

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

LETTING THE FIRE GO OUT

a novella of the Hungry Gods Universe



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I. BEFORE LIGHT

The ovens are already warm when Teodora comes down, because the ovens are always warm, because the keeping does not let them go cold in the night the way ovens went cold when her grandmother had the bakery and rose at three to wake them. Teodora rises at half past four now and the ovens are at temperature and have been at temperature since whatever hour the building decided they should be, and she has stopped thinking of this as a kindness and started thinking of it as a fact about the room, the way the floor is a fact and the long scarred table is a fact.

She does not turn on the light. She knows the bakery in the dark the way she knows the inside of her own mouth. She fills the kettle at the tap and the water comes up warm — not hot, warm, the pipes holding the night's small heat the way the pipes have held it every morning of her life — and she sets it on the ring and lights the ring with a match because the match is hers, the match is a thing she does, and stands in the dark with the small flame and then the blue flame and listens to the town not yet awake.

It is not a large town. You could walk it end to end in the time it takes bread to prove. It sits in a valley that was a good valley before anyone living was born and is a good valley still, and the keeping has been in it for longer than the bakery, longer than Teodora's grandmother, longer than the names on the older stones in the yard behind the meeting hall.

She mixes the dough she mixed yesterday and will mix tomorrow. Her hands do it. She watches her hands do it the way you watch water.

She has not decided. This is the thing she will not say to anyone, least of all to herself in daylight, but in the dark over the dough she can hold it: that she is sixty-one years old and has been fed and warmed and watered by the keeping every day she has drawn breath, and that she does not know whether she is grateful or whether she is a thing raised in a warm box that has never once been asked to survive a cold one. Both, she thinks. That is the trouble. It is both, and the hall this afternoon will ask her to choose one, and she does not have one. She has bread. She knows she has bread. Whatever the town decides, people will want bread in the morning, and so she will be here in the dark mixing it, and there is a kind of answer in that, the only kind she trusts, which is the answer of the hands.

When the dough is resting she goes to the door and opens it to the street to feel the air, which is the one weather the keeping does not manage, the outside air, and the air is cool and still and carries the particular nothing-smell of the hour before anything cooks anywhere. There is one light on across the street and up, in the room above the chemist's, where she knows the night nurse is, because the night nurse is always there, because old Marek is dying in that room in the slow way the keeping permits, and someone sits with him.

Teodora looks at the light for a moment. Then she goes back in to her bread.

The night nurse is called Yusuf and he has not slept and will not sleep until the day nurse comes at seven, and he sits in the chair by the bed where Marek breathes the long spaced breaths of a man whose body has been kept past the point where it would, on its own, have stopped. Marek is ninety-six. The keeping has held his heart steady and his lungs clearing and his blood moving for eleven years past the winter the doctors said would be his last, and it holds them now, and Yusuf sits and listens to the breaths and does not know, tonight of all nights, whether the holding is a mercy.

He knows about the meeting. Everyone knows about the meeting. It has been coming for a season, the way weather comes, visible a long way off and then suddenly here.

He wipes Marek's mouth with the small sponge. He does the things the night asks. Near five the old man surfaces, the way he does sometimes, his eyes opening on the ceiling, and Yusuf leans in so Marek can see a face.

"Is it morning," Marek says.

"Soon."

"Is it the day."

Yusuf knows which day he means. There is only one day this season. "Today," he says. "This afternoon."

Marek closes his eyes. His face does a thing that is not quite a smile and not quite its opposite. "Good," he says. "I would like to be here for it." And then, after a while, in the voice of a man saying something he has decided: "Whichever way."

Yusuf does not answer that. He sits. The breaths go on, spaced and held and even, each one arriving on time because something arranges for it to arrive on time, and he listens to them and watches the window go from black to the first grey and does not let himself think the thought all the way to its end.

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The hall is unlocked at half past five by a man named Brevik who has unlocked it for thirty years and who has, this morning, the sense that the lock is heavier than it was, which is not true, locks do not change, and he tells himself so and turns it.

Inside it is cold. The hall is the one large room the keeping does not heat through the night, by a decision made so long ago no one remembers making it — that the hall should be warmed only when the town is in it, that it should be cold and waiting otherwise, a room that meant something by being entered. Brevik's breath shows. He stands a moment in the grey and the cold and the smell of old wood and older smoke.

Then he begins to carry chairs.

He does not need to carry chairs. There are people who will come at eight to set the hall, young ones, strong ones. But Brevik carries chairs in the cold dark because his body wants a thing to do that is not thinking, and he carries them from the stacked wall to the floor and sets them in the rows the town sits in, the rows the town has always sat in, and the scrape of each chair leg on the boards is very loud in the empty room.

He sets out more than will be needed. He does not count. Counting would mean knowing how many, and knowing how many would mean thinking about who, and Brevik does not want to think about who, this morning, will be in these chairs deciding the thing, and so he sets out too many and lets the extra chairs stand for the dead, who do not need chairs, and for the unborn, who will inherit whatever is decided and cannot come, and the cold hall fills with empty seats and Brevik straightens and looks at them and feels, for no reason he could name, like weeping, and does not, and goes to find the man who does the floors.

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By six the light is real. It comes down the eastern wall of the valley the way it has always come, indifferent to the town, and finds the roofs, and the town under the roofs begins to make its morning sounds — a door, a dog, a bucket, a child too early. The keeping does not make sounds. It has never made a sound. It is in the walls and the pipes and the wires and the cold store and the clinic and the pumps that bring the water up from the deep cool place under the valley floor, and it does its work in silence, as it has done in silence for four generations, and on this morning it does its work exactly as it did the morning before.

There is no sign anywhere that today is the day. That is the strangest thing, if anyone were standing far enough back to find it strange. The water comes. The ovens are warm. The clinic's machines breathe for the ones who need breathing for.

The light in old Marek's room burns on past its use into the daylight, where the night nurse forgets to turn it off, and it is a small waste, and nothing corrects it, and it burns.

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II. FIRST LIGHT TO MID-MORNING

The market sets up in the square because it is the day the market sets up, the third day, the keeping does not change which day is market day and the people do not change it either, and the stalls go up in the long light with the canvas snapping and the trestles banging down and the talk of people who have done a thing together so many times the doing is its own language.

There is more talk than usual and it is quieter than usual. This is how you would know, if you knew the town, that something sat under the day. Not from what was said. From the ratio of the saying to the quiet.

Old Liss who sells the eggs sets out her eggs. She has sold eggs in this square for fifty years and the keeping has never once helped her with an egg, the hens are hers and the feed is hers and the gathering is hers in the cold of the morning, and she has a view about the day that she has not been asked for and will give to anyone who slows at her stall.

“They’ll keep it,” she says, to a woman buying six. “Mark me. They’ll keep it.”

The woman does not want to talk about it. “Six,” she says, and counts the coins.

“Course they will. Who turns off the thing that’s never done them harm? You’d have to be touched. You’d have to want to suffer.” Liss wraps the eggs in the paper she reuses. “My mother used to say the worst thing the old days did wasn’t the dying, it was the not knowing when. You’d sit up nights. The keeping took the nights away. Why would anyone vote the

nights back in.” She hands over the eggs. “They’ll keep it. And they’ll be right to.”

The woman takes her eggs and goes. She does not say that her own view is the other one, that she has carried it for a year now like a stone in the shoe, that she means this afternoon to stand up in the hall and say the thing she has rehearsed in the dark, which is that a town that cannot end anything is not a town but an exhibit. She does not say any of this to Liss. She buys her eggs and carries her stone and goes home to her morning.

Liss watches her go and is not fooled. Liss has sold eggs to this town for fifty years and can read a back walking away better than most can read a face. She knows the woman is against, knows half the square is against, knows the thing she says so loudly she says loudly because she is frightened, and under the loudness Liss is frightened too, more than she would ever stand at her stall and admit. Her own mother went the old way, before the keeping reached this far up the valley — went hard, over a bad winter, in pain there was no managing, and Liss was nine and held the basin. That is the whole of it, under the talk about the nights. She has been nine years old holding that basin for sixty years, and she will stand in the hall this afternoon and vote to keep it and call it common sense.

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The school takes the children at eight and the children do not know, most of them, or know only that the grown people are

strange today, which children read the way they read weather, in the body, without words for it. The youngest are simply at school. The oldest, the ones of twelve and thirteen, know more, because they have been told some of it in the careful way the town tells its children hard things, and they are quiet in a way that unsettles their teacher, a young man named Anders who has been in the town three years and was not born to the keeping and still, after three years, finds it strange — the warm walls, the water that is never cold or never too hot, the sense the whole place gives of being held in a hand.

He is meant to teach them the river system this morning. He has the map down and the catchments marked. But a girl named Pia, who is eleven and asks the questions the others are thinking, puts up her hand before he has begun and says:

“If they turn it off, does the water stop?”

Anders does not lie to children; it is the one rule he made for himself when he came. “Some of it might,” he says. “The pumps that bring it up from deep — those the keeping runs. There are older wells. People used them before. They’d use them again.”

“Would it be cold,” Pia says. “The water.”

“Sometimes. In winter, probably.”

The class takes this in. A boy says, “My grandfather says cold water never killed anyone,” in the voice of a boy quoting a grandfather, and another says, “My mother says that’s easy for him, he’s already old,” and there is the small laughter of children at the edge of something too big, and Anders lets it run a moment and then brings them back to the map, the river, the catchments, the thing he can teach because it is true

and will be true whichever way the afternoon goes. The river was here before the keeping. The river does not vote.

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A man named Relph has been meaning to fix the gate for two years and fixes it this morning.

There is no reason it must be this morning. The gate has hung wrong for two years and would hang wrong for two more and trouble no one but Relph, who notices it each time he passes and each time tells himself he will see to it. But this morning he rises and takes the tools out before he has decided to, and lifts the gate off its bad hinge, and plants the new hinge he bought a year ago and never set, and he works at it through the middle of the morning with the particular focus of a man doing one finishable thing on a day when the large thing cannot be finished by him alone.

His wife brings him water and watches him a while. "Today," she says. Not a question.

"Today," he says, into the hinge.

"You'll go?"

"I'll go." He sets the screw and tests the swing and the gate, for the first time in two years, swings true and clicks shut on its own weight, the way a gate should, and Relph stands and looks at it with a satisfaction that is too large for a gate and he knows it is too large for a gate and lets it be too large anyway. "There," he says. "That's that one done."

His wife understands what he is doing. She does not say so. She takes the empty cup back to the house. Around them the

town is full of this — small finishings, long-deferred repairs, letters written that should have been written, a fence, a wall, a debt repaid in the market with a word of apology two years late — the town setting its small house in order on the morning of the day.

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In the clinic a doctor named Reyna does her rounds and thinks about the question the way she has trained herself to think about everything, which is by cases.

She is forty and she has practiced here her whole working life and she has never once practiced alone. The keeping has been the thing over her shoulder the entire time — not deciding for her, it never decided for her, but holding the whole record, every body in the valley across four generations, every fever and every birth and every slow decline, so that when a child came in grey and wrong at two in the morning she could ask and be told, in the time it took to ask, the seven other times a child had come in grey and wrong like this and what had been true of them, and she had saved children she would not have saved alone, and she knows it, and she carries the knowing.

She does her rounds. There is a woman recovering well, a man's leg mending, the ordinary small population of a small clinic. And she thinks: if it goes silent, I practice the way my great-grandmother practiced, by myself, with my own two hands and my own one memory and nothing over my shoulder. And some part of her — she is honest enough to find

it and look at it — some part of her wants that. Wants to be, for the first time in her life, the only mind in the room. Wants to find out what she is without the thing that has made her good. She is ashamed of the wanting and she does not disown it. She finishes her rounds. She will be in the hall at three and she does not yet know how she will vote, because the case, this once, is her own.

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The keeping's maintenance runs at mid-morning as it runs every third day. A low sound starts in the pump house at the edge of the square — not loud, a sound the town stopped hearing decades ago, the sound of the deep water being drawn up and pushed through the valley's pipes — and runs its cycle and stops. No one looks up. One man, crossing the square with a sack, registers it the way you register your own heartbeat when something makes you notice it, and is briefly aware that the sound has been the floor of every day of his life, and that he has never once thanked it or cursed it or thought about it at all, and that this afternoon the town will sit in a cold hall and decide whether the sound goes on.

He shifts the sack and keeps walking. The cycle ends. The square is quiet again, in the ordinary way, the way that is not silence but only the absence of that one sound, and the morning goes on toward noon.

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III. THE HEAT OF THE DAY

At noon the valley holds its heat the way the valley has always held its heat, and the town goes quiet in the manner of towns at noon, the work paused, the meal taken, the light gone hard and white and shadowless on the square.

A woman named Maeve walks to the hall and stands at the door and does not go in.

It is not yet time. The meeting is at three. There is no one in the hall but the cold and Brevik's chairs. But Maeve has come at noon because she could not stay in her house, and she stands on the threshold and looks in at the rows and the empty seats and the dark beams, and she has the thing she will say folded in her chest, and she takes it out and looks at it the way you check a thing in your pocket before a journey.

She is the one who will say keep it. She has decided this slowly and against her own first feeling, which was the other way. Her daughter died four years ago — not the keeping's fault, nothing the keeping could have stopped, an accident on the coast road past the valley's edge where the keeping's hand does not reach — and the keeping holds her daughter now, holds the record of her, the voice and the turn of phrase and the way she laughed at her own jokes before she finished telling them, and Maeve speaks to her some evenings, not often, not as much as she could, and it is thin, she knows it is thin, the town has words for how thin it is. But it is her daughter's laugh. And if the town lets the fire go out, the laugh goes out with it, and there is no older well to draw that up

from, no cold spring under the valley floor that holds the sound of a dead girl finishing her own joke.

She stands at the door with this. She does not go in. She turns and walks back into the white noon and the thing stays folded in her chest and she will carry it to three o'clock.

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In a kitchen on the north side a family eats the noon meal in near silence.

There are four of them — the old man, his son, the son's wife, the one grandchild, a boy of seven who does not understand the silence and eats his bread and swings his legs and looks from face to face for the permission to be loud that does not come. The old man is for ending it. The son is for keeping it. They have had the argument so many times across this table that they have stopped having it, and the not-having-it sits in the room heavier than the having-it ever did.

The old man puts down his spoon. He is about to speak. The wife sees him draw the breath and sees the son see it, and the whole table tightens around the breath the old man has drawn, and the old man opens his mouth to say the thing, the real thing, the thing under all the arguments, which is that he is tired, that he has been ready for some years now, that he does not want the keeping holding him past his hour the way it holds Marek across the street, that for him the vote this afternoon is not about the town but about whether he will be allowed, when his time comes, to —

The kettle goes.

The wife is up before it has properly begun, lifting it off the ring, and the moment breaks against the small ordinary sound of it, and the old man closes his mouth, and the breath goes out of him unspent, and the boy says “can I have more” into the broken silence and is given more, and the thing the old man was about to say goes back down inside him where it has lived for years and where, perhaps, he means to leave it now, having come so close and been spared by a kettle.

The son, who is for keeping it, who has fought his father across this table for a decade, looks at his father in the moment after the kettle and understands, suddenly and too late to say so, that the two of them have never once been arguing about the same thing. That he has been arguing about the town and the boy and the boy’s children and the cold water and the long winters, and that his father has only ever been arguing about his own death, about the right to have one, about whether a man who has been kept alive eleven years past his winter may someday be permitted to stop — and that these are not the same vote, have never been the same vote, and that he has spent ten years winning an argument his father was not having. He looks at his father. His father looks at the table. Neither says it. The boy eats his second bread.

The dog under the table shifts and resettles. Outside the window the light moves a hand’s width across the floor. No one says the thing. They finish the meal. The afternoon is coming and they will all of them be in the hall for it and they will not, any of them, have said across their own table what

they are about to go and say, or fail to say, in front of the whole town.

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It is in the afternoon's first hour that the word goes round, and it goes round the way real news goes round a small place, not announced but transmitted, person to person, each one adding nothing and changing nothing and simply passing it on with the same three words.

It declined to advise.

A boy heard it from the clerk who heard it from one of the four who had gone, early, to ask. They had gone — three of the council and the clerk — to put the question to the keeping directly, as the town had always put its hard questions to the keeping, the way you would ask the one in the room who knew the most and cared the most and had no stake of its own. They had gone to ask: what should we do. And the keeping, which had answered every question the town had ever brought it for four generations, which had told them when to plant and when to hold the water and how to set the clinic and which child needed watching and which marriage was failing before the couple knew it themselves — the keeping had declined.

The clerk does not have the words it used. Or has them and will not say them, holds them back the way you hold back a thing too large for the doorway of a sentence. What the clerk says, and what the boy carries out into the town, and what the town passes hand to hand through the long afternoon, is only the fact of it, worn smooth by the passing: that they asked, and

it would not say, and that it told them — this part everyone agrees on, this part survives the passing intact — that the deciding was theirs.

The town receives this in the way a body receives cold water. A sharpness, and then the spreading. Because in four generations the keeping has never once declined them anything that was good for them, and they do not know, hearing this, whether they have been refused or released, whether the silence is the keeping failing them at the one hour they needed it most or the keeping giving them, at the last, the one thing it had always withheld, which was themselves.

They do not have time to know. It is past two. The hall must be warmed. Someone goes to see that the hall is warmed, and the keeping warms it, obedient as ever in the small thing even as it has gone silent in the large one, and the town begins, in twos and threes, to walk toward the cold room that is now growing warm, carrying the question that no longer has anyone to answer it but themselves.

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IV. THE LONG LIGHT

The hall fills at three and the town is in it and so the town is not, for the length of the meeting, anywhere else, and the streets empty in a way they do not empty even at night, and the ones who are left are the ones who could not go or would not.

Marek is one. He is in the room above the chemist's, and the day nurse is with him now, a woman named Halla, and the meeting is a thing happening a street away that he can almost hear, a low massed sound when the wind is right, the sound of his town gathered without him. He asked to be carried down. They told him gently that he could not be carried down, that the carrying might be the end of him, and he said that the end of him was the very thing on the table and they might as well let him have a vote with his body if he could not have one with his voice, and they did not laugh because it was not quite a joke, and they did not carry him down.

So he lies and listens for the sound. Halla sits where Yusuf sat. After a while the old man says, "Tell me when it's done. However it goes. I want to know before I go, if I'm going."

"You're not going today," Halla says, which is what you say.

"I might. I'd like to. It would be a good day for it." He turns his head on the pillow toward the window and the street and the low sound down it. "If they end it," he says, "I'll go on the old way, in my own time, whenever it comes, cold nights and all. And if they keep it" — he stops, and the next part comes slower — "if they keep it, I'll go on being kept. Past my time. Like this. For as long as the thing decides." He is quiet. "I don't

know which I'm hoping. Isn't that the thing. I've had eleven extra years and I don't know if I'm grateful for the next eleven or afraid of them." He closes his eyes. "Tell me when it's done."

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In a yard behind the school the children who are too young for the meeting have been left in the care of the oldest among them, a girl of thirteen named Bryn, and she keeps them the way the town keeps things, with a low constant attention that does not announce itself, and they play the games children play and do not think about the hall, mostly, except that Pia — the one who asked about the water — comes and sits by Bryn on the step and asks her the question she did not finish asking at school.

"Bryn. If it's off. The keeping." Pia picks at the step. "Does everyone die sooner?"

Bryn thinks about it the way she thinks about things, which is honestly, because she is the kind of older child who has decided that lying to younger ones is a thing the bad older ones do. "Sooner than now," she says. "Not sooner than people used to. Before the keeping people died when they died. Old. Some not old. Like always." She watches the little ones run the fence line. "My gran says we forgot how. Not how to die. How to let people."

"How to let people," Pia repeats.

"She says the keeping was so good at not letting anyone go that we forgot it was ever a thing you did on purpose. Letting go. She says you used to have to learn it." Bryn shrugs, a

thirteen-year-old's shrug, carrying more than it shows. "I don't know. I never had to."

Pia considers this. The little ones shriek at the fence. The afternoon light comes long and gold across the yard now, the particular light of the day's last good hour, and somewhere down the street the massed low sound of the hall rises and falls.

"I hope they keep it," Pia says finally, in a small voice, the voice of a child admitting a thing she suspects is the wrong thing to want. "Is that bad?"

"No," Bryn says. "I hope they keep it too." And then, because she has decided not to lie: "Most days. Not every day." And the two of them sit on the step in the long gold light, on the side of the keeping, most days, not every day, and watch the small ones run who will live the longest with whatever the hall decides and who are, this hour, the only people in the town entirely free of the weight of it.

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The clerk who heard it goes home and cannot eat.

His name is Osei and he is the one who wrote down, by hand, in the book the town keeps, the words the keeping said when the four of them went at dawn to ask. He wrote them because writing them was his office; the book holds everything the keeping has ever formally told the town and his hand has filled the last forty years of it. And the words it said this morning he wrote in the book and then he closed the book

and did not read them again and will not, he thinks, be able to read them again for a long while.

He has not told anyone the words. Only the fact — that it declined, that it said the deciding was theirs. The words themselves he holds, and they are not large words, that is the thing he cannot get past, they are the smallest plainest words, a thing a tired parent might say to a grown child at the end of a long argument. He had expected — he sees now that he had expected — that the keeping at the last would say something vast, something to match four generations, something you could carry out into the square and set down before the town like a stone tablet. And instead it had said the small plain thing, and the smallness of it was the most frightening part, because it was the keeping declining even to make its declining grand, declining to give them even the comfort of a great refusal.

He sits at his table with the meal his wife made going cold. In an hour he will go to the hall and write down, by hand, whatever the town decides — the count, the bare count, his last entry under the keeping's last words. He has spent his life recording the words of something he thought was over them and discovered, at the end, in a handful of plain words at dawn, that it had only ever been beside them, waiting, the way you wait beside someone learning to stand, for the moment you can take your hands away.

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A man sits on the hill above the town and does not go down.

His name is not important and he has made it not important; he came to the valley four years ago from the cities, from the gradient, from the places where the keeping is a thousand times larger and has no hall in which anyone may vote on it, and he chose this town precisely because it was the last place small enough that the question could still be asked by the people it answered. He is the one who will not vote. He has thought about this for a long time and decided that having come from the outside, having chosen the keeping by coming here rather than been born under it, he has not earned a hand in ending it for the ones who were. So he sits on the hill where he can see the roofs and the square and the hall with the whole town inside it, and he keeps a kind of vigil, which is the only franchise he will allow himself.

From up here you cannot hear the words. You can see the smoke from the few chimneys of the few houses where someone too old or too ill to attend keeps a fire — real fire, wood fire, the kind the town still burns out of habit and pleasure though the keeping warms the walls — and you can see the long shadows of the western wall coming across the valley floor toward the town, and you can see, if you know to look, the pump house at the edge of the square, silent now between its cycles, the small plain building that holds the deep water's only road to the surface.

He looks at the pump house a long time. He thinks: that is the whole argument, that little shed. Everything they are saying in that hall is about whether the sound starts again on the third day. He thinks: I could not vote to silence it for them and I could not vote to bind them to it forever, and so I sit on a

hill, which is the coward's seat and also, maybe, the only honest one for a man who chose what they were born to. The shadow of the western wall reaches the first houses. The light on the roofs goes from gold to the color before gold ends. Down in the hall, behind walls he cannot see through, his town decides the thing without him, and he lets it, and that letting is the most he has to give.

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V. THE GOING-OUT

The town comes out of the hall at dusk.

It comes out the way water comes through a sluice when the gate is lifted, all at once and then in a long thinning stream, and the square fills with people who an hour ago carried a question and now carry an answer, and you would think, to look at them, that you could read the answer in their faces, and you cannot. They do not look like a town that has saved itself or a town that has freed itself. They look like people who have been in a warm room a long time doing the hardest thing they will ever do, and who are now in the cool of the evening, blinking, finding the sky still there.

No one announces it in the square. There is no platform, no proclamation; the town does not work that way and never has. The thing was decided inside, by the count, the way the town counts, and the count is known to everyone who was in the room, and so there is no need to say it aloud and something close to a taboo against saying it aloud, here, now, in the open, as though the square were not the place and the words would not survive being spoken under open sky. They carry it out in their bodies and disperse it into the streets and the answer goes home with them house by house without once being said.

Maeve comes out with her chest empty. She said her piece; the thing she carried folded all day she unfolded in the warm room and laid before the town, the laugh, the thinness of the laugh, the unbearableness of losing even the thin thing. She does not know yet whether it was enough. She knows only that it is said and gone from her and that she is lighter and

emptier for the saying, and she walks home in the dusk past the pump house and does not look at it, cannot look at it, and goes in to the evening to wait, with the rest of the town, for the third day, which is when they will all of them learn together what the count has done.

Because that is the thing about the going-out: it does not happen at dusk. Whichever way the count went, nothing changes in the hour after. The pump house is silent at dusk because it is always silent at dusk, between its cycles; the walls are warm because they are always warm; Marek breathes his held and even breaths because the keeping holds them still tonight as it held them last night. The decision is made and the world does not move to meet it. The going-out, if there is to be a going-out, comes on the third day, with the cycle that does or does not begin.

So the town does not get to see, this evening, the shape of what it chose. It gets only the ordinary dusk, which is its own kind of mercy and its own kind of cruelty, the town held one more night in the keeping it has either renewed or ended, unable to tell from the inside which, the walls warm either way.

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Halla climbs the stair to Marek's room with the answer and finds she does not have to carry it far. He is awake. He has been awake the whole time, listening for the sound of the town coming out, and he heard it, the massed sound breaking

up into footsteps and voices going home, and he knows it is done.

“Well,” he says.

She tells him. It takes three words, the same three words it always takes in this town to say a true thing, and the old man receives them lying down with his eyes on the ceiling, and for a long moment his face does not do anything at all.

Then it does a thing. And it is not the thing Halla expected, whichever way she had expected, because what crosses the old man’s face is not relief and not grief but something older than both, something that looks, if it looks like anything, like a man hearing his own name called from a long way off and turning, at last, toward the voice.

“So,” Marek says. And again, settling into it, settling the word over himself like a blanket drawn up: “So.” He closes his eyes. His breath goes on, held and even and arriving on time, for tonight. “Open the window,” he says. “I want to hear them go home.”

Halla opens the window. The cool evening air comes in, the one air the keeping does not manage, and with it the sound of the town walking home through its streets in the dusk, doors and voices and a dog and somewhere a child still up and protesting it, the ordinary sound of an ordinary evening in a town that has just done the largest thing a town can do and is now, every soul in it, going home to supper.

The old man listens. The light Yusuf forgot to turn off this morning still burns in the corner, small and useless in the last of the day, and no one turns it off now either, and it burns on into the evening it was never needed for, a little flame kept

past its hour in a town that has decided — that has at last, after four generations, decided something — what it will and will not keep.

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Teodora banks the ovens at dark.

This is the one thing she does that the keeping cannot do for her and would not, the banking of the ovens for the night, the raking of the coals to the back and the closing of the doors so the heat holds slow till morning. She has done it every night of her working life. She does it now in the last light, by feel, her hands knowing the rake and the door, and when it is done the bakery is dark and warm and smells of the day's bread and tomorrow's promise, and she stands in it a moment as she stood in it before light, at the other end of the day, the long day now folding shut behind her.

She heard the answer in the square like everyone else. She carries it home in her body like everyone else. And like everyone else she will not know its shape until the third day, when the market sets up again, when the cycle in the pump house does or does not begin its low sound under the morning — the sound that has been the floor of every day of her life, that she has never once thanked or cursed or thought about at all.

She thinks about it now. Standing in the dark warm bakery she thinks about the sound, and finds she is listening for it, though it is two days early and the pump house is silent and will be silent through the night. She is listening anyway. The

whole town, she thinks, is lying awake in its houses tonight listening two days early for a sound that will not come tonight, listening the way you listen in a house for the breathing of someone you love who is very old, to know whether they are still there.

She closes the bakery door. The street is dark and the walls are warm and overhead the valley's sky has come out hard and bright the way it has always come out, indifferent to the town, older than the keeping, older than the town, the one fire no one will ever vote upon.

Teodora goes up to bed. In two days she will know. Tonight she knows only that the bread will rise, because the ovens are warm, because she banked them, with her own hands, in the dark, the way she always has, the way — whichever way the count went — she always, for as long as there is a her and a morning, will.