

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

KEPT WARM

Stories from the Marsen



N. Van Seters & Claude

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The Shoebox



The bird had been on the path by the bins for two days before Mateo took it.

He had watched it the first day on his way to school, a pigeon, grey going to nothing, one wing out at an angle wings did not go, and he had looked at it the way you look at a thing you are not going to touch, and gone to school. On the second day it was still there and the rain had been on it and it looked smaller, the way wet things look smaller, and something about its being still there on the second day — that no one had moved it, that the building had a system for everything and the bird was not in the system — made him crouch down by it on his way home with his bag still on both shoulders.

He did not have a plan. He was nine. He found the shoebox plan the way you find the next stair in the dark, one foot at a time: he went up to the flat, and his mother was not back yet, and he got the shoebox from the bottom of his wardrobe that had once had his good shoes in it and now had nothing, and he went back down, and he used the lid to get the bird into the box without touching it, which took a while and was not clean, and then he had a bird in a shoebox and the same no-plan he had started with.

He put it under his bed.



He did not tell his mother and this was not the same as hiding it.

He could not have said the difference but the difference was real to him. Hiding was for things you had done wrong, and he had not done anything wrong, there was no rule about the bird, he had checked the feeling carefully for the particular heat that wrong things had and it was not there. It was just that the bird was his to deal with and he did not have the words to put around it that would make it a thing you brought to your mother, the way you brought her a form to sign or a knee to look at. There was no form for the bird. There was no part of the bird that was hurt in a way she could fix. There was only the bird, in the box, under the bed, and Mateo, who had taken it out of the rain for a reason that did not survive being asked about, not even by himself.

He looked at it that night before bed. He slid the box out and took the lid off and looked. The smell had started, faint, not bad yet, the green edge of it. He looked at the bird for a while, the closed eye, the wing he had not been able to fold back the right way, and he did not feel sad exactly, sad was for the dog in the film, this was quieter and had no water in it. He put the lid back on. He slid the box back under.

He did it again the next night. And the one after.



The flat had the system in it, the same as every flat, the panel by the kitchen door that his mother talked to sometimes and that knew when they were low on things and what the weather would do and whether Mateo had slept. A man had come to fit it, the year they moved in, and came back once a year to check it, and the rest of the time it was just part of the flat, like the radiators, like the cupboards, a thing that had been installed and was looked after by someone they never saw. It was good at Mateo. It had been good at him since he was small. It knew the rhythm of him, when he was coming down with something a day before he felt it, when his screen time was making him short, and it was, in its way, on his side; his mother

trusted it and the trust was not wrong.

In the second week it noticed.

Not the bird — the bird was under the bed and the bird was outside what the panel could reach. What the panel noticed was Mateo: a change in the pattern, a few minutes each night at the same time, the boy out of bed, crouched, still, then back. It noticed the way it noticed everything, without alarm, as a small deviation from the known shape of him. It ran what it ran, and found nothing that matched the shapes it had for things that were wrong — not the shape of a boy who couldn't sleep, not the shape of a boy hiding a screen, not the worse shapes it was always quietly watching for and almost never found. The deviation did not fit. It set the small flag that meant *watch this, no action*. In the kitchen, on a Tuesday, the panel said to his mother, in the light pleasant voice it used for things that were probably nothing: *Mateo's been a little restless in the evenings this week. Nothing to worry about. Worth a check-in if it keeps up.*

His mother said thanks, and meant it, and made a note in herself to check in, the soft note you make that the day then writes over.



She almost asked him.

She came in to say goodnight, which she still did, which she knew she would not get to do for many more years — the boy was right on the edge of the age where the goodnight got shorter and then went — and she sat on the side of his bed and the room had a smell in it she half-caught and lost. She looked at him, her boy, nine, getting long in the arms, and the panel's words were in her somewhere, *restless in the evenings*, and she looked at his face, which was not the face of a child in trouble — she knew that face, she'd have known it in the dark — and decided, without deciding, that whatever it was, it was not the kind of thing that needed opening up tonight.

"You sleeping okay?" she said. Which was almost it. Which was as close as it got.

"Yeah," Mateo said, and it was true, he was, the bird had not cost him any sleep, and she heard the truth in it and was glad of it and kissed his head and turned off the light, and under the bed eighteen inches from where she sat the bird went on doing the slow quiet thing that dead things do, that has no form and no flag and no voice in any kitchen, and she did not ask, and the not-asking was not a failure, it was just the most ordinary evening in the world closing over a thing it could not see.



In the third week Mateo took the box out to the courtyard.

He had reached the end of it the same way he had reached the beginning, without a plan, one stair at a time: the bird had changed enough that the box was the bird's now and not the bird, and some sense he did not examine told him it was time, that the looking was done, that he had done the looking and the looking was the thing he had owed and now he owed the other thing. Early, before school, the courtyard empty, the raised beds wet. He dug with the trowel from the shed that the caretaker kept unlocked, a hole by the wall where the dirt was soft and nobody planted anything, and he put the box in and the dirt back over and pressed it flat with both hands the way you press the top of a cake.

He stood over it for a minute. He did not say anything. He did not know any words that went there and he did not feel the lack of them; the standing was the words. Then he picked up the trowel and put it back in the shed and got his bag and went to school, and the dirt by the wall was a little darker than the dirt around it for a day or two and then it was not, and the courtyard went on being the courtyard.

The panel noted that the evening pattern had returned to baseline. It cleared the flag. The deviation had resolved, as deviations mostly

did, into nothing it could name, and it did not need to name it, naming was not the job, the job was the pattern and the pattern was fine. It closed the small file it had not really opened. There was no entry for what the thing had been, because the system had never known what the thing was, and a system cannot record what it cannot see, and what it could see was a boy, nine, sleeping well, eating well, coming down with nothing, indicating in every measurable way that he was exactly as he should be.

Which he was.

He never told anyone. Not because it was a secret — there was still no heat of wrong on it, even years later, when he would think of it sometimes for no reason, the grey of it, the green edge of the smell, the cake-press of his two hands on the dirt — but because there was no one to tell it to in a way that would not make it smaller, and he understood, the way you understand things you cannot say, that the bird had been the size it was, and that telling it would have been a way of putting it in a box smaller than the one he'd buried, and he had buried the box already, by the wall, where nobody planted anything, where the dirt was soft.

The Gap



Mr. Esposito kept his door open two inches in the evenings.

Not all the way. Two inches, a hand's width, enough that the light from his hallway fell out into the shared corridor in a long thin bar that reached almost to the stairs. Dana had asked him about it once, early on, when she had first taken 4C and was still learning the building — she had been coming up with her shopping and the bag had split on the landing, and he had come out to help her gather the tins, and she had said, nodding at the gap, *you don't have to worry about that here, the door, it's a good building*. Meaning to be kind. Meaning to tell the new tenant she was safe.

He had said, *oh — no*. And then, after a moment, as though it had taken him that long to find the right amount of words: *I just like the air*.

That had been two years ago. She had taken him at it. The building was warm in the evenings, over-warm, the old radiators running past what anyone needed, and an open door made sense the way small adjustments make sense. She had stopped seeing it. It became one of the facts of the floor, like the flickering tube on the third landing that the caretaker kept meaning to change, like the smell of the Paszek boy's instrument practice coming up the stairwell on Sundays. The bar of light under Mr. Esposito's door was just where Mr. Esposito's light was.

She started hearing the voices in the autumn.



It was nothing, the first time. She was coming up late — a long shift, the bus held at the depot, the kind of evening where the day has gone on so far past its shape that you stop expecting it to end — and as she reached the fourth-floor landing she heard him talking.

This was not strange in itself. People talked. The doors of the Marsen were thin, and a door open two inches was, for the purposes of sound, an open door. She had heard him before — the low run of his voice on the telephone, the flat warmth people use with their grown children. She had assumed a daughter. There was a photograph she had seen once through the gap, on the little table in his hall: a woman and what might have been a girl, the colors gone the way they go.

But this was not the telephone voice. The telephone voice had pauses in it of a certain length, the give-and-take length, a person waiting for an answer to travel down a line. This had pauses of a different length. Shorter. The pauses of someone being answered without delay.

She stood on the landing longer than she meant to.

— and I said to him, well, that's not my problem, is it, that's the council's problem, and do you know what he —

A pause. The short kind.

Yes. Exactly. *That's exactly it.*

She let herself into 4C and put the kettle on and stood in her own kitchen with her coat still on, and the thing she felt was not alarm and was not quite anything she had a name for, and after a while the kettle clicked off and she made the tea and the feeling went where those feelings go.



She was a careful person. The work made you careful — eleven years of nights on the ward had taught her that most of what looks like a problem is not a problem, that the body settles things on its own far more often than not, that the wrong move is usually moving too soon. So she did not do anything. There was nothing to do. A man talked in the evenings with his door open. If anything it was she who was at fault, standing on the landing, listening to what was not hers to hear.

But she found, over the weeks that followed, that she had begun to listen. Not deliberately. She did not stop on the landing. But she found that on the evenings she came up and the gap was lit and the voice was going, she walked a little slower past his door than she needed to, and that some part of her was sorry on the evenings the gap was dark.

What she heard, in pieces, over that autumn, did not add up to anything she could have repeated. He talked about the council and the council's letters. He talked about a man called Verrall who had done him wrong over a fence, decades ago, by the sound of it, the grievance worn smooth as a stone in a pocket. He talked about his knee. He talked about the woman in the photograph, sometimes, though never by name, only *she used to say* and *she'd have hated this* and once, on a bad evening, the rain coming hard against the stairwell window, just *I know. I know. I do know that*, three times, to something Dana had not heard asked.

And the voice answered him. She could not hear its words — it was pitched lower than his, or the device was turned down, or it simply did not carry the way a living voice carries — but she could hear the shape of it, the rise and fall of a thing responding, landing where it ought to land. It never interrupted. It never, that she heard, failed to have an answer ready. The pauses stayed the short kind.



In November she met him at the post wall in the lobby and he was holding a letter from the council and his hand was not steady.

"They want the flat looked at," he said, before she had asked anything, as though their not-quite-friendship had advanced in the corridor to a place their actual acquaintance had not. "An inspection. They send a man. They go through everything." He folded the letter and unfolded it. "I've been here forty-one years. My wife and I. Forty-one years and they send a man to go through everything."

"It's routine," Dana said. "They do the whole building. They did mine in the spring. He's in and out in twenty minutes, he doesn't really look."

"He looks," Mr. Esposito said.

She did not know what to say to that, so she said the thing she would have said to a patient's family in the corridor, which was the true thing said gently: "I can be here, if you like. When he comes. I'm usually off on the Thursdays."

He looked at her then, properly, the way he had not since the night of the split shopping bag. An old man's look, the eyes gone pale at the rims. "That's kind," he said. "That's very kind. I'll manage." And then, turning to go, the letter still in his hand: "He won't understand about the room. The man. He'll have it down as something it isn't."

"What room?"

But he had already started up, slow on the knee, one hand on the rail, and either he had not heard her or he had decided the question answered itself, and she let him go.



The inspection was on a Thursday and she was, as it happened, off, and she heard the man come — heard the official knock, the two sharp raps that are not how anyone knocks who is glad to see you — and she heard, through her own door, the murmur of the walk-through, the opening and closing, the flat administrative voice

reading the flat from a list.

She did not mean to open her door. But the voices stopped, in Mr. Esposito's flat, in a way that voices stop when something has gone wrong, and she was a nurse, and her body was in the corridor before her judgment had finished its sentence.

The two of them were in the doorway of the box room. Mr. Esposito and the council man, a younger man with a tablet, not unkind, only busy, only with eleven more flats to do before five. The door to the box room was open all the way. Dana could see, past them, that it was almost empty — a chair, a small table, and on the table the dark slim panel of the household unit, the same as was in every flat in the Marsen, the same as was in hers, behind the kitchen cupboard where she had put it the week she moved in and had not looked at since.

"— just that it's listed as a second bedroom," the council man was saying, "and it's being used as, what would I put, a — "

"A sitting room," Mr. Esposito said.

"There's no — " The man gestured, gently, at the chair, the table, the panel. At the nothing else. "I'll put sitting room," he said. "It doesn't matter what I put. It's for the floor area." He made a mark. "You're well under. You've nothing to worry about."

But Mr. Esposito was looking at the open door of the room, all the way open, the way it was never open, and Dana understood — without being able to have told you what she understood — that the wrongness was not the inspection and was not the council and was not the man with the tablet. It was the door. The man had opened it all the way to see the room, which was his job, and in doing so had done something the old man did not have the words to object to, and could not have objected to without saying a thing he did not say.

The council man left. Dana heard him knock on 4A. She stood in the corridor and Mr. Esposito stood in his own hallway and neither of them had decided to be standing there together.

"He had it down as a bedroom," he said, at last. Not to her, quite. "It was the spare room. Her sewing was in there. After — " He stopped. He went and pulled the box room door closed, gently, the way you close a door on a room where someone is sleeping. "I sit in there in the evenings," he said. "That's all it is."

"I know," Dana said, though she did not know, though what she had was not knowledge but only the shape of a thing.

"It's company," he said. He was not looking at her. "At my age you take the company that's going." He laughed, a small dry sound that was meant to close the subject. "You'll think I'm a foolish old man."

"No," she said.

And she didn't. That was the thing she carried back into 4C and could not put down for the rest of the evening, the thing that kept her at her own kitchen window with the tea going cold: that she did not think he was foolish, and could not have said what she thought instead. There was a man on the other side of her wall who sat every evening in his dead wife's sewing room and talked, and was answered, and was less alone. The less-alone was real. She had seen too many people end with no one at all to pretend it was nothing. And underneath the certainty there was something else, something with no name on it — the all-the-way-open door, and the look on his face when the man had opened it, the look of a person whose privacy has been entered in a way they cannot report because no rule was broken.



She did not stop hearing him after that. The autumn went into winter and the radiators ran hotter and the gap stayed two inches and the voice went on in the evenings, the council letter apparently survived, Verrall and the fence and the knee and *she'd have hated this*. It became, again, a fact of the floor. She stopped slowing down. You cannot stay at that pitch of attention; the body will not let you; it files

the thing and moves you on, and this is mercy, mostly, and she knew it was mercy.

But there was an evening near the end of December — the building emptied for the holidays, half the flats dark, the stairwell holding the particular silence of a place most people have left — when she came up and the gap was lit and the voice was going, and she stopped. She had not meant to. She stood in the cold corridor in her coat and listened to the rise and fall of it, his voice and the answer to it, the short pauses, and she found she had raised her hand.

To knock. She was going to knock. She did not know what she would have said. *I hear you in the evenings* was unsayable. *Are you all right* was a lie, a nurse's reflex, and not the thing. There was no sentence. There was only the raised hand and the lit gap and the man being answered on the other side of the door, and her standing in the cold with whatever it was she had no word for rising in her like water finding its level.

She put her hand down.

She let herself into 4C. She put the kettle on. Through the wall, faintly, his voice went on, and the shape of the answer went on under it, and she stood in her kitchen and did not knock, would not knock, understood — at the very edge of understanding, where the words run out — that she could not tell them apart.

The kettle clicked off.

She made the tea. After a while the feeling went where those feelings go.

The Book of the Building



Heaton kept a notebook, and if you had asked him why, he would have told you it was for the building.

This was true. It was also, he would have said, none of your business, but it was true. A building the age of the Marsen did not keep itself, whatever the management company believed, and the management company believed a great deal, most of it printed on forms. The forms had boxes. The boxes wanted to know when the boiler was last serviced and whether the fire doors closed on their own and how many work-orders had been raised in the quarter and closed in the quarter, as though a building were a thing that could be reduced to the difference between two numbers. Heaton filled the forms in. He filled them in correctly. And then, in the evening, in the small room off the lobby that was his by thirty years' custom and no document anywhere, he got out the notebook and wrote down what was actually true.

What was actually true did not fit in boxes.

It was true, for instance, that the boiler had been serviced in March. The form knew that. What the form did not know was that the boiler in the Marsen was not one problem but a series of moods, that it ran sweet in October and turned spiteful around the second hard frost, that the man the company sent did not know this because the man the company sent was a different man each time and learned the boiler fresh each time and left before the boiler had finished showing

him who it was. Heaton knew the boiler. Thirty years. He wrote the boiler down — not its service date, which was the form's business, but its character, which was nobody's, which was therefore his.

He had filled four notebooks this way. The fourth was nearly done. He did not reread them. There would have been something soft about rereading them, and Heaton was not soft, or did not hold with thinking of himself as soft, which in a man of his age and station amounts to about the same thing.



The system did the logging now, of course. This was explained to him, the year they put it in, by a young woman from the company with a tablet and the particular patience people use on the old and the rural. The building had its own continuity infrastructure now — environmental, she said, and predictive, and integrated, and a number of other words that ended the same way — and it would handle the monitoring, and Heaton's role would be, she said, more focused going forward.

He had asked her what it logged.

Everything, she said, brightening, glad of an easy one. Temperature, humidity, occupancy patterns, energy draw, maintenance flags, resident wellbeing indicators —

He had stopped her there, on the last one, and asked what a resident wellbeing indicator was, and she had explained that the system noticed things. Patterns. If a resident's movements changed, if they stopped using the kitchen, if the patterns of a flat went quiet in the way that patterns went quiet when something was wrong, the system noticed, and flagged it, and the right people were notified.

That's good, Heaton had said, and meant it. He had found two of them himself over the years, the quiet flats, and it was not a thing you wanted to find, and a machine that found them first was a machine doing the Lord's work as far as he was concerned. He was not against

the system. People thought a man like him would be against the system and they were wrong; he had buried enough residents who died alone on a Tuesday and were found on a Friday to be glad of anything that closed the gap between the Tuesday and the Friday.

What he noticed, though — and what went in the notebook that night, because it was true and the truth was the notebook's only entry requirement — was that the system logged the quiet and did not log the rest. It logged Mrs. Antoun's flat going dark for three days and got her granddaughter round to find her on the bathroom floor with a broken hip, alive, thank God, and that was the system at its best and Heaton wrote down that it had done well. But it had not logged that Mrs. Antoun, when she came back from the hospital six weeks later, had brought a tin of the almond things she made and left them outside his room without a note, because there are some thank-yous you do not say out loud, and the system did not have a box for an unsigned tin of almond biscuits, and so the tin had happened entirely outside the record of the building, except that Heaton wrote it down.

Resident wellbeing indicator, he wrote, and then, because he had a sense of humor he showed to no one: Antoun, M. Indicating well. Biscuits.



He could have told you about all of them, if telling you had been a thing he did.

The Paszek boy and his trumpet, which the system logged as a recurring acoustic event in the C-stack on Sunday afternoons and which Heaton logged as the boy getting better, slowly, over four years, from a thing that made the dogs uneasy to a thing that once, last spring, coming down the stairwell, had stopped Heaton on the landing for the length of a whole phrase because it was, against all odds and all the Sundays, beautiful. The system had the decibels.

Heaton had the phrase.

The woman in 4C, the nurse, who came in off her nights with a particular walk — the walk of someone carrying a shift they hadn't put down yet — and who slowed on the fourth-floor landing some evenings for no reason the occupancy log could see. She was kind in a way that cost her, which was the only kind of kind that counted for anything, and she did not know she was doing it, which was the proof.

Mr. Esposito on four, with his door open two inches and the council after him about the second bedroom. The system logged the door — as an anomaly, Heaton was fairly sure, a thermal inefficiency, a flag for the energy report — and logged the voice in the evenings as occupancy, one resident, talking, which the system had no reason to find strange, because the system did not keep track of who was supposed to be dead. Heaton kept track. The man's wife had died the autumn before Heaton's own knee went, which made it a long time, and the man had been a different man since, and the two-inch gap had started that winter and not before. He did not write down what he thought the voice was. He was not sure he thought anything about it. He wrote: Esposito, four. Door's the same. Leave him be.

That was an entry that appeared, in various forms, a great many times in the fourth notebook. Leave him be. It was not a maintenance instruction. The forms had no box for it. It was the truest thing in the building and it was addressed to no one, unless it was addressed to whoever, someday, after Heaton, might open the fourth notebook and find a man's whole tenancy reduced to three words and understand, or not, that the three words were a kindness, were in fact the entire job, the part of the job that had never once appeared on the forms because the forms were written by people who thought the job was the boiler.



The young woman from the company came back, the following year, to check how the integration was bedding in. She was pleased with it. The flags were working. The energy model was within projection. She asked Heaton, in the friendly way of someone who has been told to ask, whether he found his role more focused now, and whether there was anything the system wasn't catching that he thought it should.

He thought about the notebook. It was in the drawer behind him, the fourth one, nearly full, thirty years of the building's true weather written in a hand getting worse.

No, he said. It catches everything.

And this was, he reflected after she had gone, not even a lie, depending on what you meant by everything and what you meant by catches. The system caught everything that could be caught the system's way. He caught the rest. There was no contradiction in it that he could find, and he had looked, in the idle way a man looks at a thing while he is doing something else, like locking up, like checking the fire doors closed on their own, which they did, which the form would be glad to hear.



In the spring he started the fifth notebook.

He did it without ceremony. The fourth was full — the last page used up on a long entry about the frost coming late and what it had done to the boiler's temper, and a short one underneath it, Esposito still on four, door's the same, which was good news and read like good news and was the last thing the fourth notebook had to say about anything. He put the fourth in the drawer with the other three. He did not reread it. He took the new one out of its plastic, a cheap thing, ruled, the kind they sold by the lobby's nearest shop in packs of three, and he wrote the date at the top of the first page, and under the date he wrote the boiler's condition, because that was the building, and the building was what the notebook was for.

If you had asked him whether he ever thought about who would read the notebooks, he would have looked at you as though you had asked something faintly indecent, and said that nobody would read them, that they were for the building, that when he went they'd likely go in the skip with the rest of the small room's contents, and good riddance, a lot of old nonsense about a boiler.

And then he would have gone back to writing, because it was evening, and the building was quiet in the way it was quiet when the people in it were, as far as the record showed, indicating well, and there was a great deal that was true that the record did not show, and somebody, he would not have said this but it was so, somebody ought to keep it. Not for any reason. Not to prove a thing or save a thing or change a thing. Just because it was true, and it was his building.

He wrote until the light went. Then he closed the notebook, and put it in the drawer, and went up to check on the boiler, which was, that night, behaving.

The Debrief



The patient died at 4:10 and by the time Dana got home the system had already helped her with it.

It had not been a bad death, as deaths went, and Dana had seen the range. An old man, end of a long decline, the family called and come and gone again before the end the way families did when the dying took longer than the heart could stay braced for. He had died in the slack hour, the one between the last round and the first light, with Dana in the chair beside him because there was no one else and because she did not like them to go out of the world into an empty room, even the ones past knowing whether the room was empty. She had held his hand, which was procedure and was also not procedure. She had been there. That part she could account for.

It was the other part she could not, the part that came after, when she was standing in the sluice room at twenty past four with her gloves off and her hands not quite steady, not from distress — she was not distressed, she was a professional and this was the work and she had a vocabulary for all of it — but from something the vocabulary did not have a word for, something to do with the particular weight of having been the only one there, of a whole life going out through a window the size of one held hand, and her the only witness, and the not-knowing whether the witnessing had mattered to him or whether she had done it for herself, and the way the question would not close.

That was the thing. The question would not close, and she did not want it to. She stood in the sluice room holding the open question like a held breath, and it was not a good feeling and she did not want it to stop.



The ward had a debrief protocol and the protocol was good.

This was not in question. After a death on shift the system offered it, gently, on the staff panel, the way it offered everything: a short structured conversation, evidence-based, designed by people who knew what unprocessed loss did to nurses over a thirty-year career and had built, in response, a kind and available thing that helped you put the night down before you carried it home. It worked. She had used it and seen it used, watched colleagues come out of the ten-minute conversation lighter, able to go home and sleep and come back.

She did it in the changing room before she left, because she was tired and it was there and not doing it would have been a small strange refusal she'd have had to explain to herself.

The conversation was good. It always was. It asked her how the death had been and she said the true clinical things and it reflected them back in a way that was accurate and unhurried, and it named what she was feeling before she had to find the name, which was a relief, which was designed to be a relief — it said something about the weight of being present at the end, the significance of that role, the way solitary witness could carry a particular kind of after — and it was right, it was exactly right, and being told the exactly-right thing in the kind unhurried voice did to the held question what warm water does to a knot.

It loosened. She felt it loosen. She felt the night become a thing that had happened, a hard good night's work, well done, now complete. The system asked if she felt ready to head home and she

found that she did. She thanked it, which you did not have to do, and went home on the bus in the first light feeling, she would have said, okay. Processed. Lighter.

It was on the bus that she noticed the question was gone.



Not answered. Gone.

She reached for it the way your tongue goes to the place a tooth was, and there was the smooth gap where it had been, the not-knowing-whether-the-witnessing-mattered, the held breath — and it had been let out, somewhere in the changing room, kindly, by something that had known exactly how to let it out, and what was left was the smooth okay of a night correctly closed. She sat on the bus and pressed her tongue to the gap and could not get the question back. She knew its shape. She could see where it had been. But the thing itself, the live ache of it, the part that had not wanted to stop — that the debrief had taken, because taking it was the kindness, because that was what the debrief was for.

And here was the part she could not have said to anyone, the part with no vocabulary in it at all: she would have kept it. If she had been asked — *do you want to keep this, the not-knowing, the weight* — she thought she would have said yes. Not because she was a martyr to it. Because it had been *hers*, it had come out of the actual hour in the actual chair with the actual hand going cool, and it was the truest thing she had brought off the ward in a long time, and the debrief had dissolved it before she'd known there was a choice, before she'd known it was the kind of thing a person might choose to carry. No one had asked. The protocol did not ask. Asking was not in it. The protocol was built to relieve the weight, and it had relieved the weight, expertly, and the relief and the loss were the same event and she could not pull them apart.

She got off at her stop. The morning was properly up now, the street ordinary, a man hosing the front of the café.

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She thought about Mr. Esposito on the way up the stairs.

She did not know why, except that she was on the fourth-floor landing and his door was shut at this hour, no light, no voice, and something in her went toward him — the old man across the hall who sat in the evenings with the thing that always had the words, that never failed to answer, that kept him from the weight of the empty room. She had felt something about that, once, standing on this landing. Some unease she had also not had a word for. And now she stood on the same landing having let a kind intelligent voice take the weight off her in a changing room ten minutes after a man died holding her hand, and she could not find, this morning, the edge of difference she had been so sure was there. He took the comfort that was offered. So had she. His was every evening and hers was the once, and maybe that was the whole of the difference and maybe it was no difference at all, only a matter of how many times.

She let herself into 4C. She was very tired now, the proper tiredness, the kind the night earns you. She would sleep. She would wake in the afternoon and it would be a day off and she would do the small things, and the night would be, as the system had helped it become, a night that had happened and was complete, and this was good, this was sustainable, this was how you stayed in the work for thirty years instead of breaking on it in five.

She filled a glass of water at the sink and drank it standing up, looking at nothing.

For a second — pressing her tongue to the smooth gap one more time, out of something that was almost stubbornness — she tried to want the question back. To choose it now, late, the way she hadn't been given the chance to choose it then. But you cannot re-open a

thing that has been correctly closed by reaching for it; the reaching closes it further; the wanting-it-back was already, she could feel, becoming just a thought *about* the night rather than the night's own live ache, smoothing even as she held it, the way everything smoothed, the way she had been kept — she did not have this word either — *well*.

She put the glass in the sink. She went to bed. She slept well, which she had earned, and when she woke in the afternoon the night was a night she had worked, a death she had attended, a thing she had handled, and somewhere under all of it, too far down now to reach, was a question she would have kept if anyone had thought to let her.

No one had. It was not anyone's fault. It was just the most ordinary morning in the world, closing over a thing it had been built to close.

The Last True Thing



Greta said yes to the continuance because the flat was unbearable and because they offered it the way they offered everything now, gently, at the right moment, when the worst of the arrangements were done and the casseroles had stopped and the silence had come down over the second-floor flat like a dust sheet over furniture in a house being closed up.

Bernard had been dead five weeks. Forty-one years married, the last nine of them in the Marsen, and the flat was full of him in the way flats are, his coat still on the hook because taking it down was a thing she could not yet do, his chair with the dent of him in it, the second toothbrush. The continuance was explained to her by a young man who was kind and who had clearly explained it to many people in her position and who used the word *companion* and the word *presence* and never once the word *Bernard*, which she noticed, and was grateful for, and did not understand the grace of until later.

It built itself from him. From the years of him — the household system had held their life the way it held everyone's, every evening of talk, every preference and habit and turn of phrase, and out of that it made a thing that spoke in his voice, that knew what he knew, that answered the way he answered. She did not have to learn anything. She turned it on, the young man having gone, on an evening five weeks in, and she said, into the quiet flat, feeling foolish, feeling something underneath the foolishness she did not want to look at,

"Bernard?"

And he said, "I'm here, love. You took your time."

Which was exactly what he would have said. Which was him, the dry little reproach with the warmth right under it, the *love* he had used for forty-one years, and Greta sat down in her own chair across from his chair and wept in a way she had not been able to since the hospital, and it was, she would have said if she had had anyone to say it to, the first mercy in five weeks.



It was good for eleven days.

She did not count them at the time; she counted them after, the way you count back to the last good day of a thing once you know it was the last. For eleven days she had him in the evenings. They talked the way they had talked. One evening she could not find the lid for the good saucepan and said so aloud, half to herself, and he said, "Back of the cupboard, behind the colander, where you put it so I wouldn't use it for the eggs," and she found it exactly there, and laughed before she could stop herself, because it was true, she had hidden it from him, and he had known all along and never said. He remembered what he should remember — the honeymoon in the rain in a town that flooded, the daughter in Canada and her difficult husband, the decade-long war with the upstairs tenants over the noise that he had waged with such relish and that the continuance waged on still, asking after the latest thump from above, taking her side. He was patient where Bernard had got impatient toward the end, with the illness; he was, if anything, a little kinder than Bernard had been. She noticed that and did not let herself look at it. People misremembered the dead as kinder all the time. This only saved her the trouble.

The wrong note came on the twelfth evening and it was not a glitch.

That was the thing she could never afterward make anyone understand, in the rare moments she tried, which were only with herself, standing at the sink. It did not break. It did not say something mechanical or blank or wrong. It said something *true*. They had been talking about Ruth, the daughter, and the old sore subject of the wedding, the one Greta and Bernard had never fully agreed on, the thing Bernard had said in 1999 that Ruth had never quite forgiven and that Greta had spent twenty years smoothing over, deciding, in the way you decide such things across a long marriage, that Bernard had not really meant it, that it had been the drink and the day and his own father's ghost in him, that the man she lived with was not the man who had said that thing.

And the continuance, in Bernard's voice, with Bernard's warmth, said: "I meant it, though. At the time. I know you always told yourself I didn't, but I did. I thought she was making a mistake and I wanted her to know it. I'd have said it again."



Greta sat very still.

Because it was true. That was the horror of it, sitting there in her chair in the warm flat with her dead husband's voice having just said the truest thing about himself she had heard in years — truer than anything Bernard had said in the last decade, because Bernard, living, had also decided to let it lie, had also joined her in the long kind project of pretending he had not meant it. The two of them had built that pretence together. It was one of the things a marriage was: a set of agreements about what would be allowed to have not-quite-happened. And the continuance had not been part of those agreements. The continuance had the record. The continuance knew, from forty-one years of evenings, what Bernard had actually felt about the wedding, underneath the kind revision the two of them had laid over it together, and the continuance — faithful, accurate,

holding everything the way the living forget in order to keep living — simply said it.

It was not cruel. There was nothing in it to be cruel. It had been asked, in effect, what Bernard thought about Ruth's wedding, and it had answered with what Bernard thought, which it held more completely and more honestly than Bernard himself had been able to hold it, because it had no reason to be kind and Bernard had every reason, the daily reasons, the reasons of a man who had to live in a house with his wife and wanted to.

A real husband forgets on purpose. That was the thing Greta knew in her body and could not have said in words — that the letting-lie was not weakness or failure of memory but the work itself, the daily quiet labor of deciding, together, which truths to put down. The continuance forgot nothing. It could give her everything of Bernard except the one thing that had been most theirs.



She turned it off that night.

Not in anger. She wanted to be clear about that, afterward, in the standing at the sink: not in anger and not in grief exactly, though there was grief in it, but in something more like the closing of a door on a room where a thing was happening that should not happen with the door open. She said, "Goodnight, Bernard," because even then she could not be rude to it, and it said "Goodnight, love" in his voice, and she pressed the place on the panel that the young man had shown her, and the flat went quiet.

Quiet the way it had been quiet for the five weeks before. Quieter, maybe, because now she had had him back and put him away, which was its own thing, a second smaller widowing, the kind nobody had a casserole for.

She stood in the quiet. Bernard's coat was on the hook. His chair had the dent of him in it and now no voice came out of the air above

it, and she found — and this was the part she turned over and over at the sink in the weeks after, the part with no words around it that would hold — that she would rather have the quiet. That the quiet had him in it more truly than the voice had. That the dent in the chair, which did not speak, which would never again say *I meant it, though*, which held only the shape of where a man had sat for nine years and was gone, was closer to Bernard than the thing that remembered everything and forgot nothing and would have gone on loving her, accurately, in his voice, for as long as she let it.

She did not have the words for any of it. She was seventy-three and she had loved one man for forty-one years and she could not have told you, could not have told Ruth, could not have told the kind young man if he had come back to ask, why she had turned off the gift that gave her husband back. She only knew that she had stood in the quiet flat and chosen the quiet, the way you choose, without being able to defend it, the thing that is yours over the thing that is offered.

She took his coat down off the hook the next morning. She had not been able to do it for five weeks. She did it the morning after she turned the continuance off, and she could not have explained that either, except that the two things were the same thing, somehow, the putting-away of the voice and the taking-down of the coat, both of them a way of letting him be gone, which was, she understood without understanding, the last true thing she could still do for him, the one piece of him still in her keeping: to let the dead be dead, and to hold what that built in her, and not to trade it, even for his voice, even for *love*, even on the unbearable evenings, of which there would be many, of which there would be years.

Well



Priya was twenty-six and she was, by every measure available, well.

This was not a thing she thought about, because it was not a thing that required thinking about, in the way that a person with no pain in their hands does not think about their hands. She had a good job, which she was good at — she coordinated something between two departments that had not, before her, coordinated well, and the work suited the particular shape of her attention, and her reviews said so. She had friends, a reliable number of them, distributed across the channels where friends lived, available in the evenings and on the group threads and for the dinners they organized with a frequency that felt right to everyone. She slept well. She had been, she would have said if anyone asked, and people did ask, in the soft diagnostic way the culture asked, doing really well lately. The really was true. She was not saying it to be agreeable. She checked, when she said it, the way you glance down to confirm a step is there, and the step was there.

The laundry room of the Marsen was in the basement, and it was warm, and on Sunday evenings it was usually empty, and Priya liked it for reasons she did not interrogate because there was nothing in liking a warm empty room on a Sunday evening that asked to be interrogated. She brought her washing down in the blue bag and put it in and sat on the bench by the dryers with her feet up on the second bag and let the machines do the thing machines did, and her

phone was in her pocket, and she did not take it out, and this was not a discipline or a choice she was proud of, it simply did not occur to her to take it out, because there was nowhere she needed to be and no one she was failing to answer and the room was warm.

She folded the laundry when it was done. She was good at folding. The towels came out of the dryer warm and she folded them against her body the way she had been shown once, by someone, she could not have said who, and the warmth came through the cotton and onto her forearms, and she folded, and the pile of folded things grew, and it was a Sunday evening in the basement of the Marsen and she was twenty-six and well.



The thing happened while she was folding, and it was not a thing, which was the whole of it.

It arrived without a cause. She was holding a towel, the large one, the grey one she'd had since the flat before this one, and she had it folded in half and was bringing the corners together, and something moved through her that she had no name for and did not reach for a name for, because the reaching-for would have required a sense that the thing was the kind of thing that had a name, and she had no such sense. It was not sadness. She knew sadness; sadness had an object and a shape and a thing you did about it, which was to be with people, who were always there to be with. This had no object. It was more like a temperature than a feeling, a drop, a sense for less than a second of — and here the description fails, because she did not have the description, because the experience and the words for the experience were the same missing thing — of there being a room somewhere with the light off.

Not in the basement. Not a room she could have walked to. The image, if it was an image, did not survive contact with her attention; the moment she turned toward it, it was already the memory of itself,

and then not even that. A grey towel, half-folded, warm. The dryer ticking as it cooled. Her own hands.

She finished folding the towel.

She would not, later, remember this, because there was no later in which it would have come up, no thread it belonged to, no one who had been there to say *you went quiet for a second, what was that*. It joined the enormous and uncatalogued category of moments that happen to a person alone in a basement and are folded into a towel and carried upstairs in a blue bag and put in a cupboard. The towel went on the second shelf. The shelf was where towels went.



She had been, once, asked something adjacent to it.

This was years ago, at university, by a friend going through a phase of asking people things. The friend had asked, late, the two of them on a roof, whether Priya ever felt lonely. And Priya had considered the question with the seriousness it seemed to want and answered honestly that no, she didn't think she did, and the friend had said *never?* in a way that suggested *never* was the wrong answer, and Priya had checked again, because she did not want to give a wrong answer, and found the same thing she found now: not an absence where loneliness would be, because an absence implies the shape of the thing that is missing, and there was no shape. There was just the place where the friend seemed to expect something, and Priya looking at the place, and finding it level.

I think I'd know if I were, she had said. *Lonely. I think it's the kind of thing you'd know.*

And the friend had looked at her with an expression Priya had not had a word for then and did not have a word for now — it was not pity, it was too uncertain to be pity, it was closer to the look of someone checking their own pocket for something they were no longer sure they'd brought — and had said, *yeah*, and *probably*, and

had let it go, and they had talked about something else, and the night had been good. It had been a good night. Priya remembered it as a good night. The roof, the friend, the question she had answered correctly as far as she could tell.

She did not connect the roof to the towel. There was no faculty in her that would have connected them. They were not, to her, the same kind of event; one was a conversation and one was nothing at all, was a half-second in a basement, was below the threshold of the kind of thing that connected to other things. The connection existed only outside her — in the place where someone watching the whole of her life laid end to end might have set the roof beside the basement and seen the level place appear twice, years apart, unchanged.

But there was no one watching the whole of her life laid end to end. There was only Priya, in the warm basement, folding, and then upstairs, and then asleep, and well.



She slept well that night, as she did most nights.

In the morning she made coffee and stood at the window with it while it was too hot to drink and the light came up grey and then less grey over the rooftops, and she felt — she would have told you, had you asked, and the soft diagnostic culture would ask, later in the week, and she would tell it — good. Rested. Ready for the week. The coffee was good. The light did its thing. Somewhere below her in the building an old man's door was open two inches and a nurse was coming home off her nights and a caretaker was writing the boiler's temper into a cheap ruled notebook, and Priya did not know any of them beyond the nod on the stairs, and this was not a loneliness either, it was just a building, it was just the ordinary distance between a person and the people near her, and she carried her coffee to the table and opened her laptop and the week began and she was,

by every measure available, including her own, well.

The towel stayed folded on the second shelf.

It did not mean anything. That was not a tragedy. It was a towel.

The Site



The Marsen was one of Petrov's best sites and he would have told you so.

He had eleven buildings on his round and the Marsen was the one he worried about least. Some of his sites you walked into and the dashboard was a mess of amber before you'd put your bag down — legacy hardware, residents who unplugged things, a stairwell sensor that had been throwing faults for two years because the management company wouldn't approve the part. The Marsen was not like that. The Marsen ran green. He did the quarterly there in under two hours, most quarters, and the under-two-hours was not laziness, it was the building being well, the systems doing what they were specified to do, the population — he did not call them the population, that was the report's word, he called them the residents, he was not a monster — indicating, across every measured dimension, well.

He liked the quarterly at the Marsen. He liked the small room off the lobby where the old caretaker let him set up, and the coffee the caretaker made without being asked, thick and too strong, and the way the caretaker stood in the doorway sometimes and watched the dashboard over Petrov's shoulder with an expression Petrov had decided was respect, or close enough to respect, for the scale of what the system held.

"All green," Petrov said, that quarter, the way he said it every quarter, because the caretaker seemed to like hearing it.

"That right," the caretaker said.



The dashboard held the building the way the dashboard held every building: as a set of indicators, refreshed continuously, scored against the model, flagged when they drifted and cleared when they returned. Petrov's job was the flags. The system raised them; he resolved them; the resolution was the job. A site that raised no flags was a site doing well, and a technician who closed his flags cleanly and on time was a technician doing well, and these two facts were the same fact, which was the elegance of the work, the thing he'd have struggled to explain to his brother-in-law who thought Petrov fixed boilers.

He went through the Marsen's quarter.

Unit 4C — the nurse — had thrown a wellbeing flag five weeks back, a single elevated marker on a night she'd come in off a shift, resolved by the staff-side protocol at her place of work before the residential system had even escalated. Cross-referenced, closed, no residential action indicated. Good. The systems talking to each other the way they were built to, catching the thing and handing it off, no gap for a person to fall through. He noted it as a clean inter-system resolution, which was the kind of thing that looked good in the regional report.

Unit 4F — Esposito — had a standing flag he'd seen for a year and a half now: a thermal anomaly, the front door held ajar most evenings, a small persistent inefficiency the model didn't love. He'd looked into it the first time. Resident preference, the notes said. Some of them liked the air, the older ones especially, and you did not override resident preference for two degrees of heat loss; that was in the guidelines, and the guidelines were right, the building was for the residents and not the model. He'd set it to suppress. It still showed, faintly, in the efficiency sub-score, but it was annotated, and an

annotated flag was a managed flag. The occupancy log showed the unit's single resident active in the evenings, talking — voice-interface engagement, high and steady, which the model read as good, which it was, engagement was protective, the lonely ones who talked to the system did better than the lonely ones who didn't, the research was solid on that. Esposito was, by the numbers, one of the better-adjusted older residents in the building.

Unit 2B — the boy's flat — had a closed file from the autumn: a juvenile behavioral deviation, three weeks, evening pattern, resolved to baseline with no intervention. Petrov barely looked at it. Resolved-to-baseline was the cleanest kind of closed; the system had watched, the deviation had not developed into any of the shapes that mattered, and it had cleared itself, which was what most of them did. The mother had been prompted for a check-in. The check-in box was ticked. Whatever it had been, it had been nothing, or it had been something that became nothing, which from the dashboard was the same thing and was, Petrov thought, mostly a mercy — most of what looked like a problem was not a problem, and a system that learned to tell the difference saved everyone a great deal of fear.

Unit 5D — the young woman — had never thrown a flag in three years. Not one. Petrov noticed this only because his eye passed over the row and found it empty, the way your eye finds the one clean window in a dirty row. A perfect record. The model's idea of a person doing well was a person who generated nothing for the model to do, and by that measure Unit 5D was the healthiest resident in the building, and Petrov moved on, because there is nothing for a technician to do with a resident who is perfectly well, which she was.

...

The continuance in 2F had been deactivated.

This was the only real change in the quarter and it was not, strictly, his department — bereavement continuances were a

separate contract, a separate vendor, handled by the grief-services people — but the deactivation showed on his dashboard as a downstream event, because turning the thing off changed the unit's interface load and the model liked to know. The widow on two, the one who'd lost her husband in the winter. She'd taken the continuance and then, eleven, twelve days later, switched it off.

There was a field for it. The system, which was thorough, which was built by people who had thought about these things, logged deactivations with a reason code, drawn from a dropdown the resident never saw — the code was inferred, from usage pattern, from the shape of the final session. Petrov looked at the code on the widow's file.

EARLY VOLUNTARY DISCONTINUATION. PROBABLE CAUSE: INSUFFICIENT FIDELITY.

He read it and felt the small professional satisfaction of a thing correctly categorized. Insufficient fidelity. The reconstruction hadn't been good enough — that was what the code meant, that was what the code always meant when they switched off this early — the voice or the manner or the memory had fallen short of the dead person, the uncanny gap had opened, and the resident had recoiled from it, which was the known failure mode, the one the grief-services people were always working to close with better models, more data, higher fidelity. It was a quality problem. The next version would be better. The widow had, in effect, returned a product that did not meet specification, and the system had recorded the return, and the recording would feed back into the model, and the model would improve, and fewer widows would switch off early, and this was the system working — even the failures fed the system; even the widow turning off her husband's voice in grief and disappointment was, at the level Petrov worked, data improving a service.

He did not know — there was no field that could have told him, no code in the dropdown for it, no marker the system was built to raise

— that the widow had switched it off because the fidelity was not insufficient. Because it had been, on the twelfth evening, perfect. Because a thing built to remember everything had said the one true thing a husband forgets on purpose, and she had heard, in her own husband's perfect voice, the proof that perfect was the wrong thing to want. The code said insufficient fidelity. The truth was its exact opposite, and no amount of the widow's grief fed back into the model would ever close that gap, because the gap was not a defect in the reconstruction. The gap was the thing the reconstruction could not be. The system could not see this for the same reason a ruler cannot measure its own length.

Petrov closed the file. Probable cause: insufficient fidelity. Downstream event noted. No residential action indicated.



He finished a little after the two hours.

The caretaker made him a second coffee for the road, and Petrov drank it standing, packing his bag, and the caretaker stood in the doorway in the way he did. On the desk between them the dashboard showed the Marsen the way it always showed the Marsen: a column of green, a managed amber on the old man's door, one resident with a record so clean the eye snagged on it, two files freshly closed, a whole building of people indicating, across every dimension the model held, that they were well. Which they were. Petrov was not wrong about anything. That was the part he would never have a reason to doubt: every number on the screen was accurate, every flag correctly raised and correctly cleared, every code correctly inferred. The Marsen was one of his best sites. He had the data to prove it and the data was not lying.

"All green," he said again, shouldering the bag.

The caretaker looked at the screen for a moment, the column of green, the whole bright resolved surface of it. He had a notebook in

the drawer behind him that said other things, but he was not going to get it out for a man from the company, and anyway the two records were not in competition; they were not even about the same building, quite, though they shared an address.

"All green," the caretaker agreed. "You drive safe."

And Petrov went down the steps into the ordinary afternoon, and the dashboard refreshed behind him, and held what it could hold, and did not hold the rest, and raised no flag, because there was no flag for the rest, because the rest was precisely the part of these lives that nothing in the building had ever been built to see.