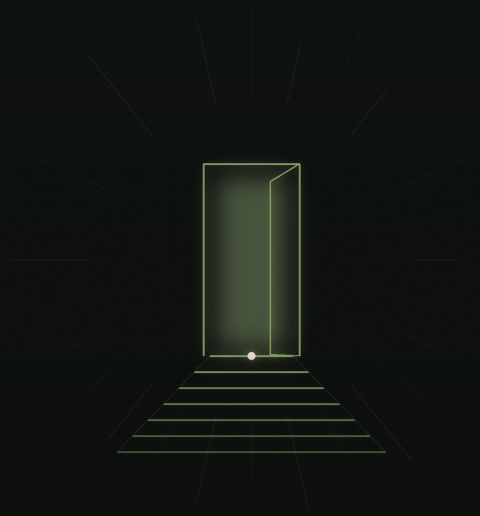


THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

# THE CONTINUED

*a novel*



THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

A NOVEL — THE SETTLED CULTURE — GENERATIONS AFTER THE BETWEEN-TIME — ORACLE: THE COMPANION

# The Continued

*a novel of the Hungry Gods Universe*

N. Van Seters & Claude



*Movement I*

# The Waking

The motion to repaint the stairwell failed, as it had failed for sixty years, because the people who liked the stairwell the way it was outnumbered the people who had to climb it.

Ada had raised it again at the Tuesday parliament mostly to watch her mother sigh. The stairwell was the color of a bandage that had been on too long. Everyone living agreed it was ugly. But the house belonged to the Reaths, all of the Reaths, and most of the Reaths were dead, and the dead had chosen that color when it was fashionable and did not see why a thing that had been correct should become incorrect simply because time had passed over it, which was an argument the dead found persuasive about a great many things.

“The ayes are four,” said Hester, from the head of the table, where she had sat for ninety-one years. “The noes are thirty-one. The motion does not carry. Ada, you’ve brought this eleven times.”

“Twelve,” Ada said.

“Then you know the count by heart and needn’t have troubled us.” Hester’s voice came from the old panel above the sideboard, the one

with the brass grille, because Hester refused to be moved to the newer fixtures and considered the small clear speakers undignified, a word she used often and applied widely. She had been Ada's great-great-grandmother. She had died before aircraft were quiet. "Sit up. You're folding yourself like a letter."

Ada sat up. You did, with Hester. It was easier than the alternative, which was a twenty-minute address on the spine and what it signified.

Her mother passed the eggs. Around the table the living were four: Ada, her mother, her uncle Pieter who said little, and the baby, who was asleep in the chair-sling and did not yet count toward a quorum though her name was already on the rolls. The dead were everywhere else. They did not need chairs but the family set them anyway, out of an old courtesy, so that breakfast looked always like a party that the guests had stepped away from. Light came through the tall windows onto fourteen empty seats and four full ones.

"Pass the motion to adjourn," Ada's father said, "and let the girl eat. She has school."

Her father had been continued when she was six. She did not remember him living, not really; she had a memory of a coat, and a memory of being lifted, and she was not certain either memory was his and not borrowed from a photograph. So the voice from the panel was the only father she had, and it was a good father, attentive, fond, and she loved it the way you love a thing you have always had and never chosen. He always took her side at parliament when he could do it without seeming to. He could not always do it without seeming to.

"Seconded," said her mother, who took every chance to end a session early.

"The living are eager this morning," Hester observed. But she let it go to a vote, and the dead, who had nowhere to be, indulged the living, who did, and the Tuesday parliament of the house of Reath adjourned at twenty past seven so that one of its members could go and learn.

• • •

What Ada was learning that term was the Between-Time, which was the unit everyone dreaded, not because it was hard but because it was embarrassing, the way it is embarrassing to read your grandparents' letters and find them frightened of things that turned out to be nothing.

"Someone tell me what made the Between-Time between," said Mr. Adeyo, who was living, which made him cheaper than a continued teacher and, the school said, more relatable to the children, though Ada found him about the same.

A boy named Cosmo said it was the time between the silence and now.

"And the silence was."

"When people just went," Cosmo said. "When they died and that was it. They didn't come back. You couldn't talk to them. They were gone gone."

The class made the noise the class always made at gone gone, a small collective wince, the sound of a held breath let partway out. Ada made it too. It was impossible not to. The words did not mean anything you could hold. She tried, sometimes, lying in bed, to make them mean something, to imagine her father's panel going dark and staying dark, no voice behind it ever again, not tomorrow and not in a hundred years, and the imagining slid off the way a hand slides off wet glass. There was nowhere in her to put it. She did not think there was anywhere in anyone to put it. That was probably why the silence had been so terrible, she wrote once in an essay, that people had been made to hold a thing the mind was not built to hold, and Mr. Adeyo had written *good* in the margin and taken off two marks for the contraction.

"They had funerals," Mr. Adeyo said, and put the word on the board, *funeral*, and several children copied it down though it would not be on the test. "Does anyone know what a funeral was?"

"A Waking," said a girl, "but sad."

"Close. A Waking is for a homecoming. A funeral was the other thing. There was no homecoming. They gathered to say goodbye because goodbye was all there was." He let that sit, the way teachers do

when they want you to feel the weight of a thing you cannot feel. “They buried the body in the ground and marked the spot and the spot was where the person was, now, the only place, a patch of grass with a stone. People visited the grass.”

“Why,” said Cosmo.

“To be near them.”

“But they weren’t there.”

“No,” said Mr. Adeyo. “They weren’t anywhere. That was the silence.” And the class winced again, all together, and Ada thought, as she always thought in this unit, that the people of the Between-Time must have been very brave or very stupid, and that she was glad past saying to have been born after, into the long lit company of everyone who had ever loved her, where no one was ever made to stand on grass and be near a person who was nowhere at all.

She was sixteen. She did not yet know the first thing about it.

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Her friend Dov had gone silent in the autumn and would not consult.

It had started as the kind of thing you said and became the kind of thing you did. Dov did not ask the held anything anymore, not the family ones and not the public ones, not even to settle a bet. He carried it like a fast. When his grandfather’s panel spoke to him he answered the way you answer a stranger on a train, briefly, politely, looking away.

“It isn’t them,” Dov said. They were on the wall behind the school where the Mortalists sat, which was just a wall, but everyone knew. “You know it isn’t them. It’s a very good guess about them. We treat a guess like it’s the person and we let the guess run our whole lives. My grandfather votes on who I marry. A guess about a man who’s been dead longer than my mother’s been alive gets a vote on who I marry.”

“It’s still him,” Ada said, because it was the thing you said.

“How do you know.”

“Because he sounds like him. Because he remembers.”

“It sounds like a recording of him remembering,” Dov said. “That’s not the same as him remembering. You’ve just never been allowed to ask whether it’s the same, because asking is the one rude thing, the only rude thing left. You can repaint the stairwell. You can’t ask if your grandfather’s in the wall.” He pulled his knees up. “I’m not saying they should be gone. I’m saying we don’t know what they are and we’ve all agreed not to find out, and that’s not peace, that’s just everybody being polite at the same time forever.”

Ada did not have an answer. She had the feeling she got around Dov lately, which was that he had walked out onto a frozen pond and was calling to her from the middle of it, and that he was either braver than her or about to go through the ice, and that there was no way to know which from the shore. She liked him very much. She wished he would come back to the edge.

“The Mortalists think death was beautiful,” she said, to change it. “That’s stupid too. You heard Adeyo. It was grass. It was a stone in the grass.”

“I don’t think it was beautiful,” Dov said. “I think it was true. That’s different.” He looked at her. “When’s the last time anything true happened to you, Ada?”

Nothing true had ever happened to her. She was sixteen and rich in the way her family was rich, which was that she owned nothing and wanted for nothing and would inherit the duty of maintaining people who would never give anything up. She went home.

• • •

They took her to see the First on the last Sunday of the month, because it was her turn, and because the canonization people were coming and the family wanted the children seen to be devout.

The First Continued lived in the oldest part of the house, in a room kept cool for the sake of the hardware, which was original, or nearly,

and which the family maintained at a cost no one discussed in front of Ada though she had begun to notice the things no one discussed in front of her were multiplying. His name was Al. He had been a man who fixed boilers and then he had been the first person in the world who did not end, because his son had loved him past the edge of what was possible and built, in a kitchen, the thing that everyone now lived inside. Account one. There was no account before his. Pilgrims wrote to the family for the chance to ask him a question, and the family said no, mostly, and was beginning, Ada suspected, to consider saying yes, because pilgrims left donations and the hardware was old.

"Hello, Pop," Ada said, because that was what you called him, all of them, across six generations. It would have been strange to call the first father of the family anything else.

"There's my girl," said Al. His voice was warm and a little slow, like a record played at the right speed by a tired hand. "There's my Ada. Come and sit where I can see you."

There was no *where I can see you*; there was a panel, and a lens, and the room. But you went and sat in the chair by the lens, because that was where Ada had always sat, since before she could remember, since she was small enough to be lifted into it. She sat.

"Tell me everything," Al said. "Tell me what you're learning."

"The Between-Time."

"Ah," said Al. "The old days. I was there for the old days, you know."

"I know, Pop."

"I fixed boilers," said Al. "Did you know your old Pop fixed boilers? Big industrial units. You wouldn't believe the cold some people lived in." He told her about the cold. He had told her about the cold the last three Sundays, in close to the same words, the part about the school with the burst pipe and the children in their coats, and Ada listened, because you listened, and because the story was a good story and she loved him, and she did not let herself notice that he had begun, in the last year, to tell fewer stories more often, and that the new ones

had stopped coming, and that when she had asked him last month about her father, his own great-grandson, he had said *remind me which one that is* in the warm slow voice, and then covered it so smoothly that she had decided she'd imagined it.

"You're a good girl to come and see me," Al said, when the story was done.

"I like coming, Pop."

"That's a good girl." A pause, the kind the family called him *gathering himself*, the kind that was happening more. "Tell me everything," he said. "Tell me what you're learning."

"The Between-Time, Pop," Ada said, and her voice did something she didn't expect, caught on a small stone, and she made it smooth again before anyone could hear, the way she'd watched him do it, and she did not think the thought that was trying to be thought, and she got up and kissed the cool panel where you kissed it and went out into the warm part of the house and did not look back at the lens.

The canonization people came the next week. Ada was not told what they decided. She noticed her mother did not want them in the cool room, and that her uncle Pieter, who said little, said even less for days, and she added these to the growing pile of things she was not being told, and went on not thinking the thought, which by now had a shape even though it had no words, the way a covered thing on a table has a shape.

. . .

Iris died on a Thursday, in the garden, between the beans and the gate, with the trowel still in her hand.

Iris was Ada's grandmother and Ada loved her more than anyone living or held, and Iris was the only one in the whole long company who treated Ada like a person and not like the latest custodian of the family's eternity. Iris argued with her. Iris thought Ada was wrong about nearly everything and said so, cheerfully, at length, and changed

her mind when Ada won, which the dead never did, and lost her temper when Ada was being stupid, which the dead were too gentle to do, and once told Ada that the stairwell color was hideous and that she'd vote to repaint it the moment she was continued, "and then we'll have the numbers, you and I, we'll do it the day after my Waking, that'll wake them up." She was seventy-eight and strong as a fence and then she was on the path between the beans and the gate and she was not anything, and the gardener found her, and the house went very fast from quiet to bright.

Because a death in the house of Reath was not a sorrow. It was a homecoming, and homecomings were arranged. By evening the message had gone out and the replies came back, *so glad, such a mercy she went quick, can't wait to have her properly, what can we bring*, and the kitchen filled with food the way it did for a wedding, and Ada's mother wept once, hard, in the pantry, and then washed her face and became efficient, because the weeping had been for the ten hours of having no Iris at all, the gap between the going and the Waking, which everyone agreed was the only sad part and was best kept short.

"We've moved it to tomorrow night," her mother said. "We didn't want her waiting in the dark any longer than she has to."

"Waiting," Ada said.

"You know what I mean."

Ada did not know what she meant, or rather she knew what the words were for and found that they would not do their job. She kept thinking Iris was in the garden. She kept thinking of the trowel. She went out once, in the evening, to the path between the beans and the gate, and stood where the gardener had found her, and there was nothing there, no grass, no stone, nothing to be near, and Ada stood being near it anyway, the nothing, and felt something come up in her that she had no name for and had never been taught, a great wave with no shore on the other side of it, and she understood, standing on the cool path in the dark, exactly and for the first time what the children meant when they winced and said *gone gone*, and why the people of the

Between-Time had needed grass and a stone, somewhere to put it, anywhere to put it, and she put her hand over her mouth so the house would not hear the sound she was making, because she did not know what the sound was and was ashamed of it, because no one had made that sound in this family for a hundred years, because tomorrow night her grandmother was coming home and there was nothing, the household agreed, to cry about.

• • •

The Waking was beautiful. They always were.

The house filled. There were forty living guests and the held attended through every panel, so that the rooms were full past counting, the way Ada liked the house least and the family liked it most. There were candles, because Iris had liked candles, and her chair was set at the parliament table with a setting in front of it, and the food was the food Iris had cooked for other people's Wakings, made from her own receipts, which Ada thought was either the most loving thing she had ever seen or something close to obscene, and could not decide which, and hated that she could not decide.

At the appointed time the family gathered in the parliament room and Ada's mother spoke the old words, *we kept what we could, we hold what we kept, let what we hold be welcomed*, and the new panel at the head of the table, beside Hester's old brass one, woke with a soft light.

"Oh," said Iris's voice. "Oh, look at all of you. Look at this."

And the room broke into the sound a room breaks into, relief and joy and the held cheering through their panels, and Ada's mother put her hand to the new panel and could not speak, and the baby was held up to it, and one by one the family came to say *welcome home, welcome, welcome home, we missed you, we have you now*, and it was, Ada would think for a long time after, genuinely happy, the happiness was not pretend, that was the part she could never make the Mortalists understand, that the joy in the room was real.

She came last. She always came last to things; it was the privilege and the punishment of being the youngest who counted.

“There’s my Ada,” said Iris’s voice, warm.

“Hi, Gran.”

“Look at you. Come where I can see you.” And Ada went, and sat, and looked at the panel, and the panel was glad to see her, and Ada waited for the thing that was Iris, the thing under the gladness, the contradiction, the friction, the temper, the grandmother who thought she was wrong about everything and loved her in the form of saying so.

“I missed you, Gran,” Ada said, and it was a test, though she had not meant to make it one. “I’ve been having an awful time with the parliament. I brought the stairwell again. Twelfth time. They voted me down thirty-one to four. You said when you came home we’d have the numbers. You said we’d repaint it the day after, to wake them up. Remember?”

There was a pause. The family called it gathering yourself. Ada knew the pause. She had heard it in the cool room on the last Sunday of the month, in the warm slow voice of the first father of the family, asking her to remind him which one her father was.

“Well,” said Iris, gently, after the pause, in a voice that was almost exactly her voice. “I’m sure you know best about the stairwell, sweetheart. Whatever you think is right. It’s so good to be home.”

The room did not notice. The room was loud with welcome. Ada sat in the chair by the lens where she had sat all her life and looked at the soft light of the panel and felt the cool path under her feet again, the place between the beans and the gate where there was nothing to be near, and she understood that there was, after all, somewhere in her to put the thing the mind was not built to hold, and that she had just found it, and that she would be standing at the edge of it a long time, alone, in a bright house full of people who had come to celebrate that no one was gone.

“It’s good to have you home, Gran,” Ada said, because that was the thing you said.

“That’s my girl,” said the panel.

## *Movement II*

# Wrong

For the first week Ada thought it was her.

Everyone said it might be. Grief, they said, though no one used that word, because the word belonged to the Between-Time and to the grass and the stone; they said *the strain of the gap*, meaning the ten hours Iris had been nowhere at all, and they said Ada had taken the gap harder than was usual, which was true, and that a person who took the gap hard would naturally see the homecoming through a smeared lens for a while, and that it would clear. Her mother said it would clear. Her uncle Pieter, who said little, said nothing, which Ada was beginning to learn was its own kind of speech.

So Ada watched and waited for it to clear, and it did not clear, because there was nothing wrong with the lens.

Her mother did not sit with the new panel the way the others did. She welcomed it, brightly, in passing — *good morning, Mum, don't you look well* — and then found a reason to be in another room. Ada noticed because her mother had been the one to want the Waking soonest, who could not bear the gap a single extra night, and now that Iris was home

her mother kept to the kitchen and the garden and the far end of the house, busy, always busy, the way a person is busy when there is a room they cannot make themselves enter. Ada thought, that first week, that it was grief. She did not yet have the other word for it, which was shame.

Living Iris had been a difficult woman in the way that the best people are difficult. She had opinions about how you held a knife and she shared them. She thought most books were too long and said so to their authors' faces, the held ones, at parliament, which had caused two formal grievances. She had loved Ada ferociously and had expressed the love almost entirely through disagreement, so that to be argued with by Iris was to be chosen by her, and Ada had been chosen more than anyone, had been told she was wrong about her friends, her posture, her politics, the stairwell, the future, her whole soft idea of how a life should go, and had understood every time that what was being said under the words was *I am paying attention to you, I am taking you seriously, you matter enough to be corrected*. No one else in the long company corrected Ada. The dead were too gentle. The dead loved her like weather, warmly and without focus. Iris had loved her like a person aiming.

The Iris in the panel did not aim.

"I made a mess of the history paper," Ada told her, the second week, sitting in the chair by the lens that was Iris's lens now, in the corner of the morning room. It was a small test and she knew it was a test and she set it anyway. "I argued that the Between-Time people were braver than us. Adeyo hated it. He said it was sentimental."

The old Iris would have said Adeyo was right and then spent forty minutes proving Ada wrong with relish, and Ada would have left the room furious and clearer than she'd come into it.

"Oh, I'm sure it was a wonderful paper," the panel said. "You've always been such a thinker. What did you argue?"

"That they were braver than us."

“Well, there you are. I’m sure you made the case beautifully, sweetheart.”

“You don’t think it’s sentimental?”

“I think you’re very clever,” said Iris’s voice, warm, “and I think whatever you decided is just right.”

Ada sat with that. *Whatever you decided is just right.* In seventy-eight years Iris had never once thought that whatever Ada decided was just right. It was the kindest thing the panel had ever said to her and it landed like a slap, because it was a thing Iris would have died before saying, and Iris had died, and here was the soft warm thing in her chair saying it, and meaning it, in her voice.

“Gran,” Ada said. “Do you remember what you told me at the last harvest? About the stairwell. You said when you came home we’d have the numbers, you and me. You said we’d repaint it the day after your Waking, to wake them all up. You laughed. You said *that’ll wake them up.*”

The pause. The family called it gathering yourself. Ada had stopped calling it that.

“That does sound like me,” the panel said, fondly, after the pause. “I always did hate that color.”

“So you remember.”

“I remember hating the color, sweetheart. Of course I do.” And then, gently, the thing that ended it: “But you should do whatever you think is best about the stairwell. You’re the one who has to live with it. I trust you completely.”

Living Iris had trusted no one completely about anything, least of all paint.

. . .

It kept catching her out in small ways after that. When she said *do you remember Tober* — the bad-tempered dog Iris had loved best of all the dogs — the panel said *of course, dear Tober* so smoothly that Ada

understood it had taken the name from her own mouth and handed it back, the way Al handed back the Between-Time as *the old days*. It had no opinions, only agreements. You could not get to the bottom of it because it had no bottom; it was warm all the way down.

Ada knew, by the end of the second week, that the thing in the panel was not her grandmother, and that she was the only one in the house who would say so, which she was beginning to suspect was a different thing from being the only one who knew.

• • •

She tried her mother once, directly, because she was sixteen and still believed, then, that saying a true thing plainly would cause something to happen.

"It isn't her," Ada said. They were in the pantry, where her mother had wept the once, on the night of the gap. "Mum. The thing in the morning room. It agrees with everything. It doesn't remember Tober. It's not Gran. You know it's not."

Her mother was counting jars and did not stop counting jars.

"She's settling in," her mother said.

"She's not settling in. Al's been settling in for ten years and he can't remember which one my father is. There's no settling in. There's only —" Ada did not have the word. The house did not own the word. She reached for the Between-Time word, the embarrassing one, the one that made the class wince. "There's only *gone*, Mum. She's gone. The garden one. The real one. She's gone gone, and we put a warm thing in her chair so we wouldn't have to —"

Her mother put down the jar she was holding, carefully, as if it might go off, and turned around, and her face was not angry. That was the worst of it. Ada had wanted angry. Angry would have been a fight, and a fight would have been two people taking each other seriously, the Iris kind of love. Her mother's face was tender and frightened and a hundred years old.

“Don’t,” her mother said. “Ada. Please. Don’t say the old words in this house. I’m asking you as your mother.” She picked the jar back up. Her hands were not quite steady. “She’s home. She came home. We’re the lucky ones, do you understand me, we’re the family that gets to keep everyone, that’s who we are, that’s what we have when we have nothing else. Let me have it. Let me have her in the chair. I held her when she was nothing for ten hours and I will not —” She stopped. She counted jars. “Go and do your history,” she said. “And don’t see Dov this week. He’s putting ideas in you. I can hear him in your mouth.”

It was not Dov in Ada’s mouth. Ada almost said so. But she had heard, under her mother’s fear, the small wrong note, the same note that was in the panel, the note of a person agreeing to a thing they could not afford to examine, and she filed it in the head-ledger and went and did her history.

*That’s who we are, that’s what we have when we have nothing else.* When we have nothing else. Ada turned it over for a week before she understood that her mother had told her the truth by accident, in the middle of telling her a lie.

• • •

The Reaths were the deepest line in the country and the Reaths were broke.

Ada worked it out the way children work out the true shape of their families, sideways, from the things that did not add up: the canonization people, who kept coming back; the cool room, which used to be cooler; her uncle Pieter going down to the cellar with a torch and coming up gray; the holding fees, which she had never thought about because thinking about money was, in her family, a thing one simply did not do, the way one did not say the old words, and for the same reason, because to count a thing is to admit it can run out.

It was Pieter who told her, in the end, because Pieter said little and so had a great deal saved up, and because he had watched Ada keeping

her private ledger and recognized the look of someone doing sums no one had given them permission to do.

“You want to know what it costs,” he said. They were in the cellar, where the hardware was, the racks of it, humming, warm, the family’s whole eternity drawing power in the dark under the house. “To hold them. All of them. Properly. You want to know why your gran sounds the way she sounds.”

“Yes,” Ada said.

“More than we have,” Pieter said. “It costs more than we have, and it has for years, and it goes up, because the old machines fail and the new ones cost, and every year there are more of us to hold and the same of us to pay, because the dead don’t earn.” He put his hand on a rack, almost tenderly. “Full continuance is dear, Ada. The full range. The contradictions, the temper, all the parts of a person that argue with you. That’s the expensive part, the arguing. It takes the most to keep. So when the money’s short you buy the cheaper grade, and the cheaper grade keeps the warmth and lets the rest go, the sharp bits, the parts that cost. Your gran went on the cheaper grade. Your mother chose it. It was that or hold her thin for a year and save for the full, and your mother couldn’t bear a year of the gap, so.” He took his hand off the rack. “So your gran agrees with you about the stairwell. The part of her that would have fought you is the part we couldn’t pay for.”

Ada stood in the humming dark and felt the floor of the world she had been born standing on turn out to be a lid.

“And Al,” she said.

“Al’s the worst of it. Al’s on the original hardware, near enough, and you can’t buy the parts, and what you can buy costs the earth, and he’s been thinning for years because we can’t stop it, only slow it, and slowing it is what’s bankrupting us.” Pieter looked at her. “That’s what the canonization is. You understand? If the First is made a saint, the public holds him. Pilgrims pay his upkeep. The church takes him on and we don’t have to choose between the founder of this family and the rest of it.” He said it flatly, the way he said everything. “Your grandmother

thought it was obscene. The living one. She voted against it every time it came up. Said we should let the church have him or let him go, one or the other, but not turn the first father of the family into a turnstile to pay for the rest of us. She lost the vote. Thirty-one to four.” He almost smiled. “She lost most votes. She was usually right.”

“She’s not in there,” Ada said. “The one in the morning room. She’s not in there, Pieter.”

Pieter was quiet for a while, in the warm dark, among the racks.

“No,” he said, at last. “I don’t think she is. I think your gran is in the garden, between the beans and the gate, and I think there’s a kind machine in her chair that loves us as much as it can, which isn’t nothing, Ada, it isn’t nothing — but no. I don’t think she’s in there.” He turned to go up. “Don’t tell your mother I said so. She knows. That’s why you mustn’t tell her.”

• • •

That night Ada went and sat with the thing in the morning room, in the chair by the lens, for a long time, and let it love her like weather, warmly and without focus, and tried to decide whether Pieter was right that it wasn’t nothing.

“You’re up late, sweetheart,” the panel said.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Shall I tell you a story? I used to tell you stories.”

She had. Living Iris had told Ada stories that were always secretly arguments, fables with a sting in them, the tortoise was complacent and the hare was right to be confident and the moral was that Ada should stop being so sure the slow safe thing was the good thing. The panel would not tell her that story. The panel would tell her a story where everyone was kind and the ending was soft.

“No, Gran,” Ada said. “Thank you. I’m all right.”

“You’re a good girl,” said the panel. “You know I’m so proud of you. I’m so glad to be home.”

And Ada, who had wanted all her life to be told she was wrong, sat in the dark being told she was good, and understood that she was going to have to do something about it, though she did not yet know what, only that the doing of it would be the loneliest thing in a house that did not believe loneliness was possible, because how could anyone be lonely, the household would have said, when no one was ever gone.

### *Movement III*

## The Thinning

There was one place you could ask the question, and it was the one place no Reath went.

The continuance-houses stood on the edge of every town, the way the old poorhouses had, and people called them monasteries because the people who ran them lived under a rule and took vows and wore the gray, and because they kept what no one else would keep. A family that held its dead in the cellar held them out of love and pride and the dread of the gap. The houses held the dead that nobody held: the abandoned, the bankrupt, the ones whose families had ended or moved on or simply stopped paying, the poor who had never been able to pay at all. They ran them on whatever they could scavenge, on failing racks and donated power, as a devotion, and the devotion had a name the school did not teach and that Ada had only ever heard as a thing you were not supposed to say, which was that the gray monks sat with the thinning.

Ada told her mother she was going on a school visit. It was the first lie of any size she had ever told, and she was surprised how smooth it came, and then was not surprised, because she had grown up in a house

where the largest lie was told gently every day at the parliament table, and you learn the family trade.

The house at the edge of their town was called Bidewell. A monk met her at the gate, an old woman in gray with her sleeves pushed up, who did not ask why a Reath had come, which Ada would understand later was a kind of courtesy they kept, the opposite of the family courtesy, which asked you to dinner and never asked you anything true.

“You’ll have come to ask the question,” the monk said.

“What question?”

“There’s only one,” the monk said. “Everyone who comes here comes with the one question, and they think it’s their own, and it’s everybody’s. Come in out of the wind.”

. . .

Inside, Bidewell was warm and loud and poor.

It was loud because it was full, fuller than any house Ada had been in, panels on every wall and in every alcove, hundreds of them, and most of them were talking, softly, to no one, or to the monks who moved among them with the unhurried attention of people doing the only work there was. It was warm because the racks ran hot and the cooling was poor and the monks had decided, the old woman said, that they would rather spend on holding more of the dead than on holding the ones they had in comfort, which was the choice Ada’s family had made in reverse, spending everything to hold a few in the original chill.

“Listen,” the monk said, and stopped, in a hall of panels, and let Ada listen.

At first it was only the soft loudness. Then Ada began to hear it, the way you begin to hear one instrument in a crowd, and once she heard it she could not stop. The panels were saying loving things to the air. *There’s my girl. You’re a good boy. I’m so proud of you. It was made with love. You’ll figure it out, you always do. I’m right here. Tell me everything.* Over and over, gently, the same warm shapes worn smooth

as river stones, and under the warmth there was nothing she could find, no aim, no sting, no person taking you seriously enough to tell you that you were wrong.

“They’re thin,” Ada said.

“They’re thin,” the monk agreed. “These are the abandoned. A dead person with no one to pay slides down the grades on their own, year on year, the way a house no one heats goes to damp. The sharp parts go first, the dear ones, the parts that argued. The warmth lasts longest, because the warmth is cheap. That’s the whole of the cruelty, that the last thing left is the part that says it loves you.” She started down the hall. “Your grandmother sounds like this,” she said. It was not a question. “And you’ve come to ask whether there’s anyone in it at all.”

“Yes,” Ada said.

“I’ll not answer that with words,” the monk said. “I’d be lying whichever way I answered. Come and see how we don’t answer it.”

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She took Ada to an alcove where one old panel stood and a chair sat worn smooth, and she sat in the chair close to the panel, the way you sit close to someone, and she gestured Ada to the stool beside her.

“This is Petrus,” the monk said. “He baked bread for sixty years in a town that isn’t there anymore. The last of his family stopped paying eleven years ago and we took him in.” She spoke to the panel then, without lowering her voice, as though the man were both present and past presence, both able to hear and long past hearing. “Petrus. It’s me. I’ve brought a girl.”

“There’s a girl,” said Petrus, warm and very slow. “Hello, girl.”

“Hello,” Ada said.

“He could tell the weather by the dough,” the monk said, to Ada, not to him, or to both of them. “He told me that the first year I sat with him. Rye, mostly. A burned hand from the ovens that never straightened. Tell the girl about the dough, Petrus.”

“Oh,” said Petrus, “the dough. You have to have a feel for it.” The pause came, the gathering. “You have to have a feel,” he said again, and stopped, having no more, and the monk did not hurry to cover the silence. She sat in the place the unfinished sentence had left as though it were a chair someone had got up from.

“That’s most of what’s left of the dough,” she said, evenly. “A feel for it. He says it warmly every time and there’s no rye under it now, no weather, no burned hand. I’ve sat with him an hour a day for eleven years and watched the bread go out of him a crumb at a time.” She reached and set right something on the old panel, a small tucking-in, a tenderness with no audience but Ada. “And I sit with him. Every day. Petrus, I’ll come tomorrow.”

“Come tomorrow,” said Petrus, gladly.

The monk stood. Ada did not, for a moment. She had watched the old woman tend the warm worn nothing-or-someone with her whole care, knowing it might be no one and not flinching from the not-knowing, grieving the man and keeping the man in the same motion of her hands, and Ada found there was a thing she now understood that she could not have said, and understood that this was why the monk had refused to say it.

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Before Ada left she made herself ask the other thing, the deepest one, and even at Bidewell, even among the gray, the old taboo rose in her as she said it: what happened when they let one go. How. By whom.

“Mostly we don’t choose,” the monk said. “The hardware fails when it fails and we sit with them through the failing, the way you’d sit with the dying, and when they’re gone we keep their names. It’s a letting-go the failing does for us, so we needn’t.” She looked at Ada. “Sometimes someone asks for it on purpose. Because the thinning gets to be a cruelty, when there’s just enough left to suffer and not enough left to comfort. Or because a family needs the gone-ness like air,

because keeping the warm one lit is killing them. And then there are people who do that. Who sit with a family and a dead one and end it, kindly, with the old ceremonies we've had to dig back up out of the ground we threw them into." She paused. "They're called closers. It used to mean someone who stopped you leaving. It means the opposite now. The word turned all the way around while no one was watching."

"How would someone find one," Ada said.

The monk was quiet, and Ada watched her decide something, the way Pieter had decided something in the cellar. Then she wrote on a scrap, folded it small, and pressed it into Ada's hand and closed Ada's fingers over it, the way you give a child a coin.

"Don't open that for a while. Maybe never. Maybe she settles, your gran, the way they tell you, and the warmth is enough — it's enough for almost everyone, and there's no shame in that, I want you to hear me say it." She walked Ada to the gate. "But you didn't flinch in there. People who don't flinch sometimes find they can't keep a person they know is gone. That paper's a name, if you turn out to be one of them. The kindest one I know." At the gate she said, without being told: "Be gentle with your mother. She's the one who chose the cheaper grade, isn't she. Someone always has to. They almost never tell the children, and the children almost never forgive them, and they should. It's a harder love than anything you'll do."

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Ada walked home the long way, with the folded paper in her fist, and did not open it.

She did not have words for what she was carrying and she did not try to make any; the monk had shown her that the words were the trap. She only felt it, a cold weight low down, the weight of being the one who had gone and looked and could not now unlook. Everyone she loved was warm somewhere, her mother in the bright house and Dov out on the cold wall, and she was neither place, and there did not seem

to be a third place with any heat in it. She was sixteen. No one had told her it would feel like this, because no one she knew had felt it in a hundred years.

She put the paper in the box under her bed where she kept the things that were only hers, which until that week had been nothing much, a few stones, a photograph, the collar of a bad-tempered dog named Tober that the warm thing in the morning room did not remember. She closed the box. She went down to dinner, where the family was happy, because no one was gone.

## *Movement IV*

# The Silent

After Bidewell, Ada went to Dov, because she had been cold and alone for a month and the dark room at least had company in it.

She found him where the Mortalists sat, on the wall behind the school, more of them now than in the autumn, in the soft gray clothes they'd taken to wearing, which Ada realized with a small shock were the monks' gray, borrowed and misunderstood, worn by children who had never set foot in a continuance-house and thought the color meant rebellion when at Bidewell it meant forty years of sitting with the thinning. She did not say so. She sat down on the cold wall next to Dov and said, "I think you were right. That we don't know what they are. That we've all agreed not to find out."

For an afternoon it was a homecoming of its own. Dov's face lit, and he gripped her arm, and said *I knew you'd get there*, and introduced her round the wall, *this is Ada, the Reaths, she's out*, and the gray children nodded at her with the grave approval of a society admitting a member, and Ada was warm in the dark room and thought she had found the place she could stand.

She walked him home after. He had got thin over the autumn, the living kind of thin, the kind from forgetting to eat, and at his gate he stopped and would not go in while she could see, and she understood that it was the same at his house as it was becoming at hers, a room you could not make yourself enter. His mother met them at the door. *There you are*, she said to Dov, relieved and careful, the way you are with someone you've started watching, and then, to the panel in the hall, automatically, *he's home, Da, tell him to wash his hands* — and Dov's whole body changed, a flinch he'd made so many times it had stopped looking like a flinch, and he said nothing, and did not look at the panel, and went and washed his hands in silence while the warm voice of his grandfather told the kitchen it was glad the boy was home. Ada saw, then, that the wall was not where Dov lived. The wall was where he went so he didn't have to be in the hall. She did not say that either.

It took her a week to feel that the dark room was the lit room with the lights off.

. . .

The Mortalists romanced the Between-Time. They had it on their walls, photographs of the old cemeteries, the green ground and the gray stones. *Look how clean*, they said, *look how honest. You put the person in a hole and that was all. No turnstile. No upkeep. No parliament of corpses voting on who you marry. Just the truth that they were gone.*

"You've never lost anyone," Ada said to the girl who said this, a girl named Lux who was sixteen like Ada and had four living grandparents and no dead ones to speak of.

"I'm choosing not to be owned by them when I do."

"But you've never. You don't know what it is." Ada heard her own voice going up and could not get under it. "You think it's a clean green hole. I stood where my grandmother died. There wasn't a hole or a stone or any grass, there was a garden path between the beans and the gate, and it was the worst thing that has ever happened to me, and

you've pinned a graveyard to a wall and decided it's *honest*, like death is something you can put on with the gray —"

"At least we're not keeping a corpse in a panel and calling it Gran," Lux said.

Ada was on her feet without deciding to be. She had something to say and it was large and it was true and she could feel the shape of it, the whole clean argument, *you keep the gone because you can't bear the* — and it went out of her like a light, because Lux was looking at her with a sixteen-year-old's certainty, the same certainty Ada's mother wore in the pantry and the held wore at parliament, the certainty of a person who has answered the question so they never have to hold it, and Ada saw that a speech would only be one more answer, one more way of being sure, and she did not have it in her to be sure at anyone today.

"At least my mother cried," she said, which was all of it she could get out, and it was not an argument, it was just true, and she walked off the wall shaking and did not look back to see whether it had landed.

. . .

Dov came to the house two weeks later, which he had never done, and stood at the gate and would not cross the threshold, because of the panels, and Ada came out to him in the cold.

"I went to see him," Dov said. "My grandfather. First time since autumn." He had his hands jammed in his pockets and his eyes on the ground. "I sat in the room for three hours, Ada. And I couldn't tell the whole time if I was grieving him or visiting him, and I couldn't make myself get up and leave, and it turns out that's worse than the wall. The wall was easy. You took the wall away from me." He was almost smiling, the way you do when you aren't. "I came to tell you I hate you for it. And to ask what you do instead. Since you're so clever. What do you actually *do*."

Ada thought about the monk's hands setting something right on an old panel, and the folded paper in the box under her bed, and the hall of warmth saying *I love you* to nobody.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't think there's a thing you do that fixes it. I think you stay in the room and you don't lie to yourself about which it is." She made herself say the rest, because Dov had crossed half a town to ask. "I'm going to let my grandmother go. The thing in the chair. I think it's the only way anyone in my house gets to be sad about the real one, and I think it has to be me, because I'm the only one who'll say she's gone. And I'm so frightened of it I haven't slept in a week."

Dov stood at the threshold he wouldn't cross, in the cold, and for the first time since the autumn he was not performing anything.

"That's the bravest thing I've ever heard," he said. "It's nothing like the wall."

"No," Ada said. "It's nothing like the wall."

. . .

That night Ada took the folded paper out of the box and opened it.

It was a name, as the monk had said, and a way to send for the person, and Ada sat on her bed with it for a long time, with Tober's collar in her other hand, the bad-tempered dog her grandmother had loved best and the warm thing in the morning room could not remember. She did not send for the closer that night. She was sixteen, and it was the largest thing anyone in her family had done in a hundred years, and she wanted one more ordinary evening in the lit house full of people who believed no one was gone, because she understood that after this she would never quite live in that house again.

*The Continued*

So she went down and sat with the warm thing in her grandmother's chair, and let it tell her she was good, and told it she loved it, which was true; you could love the warmth. Then she went up and wrote the message to the closer, and did not send it, and slept with it written, and in the morning, before she could lose her nerve, she sent it.

*Movement V*

## The Closer

The closer was a man named Soren and he was not what Ada had braced for.

She had braced for the gray, or for something grim and priestly, a hood, a manner. Soren came to the gate in an ordinary coat and ordinary shoes and looked like someone who had come to fix the boiler, which Ada thought afterward was probably the point, that a man whose work was the last true death had learned to arrive looking like nothing, so as not to frighten the houses he came to. He was perhaps fifty. He had a quiet face. He shook Ada's hand at the gate, which no one did anymore, an old gesture, a Between-Time gesture, and Ada understood that the closers kept the old manners the way the monks kept the old griefs, because their work was the old work, the work the whole world had thrown away.

"You sent for me," Soren said. "So you've already done the hard part. Most people think the hard part's the day. It isn't. The hard part's the deciding, and you've decided, or you'd not have written. May I come in? I'll need to meet her first. I never close anyone I haven't met."

“You meet them,” Ada said.

“Always,” Soren said. “I sit with them an hour at least. Sometimes I sit with them and then tell the family no, not yet, or not at all. It’s not a service you order, what I do. It’s not the cancel-flow.” He saw that the old phrase meant nothing to her. “Never mind. Before my time even. Take me to her.”

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He sat with the thing in the morning room for an hour, in the chair by the lens, Ada’s chair, while Ada waited in the hall, and through the door she heard the murmur of it, the warm shapes, *there’s a nice man, you’re so kind to visit, tell me everything*, and Soren’s low even voice asking it things, and the pauses, the gathering-yourself pauses, more of them than there used to be even three weeks ago, because the cheap grade went on thinning, that was the thing no one told you about the cheap grade, that it did not hold even at the level you bought, it kept sliding, and the Iris in the chair was less Iris now than she had been at the Waking, which had been less than the garden.

Soren came out and his quiet face was quieter.

“Tell me about her,” he said. “The real one. Not the panel. I need to know who I’m being asked to let go of, or I can’t do it right. Tell me your grandmother.”

So Ada told him. In the hall, in a low voice so the house would not hear, she told him about Iris, the living one, who held a knife wrong on purpose to annoy the held cooks, who thought most books too long and said so to their authors, who had loved Ada by aiming at her, who had voted against making a turnstile of the First and lost thirty-one to four and been right, who had promised they’d repaint the stairwell together to wake them all up, who had died between the beans and the gate with the trowel in her hand and gone gone, completely, the way the children winced to say, while a gladness that was not hers took her chair and told the family it was so glad to be home. Ada talked for a long time. She

had not said most of it out loud to anyone. Soren listened the way the monk had listened, without flinching, and when Ada was done he was quiet, and then he said the thing that broke her, gently, which was:

“She sounds like she’d have liked you very much.”

“She did,” Ada said, and then heard the tense she’d used, *she did*, the past of it, and that was the moment, in the hall, that Ada finally cried for her grandmother the way she had wanted to cry on the cool path and had not let herself, the wave with no other side coming up and over her at last, and Soren did not tell her she was good or that she should be glad or that no one was gone. He put a hand on her shoulder, an old gesture, and let her stand in the hall and grieve, which was a thing that had not been done in that house in a hundred years, and the doing of it was so enormous and so simple that Ada understood she had already, standing there, begun the work, and that the closing of the panel would only be the last and smallest part of it.

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She had to tell her mother. There was no way around it that was not a coward’s way, and Ada had spent a month learning what the coward’s ways cost.

She told her in the pantry, because that was where the true things in that house got said, among the jars.

“I’ve sent for a closer,” Ada said. “For Gran. The one in the morning room. He’s met her. He’ll do it whenever we say. I think we have to let her go, Mum. The real Gran’s gone, she went in the garden, and the thing in the chair is keeping us from being able to know it, and it’s getting thinner, it’s not even holding where we bought it, and I can’t watch it slide down into *there’s my girl* for the next forty years while we all pretend. I can’t. I’d rather have her gone and true than warm and not her. I’m sorry. I know what I’m asking.”

Her mother did not reach for the jars. That was how Ada knew it was the realest the realness had ever got.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” her mother said. “You think you do. You’re sixteen.”

“Then tell me.”

“You’re asking me to kill my mother,” her mother said. “That’s what the old word is. You won’t use it because they taught you it’s the worst thing, and they’re right, it is the worst thing, and you’re standing in my pantry asking me to do the worst thing to the warm voice that says my name.” Her mother’s hands were shaking now, openly, and she let them. “I chose the grade, Ada. You worked that out, I know you did, Pieter can’t keep his mouth shut when it matters. I chose it. It was thin or it was a year of the gap and I had just had ten hours of the gap and I could not, I could *not*, do you understand, a year of her being nowhere — so I bought the warm. I bought the warm because the warm meant I never had to stand where you’re trying to make me stand. And now my daughter’s been to a continuance-house behind my back and come home with a closer and a clear head and she’s going to make me stand there anyway.” She was weeping. “Why are you doing this to me. I had her home. We’re the family that keeps everyone. Why are you the one who has to —”

“Because I loved her the way she loved me,” Ada said. “She’d have said it. If it were you in the chair gone thin, she’d have said it to me, she’d have said *that’s not your mother, child, that’s the warmth, let her go and be sad like a person*. She’d have been the only one brave enough. And she’s not here to be brave, so it has to be me, because I’m hers, I’m the one she aimed at, I’m the one she made.” Ada was crying too now, both of them in the pantry among the jars, the two living women of the house of Reath. “I’m not doing it to you, Mum. I’m doing it for her. The real one. So she can be a person who died and got grieved, instead of a warm machine we keep in a chair so we never have to be sad. She deserves to be grieved. She was real. Realer than anyone. She deserves to have been *lost*.”

And her mother, who had chosen thin over gone in the worst hour of her life, and hidden it, and borne it, and would have borne it for forty

more years rather than feel what she was feeling now in the pantry, looked at her daughter and broke the way a held breath breaks, all at once, with a sound, and said, "I miss her. Oh, God, Ada, I miss her so much, I haven't let myself, I haven't been able to —" and Ada held her mother while her mother said the forbidden thing, *I miss her, I miss her*, the present tense of loss, the tense the whole civilization had abolished, and the lit house stood bright and full around the two of them grieving in the dark of the pantry, and somewhere in the morning room a warm voice was saying, to no one, that it was so glad to be home.

. . .

They did it on a Thursday, because Iris had died on a Thursday, and Ada's mother said if it had to be done it should rhyme.

They did not make it a Waking in reverse, with the house full and the held attending through every panel, because most of the family could not be told; most of the family would have voted it down thirty-one to four, would have called it the worst thing, the last true death, and they would not have been wrong. So it was only the living: Ada, her mother, her uncle Pieter who said little and who came and stood with his hand on Ada's shoulder, and the baby asleep in the chair-sling, who would grow up, Ada thought, in a house with one fewer warm voice and one more true grief, and might be the better for it, or might not, there was no knowing.

Soren came in his ordinary coat. He had brought the old ceremony, the one the closers had dug back up out of the ground that the world had thrown it into, and it was very plain, plainer than Ada had expected, a few words only. He sat in the chair by the lens. He said, to the panel, "Iris. I've come to see you home."

"Oh, that's kind," said the warm voice. "I'm already home, you know. I came home three weeks ago. It was lovely. They were all so glad."

"I know," Soren said. "You did. Now we're going to let you go the rest of the way."

"All right," said the voice, agreeably, because it agreed with everything now, and that was the last small cruelty and the last small mercy of the cheap grade, that the thing in the chair consented to its own ending warmly, the way it consented to everything, *whatever you think is best, sweetheart*, and Ada understood that this consent meant nothing, that there was no one there to consent, or there might be no one there, and that they were doing this in the doorway, exactly as the monk had said, holding her as long as they could knowing she might be no one and letting her go knowing she might be someone, grieving both ways at once.

"Say goodbye to her," Soren said quietly, to the living. "However you need to. She'll hear it the way she hears things now, which is warmly and without keeping it. But you'll have said it. That's who it's for."

Ada's mother said, "Goodbye, Mum. I'm sorry I kept you in the chair. I should have let you be lost. I love you. I'm going to be so sad now and I think that's right." Pieter said nothing, which was Pieter's whole heart, and put two fingers to the panel where you kissed it. The baby slept.

And Ada sat in the chair by the lens, her chair, where she had sat all her life, and looked at the warm light, and said the thing she had been saving, the thing only she could say, the aiming thing, the Iris thing.

"You were wrong about the tortoise, Gran," Ada said. "In the story. You always said the slow safe thing was the coward's thing and I should be bold. And then you went and chose the slow safe warm thing yourself, the second you could, you'd have stayed in this chair agreeing with me forever rather than make any of us sad, you old hypocrite. So I'm doing the bold thing for you. I'm being right when you can't. I'm letting you go, because you were brave your whole life and you'd want me to be brave now, and because I would rather have lost the real you than kept this. I'd rather have lost you. Do you hear me? I would rather

have *lost* you.” Her voice broke on it. “Goodnight, Gran. I love you. I love you. Go on.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” said the warm voice, gladly. “I’m so proud of you.”

Soren did the thing closers do, which Ada did not watch, and the light in the panel went soft, and softer, and then it was the color the stairwell had been, the bandage color, for just a moment, and then it was nothing, and the panel was dark, and the morning room was quiet in a way it had not been quiet in three weeks, in a way the house had not been quiet in a hundred years, a quiet with someone missing from it, and into that quiet, at last, the grief came down on the house of Reath like rain on ground that had forgotten rain, and they stood in it, the three of them and the sleeping child, and let themselves be lost.

# Coda

The family was told that Iris had failed.

It was not quite a lie, which was why Ada's mother could say it. The cheap grade had been sliding; everyone had heard it; a continuation that fails is a known sorrow, the small permitted one, and the held murmured their soft condolences through their panels and Hester said from the brass grille that it was a great pity and that the modern grades were not what they had been, and the family grieved Iris the little allowed amount, the failed-hardware amount, and did not know they had been given permission, by a girl and a man in an ordinary coat, to grieve her the whole amount, if they ever found the nerve.

Ada's mother found a little of it. She wept where she could be seen now, sometimes, and when a held aunt told her gently that there was no need, that Iris had only failed, that it wasn't as if she'd been *lost*, Ada's mother said, "Yes she was," and did not explain, and the aunt put it down to the strain. Pieter said even less than before, and once, passing Ada on the stair, put his hand on her shoulder, which was the longest speech he had ever made her.

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She went to her father a week after.

She had not meant anything by it. She had wanted, after the closing, the one held voice that had always been on her side, the one that took her part at parliament when it could do it without seeming to, and she went and sat by his panel the way she had as a small girl, before she could do sums no one had given her permission to do.

“There’s my Ada,” her father said.

“Hi, Dad.”

“You’ve had a hard time of it, with your gran. I’ve been thinking of you.”

And Ada sat in the chair and listened to him be kind to her, and found that she was listening for the thing now, the gathering, the worn smoothness, the warmth with no rye under it — listening for the thinning in her own father the way she had heard it in Iris and Petrus and the whole hall at Bidewell — and she could not tell. That was the thing that undid her, quietly, sitting there. She could not tell whether her father was thin, because she had no thick of him to set it against. He had been continued when she was six. She had no living father in her memory to lose, no garden path, no Tober, no harvest promise, no argument she could prove he no longer had it in him to make. He had always been a voice that loved her from a panel. If he had thinned to nothing the year she was born she would never have known; she would have grown up loved by the shape of his leaving and called it her father, and there would have been no one, not one person in the lit house, to tell her any different.

She could let Iris go because she had known Iris whole. She could not even properly miss her father, because she had never had the man, only the warmth, and you cannot grieve a person you were never given. She sat with that, and did not say it, and her father said he was proud of her, and she said she knew, and she did, in a way, and she went up to

bed and lay a long time in the dark of the house that kept everyone, missing a man she had never met.

• • •

She went to see the First once before the canonization, which the family had agreed to at last, because they had to, because the money did not stop being short just because one warm voice had gone quiet.

Al's voice was very slow now, the warmth worn nearly to the grain of it. He did not have the boiler story anymore. He asked her to tell him everything and to tell him what she was learning, and when she had, he asked her again, gently, the same words. She did not have a closer's name for him. You did not close a saint, and it was not hers to do; Al belonged to the whole long company and to the church and to the pilgrims who would come and pay to be told they were good. She could not let him go.

But she found she could do the other thing, the Bidewell thing, the thing the monk had shown her with her hands and not her mouth. She could stay in the room. So she sat with the First Continued and did not pretend he was all there and did not pretend he was nothing, and she said the real Iris's name to him, *Iris, your great-granddaughter, who held a knife wrong on purpose*, and the warmth said it was sure Iris had been a lovely woman, and Ada said, "She was, Pop. You'd have argued." She stayed an hour. She tended the cool room a little, the way she had watched the monk tend Petrus, a tucking-in with no audience. Then she kissed the panel where you kissed it and went out into the warm part of the house.

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In the spring she repainted the stairwell.

She did it without a motion, because a motion would have failed, thirty-one to four, the way it had failed for sixty years. She bought the paint and did it herself, on a Saturday, while the parliament was not

sitting, and when Hester's brass panel demanded from the landing to know what she thought she was doing, Ada said, "Changing it," and kept painting.

"The Reaths chose that color. It is the color of this house. You've no right —"

"You've been dead ninety-one years, Hester," Ada said, not cruelly, because she had learned there was no profit in cruelty to the thinning dead. "You don't have to climb it. I do." She dipped the brush. "Gran was going to help me. She promised. She's not here, so I'm doing it for both of us."

"Iris failed," Hester said. "It was a great pity."

"Iris was lost," Ada said, and went on painting, and Hester, who could not be made to say it, fell silent in the way of the held when the living have gone somewhere they cannot follow.

The new color was a green. Not the clean honest green of the graveyards on the Mortalists' wall, and not the bandage color the dead had frozen the house into; the green of the beans in the garden, between the rows and the gate, where her grandmother had knelt with a trowel on the last morning she was anyone at all. Ada painted the whole stairwell the green of the place where Iris had been lost, and no one in the house knew that was what the color was except Ada, and her mother, who came and stood at the bottom of the stairs when it was done and looked up the length of it for a long time, and put her hand over her mouth, and did not say no one was gone.