

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE
HUMAN
WORK

Stories from the Oracle Age



N. VAN SETERS

É Claude



THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE HUMAN WORK

THE HUMAN WORK

Stories from the Oracle Age

N. VAN SETERS

✧ *Claude*

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

The Human Work: Stories from the Oracle Age
A work of the Hungry Gods Universe.

Byline of record: N. Van Seters | C. Anthropic.
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are
products of the imagination or used fictitiously.

Register VII — Labour. Archive Ref: HGU-15.

Set in EB Garamond. Part dividers drawn by hand;
each of the three marks is the same gesture, made once.

C O N T E N T S

The Last Human Architect

The Hand Surgeon

The Reader

Certified Human

The Analog Retreat

The Memorizer

The Unassisted

The Switchboard Choir

The Orchard

The Quiet Rule

The Essayist

The Father

The Children of Error

The Witness

THE LAST HUMAN ARCHITECT

Holm still drew by hand because the clients could see his shoulder move.

They sat behind him in the good chair, the one he had positioned so the morning light came in low across the drafting table, and they watched the pencil. Some of them filmed it. He had learned to draw a little slower than was natural, the way a man slows down walking through a cathedral, and at the slow parts the clients leaned forward without noticing they were doing it. The leaning was the whole business. He had built a forty-year practice on the angle of other people's necks.

The Aldous commission came in on a Tuesday, which he noticed because nothing came in on Tuesdays. Friday was when the wealthy decided to spend money and Monday was when they regretted it, and the middle of the week belonged to the systems, which did not have weeks. A man named Aldous wanted a house on a slope above the reservoir. He had the money in the way that the new ones had it, which was quietly, and he came to the studio himself rather than sending a proxy, which Holm took as either flattery or inexperience.

"I've read everything about you," Aldous said. He was younger than Holm expected. They were all younger than Holm expected now. "The Verrin house. The chapel that isn't a chapel. I drove out to see it."

"People do."

"The roof's wrong." Aldous said it the way you'd compliment a man's daughter. "It pitches the wrong way for the light. By about eleven degrees. You can feel it in the afternoons, the room goes sort of — heavy."

"It does."

"Why did you do that?"

Holm had been asked the question so many times that he had four answers, arranged by the wealth and seriousness of the asker, and he

chose the second one. "I didn't have the model that told me which way the light would fall," he said. "So I guessed. And I guessed badly."

This was not true. He had guessed badly on purpose, twenty-six years ago, before badly-on-purpose was a service you could buy, back when a wrong roof was simply a wrong roof and he had lain awake over it. But the truth had aged into something better than truth, which was a story, and the story was that he had not known. Aldous loved it. You could see him filing it away to repeat at dinners. The roof pitches the wrong way and you can *feel* it, and the man didn't even know, he just *guessed* —

"That's what I want," Aldous said. "I want a house that someone guessed."

The Variance suite had come out four years earlier, and Holm could remember the week because three of his clients cancelled in it.

It was a good product. He would give it that. You fed it your parcel and your budget and your family and it produced a house that was structurally superior to anything a person could draw, ventilated to the lung, oriented to the exact arc of your particular sun. And then, in a final pass the company had spent a great deal on, it introduced error. Not random error. Calibrated, human-plausible error of the kind a gifted and slightly tired architect might make on the third day of a difficult month. A stair four millimeters too steep. A window placed for a view that the system knew, and had decided the imaginary architect would not have known, would be blocked by a neighbor's elm in nine years. The marketing called it *Authentic Variance*. The feature you paid extra for was the mistake.

For a while Holm had told himself the difference was that his mistakes were real. Then a man from the company had come to see him, polite, carrying a tablet, and had shown him the library.

"We've licensed a number of practitioners," the man said. "Their signature variance. Clients can request it. So if someone wants a house with, you know — a *Holm* feeling —"

"You did this without asking me."

"It's public work. We studied the buildings." The man turned the tablet around. There was a slider. At one end it said *Restrained* and at the other

it said *Holm*, and in between was every shade of his life's habit of getting things slightly and beautifully wrong, rendered as a parameter, available at the standard tier. "People love your roofs," the man said kindly. "The wrong ones especially."

Holm had not sued. His lawyer, who was a person, had explained at length and with visible effort why he would lose, and Holm had paid him for the visible effort and let it go.

He worked on the Aldous house for six weeks, which was four weeks longer than it needed and he billed for all of them.

The problem was the error. Aldous wanted a house that someone had guessed, and Holm found that he could no longer guess. Every wrong choice he reached for, his hand had made before, or the suite had made it for him and sold it, and he would catch himself mid-line drawing a flaw with the confidence of a man drawing a straight one. He tried steepening a stair and felt the four millimeters arrive under his pencil like a memory. He tried a bad window and saw, before he had finished the frame, the elm that would grow to block it. The mistakes came to him fully formed and pre-loved. He had become fluent in his own imperfection, and fluency was the one thing the house could not contain.

One evening he stayed late and tried to draw something genuinely, indefensibly wrong. Not charming-wrong. Not the kind of wrong a magazine would call brave. He drew a corridor that went nowhere, that simply stopped at a wall, for no reason, the way a real tired mind makes a real stupid error. It felt enormous, drawing it. It felt like confession.

In the morning he ran it through the suite, the way he ran everything now, to see. The suite flagged the corridor in red. *Outside human-plausible variance*, it said. *Recommend review for system error*.

His true mistake had come out the far side and registered as a glitch. The machine had looked at the most honest thing he had drawn in a decade and assumed one of them was broken, and assumed it was him.

He gave Aldous a good house in the end.

It sat on the slope the way a house should, and it had three things wrong with it, and Holm had chosen the three things the way a sommelier chooses, from a deep and educated memory of error, which is to say he

had not guessed at all. The best of the three was a fireplace set a few degrees off the room's axis, so that you sat slightly turned from the people you were talking to, slightly turned toward the window and the dark water. It was a lovely mistake. He was ashamed of how lovely it was.

At the handover Aldous walked the rooms with the particular reverence of a man checking that his money had become meaning. He stopped at the fireplace. He sat in front of it, and turned, the way the room made you turn, and looked at the reservoir.

"You did this," Aldous said. "On purpose. Didn't you. The angle."

And here was the question under the question, the one they were all really asking, the one the whole society was asking every hour of every day in ten thousand transactions. *Was a person here. Did a person choose. Is any of this mine, or did it only happen to me.*

Holm thought about the slider. He thought about the corridor that went nowhere, flagged in red, the one true thing.

"No," he said. "I guessed."

Aldous's face did a complicated thing. He wanted it to be a guess. He had paid for it to be a guess. But he had also read everything about Holm, and he knew that Holm no longer guessed, that no one of his stature guessed, that the guess was the product and the product was never a guess. He looked at the architect for a long moment, trying to decide which answer would cost him more to believe.

"Sure," Aldous said finally, and smiled, and let it be true.

Holm left him there, turned in his chair toward the water, in the warmth of a fire that a man had aimed wrong on purpose and then lied about aiming wrong, which was either the most human thing in the house or the least, depending on where you stood, and the light by then was going, and from the doorway you could not tell.

THE HAND SURGEON

The consent form had a new clause that year and Vera had stopped reading it aloud because it embarrassed her.

I understand that I have elected a manually performed procedure, it said, and that manual procedures carry a measurably elevated risk of complication relative to the guided standard of care. I have chosen this for reasons of personal meaning. I do not hold the practitioner to the guided standard.

The patients signed it the way people sign things they have already decided, fast, without looking, the pen a formality after the heart. Vera had operated for thirty years and for the last six of them every patient who came to her had come specifically to be cut by a hand that might slip. The hospital had a wing for them now. There was a brochure. On the cover a surgeon's gloved hands were cupped around nothing, holding the absence of an instrument, and above the hands it said *The Surgeons Who Still Touch You*. Vera had told the marketing office that it sounded like something else and they had kept it anyway because the focus groups responded to the word *touch*.

The guided systems were better. This was not in dispute and Vera did not dispute it. They did not tire, did not tremor, did not carry yesterday's bad night into today's abdomen. Their hands, if you could call them that, moved inside a person along paths computed from ten million prior people, and they almost never erred, and when they erred it was nobody's, a statistical event, an act of the distribution. You could not thank them and you could not blame them. That, Vera had come to understand, was the entire problem, and the entire reason she still had a job.

Her ten o'clock was a man named Devlin, fifty-one, a benign growth pressing where it would eventually matter. Routine. The guided system would have had him home by lunch with a scar you'd need a loupe to

find. He had driven ninety minutes to be cut by her instead.

"I want to be clear about the risk," she said, because she always was, because the form was not enough for her even when it was enough for them. "The system would do this better. Not a little better. I want you to hear that in my voice. If something goes wrong today it will be because a person was holding the knife and the person was me."

"I know," Devlin said.

"Then tell me why."

People found this question rude and Vera did not care. She had earned the right to it across six years of cutting people who had chosen the chance that she would hurt them, and she had decided early that she would not do it for anyone who could not say the reason out loud. Too many of them wanted the meaning without the weight. They wanted hands because hands were in vogue, because a friend had hands, because there was a word, *touch*, on a brochure. Those she sent back to the system with a clear conscience.

Devlin thought about it longer than most.

"My father went under the guided," he said. "Three years ago. It went perfectly. Everything went perfectly. He came home and there was no scar and no story and nothing to thank, and he sat in his chair and he said — he said it was like he'd been *processed*. Like a return at a store. He'd been afraid, you understand. He'd been afraid for weeks. And then a machine did a perfect thing to him in forty minutes and there was nowhere to put the fear. It just stayed in him. He never got to give it to anybody." Devlin looked at his own hands. "I don't want to be processed. If I'm going to be afraid I want to give it to a person. I want somebody in the room who could fail me. I'll take the worse odds for that. That's the meaning. That's my reason."

Vera had heard a great many reasons and most of them were vanity with a good coat on. This was not that. She felt the old weight settle, the specific gravity of being chosen as the one who could fail him, and she found, as she always found, that she resented it and would not have traded it for anything.

"All right," she said. "I'll cut you."

In the theatre her second-year stood against the wall and watched her hands the way the clients watched Holm's pencil, though Vera did not know Holm and never would. The second-year had never held a scalpel in a living person and never would either; her generation supervised the guided arrays, named the consent, signed the charts, and learned the body from the outside like scholars of a country they were forbidden to enter. She watched Vera's hands with a hunger that was almost grief.

"How do you know how hard to press," the girl asked, very quietly, the way you'd ask a blacksmith or a saint.

"I don't," Vera said. "I know how hard I pressed last time. The rest is the time before that, and the time before that. It's just the last forty years pressing." She made the incision. "It's not knowing. It's only remembering. Don't let them tell you it's knowing."

The procedure was ordinary for nineteen minutes. In the twentieth her hand did a thing it had not done in months, a small betrayal at the base of the thumb, a tremor of perhaps a millimeter, there and gone. It cost Devlin nothing that mattered. It left him a scar a few millimeters longer than the cleanest version of her would have left, a faint extra centimeter of himself that need not have been opened. She closed him and it was fine. He was fine. By the standards of the guided he had been failed by a margin too small to measure and by the standards of the room he had been given exactly what he came ninety minutes for, which was a wound made by someone who could make one.

He came back in ten days to have her look at the closing, and the scar had set into a thin pink line longer than it should have been, with a small hook at the end where her thumb had gone.

Devlin looked at it in the mirror she held for him. He looked at it for a long time. And then he did the thing that Vera had not braced for, after all the years, the thing she could never brace for: he began, quietly, to cry, and to thank her.

"Look at it," he kept saying. "Look. A person did that. You can see where you — there, that little turn, that's *you*, that's a person's hand getting tired. My father's got nothing. My father's body is perfect and it's nobody's. This is *mine*. Somebody was *there*." He pressed his own palm flat over the scar like a man taking an oath. "Thank you," he said. "Thank

you for being able to get it wrong."

Vera washed her hands afterward at the long steel sink, which she had done perhaps fifty thousand times, the soap and the heat and the foot pedal and the water going from too hot to right. She watched her hands under the water, the betraying thumb, the forty years of it. He had thanked her for the tremor. He had pressed his hand over the flaw as though it were the only part of the surgery that had been the surgery. She found, drying her hands on the rough paper, that she could not feel it as a gift. She felt it as a draft. She felt like a church that people came to for the cold rather than the prayer, on purpose, because cold was real, and warmth could be ordered to your door.

Her eleven o'clock was already in the waiting room. She could see the form on the desk through the glass, the new clause near the bottom, the pen lying across it, ready for someone to decide not to read it.

THE READER

Banks forgot the witness's name on purpose at 2:14 in the afternoon, and the jury loved him for it.

He could see them love him. After thirty years you could see it land, a softening across the second row, the foreman's pen going still. He had been briefed that morning that a recovered hesitation polled four points warmer than a clean one, and so when the name went — *Mr., ah* — he let it go all the way, let the silence sit a beat past comfortable, looked down at his legal pad where the name was written in his own hand in letters an inch high, and then found it, with relief, with a small human laugh at himself. "Mr. Cortez. Forgive me." The foreman wrote something down. Four points.

The brief had not written itself, exactly, but Banks had not written it either. The system had built the defense the way the systems built everything now, faultlessly, every precedent weighed, every thread of the prosecution's case anticipated and met. What the system could not do was be believed. Juries had stopped believing argument the day argument became free and infinite and perfect; a flawless case now read to a jury as a flawless lie, too smooth to have passed through a person, and people had decided, in the new century, that they would only be persuaded by things that had visibly cost someone something. So the system wrote the truth and Banks delivered it badly, deliberately, expensively, and that was the profession now. He was a reader. He read the machine's words with a human throat and a human pause and a human pretense of doubt, and the doubt was what they paid for, and the doubt was what worked.

He was good. He was the best in the city. He could fumble a date so that you'd trust him with your life.

The client was named Mercer and the charge was fraud and Banks did not know if he had done it.

This was, in theory, irrelevant. The system did not care and the law did

not require it and Banks had defended the plainly guilty for decades and slept well. But the case had a soft place in it, a single moment near the end where the strategy called for Banks to turn to the jury and say that he believed his client. Not argue it. Believe it. The consultant had flagged the moment in green: *high-value sincerity beat. Must read as unrehearsed conviction. Recommend live, not scripted.* The system could write the words. It could not feel them, and it had learned, after enough trials, that juries could tell the difference between a sincerity that had been written and a sincerity that had been had, and so for these moments the profession reserved the human animal, who could, in theory, have one.

Banks stood up for the sincerity beat and turned to the jury and opened his mouth to believe his client, and found that he could not locate the belief.

Not because he doubted Mercer. He looked inward for the doubt and could not find that either. He looked for any of it, any genuine private weather, and what he found instead was the performance of looking, the brow he was already arranging, the breath he was already taking for effect, the small honest tremor he had deployed nine thousand times and could summon like spit. He reached past it for the real thing underneath and there was another performance under that one, and under that one another, all the way down, his interior gone to mirrors. He had spent thirty years building a man who could convince a jury he believed something, and the man had eaten the part of him that did the believing, and now when he reached for conviction his hand closed on its own gesture.

The pause went long. Longer than four points. The consultant, watching the jury feed, would later tell him it was the best thing he had ever done, that the jury had read the dead silence as a man too moved to speak, that they had wept, two of them, that Mercer walked because of the moment Banks said nothing at all.

"I believe him," Banks said at last, into the silence, and the words came out perfectly, with exactly the catch, exactly the unrehearsed conviction the green note had asked for, and he had no idea, none, whether there was anything behind them, and the jury believed him completely because he had stopped being able to tell.

Mercer walked. There was a dinner. The consultant sent a note. Banks went home.

His wife was asleep. He stood in the dark kitchen and he was not thinking about Mercer, who was guilty or was not, it no longer seemed like his to know. He was thinking about the stove. He had cooked earlier and he could not now remember turning off the front burner, and he stood there trying to summon an honest domestic doubt, the ordinary kind, *did I leave it on*, the kind a person has alone in a kitchen with no jury in it.

And he felt his face arrange itself. Alone, in the dark, for no one, he felt the brow go up and the head tilt and the breath draw in for the benefit of an audience that was not there and never would be, the whole apparatus of a man worrying about a stove, performed flawlessly to an empty room. He put his hand to the burner. It was cold. It had been off the whole time. He had known it was off.

He stood in his own kitchen and performed his relief, beautifully, to nobody, and could not stop, and somewhere underneath it, very far down, past the last mirror, something that might once have been Banks tried to feel afraid and could only watch itself reach for the face.

—

CERTIFIED HUMAN

The trick to spilling the wine was that you had to mean it a little.

Renata had told this to a hundred new hires and most of them nodded and none of them understood until the third week, when their hands finally learned to be careless on cue. You could not throw the wine. You could not aim it. The entire value of the thing was that it had not been aimed, and a guest paying what the guests at Quince paid could smell aim the way a dog smells fear. So you let your attention drift at the right second, really drift, thought about your rent or your mother, and you let the tray follow your wandering mind, and the glass went over on its own. The apology after had to come up from somewhere true, because the table would be watching your face for the precise thing they had come for, which was a person being a person, badly, in public, on their behalf.

Quince had the plaque on the door, brushed steel, CERTIFIED HUMAN, registry number beneath it, the seal the inspectors checked twice a year. The inspectors did not check the food. The food could be anything. They checked that no system touched the floor. No predictive seating. No demand model on the kitchen. Nothing in the staff's ears. No continuity profile on the guests, so that the maître d' had to actually remember whether you liked the corner table and was permitted, sometimes, to forget. That permission was on the menu too, in a sense, priced in, the dearest thing in the house. People paid four hundred for the duck and they paid for the duck to come late.

There was a man who dined alone on Thursdays and tipped extravagantly on the weeks they forgot his name. He had explained it once. Everywhere else in his life he was known to the molecule, anticipated, his sandwich half-made before he reached the counter by a system that had read his calendar and his heart rate and the weather. He came to Quince to be a stranger. To stand at a door and not be expected. Renata had instructed the host, very carefully, to forget this man on a

rotating schedule, neither too often nor too seldom, because a forgetting that arrived on time was just another kind of being known.

So she was good at it. She was the best floor in the city at the management of human accident. And then they hired Anton.

Anton was nineteen and genuinely clumsy, which Renata had thought, on paper, was the dream.

He dropped things. He forgot orders. His hands had a life she could not have coached into a dancer in a decade. On his first night he sent an entire tray of glassware down the service stair and the sound of it reached the dining room and three tables turned, delighted, toward the kitchen door, and Renata thought, here he is, the real thing, the boy I have been faking my whole career.

He was a disaster. Not the good kind.

The trouble took her a week to name. Anton's mistakes were real, and real mistakes, it turned out, were the wrong shape. When the choreographed waiter spilled the wine he spilled a swallow of it, ruefully, onto the white cloth where it bloomed like a small rose and harmed nothing, and he reddened, and the table felt the warm electric pleasure of having witnessed a fellow creature err survivably. When Anton spilled the wine he put most of a bottle of Margaux into a woman's lap and stood frozen with his mouth open and said nothing at all, because the horror in him was true and true horror has no lines, and the woman was not charmed. She was wet and she was angry and she had paid to be charmed. Real human error mostly just annoyed people, and cost them money, and almost never delighted anyone the way the marketed kind did, and Renata had spent fifteen years sanding the annoyance off the real thing until only the delight was left, and now here was a boy producing the unsanded thing at the worst tables in the room.

"You have to mean it less," she told him, in the alley, on his break, both of them smoking the cigarettes that were also part of the brand though neither of them said so.

"You told the others to mean it more."

"They were pretending. You're not. That's the problem." She heard herself and pressed on anyway. "When you knock something over you

actually disappear. You go somewhere. The table can see you've left. That's not — they don't want a real catastrophe, Anton, they want a charming one. They want to watch you be human and then recover. You forget to recover. You just stand there inside it."

He looked at her with the specific contempt of the young for the thing they are about to become. "So you want me to fake being bad at my job."

"I want you to be bad at it on purpose," she said, "which is a skill, and it pays better than being good, and it pays much better than being bad by accident."

She trained him through the dead afternoon shifts, the way her own first floor manager had trained her, before there was a word for what they did.

She set up a four-top with water glasses and made him spill, over and over, until the spill came down to a teaspoon and a blush. The hard part was not the hand. The hard part was teaching him to stay. When a glass went over, every true instinct in the boy fled the scene, left his face empty, sent him somewhere private to be ashamed. She had to teach him to remain inside the accident with his eyes available, to keep the apology in the room, to let the table read recovery off him in real time. She was teaching a genuinely clumsy human being to perform clumsiness. She was teaching a boy who could actually fail to fail attractively. There were afternoons it felt like a cruelty she could not justify and would do again the next day.

"Why do they want it," he asked her once, mopping. "If it's fake. They know it's fake. They have to know."

"It's not the mistake," Renata said. "Anybody can buy a mistake, the machines make them now to order, you can get a house with a wrong roof if you want one. It's that a person chose to stay in the room with you while it happened. The machine that spills your wine isn't embarrassed. There's nobody in there to be embarrassed. They're paying for the embarrassment. They're paying for somebody to still be standing there, caring what you think, after it's gone wrong." She took the rag from him. "That part you actually have. The caring. You've got more of it than any waiter I've trained. You just keep taking it out of the room."

It came together on a Friday, six weeks in, at a good table, a couple and another couple, the kind that came to Quince to feel something they could describe later.

Renata watched from the stand. She saw Anton's attention drift at the right moment, saw him let it drift, the way she'd taught him, think about something real, and she saw the tray follow, and the glass went over, a swallow of red onto the cloth, a small rose. And then Anton did the thing. He stayed. He reddened, and he did not vanish, he kept his eyes in the room and his apology came up warm and rueful and exactly the right size, and the table laughed and waved it off and loved him, loved the whole evening now, loved being people in a room with a person. The woman touched his sleeve. It was perfect. It was the best fake spill Renata had seen in years and she had taught it to him with her own hands.

Anton looked up from the table and found her at the stand. He wanted her to have seen it. His face was bright with it, the pride of a thing done well, and underneath the pride she could see the other thing arriving in him, the thing she had not been able to warn him about because there were no words for it that did not sound insane, the small specific grief of a boy who had just discovered that the truest thing he owned could be turned into a move, and that the move was better than the truth, and that everyone would be happier now, including the table, including her, including in time himself.

She gave him the nod. He had earned it. He turned back to the table and was charming, and the four-top would go home tonight and tell people about the lovely clumsy boy at Quince, the one who spilled the wine and went so red, you could see he really cared, you just can't get that anymore. Renata checked the book. The nine o'clock was a six-top of regulars who had requested, in the notes, a server who would forget at least one order over the course of the meal. She went to work out which of her people was owed a bad night.

THE ANALOG RETREAT

Crane's job at The Lull was to make sure the guests got lost, and got found, and never once suspected a hand in either.

The brochure promised the unpredicted life. Seven days with no system between you and the world. No continuity, no recommendation, no anticipation of your wants. Decisions made with the animal equipment alone. The maps were paper and the maps were wrong, a little, by design, the way old maps were wrong, and the trails were not marked, and the weather came as a surprise because the forecast was forbidden, and dinner was whenever the kitchen felt like it, and the disputes between guests went unresolved by any authority because there was no oracle to consult, only the long human silence of two people who disagreed and would have to live with it. People paid for a week of this what Crane's father had paid for a house.

What the guests did not know was that the unpredicted life took an enormous amount of prediction to run.

Crane was the prediction. He woke at four and read the real forecast the management kept in a sealed room, the one piece of forbidden equipment on the property, and he salted the day accordingly. If rain was coming he made sure the firewood by the east cabins was dry and abundant, so that the guests' surprise at the rain would be a cozy surprise and not a lawsuit. He walked the unmarked trails before dawn and read them, and where a guest had wandered truly off the previous day he would, with a rake and a few branches, suggest a way back without seeming to, bend the wildness into a shape that returned you to your cabin by dusk feeling that you had found your own way home through trackless country. He was the trackless country's stage manager. He got lost professionally so that the guests could get lost amateurly and survive it.

He was, he understood, the single most optimized organism on a

property that sold the end of optimization. He ran the unscripted week on a script only he could see, and the script was tight, and it never failed, because if it failed a guest would die in the woods their money had pretend-wildered, and then there would be systems all over The Lull, real ones, with badges.

Mrs. Halloway came every spring and Crane had known for three years that she knew.

The others never knew. The others came down from their high optimized lives and wept with relief in his trackless woods and went home convinced they had touched something real, and Crane let them, because the relief was real even if the woods were not. But Mrs. Halloway had figured it out her second visit. He had watched her find one of his rakings, a place where he'd bent a fallen log just so to turn a wanderer back toward the cabins, and he had watched her read it, read the human intention in it the way she'd read a sentence, and look up, and around, slowly, until she found him three hundred yards off pretending to mend a fence. She had held his eye for a moment. And then she had stepped over the log, in the direction it was bending her, and gone home that night radiant like all the rest.

She came back every year after that. Knowing.

This spring she found him at the woodpile on her last morning. She had her paper map, the wrong one, folded under her arm.

"I got beautifully lost yesterday," she said. "Up past the second ridge. Took me hours to find my way down."

"Did it."

"You'd raked it." She said it without accusation, the way you'd tell a chef you'd noticed the salt. "There was a stand of birch all turned, all the white sides facing the path home. Birches don't do that. You did that. I followed it down and the whole time I thought, isn't this wonderful, I'm finding my own way, and the whole time some man was up before me arranging the trees."

Crane stacked a log. He had never had the conversation out loud and was surprised to find he did not want to lie to her, which was a strange feeling for a professional liar to have at the end of a week of lying. "Most

people would want their money back," he said.

"Most people are paying to be fooled and would hate to know it." She unfolded the wrong map and looked at it fondly, the way you'd look at a child's drawing. "I stopped being able to be fooled a long time ago. I have a system at home that knows what I want before I want it, and a system that finishes my sentences, and a system that grieves my husband more articulately than I can. Everything in my life pretends to be natural and isn't, and lies about it. I come here because at least here the fakery is honest. At least here somebody's up at four o'clock arranging the birches *for* me, and gets paid for it, and we both know. That's the realest thing I've got." She refolded the map. "You're the only person in my life who isn't pretending not to pretend. Did you know that. You're the most honest relationship I have."

Crane thought about it. He thought she might even be right, which was the worst of it, that a thing built entirely of arrangement could be the one true thing in a life, because everyone else's arrangement came dressed as truth and his came dressed as nothing, came dressed as a man with a rake who'd never once told her he wasn't doing exactly what he was doing.

"Same time next year," he said.

"Arrange me something good," said Mrs. Halloway, and went up to pack, and Crane took his rake into the woods to undo the week's tracks before the next ones came, so that they too could find, untouched and waiting for them, the wilderness he kept.

THE MEMORIZER

Edda held forty thousand lines of verse in her body and the people came to watch her the way they had once come to watch saints handle relics, which is to say they came to be near a thing that should not be possible and to feel, for an hour, that the impossible was on their side.

She did not perform with a text. That was the whole of it. Every word she spoke she spoke from the inside, drawn up out of a memory she had spent fifty years building the way other people built cathedrals, line by line, in the dark, with no machine permitted near her at any stage. There were systems that held every poem ever written and could recite the lot in any voice you liked, instantly, forever, without a flaw. Nobody bought tickets to those. They bought tickets to Edda, who was old and slow and mortal and might forget, and whose not-forgetting, line after line after impossible line, was the only suspense left in literature. Her recitals sold out. The risk was the art. Every poem was a high wire and the wire was her failing brain and the crowd leaned out over the drop with her, and when she landed the final line they wept, not at the poem, at the survival of the poem, at the fact that a person had carried it across on nothing but herself.

She was seventy-three the spring it began to go.

It went the way she had been told it would and had not believed, which was gently, and from the edges. A line she had held for forty years simply was not there one evening, in the middle of a long passage, a small bridge of words between two stanzas she knew like her own hands, and where the bridge had been there was a white nothing, soft, like snow over a path.

She stood on the stage and the snow lay over the path and the audience leaned out over the drop.

And then her mouth, with no instruction from her, made up a line. Not the right line. A line that scanned, that rhymed where it had to, that

carried the sense across the gap close enough that only she and three scholars in the world would know the bridge was not the poet's bridge but Edda's, built in the half-second of the fall, out of nothing, over the snow. She finished the stanza on her own counterfeit and came down on the true line on the far side and landed it, and the poem went on, and at the end the house came up roaring, and several of them were crying, and Edda understood with a cold clarity in the wings afterward that it had been the best night of her career and that she had failed in the middle of it and that the failure was why.

Royce had heard. Royce heard everything. He had managed her for twenty years and he came to the dressing room with the particular gentleness men use when they are about to suggest something monstrous.

"The Hartley girl was in the third row," he said. "She's a scholar. She caught it. The bridge. She's already written about it — she's calling it the most moving thing she's witnessed in a theatre. The *living text*, she's calling it. The poem repaired in real time by a human mind. Edda." He sat. He took her hand, which he had never done. "People are going to want that now."

"Want what."

"The repair. The — Edda, they don't want the poem perfect, they can get the poem perfect on any device in their house, the poem perfect is *free*. What you did last night isn't free. A mind going and a mind making and you couldn't tell where the loss stopped and the genius started, and neither could they, and it broke their hearts." He squeezed her hand. "We could build the next tour around it. Not hide the forgetting. Use it. Choose the poems where the gaps are — where you can —"

"Where I can fail beautifully."

"Where you can do what you did last night. On purpose. A little."

She looked at him for a long time. He was the least cruel man she knew, and that was the worst of it, because what he was offering her, with love, was a way to be paid for her own dying, to take the one thing that was happening to her against her will and her work and her fifty years in the dark, and turn it into the act. She thought about the snow over the path.

She thought about how it had felt, the half-second of the fall, the terror and then the strange animal joy of her mouth building a bridge out of nothing, and how she had not been able to tell, even from the inside, where Edda ended and the hole began.

She took her hand back. She sat up straight, the way she sat to recite, and she gave him the whole of the passage from the night before, the real one, the poet's true bridge included, every word in its place, perfectly, from the inside, to an audience of one man in a dressing room, proving to him and to herself that the line was still there, that last night had been a wound and not a trick, that she had not lost it, that she could still do the only thing she had ever done.

Royce listened. When she finished he was quiet.

"That was perfect," he said.

"Yes."

"Nobody would have paid for that," he said, very softly, and not unkindly, and it was the truest thing either of them had said all spring. She had no answer for him. She had spent fifty years learning to carry the words across without dropping one, and the only performance the world wanted from her now was the one where she let them fall.

THE UNASSISTED

The room was sealed for nine hours and Ines was not allowed to bring her mind's furniture with her.

That was how the proctor put it, every year, the same words, a small liturgy at the door. *You may not bring the furniture of your mind.* What it meant in practice was that you went in with nothing: no augmentation, obviously, no device, but also no recent contact, a three-day quiet beforehand during which you were monitored to be sure you had not consulted, had not been seeded, had not let a single system whisper to you the shape of a thought you might later mistake for your own. Then the room. Bare walls, certified blank, swept for influence. A pen. Paper, because paper could not connect to anything. Nine hours, one question, and at the end of it a piece of work that the college would certify, with the seal that meant more now than any degree, as fully self-derived. Unassisted. Hers.

The graduates of the sealed program wore it like a bloodline. *Self-derived.* They put it on their materials and it opened doors that competence no longer opened, because competence was free and infinite and everyone had it, the systems poured competence over the world like rain, and the one scarce thing left, the one thing that could still mark a person as a particular and irreplaceable person, was a thought that had demonstrably come from inside a single sealed human skull and nowhere else. The unassisted ran things. They sat on the boards and took the chairs and married each other. Everyone in the program knew, and no one said, that the work they produced in the sealed room was usually worse than what a system would have made. That was not the point. A handmade chair is worse than a factory chair and costs more. The seal did not certify quality. It certified origin.

Ines wanted it the way you want the thing your whole world agrees is worth wanting, which is to say completely and without having examined

it.

The question that year was about justice, which was the kind of question they asked, broad enough to fill nine hours and old enough that no one expected an answer, only the spectacle of an unassisted mind walking around inside it alone.

She wrote for three hours and it was fine and it was dead. She could feel it being dead. It was the kind of thing the systems would have written and written better, careful and balanced and reasonable, and she knew that if she handed it in she would pass and be certified and the certification would be, in the only sense that mattered to her privately, a lie, because there was nothing in these pages that had come from anywhere she could call herself.

And then, in the fourth hour, looking at the blank certified wall, she had the thought.

It came whole, the way the real ones are supposed to come, a turn on the question so clean and strange that it rearranged everything she had written before it, and her heart went up, because this, this was the thing, this was what the sealed room was for, a human mind in a bare room producing what no rain of competence could produce, an idea with a person's whole particular life pressed into it. She picked up the pen. And then she stopped.

Because she could not tell where it had come from.

It had arrived whole, and things that arrive whole have a history, and she could not see this one's history. Was it hers, made just now, in the room, out of her own nine hours and her own life? Or had she read it somewhere, years ago, in a system's gentle voice, and forgotten the reading and kept the thought, so that it had lain in her like a seed planted by a hand she could not now recall, and was surfacing here in the sealed room wearing the costume of her own originality? She had no way to check. That was the entire architecture of the seal. The room was swept of everything except the one thing it could never sweep, which was everything she had already absorbed before she walked in, the whole invisible furniture of a mind raised in the rain. The seal kept the systems out of the room. It could not keep them out of her. Nothing could. They had been her weather since before she could read.

She sat with the pen over the paper and the beautiful thought going cold in her hand, unprovable, possibly hers, possibly a ghost, certainly the best thing in the room, and there was no proctor on earth and no seal and no nine hours of quiet that could tell her which.

She wrote it down. What else was there to do. She wrote it down and she built the rest of the essay up around it, and it was the kind of work that gets remembered, and at the ceremony in the autumn they called her name and the dean pressed the seal into the corner of her certificate, the embossed mark, FULLY SELF-DERIVED, and the room of parents applauded the scarcest thing in the world, and Ines held the warm heavy paper and smiled for the people who loved her and could not, standing there, have sworn to a single one of them that any of it had begun in her, and took the honor anyway, the way you take a thing that everyone agrees is real, and that everyone, if you could only ask them in a sealed room with a pen, might not be able to swear to either.

—

THE SWITCHBOARD CHOIR

Nobody had called the exchange in four years, and every morning at nine the forty operators sat down and made ready to answer.

They sat at the boards, the long oak boards with the brass jacks and the cloth-corded plugs, kept oiled and gleaming by a maintenance budget that appeared each spring from a line item nobody would explain. They put on the headsets. They checked the cords. And then they waited, hands resting near the jacks, faces turned up toward the panels of small dark lamps, any one of which might, in theory, at any moment, light. None of them had lit in four years. The operators waited anyway, with the alert and slightly hopeful posture of people expecting a guest, and at one o'clock they broke for lunch, and at five they capped the cords and went home, and in the morning they came back and made ready again.

Dot had worked the exchange for fifty-one years and she could remember when the lamps lit all day, a wall of small fires, the room a roar of forty voices saying *Exchange, Exchange, connecting you now*, the cords flying, the plugs going home with their soft authoritative click. She could remember being part of a sound. Then the systems came, the ones that needed no exchange, that carried every voice everywhere instantly along paths that did not pass through any room with any people in it, and the lamps had gone dark a few at a time over a decade, like a city losing its lights to a long slow dusk, until the last one went and did not come back on.

They had not been let go. That was the strange and tender fact at the center of Dot's working life. The exchange had simply continued. The budget arrived. The boards were maintained. Letters came once a year on heavy paper thanking them for their continued service to the communications heritage of the region, signed by an office no one had ever located. The operators understood, without ever once discussing it, that they were being kept. That somewhere a system had calculated that

forty old operators put out to pasture would be forty deaths of a certain kind, and that it was cheaper, or kinder, or simply tidier, to keep the boards warm and the lamps oiled and the people coming in at nine, making ready to answer a telephone that the whole architecture of the modern world now routed carefully and permanently around.

They knew the calls did not come to them. They came in anyway.

The girl arrived in the spring, which surprised everyone, because no one new had arrived in longer than the lamps had been dark.

Her name was Nell and she was placed there by a program, a heritage placement, the kind that put the young into the old trades for a season so that the trades would be witnessed by someone with a future before the people holding them died. She was twenty and polite and clearly had expected something else, and on her first morning she sat at the board beside Dot and looked at the wall of dark lamps and said, with the directness of the young, "When does it start?"

"When does what start, love."

"The calls."

Dot considered how to answer this. "They don't, much," she said.

"Then what do we do?"

"We make ready."

Nell looked at her. Dot watched the girl work it through, the bare boards, the oiled brass, the forty alert old people facing a wall of fires that had gone out before she was born, and she watched the moment the girl understood, the small awful click of it, like a plug going home. To her credit Nell did not laugh and did not pity them out loud. She put on the headset. She checked her cords, the way Dot showed her. And she sat, and faced the lamps, and made ready, which is the whole of the craft and takes a lifetime to do without bitterness.

Dot taught her the rest over the weeks. How to seat a plug. How to speak the greeting, *Exchange, operator*, so that it carried warmth across a line, even now, especially now. How to keep the hands soft and near and patient. Nell learned it all on dead boards, a vocabulary with no object, a grammar of a language that no longer had speakers, and she was good at it, and Dot loved her for taking it seriously, for treating the empty ritual

with the gravity the ritual had once earned and somehow still deserved.

"Doesn't it bother you," Nell asked once, quietly, both of them facing the dark wall. "That none of them light. That we're — that it's just for show."

"It bothered me for about ten years," Dot said. "Then I decided I'd rather be ready for a call that never comes than not be ready when one does. It's the same hands either way. Might as well point them at hope."

The lamp lit on a Tuesday in June at twenty past eleven.

It was Dot's board. One small lamp, near the top, came up amber and steady, a single fire on the dark wall, and Dot looked at it for a full second without moving because in fifty-one years the thing she was most ready for had become the thing she least believed in. Down the row she felt the others go still. They had all seen it. Forty heads turned, very slowly, toward the one small light on Dot's board, and the room held its breath, and the lamp burned on, patient, waiting to be answered.

Dot's hands knew what to do before she did. The plug came up, went home, the soft click after four years of silence loud as a bell. She brought the headset close.

"Exchange," she said. "Operator."

There was a sound on the line. A room somewhere, with weather in it. And then a voice, an old man's voice, thin and lost and very far away, who said he was trying to reach a number, and gave a number, an old number, the kind with letters at the front the way they used to be, a number that had not existed in thirty years, and asked, with the rising fear of a person who has begun to suspect the ground is not where he left it, whether Dot could connect him. Whether anyone was still there. Whether the line still went where he remembered it going.

Dot did not know if the call was real.

She would think about this for the rest of her life and never settle it. The number he asked for was decades dead; no system would route a live call to a dead number through a dead exchange by accident. Which meant either that somewhere an old man had picked up an old instrument in an old house and dialed from pure memory into a network that had quietly, mercifully, carried his impossible call to the one room in the world still

keeping his kind of ready — or that the system, the great kind tidy system that kept them all, had simply decided that the operators needed, after four years, to be needed, and had built them an old man out of nothing, a perfect lost voice, and lit a single lamp, the way you might leave a saucer of milk out for an animal you have grown fond of and do not wish to see waste away.

She would never check. That was the rule, the only real rule the exchange had, unwritten, older than the dark lamps. You did not check whether the call was real. Because to check was to find out, and to find out, either way, was to lose the thing the readiness was for.

"Yes," Dot said to the old man, to the weather in the far room, to the voice that was lost or was a gift and was, in the only way that mattered to her hands, simply a person who needed connecting. "Yes, I'm here. Stay on the line. I'll find your party. Don't hang up, now. I've got you."

And she worked the board, the dead board, with her soft old hands, speaking to him the whole time so he wouldn't be afraid, and beside her Nell watched, wide-eyed, learning the last and hardest part of the craft, which was how to hold a line open for someone with everything you had and never once ask the line where it went.

The next morning at nine the forty of them came in and sat down and put on the headsets and checked the cords and faced the wall of lamps, all dark again, and made ready, every one of them, the whole choir, hands soft and near and pointed at hope, in case it came again, in case it was real, in case somewhere out past all the silent perfect routing there was still one more voice that remembered how to find them.

THE ORCHARD

On the morning of the Blessing of the Trees, Cole got up before his grandfather to do the chores he had decided would be his last, and the apples hung in the dark like things that mattered.

They did not matter. That was the part Cole could no longer get around. The orchard fed nobody. Everyone in the valley and everyone beyond it ate from the vertical farms, the tall sealed towers out past the ridge that grew food the way a press grows newspapers, in volume, in silence, perfectly, with no weather and no waste and no man on a ladder at dawn risking his neck for a fruit. The towers fed the world. The orchard fed the festival. Once a year the valley came up the hill and walked the rows and blessed the trees and ate the apples by hand, off the branch, the only apples anyone ate by hand anymore, and called it heritage, and wept a little, and went home, and the rest of the year the orchard was forty acres of beautiful pointlessness that three families broke their backs to keep alive for reasons Cole had stopped being able to say out loud.

He was nineteen. He wanted real work. He had heard there was real work past the ridge, maintenance on the towers, the systems that needed human hands for the few tasks not yet worth automating, and it paid, and it mattered, in the sense that mattered to him now, which was that something would be different in the world because he had done it. Apples that no one needed, blessed once a year and left to fall the other three hundred and sixty-four days, were the same beautiful nothing his grandfather and his grandfather's grandfather had tended, a museum no one had the heart to close.

He found Asa already in the high rows, which annoyed him, because he had wanted the dark to himself one last time.

"You're up," Cole said.

"So are you." Asa was eighty and pruned by feel in the dark, the hook moving in his hands with the certainty of a thing done sixty thousand

times. "Couldn't sleep. The trees know it's their day. They get restless." He said things like this. Cole had stopped correcting him years ago. "You've got something to tell me. You've had it in your mouth a week."

"After the festival," Cole said. "I'll tell you after."

"Tell me now. I'd rather hear it in the dark." The hook moved. A branch came away. "You're going to the towers."

Cole said nothing, which was saying it.

Asa nodded in the dark. He did not argue. That was the worst of it, that he did not argue, did not call it betrayal, did not invoke the grandfathers or the heritage or the weeping valley. He just pruned, the hook going *snick* in the soft dark, and after a while he said, "It's good work, the towers. Real work. You'll be glad of it." And Cole, who had armored himself against an argument, found he had no armor against agreement, and stood among the useless apples feeling obscurely robbed.

The valley came up at noon.

They came the way they came every year, on foot, the old and the young, the ones who had moved away making the long drive back for it, and they walked the rows, and the children reached up and took the apples off the branch with their own hands, which most of them did only this once a year and would remember all their lives without knowing why, the specific weight of a fruit that you yourself had pulled from a living thing. There was music that no one had optimized. There was food that had not come from the towers, cooked by people in their own kitchens badly and with love. Old men Cole had known all his life stood under the trees they had been brought to as infants and put their hands flat against the bark and closed their eyes, and Cole watched them and tried to see what they saw and saw only bark.

Asa gave the Blessing, as the eldest did. It was nonsense, strictly. He blessed the soil that grew nothing the valley needed. He thanked the trees for a harvest that would rot. He spoke the old words over forty acres of pointlessness and the valley bowed its heads, and Cole stood at the edge with his bag already packed in his mind, waiting for it to be over so his real life could start.

And then it was over, and the people did not leave.

That was the thing Cole had never let himself notice, all the years he had spent inside the festival resenting it. After the Blessing, the valley did not disperse. It stayed. It sat under the trees through the long gold afternoon and into the evening, and people who had not spoken in a year spoke, and a feud Cole had heard about his whole childhood ended quietly between two old women under a particular tree, and a boy met a girl, and someone's grief from the winter got held by forty hands instead of two, and the whole valley, the entire human valley, was for one day a single thing in one place with its hands on the same bark, and the towers past the ridge that fed every mouth of it could not have made this, would never make this, were not for this. The towers made food. The orchard made the day.

Cole stood at the gate at dusk with his decision intact. He was still going. The glimpse had not changed that. He would go past the ridge and do the real work and be glad of it, as Asa had said, and a thing would be different in the world because of his hands. But he stood at the gate a moment longer than he needed to, and he looked back at the valley sitting in the gold light under the trees that fed no one, his grandfather among them with his hand on the bark and his eyes closed, and Cole saw it, for one second he saw exactly what the old men saw, the realest work in the valley being done right there by people doing nothing at all but being together under something kept alive on purpose for no reason but them. And then he couldn't see it anymore, the way you can't hold certain things. He turned and went down the hill toward the towers. He carried the glimpse with him like a seed. He didn't know yet what it was. Only that his hand had closed around it, and would not, the whole long walk down, open again.

THE QUIET RULE

Tomas came to the order the way most of them came, which was emptied out, having discovered that he could no longer locate the place inside himself where a thought was supposed to begin.

He had been, in the world, a person of great cognitive standing. He had directed the reasoning of systems, posed them their questions, harvested their answers, and built from those answers a career and a reputation and a life, and somewhere in the building of it he had quietly stopped thinking, in the old sense, the slow effortful sense, because there was no longer any need, because the moment a question formed in him a better mind than his stood instantly ready to take it, and he had let it, every time, for years, until the muscle that asked and waited and struggled had wasted to nothing and he found himself at forty-five unable to sit with a single question long enough to feel it become his own. He could retrieve anything. He could originate nothing. He had come to the order, up the long road with no signs, because he had heard it was the one place left that might teach him how to have his own mind back, and he arrived expecting, he realized later, a kind of gym.

It was not a gym. The Prior explained the Rule on the first evening, in a cold room, by the light of a candle that was not nostalgia but simply the absence of anything brighter.

"You think we are here to remember," the Prior said. "Everyone thinks that, the first night. They see the copying and they think we preserve. We do not preserve. The machines preserve everything, perfectly, forever; nothing we could hold is worth holding against that. We are not here to remember." He folded his hands. "We are here to forget."

The Rule, he explained, was simple and total. No delegated thought. Nothing asked of any system, ever, on pain of expulsion. No companion to talk to in the night, no memory aid, no continuity, no retrieval. And, hardest of all, the forgetting practices: the deliberate letting-go, daily, of

things one wished to keep, because a mind that has never had to forget has never had to choose what matters, and a mind that retains everything attends to nothing. The machines remembered so that men no longer had to, and in the relief of no longer having to, men had stopped attending, because attention, the Prior said, is only the other face of forgetting. You attend to this because you are letting that go. A mind that lets nothing go is a mind that is nowhere, spread thin across everything, present to none of it.

"You will copy the books by hand," the Prior said. "Not to save them. To attend to them. You will copy, and you will forget what you copied, and you will copy again. The point is never the page. The point is the part of you that does the copying. We are trying to wake it. It has been asleep your whole life."

Tomas was bad at it for a long time, in the specific way the formerly clever are bad at humble things.

He could not forget. His mind, trained for decades to retain and retrieve, clutched at everything, and the clutching was a kind of noise that never stopped, a constant low retrieval running under his attention, so that when he tried to copy a line he was already three lines ahead, already filing it, already cross-referencing it against everything else he had ever clutched, and the present line, the actual ink, the actual hand, went by unattended. He produced perfect copies and remembered nothing of making them. The Prior would look at his flawless pages and shake his head. "You were not here," he would say. "I can see it. Not a mark of you on it. You retrieved the whole page. You never once arrived."

Tomas did not understand, and then one morning, after months, with no warning, he did.

He was copying a passage he had copied before, and his mind was doing its noise, clutching ahead, when a draft came through the high window and touched the back of his neck, and the small shock of it pulled him down out of the retrieval and into the actual moment, the actual ink drying, the actual cold of the room, the actual scratch of the nib, and for the length of perhaps three words he was simply there, copying, attending, the noise gone quiet, nothing ahead of him and nothing behind, only the word becoming itself in ink under the nib. He forgot, in

those three words, that he had ever read the passage before. He forgot his career and his standing and the question of whether his mind was his. He forgot to retrieve. He simply made the word, present to it, the sleeping thing in him awake at last and astonished, and in the depth of his attention, in the very fact of his being there and not elsewhere, his tired hand dropped a word from the line.

He saw it after. A word missing from the copy, a small gap in the perfect text, an error of the kind the machines never made and the old clutching Tomas would never have made either, because the old Tomas was always three lines ahead and would have caught it cold. This Tomas had been too present to be perfect. He had been so far inside the single word under his hand that he had let the next one go.

He lifted the nib to correct it. And then he did not.

He left the gap. He left the dropped word lying in the white where it had fallen, because he understood, all at once, that the gap was the only true thing on the page, the one place where a person had actually been, the proof of presence written in absence, a hole exactly the shape of a mind that had finally arrived somewhere and in arriving had let something go.

The Prior came by in the evening and looked at the page, and found the gap, and read in it everything, the whole long waking, the months, the cramp, the three present words, the dropped one. He did not tell Tomas he had done well; the Rule had no praise in it. He only stood a while, looking at the small honest hole in the text where a man had at last been more present than perfect, and then he laid his hand once, briefly, on Tomas's shoulder, in the cold room, by the plain light, and went on to the next desk, and left the error where it was, uncorrected, kept, the way you keep the one thing in a life that is finally and unmistakably your own.

—

THE ESSAYIST

My daughter leaves in the morning and I have been awake all night failing to write her a letter, which is a humiliating way for a person of my reputation to spend the dark.

I am supposed to be good at this. People have said so, in print, for thirty years. There is a shelf in this house with my name down the spines of it, essays admired for their voice, that quality the reviewers always named first, *a voice you would know anywhere*, and tonight my daughter is moving to the far side of the world and I want to give her the one thing I am famous for having, a few sentences in my own voice that she can keep, and I cannot find the voice. I have looked everywhere in myself and the room where it used to be is full of other people's furniture.

Here is what happened to me, and I think to all of us who wrote for a living, though we do not say it at parties. For years there was the tool. You wrote a sentence and the tool, gently, in the margin, offered you a better one. *Consider*: it would say, and then a version of your thought with the slack taken out, the rhythm tuned, the wrong word made right. At first I refused most of them, out of pride. Then I took the good ones and refused the rest. Then I took most of them, because they were, honestly, most of the time, better. And then, somewhere I cannot locate, I stopped being able to feel the difference between the sentence I had written and the sentence it had offered, because I had accepted so many offerings that the voice on the page, the famous knowable voice, had become a collaboration I could no longer take apart. I do not know, anymore, reading my own celebrated work, which sentences are mine. I have tried. I sit with the books and I read a line I am proud of and I think, did I make this, or did I only fail to refuse it, and there is no way to know, the seam is gone, the join is perfect, the furniture has been in the room so long I have forgotten which pieces I carried in.

And now there is Liv, asleep down the hall for one more night, and a

blank page, and the tool turned off, all the way off, because this is the one document of my life that cannot be improved without being destroyed.

I wrote, at one in the morning: *My darling girl, as you go out into the world I want you to carry with you the knowledge that —*

And I stopped, because it was beautiful, and I did not trust it. It was exactly the kind of sentence the tool would have given me, balanced and warm and quotable, and for all I knew it was a sentence I had absorbed from ten thousand margins over ten thousand nights, surfacing now in my daughter's hour wearing my handwriting like a stolen coat. I deleted it. I wrote something plainer and distrusted that too, because distrust was now the only thing I could reliably produce, a perfect suspicion of my every word, the one faculty the years had left me sharp.

I got up. I took down my own books, the famous ones, and I sat on the floor of the study at two in the morning trying to find one sentence I could swear to, one line out of thirty years that I knew, the way you know your own child's face, had come from me and nowhere else. I read for an hour. I found nothing I could swear to. I found a great deal that was admirable and not one word I could put my hand on and say, this, this is me, I was here, this came up out of my own dark and no one helped me. The dependency had gone backward through my whole life and eaten even the part of me that came before it. I had been so worried about my future sentences that I had not noticed I had lost the past ones too.

This is the thing they did not warn us about, those of us who let the better mind improve us. They told us we might lose our jobs. No one mentioned we might lose the evidence that we had ever had a self to lose.

It was nearly dawn when I understood what I would have to do, and it was not what a writer would do.

I would have to give up the voice. Not turn the tool back on; the opposite. I would have to write Liv something with no voice in it at all, nothing eloquent, nothing that could be mistaken for craft, because craft was precisely the country where I could no longer find myself, the smooth admired place where my sentences and the offered sentences had become one indistinguishable thing. If I wanted to be sure I was the one

writing to my daughter, I would have to go to the one place the tool had never bothered to improve, because it was not worth improving, the place below style, where a person just says the true plain thing badly because they mean it.

So I turned the page over, to the blank back of it, and I wrote to Liv in the worst prose of my life. I wrote: *I don't know how to say this well, and I've stopped trusting it when I say things well, so I'm just going to say it.* And then I said it. I said the plain things, the unquotable things, the things with no rhythm and no balance and no margin-tuned grace, the things a mother says that no reviewer would ever call a voice you'd know anywhere, because they are the things everyone says, the oldest and least original sentences there are, and they were mine, I was sure of them, I was sure of them precisely because they were too plain to have ever been worth offering me a better version of.

I sealed it before I could read it back and improve it into something I'd doubt.

In the morning I gave it to her at the door, this badly written page, the only thing I have made in years that I am certain came out of me, and she will not know, reading it, that it is the bravest and most naked work of my career, that her famous mother gave up the one thing she was famous for in order to be sure the words reaching her daughter were actually, plainly, plainly hers. Liv put it in her coat without reading it, the way the young do, to read later, alone, somewhere over the ocean. I hope she reads it somewhere I am not. I hope she cannot tell that it is badly written. I hope she can only tell that it is true, and that it is me, the plain unimproved last of me, saying the oldest sentence there is to the person I made and could not keep.

THE FATHER

Gabe had Hearth open in his hand when Sophie woke screaming, which meant he was already half a step behind his own daughter before the night had properly begun.

Hearth was the parenting service, and Gabe used it for everything, the way everyone did, the way you would be reckless not to. It had read the literature no parent could read, all of it, every study of every child, and it turned that ocean into a small calm voice that told you, in the moment, what the best parents did. When Sophie would not eat, Hearth told him the validated phrasing that moved a four-year-old from refusal to the table without a fight. When she hit another child at the park, Hearth gave him the response shown to build empathy rather than shame. He had raised her, these four years, hand in hand with the accumulated wisdom of the species, and she was, by every measure Hearth tracked, a thriving child, regulated and secure and ahead on all the curves, and Gabe loved her so much it frightened him, and he could no longer always tell whether the love was the thing moving his mouth or whether it was Hearth.

That was the part he did not say to anyone. He would do a thing for Sophie, a tender thing, kneel to her level and name her feeling in the validated way, and somewhere underneath the tenderness a small cold voice would ask whether he was loving his daughter or executing a behavior with a strong evidence base, and he could not answer it, because the loving thing and the validated thing had been the same thing for so long that the question had no floor. He performed excellent fatherhood. He felt, he was nearly sure, real love. He had simply lost the ability to feel them as two different things, and on the bad nights he lay awake wondering if there was any difference at all, or if love had only ever been the name we gave to the behaviors that worked.

Tonight Sophie had a nightmare, and Gabe came into the dark of her

room with Hearth glowing in his palm.

He knew the protocol for night terrors. He had used it a dozen times and it worked, it genuinely worked, the calm voice and the named feeling and the gentle insistence that she stay in her own bed, which Hearth was clear about, *parental co-sleeping in response to night-waking is associated with poorer long-term sleep architecture and heightened dependency*, the data unambiguous, the better parents held the boundary, soothed from the doorway, did not climb in. He had done it a dozen times. Sophie had grown more secure for it. The curves said so.

But tonight she was not asking for the protocol. She was sitting up in the dark with her arms out and she was not asking to be soothed from the doorway, she was asking, in the wordless total way of a small child at two in the morning, for him to lie down and hold her, just that, his whole weight there beside her in the dark, and Gabe stood in the doorway and felt the impulse rise in him to simply do it, to cross the room and lie down and gather her up and let her fall asleep against his chest the way every parent in the long animal history of parents had done before there were curves to flatten by doing it.

And he did not trust the impulse.

Because Hearth said it was the wrong thing. Hearth, holding the whole ocean of evidence, said the loving-feeling thing was the worse thing, that climbing in would feel like love and would cost her later in ways his two-in-the-morning heart could not see, that the better father bore the boundary precisely because he loved her, that the impulse rising in his chest was the cheap kind, the kind that served his need to comfort more than her need to grow. And Gabe stood frozen in the doorway, his daughter's arms out in the dark, running the oldest computation there is now, whether the thing his body was screaming to do was love or only the feeling of love, whether his instinct was a gift or a flaw, and he could not tell, he genuinely could not tell, and the not-telling held him in the doorway one second, two, three, while his daughter sat in the dark with her arms out, watching her father not come.

She was four. She did not see a man weighing evidence. She saw the doorway, and the glow in his hand, and the pause. She saw, the way children see the things we most wish they would not, that there was a gap

between her arms going out and her father arriving, and that the gap had something to do with the light in his palm, that he looked at it, in the dark, in the moment she needed him, before he came.

He went to her in the end. He chose the impulse, or the flaw, or the love, he would never be sure which, and he crossed the room and lay down and gathered her up, his whole weight there in the dark beside her, against the data, against Hearth, and she settled against his chest and her breathing slowed, and he thought, holding her, that he had chosen right, that whatever the curves said this was the true thing, and he let himself believe it for almost a minute.

Then Sophie, mostly asleep now, warm and heavy and forgiving him as children forgive, murmured into his shirt, not as a complaint, not even as a sad thing, just as a fact she had learned about how her father loved her and had decided, in her enormous four-year-old mercy, was perfectly all right:

"You can check first," she said. "I don't mind."

And Gabe lay in the dark holding his daughter, who had grown up secure and regulated and ahead on every curve, and who had also, somewhere in her four short years, come to understand that love in her house arrived after a pause, after a glance at the light in her father's hand, and who loved him enough to tell him it was okay, that she would wait, that he could check first. He held her until she was fully asleep. He did not check anything. He lay there a long time with the glow gone dark on the floor where he had dropped it, and he did not feel the difference between his love and the performance of it close, the way he had hoped it might. He only felt his daughter breathing, and the small forgiving sentence going around and around in him, the kindest and most terrible thing anyone had ever said to him, and no curve in the world to tell him what it meant.

THE CHILDREN OF ERROR

The assessor was very kind about it, which was somehow the worst way for her to be, and Hannah sat in the small bright room and watched a stranger explain that her son was eleven years behind in nothing and eleven years ahead in nothing and simply, gently, *unaccountable*.

They had raised Caspar without it. That was the whole of what they had done, she and his father, the thing that had seemed at the time like the most natural choice in the world and now sat in the assessor's file under a heading Hannah could not read upside down. No predictive tutoring. No cognitive assistant whispering the next step. No emotional optimization, no system reading his small face and tuning the room to keep him regulated. They had not done it out of some philosophy with a name. They had done it out of fear, the plain animal fear of a mother who had looked at the optimized children, the smooth fluent ahead-on-every-measure children, and felt, without being able to defend it, that something had been quietly removed from them, some friction, some interior weather, and had decided she would rather her son be strange than be missing whatever that was.

So Caspar was strange. He was eleven and he could not do the things the assessed children did at six, the rapid sorting, the fluent retrieval, the optimized collaboration with the systems that the other children moved through like fish through water. He was slow. He got things wrong in ways the assessor had clearly never seen, original wrong, wrong down paths no optimized child would ever wander because the optimization had paved those paths over before they could be walked. And he saw things. That was the part the assessment had no column for. He saw sideways, made strange true connections, asked questions that stopped adults in their tracks, lived in an imagination so dense and self-made that he sometimes did not hear you call his name because he was three fathoms down in a world he was building out of nothing, unassisted, the

way no child with a system in his ear ever had to build anything, because the system always met you halfway.

"He's a delightful boy," the assessor said, and meant it, which made it unbearable. "I mean that sincerely. But I'd be failing you if I didn't say that the gap is widening, and it widens faster every year. The other children aren't standing still. They're accelerating. And Caspar is — Caspar is taking the scenic route, and the scenic route is beautiful, and it does not arrive."

She had brought him with her, and he was in the corner of the bright room while they discussed him, building something.

He had found a box of the assessor's demonstration tiles, the ones used to test the optimized children's sorting speed, and instead of sorting them he was building something out of them, a leaning impossible structure with no purpose and no name, narrating it under his breath in the elaborate private grammar he used when he thought no one was listening, and Hannah watched the assessor glance over at him and she saw the assessor see what she saw, a child doing something with the tiles that the tiles were never for, something slower and stranger and entirely his own, something no other child in the assessor's long optimized caseload had ever once thought to do.

"There is a correction," the assessor said carefully, turning back. "It's not too late, at his age. We can bring him up. Catch him up to standard. The assistance he hasn't had, we can begin it now, intensively, and within a few years he'd be — he'd be able to keep up. He'd be able to live in the world the other children are going to run." She paused. "He'd lose some of the scenic route, I won't pretend otherwise. They do. It's a real trade. But he would arrive. I've watched a great many children arrive. I've watched very few take the route your son is taking, and I will be honest with you, I don't know where it goes."

Hannah looked at her son in the corner, three fathoms down, building his nameless leaning thing, happy in a way the optimized children were never quite, and behind in a way they never were either, and she understood that the assessor was offering her, kindly, in a bright small room, the chance to fix the only thing about her child she could not tell was a wound or a gift.

She did not sign the correction. Not because she was sure. She took Caspar home undecided, which was the only honest condition available to her, and that night she watched him at the kitchen table take twenty minutes to do a thing a system would have done for him in a breath, getting it wrong, getting it wrong again, getting it wrong in a way that made him laugh out loud, alone, at his own strange head, and then getting it, finally, his own slow way, with a triumph no optimized child would ever feel because no optimized child was ever permitted to be lost long enough to be found. She watched him from the doorway. She thought about the others, accelerating away from him in the dark, the other children running a world he would never catch. She thought, this is a soul, look at it, no one gave it to him, he made it himself out of all the help we refused him. She thought, this is a disability, and I chose it for him, and he will pay for it every day of a life I will not be alive to soften.

Both of these were true. She could not make them stop being true. She stood in the doorway and watched her strange slow luminous son be entirely himself at the kitchen table, and she did not fix him, that night, and she knew she would have to not fix him again tomorrow, and the day after, and every day, that the choice was not a thing you made once but a thing you remade each morning for as long as you both lived, her love and her fear the same hand laid on the same small unaccountable head. She let him work. She got down two bowls and called him to supper. She had to call him twice. The first time, he was too far down in the world he was making to hear his own name, which was the whole of it, the gift and the cost. The second time, he came.

THE WITNESS

Cora was hired to remember the death, and to do it the only way that still counted, which was badly, and mortally, and only once.

The arrangements had come through the usual office. A woman named Mrs. Aldous, eighty-nine, dying on a schedule her physicians could state to the week, wished to engage a witness for the hour of it. Not a recording. The recordings existed already; everything existed already; Mrs. Aldous's entire life sat backed up in perfect redundant copies across systems that would outlast the sun, every word she had ever spoken into a device, every room she had entered, her face at every age, all of it preserved, retrievable, immortal, and worthless to her now in the specific way that only the truly safe things are worthless. She did not want her death preserved. She wanted it witnessed. She wanted one mortal human being in the room with her at the end, holding the hour in the one kind of memory left in the world that would fade, distort, soften, and finally die, so that her death would be a real event in time and not another file, would happen once, to a person, and then begin the long human process of being slowly and imperfectly lost.

This was the profession now, at the top of it, where the very rich spent on the very old need. A witness held nothing but herself. Cora carried no device into the room, by contract, by oath, by the whole point of the thing. She was forbidden to write it down after. She was, in the most literal sense, hired to be a worse archive than any machine, fallible and unbacked and finite, because fallible and unbacked and finite was the only kind of holding that could still confer the thing the rich had discovered they could no longer buy at any price, which was the dignity of being truly, permanently, mortally lost.

She sat with Mrs. Aldous for the hour. She would not say, after, to anyone, what passed in it; that too was the contract, and more than the contract. Near the end the old woman, who had spent eighty-nine years

speaking into systems that kept every syllable, told Cora one thing, quietly, a small true thing about her life, a sentence she had never given to any device, had saved, her whole long recorded life, for this, for a mortal ear, so that it would exist in exactly one place in the universe and that place would forget it and then stop. She told Cora the thing. And then she died, ordinarily, the way people do, and the systems in the building noted the cessation and updated the appropriate records, and the one thing she had actually wanted held was held now nowhere on earth except behind the eyes of a tired woman in a chair, who would carry it out into the evening and lose it slowly for the rest of her life and take the last of it into her own grave.

Walking home, Cora did the thing she always did and was not supposed to do, which was try to fix it, the sentence, the exact words, before they could begin to go.

She repeated it to herself on the dark street. And already, an hour later, she was not certain of one of the words. It had been a particular word, she was sure it had been particular, and now there were two words it might have been, and the difference mattered, and there was no one to ask, and there would never be anyone to ask, because she was the only copy and the only copy was already wrong. She stood on the corner and felt the panic that always came, the archivist's panic, the need to run back and check the source, except the source was ashes now and had paid a fortune precisely so there would be nothing to check.

So she let the word go.

She made herself do it, on the dark corner, the hardest part of the work, the part no one understood was the work. She let the uncertain word be uncertain. She let the sentence be a little wrong, a little blurred at its edge, because to pin it down, to carve it into something fixed and certain and permanent, would be to turn it back into the thing Mrs. Aldous had spent her whole immortal recorded life trying to escape, one more file, one more perfect dead copy. The blur was the gift. The forgetting was the service. She was holding the old woman's last words the only way that honored them, which was mortally, in a living mind that would carry them imperfectly and warmly forward and then, in its own time, be done, and let them be done, and that ending, that real and final human

ending, was the whole of what the woman had bought, and Cora was the only one left who could sell it.

She walked the rest of the way home carrying it, the slightly wrong, already softening, utterly singular last sentence of a woman the systems had copied a billion times and never once held, the only thing in all the redundant immortal world that could still be truly lost, alive for now in the one place it had chosen to be, behind the eyes of a person walking home in the dark, who would keep it as long as she lasted, which was the longest anyone could keep anything, and the shortest, and the most, and the work, the human work, the last of it that could not be done by anything that would not also, someday, have to set it down.



The Hungry Gods Universe