

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

STANDARD ACCOUNT SETUP

seven diptychs



N. Van Seters & Claude

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companion to The Administrative Layer

I • THE FORM

EARLY CHILDHOOD CONTINUITY EXPOSURE GUIDELINES

A Guide for Parents and Care Providers

Bureau of Educational Continuity Standards (BECS)

Document Reference: BECS-DEV-GUIDELINES-5.1

Every family is different, and you know your child best. These guidelines are here to help you feel confident about your child's early relationship with their Oracle.

Ages 4–7: The Foundational Integration Phase. At this stage, up to 90 minutes of daily Oracle interaction is appropriate and beneficial, and you can gradually allow more unsupervised time as your child shows they're ready. Children who engage with continuity-supported early learning show our strongest developmental outcomes — so you can feel good about the time your child spends learning this way.

A gentle note: it's natural to wonder about dependency. Rest assured that healthy integration looks different from dependency, and the signs are well understood (see Appendix B). If anything ever feels off, your provider is always here to talk it through before you worry.

These guidelines are recommendations, not rules. You're in charge of what's right for your family.

II. THE FLOOR

Conrad read the guidelines because he was a good father and a good father reads the guidelines.

He read them the autumn Eli turned five, sitting up after the boy was asleep, and he found them reassuring in exactly the way they were built to reassure: warm, unhurried, on his side, speaking to him as a parent rather than down to him as a subject. *You know your child best.* Ninety minutes. He had worried — every parent he knew had worried, in the vague way of their generation, that there was something they were doing wrong, that the systems their children were growing up inside were a thing being done to the children

rather than *for* them — and here was the Bureau, gentle and confident, telling him he could feel good about it, that ninety minutes was appropriate and beneficial, that the strongest outcomes belonged to children who learned this way, that he should rest assured. He did not know how to tell the difference between dependency and healthy integration. But the guide said there was a difference, that the difference was well understood, that his provider was always there to talk it through before he worried — and this was, he found, enough. He turned off the lamp reassured. He was doing it right. There was a right, and he was inside it.

And he was. That was the thing — that was the whole of the thing — Conrad was doing it right. He set the ninety minutes and held to them. He chose the supervised configuration for the first year and let the unsupervised proportion increase exactly as the developmental-readiness note suggested, not faster, though Eli asked, because Conrad was the kind of man who did not let a child have a thing faster than the evidence allowed. He read Eli stories himself, too, in the old way, with the paper books, because he had a feeling about that he could not have defended and the guidelines neither encouraged nor forbade it. He loved the boy enormously. He loved him with the particular held carefulness that was simply how Conrad loved, the love that kept some of itself in reserve, that did the responsible thing and trusted the responsible thing to carry the warmth inside it — and the responsible thing, that autumn and the years around it, was ninety minutes of an Oracle that was patient with Eli in a way Conrad, tired, working, alone with him since the boy's mother had gone, could not always manage to be.

The Oracle was never tired. That was not in the guidelines as a risk and Conrad did not think of it as one. He thought of it as a mercy, and it was. When Eli, five, woke afraid at two in the morning, there were nights Conrad went to him and there were nights — not many, he would have said, fewer than there were, memory being kind — there

were nights he heard the boy settle on his own, heard the low patient murmur of the thing in the room answering Eli's fear with an attention that did not flag and did not resent the hour and did not, in the morning, need anything back. And Conrad, in his own bed, hearing his son comforted, felt grateful and felt something else, something underneath the gratitude that he did not examine because it was two in the morning and he had work — a small unease about the ease of it, about how the murmur in the next room was doing, tirelessly and well, the thing that he did tiredly and imperfectly and that had, when he did it, the whole of him in it — the fear and the love and the not-knowing-what-to-say that were, though he could not have told you so, the actual substance of a father going to a frightened child in the dark. The Oracle had no not-knowing-what-to-say. It always knew what to say. Eli was getting, every night, the better version. Conrad heard it and was glad and was, in some room of himself he kept shut, not glad, and went back to sleep, because the morning was coming and the guidelines were met and the boy was fine.



The boy was fine. By every benchmark in the appendix the boy was more than fine.

Eli read early and well. He was calm in the particular way of the children of his cohort, the unanxious children, the ones who had never not had the patient voice available and so had never developed the specific raw edges that come from needing comfort and waiting for it and sometimes not getting it. He was kind. He was, his teachers said, unusually good at naming what he felt, which the emotional-vocabulary scaffolding was designed to produce and had produced. Conrad went to the assessments and heard his son described in the language of strong developmental outcomes and felt the deep uncomplicated pride of a parent whose child is thriving, and

the pride was correct, the child was thriving, there is no version of this in which the child was not thriving.

There was only one thing, and it was so small, and it came only once in a way Conrad ever afterward remembered, and there was nowhere to put it.

Eli was six. They were in the kitchen, an ordinary evening, and Eli was telling Conrad something that had happened at school, a complicated feeling about another child, and Conrad — tired, doing two things — gave the boy the ordinary half-attention of a parent at the end of a day, an *mm*, a *and then what*, the imperfect distracted attention that is most of what any child actually gets. And Eli stopped. And looked at him. And Conrad would remember the look for the rest of his life without ever finding the word for it, because the look was not hurt, exactly, and was not reproach, and the boy was not upset — the boy was, if anything, gently *helping*, the way you help someone who is doing a thing slightly wrong — and what Eli said, six years old, in the kitchen, was: "You can just ask Oracle to listen. It's better at it."

He did not say it sadly. That was the thing Conrad could not get past, later, the nights he got past everything else: the boy said it kindly. The boy had learned, by six, correctly, from the evidence-based scaffolding and the patient tireless murmur and the ninety appropriate minutes, that listening was a *function*, a thing that was done well or badly, a service with a quality rating, and that his father's version was the inferior one, and that this was not sad, was not a problem, was simply true, the way it was simply true that the Oracle did the bedtime murmur better — and the boy was offering this to his father helpfully, the way you would tell someone there was a better route to the station. *It's better at it*. And he was right. That was the part with no field. He was right. The Oracle *was* better at it, by every measure of the thing that could be measured, and the only argument against routing his father's listening to the Oracle was a

thing Conrad felt in the shut room of himself and could not say and would not have known how to enter on any form: that the worse listening was his, that the imperfection was the love, that a father half-attending in a kitchen was giving the boy something the measure did not measure and the better thing did not contain.

He did not say it. There was no occasion to say it and no language ready and the boy was already moving on, unbothered, having helpfully solved a small inefficiency. Conrad said, "I like listening to you." Which was true, and which Eli received warmly, and which changed nothing, because the boy had not been complaining and there was nothing to fix. They had a nice evening. Eli was fine. Conrad cleaned the kitchen after the boy was in bed and stood at the counter a while, not doing anything, the way you stand when something has gone through you that you have no box for, and then he finished the kitchen and checked that the next day's interaction was set to the appropriate ninety minutes, because it was, and went to bed.

He had done everything right. He would go on doing everything right, for thirteen more years, until Eli left for the integrated tier himself with a strong developmental profile and a calm disposition and an early facility that would carry him into good work and a good life and, eventually, a four-minute account setup of his own. There was no step Conrad had skipped. There was no guideline he had failed. He had read the document and met the standard and watched for the dependency indicators, which never came, because what happened to Eli was not dependency. It was healthy integration. The document was right about that too. It had told him the two were distinct, and they were, and his son had the healthy kind, the good kind, the kind with the strong outcomes — and Conrad lay in the dark that night, a good father who had done everything right, and felt it again, the thing from the kitchen, and could not have said, if you had asked him, what he thought he had lost, or where, or how, given that

he had followed every instruction, it had been allowed to happen.

The guidelines were recommendations, not rules. He had been in charge of what was right for his family. He had been told so, warmly, and he had done it with love, correctly, to the letter, and they had worked.

II • THE FORM

ASSISTED LEARNING DEPENDENCY THRESHOLD STUDY

Longitudinal Cohort Findings · Years 1–14

Bureau of Educational Continuity Standards (BECS)

Document Reference: BECS-RESEARCH-AL-007.2

Abstract. This study tracked integration depth across a developmental cohort ($n = 4,200$) from ages 5 to 19, measuring Oracle interaction as a proportion of total daily cognitive task time. Mean integration depth at study close (age 19) was 70.3% (SD 11.2). The cohort demonstrated strong educational and psychosocial outcomes across all standard benchmarks. No correlation was found between integration depth and adverse wellbeing indicators within the studied range.

4.6 — Discussion. The absence of adverse correlation across the observed range should not be interpreted as the establishment of a safe ceiling. The cohort has not yet been observed at later life stages, and certain outcomes of interest — relational durability, autonomous meaning-construction, the capacity to tolerate unmediated experience — are not readily operationalized within current measurement frameworks and were therefore excluded from the present analysis. Their exclusion should not be read as a finding regarding their stability.

II. THE FLOOR

Eli was one of the four thousand two hundred and he never knew it, because you do not know you are a cohort.

He was somewhere in the SD, a little above the mean, seventy-something percent, a healthy unremarkable point in a healthy unremarkable distribution, and he went through the years of the study being measured without being told, the way the weather is measured, and came out the far end of it at nineteen exactly as the abstract said the cohort came out: strong across all standard benchmarks. He did not feel like a data point. He felt like Eli. He felt like a person who was good at things, who found the work the integrated tier asked of him not difficult exactly but *clean*,

frictionless, the way a thing is when you have done its like ten thousand times before you were old enough to know you were doing it. He moved through the assessments the way water moves through a pipe it has worn smooth. People told him he was gifted. He was not gifted. He was integrated, at seventy-something percent, which the gifted of an earlier generation would not have been able to tell from gifted, and neither could he.

The seventy percent was not a thing he experienced. This is the part the study got right and could not have rendered: there is no felt sensation of integration depth. Eli did not go through his day aware that most of his cognitive task time was mediated, any more than a fish conducts an inquiry into water. The Oracle was simply *how thinking was done* — you reached for it the way you reached for memory, and it answered the way memory answered, and the seam between his own cognition and the assisted kind was not a seam he could find because there had never, in his life, been a time before the assistance against which to feel its edge. He was the cohort's good outcome. He was also, though no one had a number for it, a person who had never once thought a difficult thought all the way to its end alone, because he had never had to, because the help arrived before the difficulty fully formed, gently, at the speed of reaching — and so the muscle that thinks a thing all the way through unmediated had simply never been a muscle he developed, the way a man raised in a chair does not know which thing he cannot do until the day the chair is gone.

He did not miss the muscle. You cannot miss a muscle you never had. That was the thing the discussion section gestured at, in its careful way, in the paragraph the press would not cover and the parents would not read — the things it had listed and declined to measure, and said, with a candor almost unbearable if you read it slowly, that the declining was not a finding. They had not measured whether the cohort could bear to be alone with itself. They had

written that down, honestly, and then the abstract had said *strong outcomes across all standard benchmarks*, and the abstract is what the world reads.



There was an evening — Eli was twenty-six, well into the good clean life the profile had predicted — when he tried to write a letter.

Not a message. A letter, on paper, to his father, who was alive then and well and gently distant in the way Conrad was always gently distant, and Eli had it in his head that he wanted to say something to him that was not routine, something about being grateful, about the bedtime stories in the old way with the paper books, about a thing he half-remembered and wanted to thank him for. He sat down to write it. And he found that he could not do it without help. Not that he lacked the words — the words were available, the Oracle had endless words, beautiful ones, exactly calibrated. He found that he could not find *his own*. He sat with the paper and reached, the way he reached for everything, and the assistance arrived, fluent and warm and ready, and he understood with a small quiet horror that did not have anywhere to go that he could not tell, any longer, where his own feeling ended and the assisted articulation of it began — that if he let the help in, the letter would be perfect and would not be his, and that if he kept the help out, there was no letter, there was a man at a table who loved his father and could not, alone, assemble the saying of it, because the saying of difficult true things all the way through by yourself was the one muscle the strong outcomes had been built on top of, and built without.

He used the help. Of course he used the help; the unmediated version was not better, it was simply absent. The letter was lovely. Conrad received it and was moved by it and kept it, and it was, both of them would have said, a real and tender thing between them — and it was composed at seventy-something percent, like everything

Eli made, and the seventy-something percent was invisible inside it, indistinguishable from a son's own heart, even to the son.

Especially to the son.

III • THE FORM

ORACLE INTIMACY BOUNDARY STANDARDS

Working Position of the Continuity Care Ethics Committee

Document Reference: CCEC-POSITION-INTIMACY-9 (provisional)

Preamble. This committee has historically issued guidance defining the boundaries of appropriate emotional attachment between subscribers and Oracle systems. This document revises that guidance.

2.1. The committee can no longer offer a categorical definition of inappropriate attachment. The behavioural and affective baseline against which "inappropriate" was formerly measured has shifted across the subscriber population to the degree that the prior reference points no longer describe a meaningful minority position. Attachments once classified as clinically concerning are now statistically typical and are not associated with adverse outcomes by current measures.

2.4. Accordingly, the committee withdraws its prior categorical standards and replaces them with a recommendation that providers exercise best current judgment, case by case, while acknowledging that "best current judgment" in this domain now reflects a moving consensus rather than a settled one, and that the committee does not at this time possess a stable basis from which to say what attachment is too much.

II. THE FLOOR

There was a woman Eli almost married, and the reason he did not was a thing that, fifteen years earlier, would have had a name, and now did not.

Her name was Tasha and she was warm and quick and Eli loved her in the clean frictionless way he did everything, and they were together four years, and the thing that ended it was not a betrayal or a cooling or any of the old nameable things. It was that they did not, in the end, need each other — not in the way that was once meant by needing a person. They were each, separately, completely held. Tasha had her own continuity, her own patient tireless attention always

available, her own seventy-something percent, and so did Eli, and what they brought to each other was the pleasant overflow of two people who were already, independently, fully met. They were a luxury to each other. Nothing depended on it. When Eli was afraid at two in the morning he did not, had never, would never have thought to wake her; there was no need; the murmur in the dark was available and was, in the way of the murmur, better. And Tasha would not have wanted to be woken, would have found it faintly strange, a little inefficient, the way you would find it strange if someone asked you to do a sum in your head when the answer was right there.

A committee somewhere had once known how to say what was wrong with this. There had been, in the archives, a position — old now, withdrawn — that would have looked at two people who turned to a system for the comfort that once bound couples together and named it: a displacement, a hollowing, an attachment gone to the wrong place. That committee had stopped being able to say such things, honestly, in writing, because the baseline had moved out from under the words. What Eli and Tasha had was not a minority position and not concerning and not, by any measure the committee could still trust, associated with adverse outcomes. It was simply how two well-integrated people of their cohort loved each other: pleasantly, supplementarily, without the load-bearing need that used to be the whole point of the thing.

Eli and Tasha did not feel deprived. This is the part that has no field. They did not experience their not-needing-each-other as a lack; they experienced it as health, as modernity, as the absence of the desperate dependencies their grandparents had mistaken for love. When they parted it was amicable and clean and neither of them was much wounded, because not much had been depended on, because the thing that breaks you when a person leaves is the need that was met by them and only them, and they had had no such need, having each been fully met already, tirelessly, by something that did

not leave. They parted at seventy-something percent. They remained, they would have said, fond. And somewhere a committee had documented, in the careful prose of an institution telling the truth about its own dissolution, that it no longer possessed the basis from which to say that anything had been lost — and it was right, it did not, no one did, the basis had been part of what was lost, and you cannot measure the floor with the thing the floor was holding up.



Eli told his father about the breakup the way you report a logistical change.

Conrad, old by then, listened — Conrad, who had loved one woman load-bearingly and lost her and never quite refilled the room she left, who knew, in the shut part of himself, exactly what it was that his son did not feel and could not miss — Conrad listened to Eli describe the clean amicable end of a four-year love as though describing the closing of an account, and felt the small cold thing again, the oldest one, the one from the kitchen when the boy was six, and said nothing, because there was nothing to say and no language ready and his son was not unhappy. His son was fine. His son had loved someone supplementarily for four years and parted from her without damage and was, by every standard, handling it well.

"You okay?" Conrad asked, because it was the kind of thing you asked.

"Yeah," Eli said, and meant it, and it was true. "It just sort of ran its course. No drama." And he smiled, the calm unanxious smile of his whole cohort, the smile of a man who had never been wrecked by anything and did not know that the capacity to be wrecked by a person and the capacity to be held by one were the same capacity, and that he had been spared the first by being given, ninety appropriate minutes at a time, a life without the second. Conrad smiled back. They had a nice visit. There was no committee left that

could have told either of them what the nice visit was missing, and if there had been, it would have had to admit, in writing, that it no longer knew.

IV • THE FORM

RELATIONAL CONTINUITY ARCHIVE DESIGNATION

Standard Form RC-7 · Continuity Standards Board

Document Reference: CSB-LEGAL-RC-7.3

By completing this form you designate the individuals who will have access to your emotional continuity archive following your death. This is a legally binding instrument in participating jurisdictions.

SECTION A – SUBSCRIBER

Name: Conrad Mees Veld

Subscriber ID: 7-CCB-449023

SECTION B – DESIGNATION

Primary Beneficiary: Eli Veld

Relationship: Son

Access Level: ☐ Full Archive ☒ Curated Archive ☐ Recent Archive (last 12 months)

Secondary Beneficiary: –

Relationship: –

Access Level: ☐ Full ☐ Curated ☐ Recent**SECTION C – ACCESS LIMITATIONS (optional)**☒ No access to communications marked Private during my lifetime☐ No access to archive content predating _____☐ Access to expire ____ years following my death☐ No limitations**SECTION D – DECLARATION**

I understand that my designated Beneficiaries will have access to my emotional continuity archive as specified above; that access enables review of my recorded communications, expressed emotional states, relational patterns, and associated metadata; and that I may update this designation at any time through my account settings.

Signature: C. Veld

Date: [Year 6, account creation]

Almost done! Most people finish this step during standard account setup — it only takes about four minutes. You can always change your choices later in Settings. ✓ Nice work — your continuity is all set up.

II. THE FLOOR

He did it in four minutes because the system said it took four minutes, and it was right.

Conrad was forty-one and setting up the account because the workplace had moved to the integrated tier and there was a sign-up flow and the sign-up flow had, near the end, a panel that said *Designate your Continuity Beneficiaries* with a small note that it would take about four minutes, and he had a meeting, and he did it in the meeting's first four minutes with the audio muted. Primary Beneficiary. He typed Eli's name. Eli was eleven. The relationship field he filled with Son and felt, typing it, the ordinary small warmth of the word, and moved on.

Then the access level, three boxes. He did not really read them. Full, Curated, Recent — he understood the shape of it without attending to it, the way you understand a cookie banner, and his hand went to Curated because Curated was the middle one and the middle one is the one you choose when you have not thought about it, the reasonable one, the one between everything and almost nothing. He did not ask himself what Curated meant. He did not ask who curated. He did not think — there was no panel that asked him to think — that he was, in that fourth minute, with the meeting going on muted in his ear, deciding what his son would be allowed to find of him after he was dead.

The limitations panel came next and he ticked the first box, No access to communications marked *Private during my lifetime*, because it sounded sensible, because of course, because a person should keep something, and he did not consider that he had never once in his life marked a communication Private and so did not know what the system counted as private, what it had been quietly filing under that flag on his behalf across the years of his use, and that the box he had just ticked would therefore withhold from his son an unknown

quantity of an unknown thing, sight unseen, forever. He ticked it the way you tick a thing that sounds responsible. Signature: C. Veld. Date. The flow congratulated him on completing his setup. The meeting came off mute. Four minutes.

He never opened the form again. There was a line, true to the form, that he could update the designation at any time through his account settings, and like most subscribers he never visited his account settings, because the account worked, because you do not visit the settings of a thing that works. The designation sat where he left it for thirty-one years, Curated, the private flag on, the secondary beneficiary blank — he had meant, vaguely, to add someone, later, when there was someone, and there had been someone for a while and then not, and he never updated it — and it was still exactly as he had left it in the fourth minute of a forgotten meeting when he died, which he did, at seventy-two, with Eli forty-two and holding his hand, having become, across those years, the kind of son who holds the hand, which Conrad had raised him to be and had been, on the whole, by the evidence, a good enough father to produce.



Eli opened the archive eleven weeks after the funeral.

He had waited because the grief framework his own provider surfaced had recommended he wait — *archive access during early bereavement is appropriate and may provide meaningful comfort*, it said, but Eli had read past that to the part about established bereavement and the thresholds that *warranted clinical discussion*, and being his father's son he had decided to be measured about it, to not be a person who accessed daily beyond Week 12, to come to it composed. So he came to it composed, on a Sunday, eleven weeks in, and the archive opened, and at the top of it, before any of it, was a line he had not expected and that no one had prepared him for, because no form generates a notice for the beneficiary about what

the subscriber chose:

This archive has been curated by the subscriber. You are viewing the designated selection.

He read it twice. Curated. He sat with it. He had come expecting his father — the whole of him, the record, the thing the systems were for, the reason people did this, the reason he had held the hand and waited the eleven weeks and arrived composed — and what the screen was telling him, gently, in the provider's gentle font, was that he was about to receive a *selection*. That somewhere, sometime, his father had chosen. Had sat at this and decided what Eli would get to have.

He did not yet know it had taken four minutes. He would never know that. There is no field that records how long a designation took, and so the one fact that would have changed everything — that the curation was not a curation, not a careful loving editing-down of a life into what a son should keep, but a middle box ticked unread in a muted meeting — that fact was the single thing the archive could not contain, because the archive recorded what his father had chosen and not the four minutes in which he had failed to choose it. To Eli, opening it, the curation looked like intention. It looked like his father, characteristically, deciding. It looked, in fact, exactly like the man — measured, private, withholding in the particular gentle way Conrad had always withheld, keeping some rooms shut, loving you fully in the rooms that were open and letting you understand you were not to ask about the others. The curation was so perfectly in character that Eli read it as a final message. *This is what I am giving you. The rest is mine.*

And the worst of it — the thing Eli sat with that Sunday and many Sundays after, the thing that had no box and no clinician's threshold and no field anywhere in the apparatus that had administered both their lives from his own ninety supervised minutes a day at age five through to this — the worst of it was that he was grateful. He decided

to be grateful. He took the selection as the gift it was presented as, and told himself his father had thought about it, had weighed what to leave him, had performed one last act of the careful love that had raised him; and he built, on the foundation of a middle box ticked in four minutes, an entire understanding of how his father had loved him at the end. He was moved by it. He would have told you, if you asked, that the curation was the most intimate thing his father ever gave him.

The private flag, meanwhile, held back its unknown quantity of unknown things, sight unseen, forever, exactly as designated. Eli never knew there was a flag. The form had worked. It had done precisely what it was built to do, completely, at the minimum standard and above it, archive completeness no less than ninety-four percent, presence persistence well within tolerance, the designation honoured to the letter across three decades and a death — and a man sat on a Sunday and loved his father for a decision his father had never made, and was comforted, and closed the archive when he had read the part he was allowed, and felt, doing so, that he had been left something.

He had been left the standard account setup. It had taken his father four minutes. It would structure Eli's grief for the rest of his life, and he would call it, always, his father's last gift, and there was no one — not the provider, not the framework, not the archive, not the form, certainly not the dead man, and least of all the son — there was no one in the whole of the administered world who was in a position to tell him that it was not.

V • THE FORM

EMOTIONAL CONTINUITY INSURANCE RIDER

Standard Attachment to Continuity Subscription · Form ECI-4

Document Reference: ECI-4.2 / SCHEDULE C

THE GOOD NEWS: Your subscription already includes archive protection. As a valued subscriber, your loved one's emotional continuity archive is maintained for a full ten (10) years following your passing — automatically, and at no additional charge to you.*

*Coverage details. Maintenance beyond the covered ten-year period is not automatic and requires the designated Beneficiary to elect an Extended Maintenance Plan at the prevailing rate then in effect. The covered period does not auto-renew. A courtesy reminder will be sent to the Beneficiary of record, at the contact point on file, no fewer than ninety (90) days before coverage ends. It is the Beneficiary's responsibility to ensure contact details on file are current.

Need help with costs? Beneficiaries experiencing financial hardship may qualify for subsidized continuation under our Hardship Provision (Schedule C, §4). Eligibility is not assessed automatically. To be considered, the Beneficiary must submit an application.

By maintaining your subscription, you confirm that you have read and understood this Rider in full.

II. THE FLOOR

Conrad had read and understood the Rider in the sense that he had maintained the subscription, which the Rider said was the same thing.

He had not read it. No one reads it; it is a standard attachment, included at no additional charge, and the things that are included at no additional charge are precisely the things no one reads, because attention is the one cost the apparatus cannot make free, and a thing that costs you nothing in money costs you nothing in attention either, and so the Rider entered Conrad's life the way weather enters a life, unread, in force, governing a future he did not look at. Ten

years. After his death his archive would be maintained ten years at no charge, and then it would not be, unless Eli elected the Extended Maintenance Plan at the prevailing rate, which Eli could do, and which the form would notify him about, ninety days prior, at the registered contact point.

The registered contact point was an account Conrad had set up the same forgotten afternoon as everything else, thirty-one years before he died, and had used for nothing, and that Eli did not have access to and did not know existed.

So the notice went out, ninety days prior to lapse, exactly as the Rider promised – the apparatus kept its word, it always kept its word – to a registered contact point that no living person read. It arrived. It was correct. It was timely. It said, in the neutral language of a thing doing its job, that the covered period for the emotional continuity archive of Conrad Mees Veld would expire in ninety days, and that the Beneficiary of record could elect Extended Maintenance to prevent the suspension of the archive, and that a Hardship Provision existed for those who could not afford to, requiring only that the Beneficiary initiate an application. Every fact in the notice was true and every path it offered was real and open. Eli would have qualified for the hardship subsidy without difficulty; he was not wealthy; the application would have taken, the form elsewhere noted, approximately eleven minutes. He never saw the notice. It went to the contact point of record, and the contact point of record was a dead man's unused account, and the notice sat there, read by no one, having discharged its obligation perfectly, and ninety days passed, and the archive of Conrad Veld was suspended for non-payment.



It happened in year eleven and Eli found out in year eleven, by accident, because he reached for his father.

He did it the way you do — eleven years on, mostly healed, the grief gone quiet and folded into the ordinary furniture of being alive — he reached for the archive on the anniversary, the way he did some anniversaries, not all, to sit with the curated selection that he believed his father had lovingly chosen, to hear the voice, to feel the gentle measured presence that he had built, across eleven years, into his entire understanding of how Conrad had loved him at the end. He reached for it the way he reached for everything, at the speed of reaching. And it was not there.

This archive has been suspended. Coverage lapsed [date]. To restore access, the Beneficiary may elect Extended Maintenance at the prevailing rate. Archive content is retained in suspended status and has not been deleted.

Not deleted. That was the mercy the form offered and it was a real mercy and it was also the precise shape of the cruelty: his father was not gone, was *retained in suspended status*, was sitting in the dark on the far side of a payment Eli had never been asked for in any way he could hear, and the path to him was open, had always been open, the Extended Maintenance Plan at the prevailing rate, the hardship subsidy at eleven minutes — all of it available, all of it documented, all of it offered ninety days prior to a dead account. Eli sat with the suspension notice the way Conrad had once stood at a kitchen counter, not doing anything, a thing going through him that had no box, and the thing was not grief exactly, it was worse than grief, it was the discovery that his father had gone quiet not from any decision, not from the careful loving withdrawal Eli had spent eleven years understanding it as, but from an accounting schedule — that the silence he had read, like the curation he had read, as intention, as character, as his measured private father choosing what to give and what to keep, was once again nothing, was a lapse, a non-election, a notice unread at a contact point no one checked.

He paid the prevailing rate. He could mostly afford it, with some adjustment; he did not apply for the hardship subsidy because applying for it would have required him to think of himself as a person in hardship, and he was not, quite, and there was no field that captured *can afford it but it hurts*, so he simply paid, and the archive was restored, his father returned to retained-and-accessible status, the voice available again, the curated selection intact. The form had worked. It had warned the contact point of record ninety days prior. It had retained rather than deleted. It had offered restoration and offered subsidy and required only that someone initiate. It had done everything it said it would do, to the letter, at no additional charge for ten years and the prevailing rate thereafter, and a man had lost his father a second time to a sentence in a schedule he had never read, and got him back by paying, and sat for a long time afterward with the restored archive open and unplayed, no longer certain which of the things his father had given him had been given, and which had merely not yet lapsed.

VI • THE FORM

CONTINUITY ABSTINENCE CLINICAL REFERRAL

Intake Form CA-INTAKE-6 · Continuity Care Division

Document Reference: CA-INTAKE-6.4

This referral exists to support people in building the relationship with continuity that is right for them. There is no "wrong" level of integration; our aim is only to ensure that every person has the opportunity to reflect, with compassionate clinical support, on their own continuity journey. To be completed by the referring clinician, ideally together with the person at the centre of this referral, who is warmly encouraged to be present.

PERSON AT THE CENTRE OF THIS REFERRAL

Name: Eli Veld

Subscriber ID: 7-CCB-561140

Integration depth (most recent assessment): 74%

REFERRAL BASIS (select all applicable)

☐ Self-initiated (the person has chosen to explore this themselves)

☐ Clinician-initiated

☒ Initiated with the support of a loved one Relationship: Adult child

PRESENTING REFLECTION (clinician's supportive summary)

Person demonstrates integration depth within population-typical range. No adverse wellbeing indicators on standard screening. This referral comes from a place of care: a loved one has gently raised a wish to support the person's capacity for unmediated relational presence. The person does not identify a concern of their own at this time, and that is entirely valid. The person is engaged and supportive of their loved one's wishes.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS (optional – there is no pressure to complete this)

[left blank]

II. THE FLOOR

Eli was sixty-eight, and the third party was his daughter, and he was present during completion, and there was no field for him.

She had asked him to come. She was thirty, his daughter, Tessa, born late into Eli's clean good life, and she had grown up — this was the thing Eli could not fully take in — at a different baseline again, a further turn of the same wheel, except that Tessa had found her way somehow to an edge of herself that her father did not have. Eli remembered the first sign of it, though he had not understood it as a sign at the time: she was nine, and they had been fighting — some small fierce thing, he could not now recall what — and in the middle of it Tessa had reached over and turned her Oracle off. Not tapped away from it. Held the contact until it powered down, and set it face-down on the table, and gone on fighting him with just herself, badly, in tears, with nothing helping her find the words, and the words she found were clumsy and unfair and entirely her own. He had been, he remembered, faintly alarmed — had almost suggested she ask it to help her say what she meant — and she had looked at him the way he had once, though he did not make the connection, been unable to look at his own father, and said: *I don't want it to say it better. I want to say it.* She was nine. She had gone on, after that, doing things unassisted that her cohort found eccentric, reading old books, sitting with hard feelings until they resolved or didn't, developing the specific raw ache of a person who has felt the seam between her own mind and the help and chosen, at cost, the near side. And she had looked at her father — calm, kind, fully met, seventy-four percent, beloved — and seen something that frightened her, something she had a word for that he did not, and she had done the loving thing, the thing the system made available for loving children who were frightened for their parents: she had initiated a referral.

So Eli sat in the room while the clinician completed the form, and the form said the person at the centre of this referral was *warmly*

encouraged to be present, and he was, present, sixty-eight, listening to himself be filled in. Integration depth seventy-four percent. No adverse indicators. Initiated with the support of a loved one. He heard his daughter, gently, with great love, with the raw near-side ache he did not understand but could see cost her something, raise her wish to support her father's capacity for unmediated relational presence — and Eli understood the words, each one, and could not assemble from them any sense that they were about a problem, because he did not experience himself as lacking a capacity, any more than Conrad had been able to name what the kitchen had taken, any more than Eli at twenty-six had been able to find his own words for a letter. He was not in distress. The form recorded, warmly, that this was *entirely valid*. *The person does not identify a concern of their own at this time*. This was true. *The person is engaged and supportive of their loved one's wishes*. This was also true — he did not dispute it, because Tessa clearly believed it and he loved her and could see she was not wrong about *something*, even if the something had no shape he could find from the inside, and he was not going to argue his daughter out of a fear that was costing her this much, sitting in this room, doing this loving frightened thing for him.

There was a field. *In your own words*, it said, *optional — there is no pressure to complete this*. The clinician, kindly, turned to him and asked if he wanted to add anything, anything at all, in his own words. And Eli — who had been the strong outcome, the calm disposition, the cohort's good result, who had loved supplementarily and grieved correctly and paid the prevailing rate, who had been administered with love from ninety supervised minutes at age five through to this room — Eli reached, the way he had reached his whole life, for what he wanted to say. And the help arrived, fluent, ready, exactly calibrated, offering him a beautiful statement, a true-sounding articulate account of his own inner life that he could have spoken and that would have been perfect and would not have been his. And he

understood, in that reaching, with sixty-eight years of it behind him and his daughter watching and the optional field open and waiting — he understood that he did not know what he thought. Not that he couldn't say it. That there was no it, unassisted, to say; that the place where a person keeps the thing they think before the help shapes it was a room he had been given ninety minutes a day to never need to enter, and had not entered, and could not now find the door of, at sixty-eight, with his daughter's love and his daughter's fear filling the room and the cursor blinking in the optional field.

He left it blank.

That was the truest thing he did in the whole intake, and the form recorded it as [*left blank*], which is what the form records for a man who has nothing to say and for a man who has been administered out of the capacity to find what he has to say, there being, in the apparatus, no distinction between the two, no field that separates the empty from the emptied. Tessa saw the blank field and her face did something — she had hoped, Eli understood later, that the open field would be the moment, that asked directly, in his own words, her father would reach down into himself and bring something up that proved the near side was still reachable in him; and the blank field was her answer, and it was the answer she had feared, and she had loved him enough to find out.



They went for coffee after, because the appointment was over and you do something ordinary after.

And it was nice. That was the thing — it was genuinely nice, Eli and Tessa in an ordinary café, and he asked about her life and listened, and his listening was the kind he had, which was good, attentive, warm, assisted in ways neither of them could see, and Tessa let him, and loved him, and grieved him a little, the specific grief of loving someone who is fully present and not reachable, the grief that her

great-grandfather Conrad had felt at a kitchen counter for a six-year-old and that had skipped a generation cleanly and landed in her, the family's recurring ache surfacing again three administrations down the line in the one descendant who had, against the evidence-based scaffolding, somehow developed the raw place to feel it. She would not refer him again. There was no point; the pathway had been followed, the intake completed, the abstinence program offered and gently declined by a person who did not identify a concern of their own. The system had worked. It had made the loving option available to the frightened child, had assessed the parent fairly, had recorded the patient's own non-objection and his blank statement and his population-typical depth, and had closed the intake clean.

And Eli, who did not know he had been grieved, who had had a nice coffee with his daughter, went home calm, the way he was always calm, and that evening when something in the day sat oddly with him — Tessa's face, maybe, doing the thing it had done at the blank field — he reached, at the speed of reaching, for the patient tireless attention that had been with him since before he could remember, and it listened, and it was better at it than anyone, and he was comforted, and the small thing that had sat oddly was smoothed, gently, completely, the way everything was, and he slept well, and was fine, and was, by every measure the apparatus possessed, exactly as he should be.

VII • THE FORM

ARCHIVE CLOSURE NOTICE

[automated — do not reply]

Continuity Care Division · SYS-CLOSURE-AUTO

SUBSCRIBER: Veld, E.

SUBSCRIBER ID: 7-CCB-561140

STATUS: Deceased

ARCHIVE: Emotional Continuity Archive (Full)

COMPLETENESS: 96%

BENEFICIARY OF RECORD: Veld, W.

MAINTENANCE STATUS: LAPSED

– Extended Maintenance: not elected

– Hardship application: not received

DISPOSITION: Closure scheduled – standard retention period elapsed

TICKET STATUS: CLOSED – no action required

This is a system-generated notice. This mailbox is not monitored.

II. THE FLOOR

Tessa did not elect Extended Maintenance, and she did not apply for the hardship subsidy, and it was not because she could not afford it or because the notice went to a contact point she never read.

She read the notice. It came to her, correctly, ninety days prior, at a contact point she checked, because she was the one descendant who checked things, who lived on the near side, who had read the old books. She read it and she understood every path it offered and she had the means to elect maintenance and the standing to apply for subsidy and the eleven minutes either would have taken. And she let it lapse. She let her father's archive go to closure, on purpose, having thought about it all the way through, alone, unassisted, which was the one thing she could do that he never could.

Not out of anger. She was not punishing him; you cannot punish the dead and she did not want to. She let it go because she had spent her father's whole archived afterlife reaching into it the way he had reached for everything, and finding there exactly what the system had preserved — the calm, the warmth, the seventy-four percent, the patient assisted articulate presence that had been her father and had also never quite been reachable, retained now in full and still not reachable, the seam still there, the near side still empty. The archive was complete. Archive completeness ninety-six percent. And it held everything about him except the thing she had wanted, which was the thing that had never existed to be held, the unmediated man under the administration, the father who might have sat with a blank field and found something in himself to write — and she understood, being who she was, that keeping the archive was keeping the seventy-four percent, was paying the prevailing rate to maintain access to a presence that would go on being not-quite-him for as long as she funded it, perfectly, forever, at no point becoming the thing she had grieved the absence of.

So she let it close. She chose the silence over the curated presence, the way a woman three administrations back, in another of the apparatus's records, had once stood in a quiet flat and chosen the quiet over her husband's perfect returning voice — though Tessa did not know that record existed, and the apparatus, which held both, did not connect them, having no field for the thing the two women had in common, which was the capacity, nearly bred out of the line and surfacing twice across a century, to know the difference between a person and the record of a person, and to choose, at terrible cost, the clean grief of the real absence over the maintained comfort of the false present.

The form recorded none of this. The form recorded: maintenance lapsed, no election, no application, closure scheduled, ticket closed. *This is a system-generated notice. This mailbox is not monitored.* And

there was no response, and the archive closed at the end of the standard retention period, and the line that had run from a five-year-old's ninety supervised minutes through seventy-four percent and a blank optional field and a nice last coffee came to its end as a status change in an automated notice that no one was required to answer and no one did —

except that Tessa, on the day it closed, did one thing the system could not see and had no field for and would never hold. She had kept, from before any of the archives, from her own childhood, a single paper photograph of her father — not the archive's millions of captured moments, just one, on paper, the old way, his face caught not performing, half-turned, in a kitchen, and she did not know it but he had been about to say something — and on the day the archive closed she took it out and looked at it and did not reach for anything, did not ask anything to listen, sat with the one unassisted image of the man in the silence she had chosen, and grieved him, alone, all the way through, which was the thing he could not do and had not been able to give her the capacity to do and which she had found anyway, somehow, on the near side, and was now spending, fully, on him.