there, frozen, caught between wanting to leave and nowhere to go. All his ties loosened as he turned away, walking back slowly. Nothing changed empty walls all around. He reached the other side, felt the sharp edge with his hand. "How did I not notice this before?" he whispered.

Exhausted, he returned to the sofa and sat down, hours slipping by in silence. A dream or a joke? It had to be a dream a bad one, but a lesson learned. He turned to his side, hoping to fall asleep and wake up at home. He closed his eyes... and then opened them. Still there. He waited, closed his eyes again, but sleep wouldn't come. "Wake up, wake up, wake up... you're drunk. Wake up, wake up," his mind repeated, restless and sharp. He squeezed his eyes shut and then, barely a moment later, opened them and zoned out. Not a dream, then. He reached out, his hand slipping down between the sofa and the headrest. "Not a dream at all," he whispered. He leaned back into the sofa, eyes darting around like a child lost in a busy market. His mind went blank—nothing making sense. "What happened? Why am I lost?" he thought, but no memory came. He whispered, "Who am I even?"

Then he started feeling his clothes, his trousers, then his coat. His hand brushed something inside a note. Surprised, he pulled it out and opened it, eyes lighting up. "Alemayhue, Alemayhue," he muttered over and over, almost ten times. The letters looked typed, clear as if it was his name. "Aha," he said, like a new memory clicking in

his mind. He repeated softly, "Alemayhue... that's me." Then he asked himself, "Why is this happening, Alemayhue?" His mind pushed him "Remember, remember." He slapped his head, but it only made the pain worse. "Let me go slow," he thought. He looked back at the paper. Before his name, there was "ENG." He wondered, "English? No... Eng, eng, engine." Then it hit him. "Ohhh, I'm an engineer." He wasn't completely sure, but deep down, he felt it was true. Then he got up and started pacing, thinking about "engineer Alemayhue." Suddenly, a memory flashed a picture he had drawn in his house, left on the table. He didn't know where that memory came from, but it felt real. He started talking aloud, explaining the house layout in detail—measurements, angles, light directions just like a real engineer, animated, proud. But mid-sentence, he paused. "Wait... am I here for work? Did my boss send me?" His voice cracked a little. "But how? How am I even an engineer?" He clutched his head. A flash his old college ruler, the one that always reminded him to stop overthinking. He froze. "This is nonsense." He stood there for a while, staring into nothing. "Maybe I'm here to draft something... but what?" He sighed. "For now, focus." He looked around. "Focus on what? There's nothing. Not even a pen. I wish I had one. Just one object. I'd remember everything."

He closed his eyes, pressing his palms to his temples. Engineer. ENG. Draft something... And then, like a crack through glass, a flash A large table, cluttered with papers. Lines, angles, notes in tight handwriting. A sharp pencil between his fingers. A lamp casting a yellow circle of light. He was drawing. No... redrawing. Frustrated. Erasing. There was something wrong with the design. A structure. Layers. Confusing paths. Symbols he didn't understand anymore. But before the memory could take shape, a wave of exhaustion washed over him. Heavy. Sudden. Like medicine kicking in. His knees buckled, and he sank slowly to the floor.

He sank back onto the sofa. "These numbers... they're giving me a headache." He glanced toward the TV and stood up, walking over to it. His fingers traced the edges. "Where's the antenna? Where are the wires?" There was nothing—no wires, no antenna, nothing at all. He looked down at the floor. Empty. How is this even possible? He slowly returned to the sofa and sank down again. His eyes fixed on the window—a painting of a dark sun, still and silent behind the glass. He tried to remember how the sun feels warm on his face, the gentle brush of his beard in the light. He sighed softly. "That feels good," he said quietly, as if sitting on a bench in the morning, thinking. Like he hadn't been outside in months. He muttered, "Memory, memory, where you at? Did the whiskey from last night wash you out?" The words stirred something deep inside. Suddenly, a flash last night. Whiskey. A bar. "Who was with me?" he whispered, but the answer slipped just out of reach. He turned back to the TV, watching the numbers flicker up and down. "Now the numbers are increasing, right?" he said, staring at his reflection in the dark screen. "I hate the color grey," he muttered. His hands came up, fingers moving as if counting something only he could see. Trying to make sense of it all. He

leaned forward, almost slipping off the edge of the seat. His eyes squinted as he focused on the numbers. "Not just a number," he whispered, pointing with a shaky finger. "A number with meaning?" "Maybe it's the time left... or the time I've been here... or even the time I've been sleeping," he muttered, leaning back. He closed his eyes tightly, trying to see the numbers in his mind.

Then, like a spark, a memory came "Micky... ohh, my friend Micky." He smiled weakly. "He even said hi... like he was really there. My best buddy." Last night, I was with Micky at the bar. We were talking about the work we have. How did I even remember that? He glanced back at the numbers on the TV, then closed his eyes again, as if searching for answers there. But the moment his eyes shut, a wave of sadness hit him hard, heavy and sharp. But that's impossible. Micky's been dead. He remembered the funeral the tears, the silence, Micky's family standing broken. He sank back down, resting his head in his hands. "He's dead," he whispered. "How did we even meet?" How? How were we at a bar together then? "Ohh, I'm going crazy," he whispered. Tears spilled over. "Ohh, Micky, Micky, my good friend. I miss you. I never had a friend like you." "Even when no one wanted to be my friend... Micky, my old buddy." He stopped crying, stood up quickly, hands on his waist. "That means... that means... that means " The silence hit him so loud it filled the room. He stared around like looking for a reflection. "I'm dead," he said, voice fading slowly, from a high pitch to low. He shouted, "I'm dead! Dead! Dead! Dead! Dead! Dead!" Then he looked back, trembling, and touched the TV screen, tears running down its cold surface. "I'm dead... again and again." His voice cracked with disbelief. "Okay, white light that means I'm in heaven. That's good." He sighed, relieved. "But what good deed did I do to get here?" He paused, voice heavy. "I'm old, drank too much, carried all those bad deeds... how did I deserve this?" He fell silent. A man like me a bad one. Good things never happened for me. I didn't even treat Micky's family as I promised. He slammed his hand against his head, slapping hard. "Yes, you idiot!" he shouted. Without noticing, exhaustion took over. He fell back, staring up at the light. "Idiot... you deserve this."

Hours passed. He gave up trying to figure out what happened. His eyes closed, his mind finally letting go. He fell asleep deep, heavy sleep like real rest. When he woke, the same light greeted him. Same light... different position. He stared at it. He woke with a dry breath, the light steady above him. No change. No sound. But something felt different. He sat up slowly, rubbed his face, and let out a long, tired breath. "Okay... okay." He pulled himself onto the sofa, careful, like not to disturb the stillness around him. His hands rested on his knees. He closed his eyes just for a second. "Let's try again," he whispered. "No panic. No shouting." Just the soft hum of nothing. He stood up suddenly, like energy had rushed back into his body like he just ate a good meal. He started moving, fast, alert. First, he dropped to the floor, peeking under the sofa. "Nothing," he muttered. "It's attached to the floor. Okay... good." He hurried to the



corner of the room, eyes scanning every inch. He ran his hand along the wall, searching. "Come on, just one thing..." But nothing. So far. And then it hit him—"You know what?" he whispered. "I didn't see the TV." He looked back, stepped toward the TV, then knelt down in front of it. "04... 04... 04," he repeated, staring close. "I get it. It's going back. It must be days... or even " He nodded to himself. "It has to be days. Good." His eyes lit up. "Next one... hours. Good. Then minutes. Seconds." He smiled wide, almost laughing. "Yes... yes... yes! I get it now." "Okay... days. Days. 04 days." "That means I've been here four days..." His smile faded. "The police got me here? That can't be... or am I crazy?" He started pacing. "Mental doctors? I should've remembered something by now." He stopped and rubbed his temple. "Why the TV? A clock would've been enough." He looked around, tense. "And why no door?" He caught himself. "Stop. One thing at a time. No clock. Nothing." He turned slowly And walked straight to the door.

He reached the door, tapped it. Drywall. Not a door. Just more walls. He ran around the room, palms brushing the surface, checking every side. Then he stopped at a corner, crouched, started measuring with his steps and arms. "This has got to be four by four. You can't build this any other way." He stood still, eyes tracing the ceiling. Nothing. Just the single light, dead center. He exhaled hard and looked around slowly. "Okay... what do I have?" Trying to make sense of it all. And how did I even get here? Or was this built while I'm inside? He scanned the walls, searching for anything. Then, suddenly, he shouted into the corner, "I'm here! I'm here!" As if he were the only one trapped. He slammed his fist against the wall, voice cracking. But tiredness hit him hard. "I need to stop. That's not the way." "If someone put me here, they'd have come for me by now." He sank back down onto the sofa. Then his stomach growled. "Ohh, I'm hungry... and thirsty," he muttered. He asked himself all these questions, trying to ignore the hunger and thirst weighing on him.

Then, in a blink, a flash appeared A man's reflection in a mirror, like his bathroom mirror. "Huh... a big man," he whispered. He turned slowly, eyes scanning the room. "That man... only found in the guard post." He frowned. "I must've been taken from the bar... or home. No, not home. Nothing feels right." His gaze bounced between the TV and the door. "If that man brought me here—why? Why? Why?" "I didn't steal anything. Didn't do anything wrong, right?" All these questions only made his hunger grow stronger. "Food..." he whispered slowly, as if realizing how much he needed it. He touched his body thin, long legs, a slim frame, like a drained pipe with no fluid left. Leaning against the wall, he sank down again. Still, the questions kept coming. Answers. Answers... Then the anger came rushing back. "Remember! Remember!" he shouted, facing the wall. He started hitting himself, fist after fist—Hit, hit. Suddenly, he collapsed backward, blood trickling from his head. Tears streamed down his face as he cried through the pain. He fainted.

Hours passed. When he woke, blood covered his eyes. He wiped it away with his coat, then took the coat off and folded it on the sofa. That's when he saw it—A name tag, pinned to the coat. "My name... my name." He whispered, surprised. "You only find this in hospitals, right?" Hospital? I'm not sick. I'm totally fine. I haven't been in a hospital for years. It can't be. He tried to remove the tag, but his hands felt numb—too weak to pull. "Ohh," he sighed, leaning back against the TV stand. Slowly, sleep took him again. He woke up again, only to drift back to sleep, over and over. His eyes never fully opened. He tried to move from the TV to the sofa—but couldn't. "Kill me," he whispered, voice barely there. "Kill me. I'm done with all these questions." Blood stained his hand as he gripped the sofa handle and rested his head on it. His legs crossed, staring at nothing.

Then, a memory surfaced When he was a child, how his mother cared for him when he fell and his knee bled. He smiled softly. "Mom," he whispered. Another memory came Running alone in the woods, no friends, just himself. Slowly, his childhood came back. As the memories faded, Alemayhue's ears caught a faint crack like a door slowly creaking open. His heart raced. Finally, he thought, someone. He tried to push himself up, but his body wouldn't respond. The door swung wide open, revealing a tall man standing in the doorway. He was broad-shouldered, wearing a worn leather jacket that looked like it had seen years of rain and dust. His face was shadowed, but sharp eyes met Alemayhue's with a quiet kindness. A rough beard framed a calm, tired expression someone who had seen too much but still cared. The man stepped fully into the room. His eyes were deep, tired but steady like someone who carried weight silently. His dark hair was messy, with streaks of gray at the temples. A faint scar ran down his left cheek, barely noticeable but telling a story. His hands were rough, calloused, like from years of hard work. He wore worn boots, dust-covered pants, and a simple shirt under the jacket.

Alemayhue's breath hitched. "Micky," he whispered, disbelief and relief tangled together. With a sudden burst, Alemayhue pushed himself forward as much as he could. He wrapped his arms tightly around Micky, holding on like he never wanted to let go. They stayed locked in that embrace for what felt like hours two old friends reunited after a lifetime apart. He leaned into Micky's shoulder, his body trembling with quiet sobs. The tears came slowly at first, then poured like a river breaking through a dam. "Lonely man..." he whispered, voice cracking, "I've been so empty... like a hollow space where nothing grows." He felt the weight of years of silence, of isolation pressing down like a heavy fog. "All this time... I was alone. Not just here, but inside too. A vacuum pulling everything away." His hands gripped Micky's coat, soaking it with every tear, every word unspoken for so long. The ache of being forgotten, of being lost, wrapped around him like a cold shadow. And in that embrace, all the loneliness spilled out, raw and aching, finally finding a place to rest. He stopped crying slowly, the trembling in his body fading but not gone. With effort, he lifted his hands and gently held Micky's—feeling the

warmth, the reality of it. He looked up, meeting Micky's steady, tired eyes, searching for something solid to hold onto.

Then, his gaze shifted, pulled by a flicker from the TV. There, on the screen, was himself still crying, still lost in that embrace. A cold shiver ran through him as the pieces started to slip away. He blinked hard, confusion clouding his eyes. The room around him felt less solid, like mist slipping through fingers. His heart pounded as he glanced toward the door again But the door was just paint, flat and lifeless. A cold wave crashed over him. All of this Micky, the room, even the tears was inside his own mind. His body ached, head pounding, blood trickling from a fresh wound. He crawled forward, each movement heavy and desperate. Blood dripped from his lips as he coughed, his hands trembling as he wiped away the mix of tears and blood. His mind screamed for answers, but only silence answered back. He collapsed near the wall, chest rising in sharp, shallow bursts. His eyes drifted first to the ceiling, then to the floor. Nothing moved. No sound. Just the quiet hum of stillness. He blinked slowly. His gaze found the screen one last time. The static had cleared. Now, centered on the TV in clean white text: **FINAL STAGE** A soft beep echoed in the room. Then another. Then silence. And the screen went black.