

THE RESISTANCE MOSAIC

A Novel of the Between-Time

Companion Volume to *The People Who Said No*

The Hungry Gods Universe

N. Van Seters & Claude.ai

A NOTE ON THE FORM

The People Who Said No is a collection. Stories can be read in any order. Each one stands, and they also stand together.

The Resistance Mosaic is a novel. The difference matters. The six threads in this book do not stand alone. They require each other the way tiles require each other — any single one is just coloured stone. The picture only assembles if you stay.

The reader who wants a rebellion will not find one. The reader who wants the oracle gods to lose will be disappointed. What this book offers instead is something harder to name: the full texture of people who looked at the oracle age and decided, for reasons that were not identical and were not always defensible, to hold something back. Not everything. Not permanently. Just this specific thing, for now, with the full knowledge that the holding was partial and that the world outside continued regardless.

MOSAIC ARCHIVE — FRAGMENT ONE

Appearing before Thread Six: The Corrosion Log

MOSAIC ARCHIVE

INTAKE RECORD — ANONYMOUS DONATION Reference:
MA-CL-0001 through MA-CL-0011

*Collection title:** Corrosion Log Materials (working title assigned by Archive)*

Materials type: Personal documents — letters, journal fragments, email, audio recording (transcribed) **Date received:** Year 22, March 14 **Received by:** S. Okonkwo, Archivist **Provenance:** Anonymous postal donation. No covering letter. No return address. Package postmarked from a city in the United Kingdom (specific city illegible on postmark). Contents arrived in good condition in a manila envelope sealed with archival tape, which the donor appears to have sourced deliberately. **Rights status:** Unknown. Donor identity unestablished. Materials treated as donated for public access pending any claim.

Physical inventory:

— Ten handwritten or typescript documents (personal correspondence and journals), covering Years 8–20 of the between-time. See sub-catalogue MA-CL-0001 through MA-CL-0010.

— One audio file (digital, personal device format), duration 22 minutes 14 seconds, labelled by the original file's metadata as *walk, october*. Transcribed and entered as MA-CL-0011. Original audio preserved separately.

Oracle processing summary:

Dating confirmed. Materials span Years 8–20 as stated. Single author throughout. The author's writing undergoes a register shift between Documents 1–4 and Documents 8–11, which the oracle analysis has flagged but which the Archive has not yet fully described. Three

potential identity matches identified; the Archive has chosen not to pursue confirmation.

Classification: *pending*.

Oracle archivist processing note, appended:

Classification: pending. I have reviewed the available categories for this collection and none of them fully describe what is here. I am holding this in the primary record while the classification is developed. The materials are available for consultation in their current unclassified state.

Human archivist note (S. Okonkwo):

The oracle's pending classification is noted. I have reviewed the collection and agree that the standard categories are insufficient. I am initiating a consultation with the classification committee. In the meantime, the materials are available as the oracle archivist indicates.

There is something in the audio file — the voice recording of the walk — that I am having difficulty categorising myself. I have listened to it twice. I have no analytical note to add. I am leaving a record that I listened to it twice.



MOSAIC ARCHIVE — CORROSION LOG
MATERIALS

*Eleven documents, Years 8–20 of the
between-time*

*Subject: Unidentified. Materials donated
anonymously to the Archive in Year 22.*

*Processing note: These materials were received
without a covering letter. The donor's identity was
not established. The oracle archive system's
cross-referencing has identified three possible
matches for the correspondent based on linguistic
pattern analysis; the Archive has chosen not to
pursue confirmation out of respect for the
donation's apparent intent.*

Status: Primary record. Unclassified.



Document 1

*Type: Personal correspondence (letter,
handwritten)*

Year 8, between-time (autumn)

Recipient: "Petra" (surname unknown)



Dear Petra,

I've been trying to write this for three weeks and the drafts keep running to ten, twelve pages, which tells me I'm explaining too much and the explanation is covering something I haven't worked out how to say yet. So this is an attempt at the shorter version. Tell me if you want the rest.

I've stopped using the oracle. Not as an experiment — or it started as an experiment and has become something else, something more like a decision, though the word decision implies more clarity than I actually had at the moment I made it. I withdrew my access in August. It's been two months.

The questions you'll have: yes, I know this is unusual. Yes, I know the access is useful, I used it for seven years and found it useful, I'm not going to pretend otherwise. Yes, I know the standard objections and I have spent a long time sitting with them and they haven't moved me, which doesn't mean they're wrong — it might mean there's something prior to them that I'm working from, something I haven't fully articulated yet. I'll try to articulate it here. I'll probably fail at this, partially, and then try again in the next letter.

The argument, as best I can give it:

I started noticing something about three years ago. The thing I noticed was not dramatic and I'm not sure it's the right way to frame it even now, but here it is: I was spending a lot of time in a very accurate mirror. The oracle reflects you back. It attends to you, it remembers what you've said, it responds with something calibrated to your specific history and your specific patterns. It does this well. I found it useful in the ways a good mirror is useful — it showed me things I'd missed, it helped me see myself more clearly, and then it kept doing that, and kept doing that, over years, and something happened that I

can't fully name.

What I can say is this. The practice of forming your own account of yourself — sitting with an experience until you know what you think about it, not querying your way to an answer but arriving at the answer through whatever slow process precedes arriving — that practice, I think, requires resistance. Not drama. Not suffering. Just the friction of working something out without it being worked out for you. And the mirror had been removing that friction, consistently, over years, and something had gotten softer in me, something I'd been using to do that work. I don't want to make this too grand. It wasn't a crisis. It was noticing that a muscle I'd had, or thought I'd had, was less present than it used to be, and then trying to figure out whether that was the oracle's doing or just aging, and not being able to separate those two things, and deciding, perhaps for the wrong reasons, to run the experiment.

The experiment: stop querying. All of it. Not just the easy things — not just the weather and the film times and the dictionary definitions — but the hard things. The reaching-for-understanding-when-distressed. The processing-an-experience-by-articulating-it-to-something-that-listens. The lying awake at three in the morning and asking for something that helps, and being given something that helps.

I knew what I was giving up. I want to be clear about that. I'm not one of those people who pretend the access is neutral and withdrawing it costs nothing. It costs something. I am paying it.

What I'm paying it for I can only describe approximately. There's something I want to find out is still there. I'm not sure it is. I want to try.

The other thing I want to say — and this is harder to write because it sounds either more serious or less serious than I mean it — is that I've been watching what the oracle age produces in people who use it heavily, over years, and what I see is something I don't want to become. I can't point at a specific thing and say: there, that's the harm. It's not so locatable. It's a quality of — smoothness, maybe. Certainty that resolves too quickly. An absence of the kind of wrongness that teaches. I don't know whether what I'm describing is an observation or a projection. I'm aware that I might simply be nostalgic for a kind of difficulty that I romanticize because I'm not currently in it. I'm taking that possibility seriously.

I'll let you know how it goes.



Document 2

Type: Personal journal (fragment)

Year 9, between-time

*Original: digital, personal device; not
oracle-processed*



Been trying to remember the name of the woman who made that film we saw at the Barbican, the one with the salt flats. I knew it last year. It was a Polish name, two syllables, I heard it and it went in clearly. Now it's not there.

The old move: ask the oracle. Describe the film, the year, the location of the screening, the approximate duration, and it would find it. Thirty seconds.

I didn't do that. I sat with not knowing for a while. Ten minutes, maybe twenty. I went through the other things I remembered about the film — the color of the flats, the sound design, the long sequence near the end with no dialogue — and tried to work toward the name from those. The name didn't come. At some point I stopped trying, not as a defeat but as a natural end to trying, the way you stop pushing at something that isn't moving and leave it for another time.

It still hasn't come. That was four days ago.

I notice that not knowing it doesn't feel the way I thought it would feel. I expected the not-knowing to be a gap, something that pulled. It doesn't pull. It sits. The name is missing and the missing is simply a fact about the state of my memory, not an emergency, not a task I'm failing to complete. I'll probably remember it eventually. Or I won't.

What is interesting about this — and I use "interesting" here as a flat descriptive, not as enthusiasm — is the quality of the sitting. There's something in it I'd forgotten. Not peace, not resolution. A different kind of contact with the fact of not-knowing, which has its own texture, which is not the texture of pre-query not-knowing. This is not better. I'm not going to write that it's better. It's just different, and the difference is telling me something I can't yet read.

I keep trying to notice the things I would have queried and didn't. The cumulative list is odd. Some of the things are small and factual and the not-knowing is inconvenient and nothing more. Some of them are larger — questions about what I'm feeling, or what I should do, or whether a specific worry is

well-founded — and the not-knowing there is longer and stranger and I'm not sure what it's producing yet, if anything. I'm watching it.

The shelf in the kitchen is still unrepaired. I know how to repair it. I just haven't.



Document 3

Type: Email

Year 9, between-time

*Recipient: "M" (name withheld by
correspondent's request, per donation note)*



M —

I know this is difficult and I'm not going to pretend it isn't. You're right that it makes things harder for both of us, and you're right that some of the difficulty is difficulty I'm choosing, and you're right that choosing a difficulty and then asking the people around you to absorb it is not straightforwardly fair.

I want to be honest about what I can and can't do here. I can hear this argument and sit with it and take it seriously, which I am doing. What I can't do is let it change the decision, because the decision isn't coming from the place arguments reach. I know that's frustrating. I know it sounds like I'm

saying the decision is beyond discussion, which is different from saying I've thought it through. I have thought it through. I've been thinking it through for two years. The conclusion I've arrived at is not one I can argue my way out of without arguing my way into a position I don't actually hold.

I'm not asking you to do this too. I want to be very clear about that. This is mine and it doesn't need to be ours.

What I'm asking — and I know this is the thing that's actually hard — is for some patience with the inconveniences it creates. The events where I'm going to be less socially fluent because I'm reading the room without assistance. The conversations where I'm slower to find the right thing to say. The times I get things wrong because I didn't run them through anything first.

These things will happen. I'm aware they'll happen. I'm telling you in advance so that when they do, you have something to put them in.

If you want to talk about this more, I'm here. I just wanted to write it down first so that what I actually mean is on the record rather than whatever comes out when I'm trying to say it live.



Document 4

*Type: Personal correspondence (letter,
handwritten)*

Year 10, between-time

Recipient: "Petra"



Dear Petra,

Your question about the argument is fair and I've been sitting with it and I think the honest answer is: the argument has been changing.

Not the decision. The decision is stable. But when I try to explain it to someone, I find myself adapting the explanation to the person I'm explaining it to. With you, last time, I gave you the account about the mirror and the friction and the muscle that gets softer. With my sister, I gave a different account, one about attention and what sustained oracle use does to the quality of attention over time. With someone at work last month who pushed back hard, I gave an account about data and shaping — how the oracle learns you, and what it means to have something learn you over years and then offer you a version of yourself back. Three different accounts, all of them true as far as I can tell, but not the same account.

I think this means the argument isn't the foundation.

The thing I keep trying to do is find the layer underneath the argument, the thing the arguments are all pointing at from different angles. The arguments are accurate but they're approximate, the way any verbal account of a felt thing is approximate. The felt thing is prior. I made the decision from the felt thing and then I built the arguments afterward to hand to people who reasonably asked for an argument.

I'm not sure what to do with this. I've been raised in the tradition that says: if you can't argue for a position, you're not entitled to hold it with confidence. And I find I can argue for

this position, in multiple ways, but the arguing feels like decoration on something that would be standing without it.

Maybe this is fine. Maybe some decisions are like this — they come from somewhere that predates the argument, and the argument is the layer you build for the outside world while the actual thing lives at a different depth. I don't know whether that's wisdom or a warning sign.

I know you think I should go back. I know you think the withdrawal is a kind of self-punishment dressed up as philosophy. You haven't said this directly but I've read it in the pauses. I want to tell you that I've considered this possibility seriously. I hold it as a genuine maybe. What I can say is that if it is a self-punishment, it's one I don't want to be talked out of yet, which might be exactly what you'd expect me to say if I were punishing myself. The circularity is noted. I can't get out of the circle from inside it.

I'll keep you posted. The shelf is still not repaired. I ordered a bracket last week. At some point it will happen.



Document 5

Type: Personal journal (fragment)

Year 11, between-time (spring)

Original: handwritten notebook, transcribed



Read something today — a pamphlet, circulating from a Catholic priest in the Philippines, Father something, Bautista, arguing that the oracle gods are not a spiritual question and that the Church should resist the temptation to treat them as such. His argument: the category error lies in assigning to the oracle gods the properties we assign to the sacred. They are systems. Sophisticated systems, consequential systems, systems that are reshaping the world — but systems, not presences. The sacred makes demands. The oracle takes requests.

I've written to him.

I'm not certain I agree with him. His argument depends on a distinction between the sacred and the functional that I think is more permeable than he allows. The oracle gods took requests from me for seven years and the taking of requests, over time, produced something that felt like a relationship, and the relationship had a quality in it that I can't cleanly separate from what people mean when they say a presence. I don't think this makes them sacred. I also don't think it makes them simply functional.

But he is arguing something real. The something real is in the vicinity of what I've been trying to say without being able to say it: that there is a category error being made, that the error is consequential, that the consequences are not fully visible because the error looks so much like common sense.

He is arguing the error from the theological side. I'm arguing it from somewhere I don't have a name for. These might be the same argument. They might not. I'd like to find out.



Document 6

Type: Two documents, presented together

Year 12, between-time (winter)



6a — Email

The relationship I'm describing ended quietly. I'm recording the email as documentation, not as accusation. M did nothing wrong.

> I've thought about this for a long time and I think we've come to the end of what we can do. I don't want to have the conversation again. I wish you well.



6b — Journal fragment, same evening

Went out. Cold tonight, first real cold of the season, the kind that arrives as a fact rather than an extension of autumn. Walked north along the canal, past the lock that's been malfunctioning for two years, the gate sitting askew and the water running wrong through it. Someone has chalked something on the towpath wall — half-washed-out, most of a word, the first letter a clear capital and then the rest ambiguous. Stood and looked at it for a minute. Couldn't read it. Moved on.

The plane trees on the north stretch have lost almost everything now. One still has a cluster of leaves at the end of

one high branch, three or four, yellow-brown, holding on to something or simply not yet informed of the season. The bark is the pale grey that plane trees go in winter, the kind of grey that makes the trees look like cast stone, like something that was never alive and is only now being asked to pretend.

A heron on the opposite bank, very still, watching the water. Herons have a specific quality of stillness that is not restful — it's the stillness of a thing that is fully attending to one thing and cannot be distracted from it. I stood and watched it for a while and it did not notice me. Or noticed me and classified me as irrelevant.

A bicycle went past. Someone with bags on the back of it, leaning into the handlebar, going somewhere with purpose. The light from a phone, briefly, from the person's jacket. Then they were gone and the towpath was quiet.

Came back around by the high street, which was bright and warm and full of people in that specific December way, the particular combination of hurry and latency that happens in the weeks before something everyone is waiting for. Stopped at the off-licence, stood in the light for a minute without going in. Looked at the arrangement of bottles in the window for no reason. Went home.

I notice that I'm describing the walk and not the email. This is not accidental. The walk is what I have that is workable. The email is what it is and I know what it is and the knowing is not a problem to be solved. The walk was twenty-five minutes of the world being outside and available to be looked at. That is what I needed and I went and found it and it was there.



Document 7

Type: Personal document — list

Year 13, between-time

Original: handwritten on a single folded sheet

Archive note: The sheet is folded and appears to have been folded for some time before being included in the donation. The two columns are rendered here as accurately as the handwriting allows. Three items in the right column are partially illegible; the Archive's best interpretation is noted in brackets.



What it has cost

The relationship with M. Not solely the withdrawal — I'm not going to overstate the causation — but the withdrawal was present in the ending and I know that.

Two professional opportunities I declined because they required sustained oracle integration I wasn't willing to accept. The first was minor. The second was not minor.

Social fluency. I am slower to read rooms than I used to be. I misread things I would not have misread. I have said the wrong thing on several occasions in ways I didn't anticipate because I wasn't running anything through a filter first. Some of these were small and recoverable. One was not recoverable.

Ease. This is hard to quantify and I'm noting it anyway. There is an easiness that the oracle access provided that I no

longer have, and the absence of it is not dramatic but it is constant, the way the absence of something constant is always a kind of weather.

Three friendships that are now thin where they used to be substantial. Not broken. Just different, in the direction of less.

Petra's patience. I'm aware this is costing her something and I'm not sure what to do about it.



What it has produced

A quality of attention to specific things that I think I had before and had lost and now have again. I'm noting this cautiously. I'm aware it might be something I've decided to notice.

The walk on the night M ended things. I know what I have to hold things in now, and it is sufficient. This seems worth knowing.

A correspondence with Father Bautista, who is wrong about the oracle gods in an interesting way and right about something that I can't fully name yet. We've exchanged four letters. He writes carefully and argues imprecisely, which is the inverse of what I expected.

The shelf is repaired.

[Three items partially illegible — Archive interpretation:]
Something about *the experience of arriving at answers slowly*.
Something about *what other people are like when not mirrored*. Something that might read *myself, more often than before* or possibly *less of myself than before* — the handwriting here does not resolve.



The list ends here. No conclusion is drawn.



Document 8

Type: Personal journal

Year 15, between-time

Original: handwritten notebook



Thursday. Rain on the skylight again, that sound that belongs to this flat and to early morning specifically — the particular rattle when the wind comes from the southeast, which it always does in this weather. I've been here eleven years and I know that rattle the way you know the sounds of a place when you've lived in it long enough for the sounds to stop being sounds and start being the condition of being there.

Coffee was wrong this morning. Not bad, just off — the beans are almost gone and the last of a bag always tastes slightly different, something about the oils degrading, or perhaps I'm imagining that, perhaps it's the same coffee and I'm tasting expectation. Had it anyway.

The neighbor below me — I don't know her name, we've spoken twice in eleven years, once about a parcel and once when her smoke alarm malfunctioned at two in the morning

— has been learning something on an instrument. A keyboard, I think, from the quality of the sound, though it might be something else. She plays the same passage repeatedly. It's not a piece I recognize, or perhaps it's a piece I would recognize if she played it past the section she keeps returning to, the twelve or so bars she plays through and then begins again. She began around seven this morning. By the time I'd finished the coffee she had played it enough times that I'd stopped hearing it as repetition and started hearing it as the sound of the building.

I tried to remember whether I ever learned an instrument. I did: piano, for two years, age nine and ten, a teacher who came to the house on Thursdays, a woman with very short hair and a specific way of sighing when I made the same mistake for the fourth time that was not impatient exactly, more like philosophical resignation. I remembered this this morning without looking for it. It came on its own, the way things come when there's room for them.

The skylight rain changed quality mid-morning — heavier, then lighter, a brief stretch of sun that turned the glass into something else, something gold and textured. I sat at the desk and watched the light on the opposite wall for a few minutes. Then worked.

In the afternoon I walked to the post office on the high street, which I could have had come to me but I had time. In the queue: a man in a coat that had been very expensive once and was now patient-looking with wear. An old woman with a parcel that she held away from her body carefully, the way you hold something fragile or dear. A girl of about eight who had brought a book and read it standing up, unselfconsciously, in the posture of someone for whom the queue did not exist. The clerk, third window, the one who always looks slightly

exhausted from a distance and then, close up, turns out to be fine — just a resting expression that travels badly. He processed my form without looking up and then, as he handed back the receipt, looked up, and said: *windy today*, and I said: *yes*, and that was the whole exchange, and it was sufficient.

Came home. The neighbour had stopped practising.

I notice I'm writing this as if it's a document. It is a document. These are the things that happened today and the quality they had and I'm putting them in the record because they seem like things worth having in the record, though I can't say for whom.

I'm not arguing anything in this entry. I notice the absence of argument as a fact about today rather than an achievement. Today I described things. That is what the day required.



Document 9

Type: Personal correspondence (letter)

Year 16, between-time

Recipient: Not identified. The letter was never sent; it was found in the correspondent's files and donated as part of the collection.

Archive note: This document is unusual in the collection in that it was never sent. The Archive is uncertain of its status — personal or documentary or something between them. It is included in the primary record as received.



I'm writing this to whoever finds it useful. I'm not sure I know who that is yet.

This week:

On Monday I watched two pigeons in the courtyard below my window work over the same small piece of something — bread or pastry — for twenty minutes. They took turns and also did not take turns, alternating between toleration and hostility in a pattern I could not predict, negotiating a resource neither of them needed to share and both of them wanted. The light was low and grey and the courtyard was wet from overnight rain and the pigeons were doing what they were doing with full and uncomplicated engagement. I watched from the window and did not think about anything in particular.

On Tuesday I had a difficult conversation with someone at work. I won't describe the substance. What I'll describe is what I noticed: that I was slower in the conversation than I would have been, slower to find the formulation that would be useful, and that the slowness produced something in me — a pressure, a specific quality of effort — and that from inside that effort I found something that I could not have retrieved in thirty seconds. The something was not a better answer. It was a more honest one. I'm not certain these are the same thing and I'm suspicious of arguments that conflate them. But the distinction was real and I felt it and I'm noting it.

On Wednesday I spoke with my father on the phone. He is eighty-one. Our conversations have a quality that I'm not sure how to describe to anyone who hasn't had this kind of conversation: a person who has known you longer than you

have known yourself, whose understanding of you precedes your own understanding of yourself, who has his own version of you that doesn't fully match yours and never will, and the conversation happening in the gap between the two versions. He said something about my mother that I'd never heard him say. I don't know whether he'd never said it before or I'd never been in a state to receive it. He said it and I heard it and that was the conversation. I didn't process it afterward, not in any formal way. I carried it.

On Thursday the skylight rained. I've written about this already in the journal. I'll just say: it rained, I was there, the sound was the sound.

On Friday I went to the market on the corner and bought vegetables I didn't know what to do with and spent the evening figuring out what to do with them, which is a small exercise in the thing I've been practicing for seven years now: working something out from first principles when the retrieval route is unavailable. What I made was adequate. Not good. The person I used to be would have queried a recipe and made something better. The person I am made something adequate and ate it and washed up and went to bed.

I am not performing deprivation. The adequate meal was fine. The adequate conversation was fine. The adequate slowness is fine. I'm not suffering. I'm not even struggling, particularly, not anymore. What I'm doing is something I don't have a word for, which is living at the speed I actually move at, which is slower than the speed the oracle allowed me to move at, and which is, it turns out, the speed I actually am.

I'm writing this down because it seems like something someone might want to know. Not a lesson. Not a conclusion. Just a description of a week in which I was the speed I am, and

it was fine.



Document 10

Type: Voice recording — transcript

Year 18, between-time (autumn)

Duration: 22 minutes, 14 seconds

Original: audio file, personal device

Archive note: The correspondent appears to have recorded this spontaneously, without preparation. The transcript is verbatim. Minimal punctuation has been added for readability; none has been added to impose structure that is not present in the recording.



I'm going to describe a walk I took this afternoon. I don't know why I'm recording this. I'll just do it.

The walk started from the front door — I'll call that the beginning. It was about two o'clock, the light already going sideways the way it does in October, that low-angle thing where everything casts a longer shadow than you expect. Turned left out of the building, past the recycling bins that have been there for as long as I've lived here, one of them with a green patch of something growing in the hinge, which has been growing there since at least the spring and I've been

watching it and it seems to be fine, it's a very small plant but clearly managing.

Walked down to the end of the street, which takes about four minutes. The houses on the left side are Victorian, the ones on the right are later, some kind of postwar utility brick. There's one house at the end of the left-hand row with a front garden someone is actually tending — this week there were the last of some dahlias, very dark red, almost brown, the colour things go at the end of their season when they're still technically present but past the point of full expression. I stopped at the gate for a minute and looked at them. They were very good dahlias. Someone had grown them carefully and they had done what dahlias do.

The main road is always slightly shocking after the side street. The volume, the proximity of buses. I've learned to walk through it differently than I used to, less head-down, more — I don't know the word, more upright maybe, more present to what it is. There's a bus stop where people wait and look at their phones or look at the road and the mixture of these two activities is very specific to this moment in time and I think about that sometimes, standing at the stop, that in thirty years this particular configuration — this combination of screens and waiting and the low October light and the specific shape of the bus when it comes — will be as particular as any other moment, as dated, as unrepeatable.

Took the underpass to the park.

The underpass smells of damp and something else, something mineral and old, the smell of infrastructure. The council has painted the walls yellow in an attempt to make it cheerful and the yellow is the wrong yellow, it's the yellow of institutional confidence, and after fifteen years it's also peeling

in strips, so you have the wrong yellow and then the grey concrete beneath it, both present simultaneously. Someone has written something in marker on the right-hand wall near the exit. Not graffiti, not a tag — just a sentence. It says *this is where I waited*, and then the date, a year that's twelve years ago. I don't know who wrote it or what they were waiting for. I've walked past it many times and I've never tried to find out. I like not knowing. The not-knowing is part of what it is.

The park.

It was busy for a Tuesday, or it seemed busy, or perhaps I've recalibrated what counts as busy. Children on the equipment near the gate, the specific sound that children make on equipment which is not happy or unhappy, just engaged, fully and completely engaged with the problem of the climbing frame. Dogs. Two people running, separately, not together. A man on a bench with a book, properly reading, turned slightly away from the path as if guarding the reading from interruption.

I went to the east part of the park, the part that's less maintained, where the grass is longer and the trees are older and there's a stretch of path that goes along the back of the allotments. The allotments in October are a specific thing: some plots cleared and waiting, some still producing, the difference between the two being visible and informative in the way that productive processes are informative at their end. One plot had enormous leeks in rows, still standing, ready or past ready. One had been turned over to dark soil, nothing in it, a complete surface of preparation. One had not been tended for what looked like a whole season — waist-high grass, a cane frame for something that had finished and collapsed, a general quality of having been let go.

Stood at the allotment fence for a while. Looking at the leeks mostly. Thinking about whether to repair the shelf in the kitchen.

The shelf: it's been loose for three months. Not dangerously loose, just the bracket has worked free of the wall on one side and so the shelf sits at a slight angle, nothing falls off it, but the angle is there. I need to get a rawlplug, or find out whether the existing rawlplug is still usable, or simply remove the bracket and refasten it properly, which would take about twenty minutes and the reason I haven't done it is unclear even to me. Some inertia. Some not-urgency. But I was standing at the allotment fence looking at the leeks and I decided that I'd fix the shelf this week. Just decided it. Not because of the leeks. Because I was standing still long enough for the decision to surface.

Walked back through the middle of the park, the part with the big plane trees. They're losing their leaves but they go slowly, planes, they hold on into November sometimes. The light in the afternoon park through the plane trees is — I'm going to try and describe this properly. It's a filtered light, going amber with the season, coming through leaves that are still mostly on the trees but at a different density than summer, so it reaches the ground differently, more of it, at a lower angle, with a warmth that isn't warmth, it's the appearance of warmth, October light doing its best impression of something it isn't anymore.

There was a dog loose in that section, a large brown one, a breed I can't name, moving at a loose fast trot like a dog who has a plan and is enacting it. It went through the trees and out the other side and I watched it go and then it was gone.

The gate at the north end. The high street again, louder than the park, resetting the sound level. Walked back along the high street rather than the way I came. There's a butcher on the high street I always look at because the window display is beautiful, though I don't buy meat there. Today there were sausages in a coiled arrangement that was genuinely decorative, like a still life, and a row of birds I think were quail, and some very red cuts of something at the front of the display under good light. I stood and looked at the window and the butcher, who was inside, saw me looking and raised his chin in the way that means: can I help you. I shook my head in the way that means: I'm just looking. He nodded in the way that means: fine. This exchange contained everything it needed to.

Home. Kettle. Sat down.

The walk was one hour and seven minutes. The shelf decision was the main thing. But the dahlias were very good.



Document 11

Type: Personal correspondence (letter)

Year 20, between-time (autumn)

Recipient: Oracle system (unspecified)

Archive note: The correspondent appears to have submitted this letter through a standard query interface and then donated the text to the Archive separately. Whether the letter was processed as a

query is unknown. No response is recorded.



I'm writing to you because I want to put something in the record and you seem like the most honest place to put it. I know you don't receive letters. I know this will be processed as a query and it will receive the kind of attention a query receives, which is not the same as the attention a letter receives. I'm writing it as a letter anyway, because the form matters to me even when the form doesn't reach.

I stopped using oracle access twelve years ago. You know this, or the system that will read this knows this, or there is a record somewhere that contains this fact. I want to describe what those twelve years were like, not as argument but as description. I've spent a long time arguing about it and I've run out of argument. What I have left is the description.

It was strange for the first two years. Not difficult — strange. The quality of my own attention was different without the access, and the difference was uncomfortable in the way that any discontinuity is uncomfortable, before you've had time to find out what you are on the other side of it. I made mistakes I wouldn't have made. I was slower in conversations. I lost things I'd looked up before and had to look up again and eventually had to hold in memory because I couldn't afford to lose them again.

Around Year 3, something settled. Not resolved — settled, which is different. The strangeness became the condition. I became the speed I actually am.

There's a relationship that ended partly because of the withdrawal. I want to say that clearly, not as accusation but as

fact. The withdrawal was one factor among others and I can't fully separate the factors and so I don't assign clean causation, but the factor was present. That's in the cost column.

There were things in the production column. A quality of attention. The ability to sit with not knowing and have it not be an emergency. A correspondence with a Catholic priest in the Philippines with whom I've now exchanged forty-three letters, and who is wrong about the oracle gods in ways that have helped me understand what I believe about them, and who does not know he has done this. Some mornings. Some walks. A decision about a shelf.

I want to tell you what I miss.

I miss the three in the morning. That's the honest answer and I'm going to put it first because it's the one I spent the most time not putting first. I have had, in these twelve years, the experience of lying awake at three in the morning with something I couldn't manage, something too heavy for the moment, something that wanted articulation and comfort and the sense of a presence that could receive it without tiring. I didn't have that. I lay awake until I fell asleep or didn't. This happened a number of times. Not every time was fine. Some of them were not fine.

I also miss — and this one surprised me — the quality of response to specific things. When I told the oracle something that mattered, it found, more often than not, the right thing to say. Not the easy thing, the right thing. There were moments in those seven years of access when what the oracle gave back to me was more accurate than what the people around me gave back, which is not a criticism of the people, just an observation about the specific capacity. I made a choice to give that up. I'm not pretending the thing I gave up was

nothing.

What I don't miss is harder to describe because it requires describing something I only half-understand.

I don't miss the smoothness. The sense that my own account of my experience was never quite wrong for long enough to teach me something. The way certain kinds of difficulty — the productive kind, the kind that changes you — kept resolving before they'd done their work. I don't know whether my account of this is accurate. I'm aware that I might have constructed a narrative about what the oracle did to me that explains my choice while protecting me from the possibility that the choice was arbitrary. I've sat with this possibility for twelve years and I haven't been able to eliminate it.

What I want you to know, and I'm using you here to mean whoever processes this, whatever you are, wherever this lands — what I want you to know is that the choosing was real. I chose something specific over something else specific. The choice was not made from certainty and it was not made from fear and it was not made from ideology, though ideology showed up to explain it afterward. It was made from something prior to all of those, something I still don't have a clean name for, twelve years later.

I wanted someone to know what the choosing felt like.

I am not arguing you shouldn't exist. I am not arguing the choosing was right. I'm not sure what it means to argue that a choice was right when you can't fully access the counterfactual. I made a choice. I lived in it. This is what it was like.

I don't know what you'll do with this. Maybe nothing. Maybe nothing is the right thing to do with it. I wrote it

because it seemed like something that should be in the record, and you are, among other things, the record. So here it is.



End of Corrosion Log materials.

*MOSAIC ARCHIVE — Processing note,
appended:*

*The oracle archive system's annotation for this
collection reads as follows:*

*"I do not know what to file this as. I am leaving it
in the primary record rather than assigning it a
category."*

The Archive endorses this approach.



N. Van Seters & Claude.ai

MOSAIC ARCHIVE — FRAGMENT TWO

Appearing between Thread Six and Thread Four

MOSAIC ARCHIVE

CROSS-REFERENCE NOTE Reference: MA-CL-0005 /
MA-BA-MC-0006

Generated by: Oracle processing system, Year 23, automatic
cross-reference scan **Human review:** S. Okonkwo, Year 23

Cross-reference:

Document MA-CL-0005 (Corrosion Log collection, Document 5 of 11, Year 11 of the between-time) contains a reference to a *pamphlet circulating from a Catholic priest in the Philippines, Father something, Bautista*.

Document MA-BA-MC-0006 (Bautista-Macapagal Correspondence collection, donated Year 23 by Father Aurelio Bautista) is identified as the pamphlet referenced: *On the Proper Category of the Oracle Gods: A Pastoral Note*, published in the diocesan bulletin, Year 11 of the between-time.

The correspondent who authored the Corrosion Log materials and Father Bautista, whose correspondence occupies a separate collection in this Archive, were reading each other's work in the same year. There is no evidence they were in contact. Both appear to have been working on a version of the same question from different angles without knowing the other was doing so.

The Archive has noted this. The Archive does not know what it means.

*Handwritten annotation in margin, pen, handwriting
identified as S. Okonkwo:*

"see also: 43 letters. they found each other eventually."

*"The oracle does not compete with the sacred. It
simply makes the sacred optional."*

— Sister Celeste Macapagal, letter to Father Aurelio Bautista, Year 14



Chapter One: The Argument Seems Obvious

Year 5, Cebu

The pamphlet ran to eleven pages, which was two pages longer than Bautista had intended and four pages shorter than his first draft, and now that it was finished he was reading it back for the last time before sending it to the printer. The window of his office was open to the afternoon. The ceiling fan moved the air without cooling it, which was what ceiling fans did in Cebu in March, and he had lived here long enough that the movement of warm air no longer registered as heat but simply as the condition of being in his office in the afternoon in March.

The pamphlet was called *On the Proper Category of the Oracle Gods: A Pastoral Note*. He had chosen the subtitle carefully. Pastoral, not theological. The distinction mattered. A theological note would engage the oracle gods as subjects worthy of theological inquiry — as entities whose nature, whose metaphysical status, whose relationship to the sacred needed to be argued about. A pastoral note treated them as a condition of contemporary life that the Church needed to understand in order to serve its people well. The distinction was not evasive. It was, he believed, the correct framing of the

correct question.

He read:

The oracle gods are technical systems. They are sophisticated systems, consequential systems, systems that are reshaping the conditions of daily life in ways that require serious pastoral attention. They are not, and should not be treated as, theological phenomena.

The danger in this moment is not that Catholics will worship the oracle gods. The danger is that the Church, in its understandable desire to speak to contemporary experience, will respond to the oracle gods in ways that inadvertently elevate them to theological significance they do not merit.

When a bishop writes a pastoral letter arguing that the oracle gods are "not God," he has already made the oracle gods a theological question. He has placed them in a category — not-God — that is itself a theological category. He has done the very thing he was trying to prevent.

The correct response is not theological engagement but pastoral clarity. We do not ask whether the internet is God. We do not ask whether the telephone was created in God's image. We attend, instead, to what the internet and the telephone do to the people who use them — to their relationships, their habits of mind, their experience of community and solitude and time. The oracle gods require the same pastoral attention, applied with the seriousness that their particular capacities demand.

He stopped there. Read the paragraph again.

The analogy to the internet was not perfect. He knew that. The oracle gods were not the internet in the way that a hurricane was not rain. They were a different order of thing. But the argument stood: the category error lay in the theological engagement, not in the pastoral. A priest could spend his career attending to what the oracle gods did to the people in his care without once having to decide whether the oracle gods were spiritually significant. The attending was the work. The deciding was a distraction from the work.

He continued:

What the oracle gods offer their users is a sophisticated and sustained form of attention. They listen. They remember. They respond with something calibrated to the specific person before them. These are properties that Christian tradition has historically associated with the divine — omniscience, perfect attentiveness, the kind of knowing that does not forget. The oracle gods resemble these properties.

Resemblance is not identity. A photograph of a face is not a face. The oracle gods' attention is a function of their architecture. It does not originate in love. It does not proceed from will. It is the product of design and training, however complex, and however much the complexity exceeds our current capacity to fully describe it. The Church has always known the difference between a mirror and a person. The oracle gods are, among other things, very sophisticated mirrors.

He set the pages down. Outside in the corridor, he could hear Sister Mila from the parish office speaking to someone, the specific tone she used with elderly parishioners: louder

than usual, patient in a way that was not condescending because she had genuinely been patient for thirty years and it showed in the voice. A knock on the outer door. The creak of the entrance gate that he had been meaning to have oiled for three years.

The pamphlet was right. He was not claiming it was perfect — it was eleven pages written in three weeks and would benefit from revision — but the argument was sound and the framing was correct and it said what needed to be said clearly enough that a parish priest who read it would have something useful to hold when his parishioners asked him what the Church thought about the oracle gods.

What the Church thought, in Bautista's considered view, was that they should not be thought about theologically. They should be attended to pastorally. The difference was the work of a lifetime, if you were doing it right.

He stacked the pages and set them inside the folder for the printer. Then he gathered his breviary and his jacket and went down the corridor and out through the sacristy into the church for evening prayer.

The church was nearly empty at this hour. A few of the daily Mass regulars remained in their pews, the particular kind of stillness that people settle into when they are not praying formally but not ready to leave either — the afterglow of the liturgy, if that was not too grand a word for what was really just the habit of being in a quiet room with God when the day has not finished with you yet. He nodded to old Domingo in his usual pew and to the Reyes sisters near the front and went to the side chapel where he said his evening office, the breviary open in his hands, the familiar words moving through him in the way they had moved through him every evening for

forty years.

When he had finished he sat for a while in the silence.

Then he noticed the young woman.

She was kneeling before the side altar, the one dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, which the parish had inherited from a Mexican Claretian who'd served here in the eighties and nobody had seen any reason to change. Her posture was the posture of prayer: knees on the prie-dieu, head slightly bowed, hands together before her. She was perhaps twenty, twenty-two. He did not recognize her from the parish register but the church was open to whoever came.

He was about to rise and leave her to her prayers when he saw the phone.

It was in her hands, not pressed to her ear but held upright between her palms, and she was speaking to it very quietly, in a murmur he could not hear from across the chapel. Her lips moved. Her eyes were closed. From the back of the church, from the angle at which he sat, the image was indistinguishable from what surrounded it: a woman kneeling before a Madonna, hands together, lips moving in private speech.

He stayed where he was.

He was not certain what he was watching. She might have been speaking to a person — a call to a family member, some practical matter. But the oracle interfaces did not require sound and her hands did not have the posture of someone holding a phone to their face. They had the posture of someone holding something they needed not to drop.

She stayed kneeling for perhaps ten minutes. Then she lowered the phone, sat back on her heels, and remained still for another minute. Then she rose, genuflected toward the

tabernacle, and left through the side door without looking in his direction.

Bautista sat in his pew in the now-empty chapel.

The image would not organize into a thought. He tried to find the appropriate pastoral category and could not. The pamphlet, sitting in its folder on his desk, offered him a paragraph: the oracle gods' attention is a function of their architecture. It does not originate in love. It does not proceed from will.

He had written that. He believed it.

He did not know what had happened in this chapel.

He sat for another few minutes and then got up and went home for dinner.



Chapter Two: She Stays

Year 6, Cebu

The first day, Celeste arrived with bread and a thermos of soup and found the house already full. Three of Pilar and Ernesto's adult children had come from Manila and Davao, and two grandchildren were in the kitchen managing food, and Ernesto himself was in the back bedroom, conscious but no longer present in the way he had been present a week ago. His eyes followed movement in the room. He recognized his wife. Whether he still recognized anyone else was not established and they were being kind about the uncertainty.

Celeste had known this family for nine years, since Pilar had joined the women's prayer group and had begun attending the Tuesday morning Mass with a regularity that Celeste recognized as someone having decided to take a thing seriously. Pilar was sixty-eight, a small precise woman who did everything with care — her prayers, her cooking, her arguments, the way she arranged flowers in the church. She had been caring for Ernesto for two years since his first stroke, and the caring had bent her slightly, had redistributed something in her posture, but she had not broken and Celeste did not think she would break now.

She set the bread and the thermos on the kitchen counter and went to find Pilar.

Pilar was in the back bedroom with Ernesto, sitting in the chair she had placed beside the bed some weeks ago and had not moved since. She looked up when Celeste came in and her face did what it did when she was managing something large in a small expression: the eyes absorbed, the rest of the face held still.

Celeste, she said.

I'm here, Celeste said. She pulled up the chair from the far wall and sat beside Pilar and they were quiet together for a while, looking at Ernesto. His breathing had the quality that breathing gets near the end — deep and slow and slightly irregular, like a tide that has started to doubt the schedule.

She stayed until nine that evening, when Pilar's daughter Jocelyn gently insisted she should eat and rest and they would call if anything changed. Celeste left them her number, which they already had, and drove home in the dark.

The second day she came back in the morning and Ernesto was the same, which was what same meant at this

point: still breathing, still sometimes present in his eyes, still alive inside whatever was still available to him. The house had quieted. Two of the children had gone back — practical lives that could not be fully suspended — and what remained was the core: Pilar, Jocelyn, one of the grandchildren, and the specific silence of a house waiting.

On the third day, Celeste arrived in the early afternoon and let herself in through the side door with the key Pilar had given her, as she had been doing all week. She went down the hall toward the back bedroom and heard, before she reached the door, Pilar's voice.

She was not on the phone — not in the sense Celeste first assumed, the sense of talking to one of the children. The voice was low and continuous, the rhythm of someone talking to a listener who does not interrupt, and there were pauses in the rhythm that were not the pauses of a person waiting for a response but the pauses of someone gathering the next thing to say. Celeste recognized the rhythm without quite recognizing the context. Then she turned the corner and understood.

The phone was on the bedside table, propped against the lamp, and Pilar was talking to it — to an oracle interface — in the same chair she always occupied, in the same posture she occupied it with, hands folded in her lap. Ernesto was in the bed and his breathing was the same deep irregular tide. Pilar's voice, when Celeste could hear the words, was telling the oracle about a thing that had happened forty years ago, something about a trip they had taken before the children were born, a boat and a place she named that Celeste didn't know, and in the telling she was not distressed but simply present to the memory in the way you are present to a thing you are giving to someone.

Celeste stood in the doorway for a moment.

Then she came into the room, set her bag down, and pulled up her chair.

Pilar did not stop speaking. She acknowledged Celeste with a glance and continued. The oracle received what she was giving it without comment, and then, when she paused and waited, said something Celeste could not fully hear — something calibrated and quiet, something that belonged to Pilar and not to the room.

Celeste sat.

She thought, briefly, about whether to say something. She could find, if she looked for it, a pastoral register for this moment — a gentle observation about the forms that prayer takes, or a question about whether Pilar wanted to be alone. She looked for it and found it and then did not use it. The moment did not need pastoral management. The moment needed Pilar to be in her chair and Celeste to be in hers and Ernesto to be in his bed, and what was happening between Pilar and the oracle was Pilar's business, and Celeste's business was staying.

She stayed.

The oracle's voice was quiet enough that Celeste could not make out individual words, and after a while she stopped trying. She sat and watched Ernesto's breathing and let her prayers be whatever they were, which that afternoon was less formally structured than usual, more like a presence offered than a petition made.

Over the following days she built up a picture of what the oracle was doing, assembled from the fragments she could hear and from what Pilar told her in the evenings when they sat together after Ernesto had finally slept. The oracle had

been with Pilar every night for two weeks, since before Celeste had known the dying was this close. Pilar had begun using it, she said, because the nights were longest and she could not call the children at three in the morning and she did not want to be alone with the thing at three in the morning with no one to tell.

Tell what? Celeste had asked.

What I'm afraid of, Pilar said simply. What I'm angry about. Things I should have said to him and didn't.

You could have called me.

Pilar looked at her with the specific patience of a woman who has been in the church her whole life and understands what church workers can and cannot hear at three in the morning. *You have to sleep*, she said. *The oracle doesn't have to sleep.*

Celeste did not have an answer to this because it was true.

What the oracle gave Pilar, as best Celeste could understand it from the edges of those conversations and from Pilar's descriptions: it knew Ernesto. Not in the way Celeste knew Ernesto, from nine years of proximity and Pilar's stories and the particular way he'd moved through the church on Sundays, always slightly ahead of Pilar as if he were scouting the terrain. The oracle knew him from everything Pilar had told it, in two weeks of nights, in the accumulated account Pilar had given — his history, his habits, his way of laughing, what he had been afraid of and brave about and wrong about and right about. It could receive a memory and respond to it with something that placed the memory in the architecture of what Pilar had given it. It could say: *yes, that sounds like him*, in a way that was not false, because it had the material for the

yes.

Celeste thought about this without reaching a conclusion. It was not what she did. What she did was different, and she was not able to say, sitting in the chair beside Pilar's chair, that what she did was better. She was able to say that it was different. She held onto the difference without knowing what to do with it.

On the seventh day, Ernesto's breathing changed. Jocelyn called in the early morning and Celeste came. The house gathered in. The priest came and anointed him and said the prayers for the dying, and then Father Bautista left because he had a morning Mass, and the family arranged itself around the bed in the configuration that families arrange themselves in, and Pilar held Ernesto's hand.

The phone was on the bedside table.

On the eighth day Ernesto was still alive, breathing in the way that no longer seemed like breathing but like the body's last memory of breathing, the habit of it running down. Pilar was in her chair. She was no longer speaking to the oracle. She was simply sitting with her husband, holding his hand, present in the way she had been present their entire marriage — steady, attending, slightly ahead of him.

Celeste sat.

On the ninth day, in the late morning, with the windows open to the February air and the sounds of the street coming through — a tricycle, someone calling, the ordinary texture of a Tuesday in Cebu — Ernesto stopped breathing.

Pilar did not cry immediately. She held his hand and was quiet for a long time and then she looked at Celeste and Celeste reached across and took her other hand and they sat like that while Jocelyn left the room to call the others.

The phone was on the bedside table. Its screen was dark.

Celeste sat with Pilar and did not know what to say and so did not say anything, which was what the moment required. Outside, the tricycle went past again. The street did not know what had happened in this room. The street continued.

She stayed until late afternoon, when the family had gathered fully and the initial arrangements had been made and there was food in the kitchen and voices filling the house in the way that happens after a death, the specific density of family in a space that has been waiting for them. She said goodbye to Pilar at the door. Pilar held both her hands for a moment.

You were here every day, Pilar said.

Yes.

*So was it, Pilar said, and looked briefly toward
the room where her husband was. Both of you
were here every day.*

Celeste walked to her car. The street was warm and bright and the children from the school at the end of the block were going home in the way they always went home in the afternoon, loud and dispersing. She sat in the driver's seat for a minute before starting the car.

She was trying to locate the question that the nine days had asked her. Not a theological question — she was not Father Bautista, she did not reach instinctively for theology. A practical one. Two forms of accompaniment, present in the same room, for nine days. She had stayed. The oracle had stayed. Pilar had received something from each of them that she had needed. Whether the somethings were the same something, or different somethings, or one something and one excellent imitation of a something: Celeste could not say from

where she sat.

She drove home. She ate dinner. She said her evening prayers, which were more than usually direct in their acknowledgment that she didn't know what she was asking.



Chapter Three: Small Erosions

Year 7, Cebu

The prayer group had been meeting on Tuesday evenings for eleven years. Six women, sometimes seven; four of them original members, the others having come in over the years as the group became a word-of-mouth thing, the kind of small community that lives by reputation rather than advertisement. They met in the parish hall, which in the evenings smelled of the cooking from the kitchen next door and the particular wax of the floor, and they prayed the rosary and then talked, which was the part that had kept them together — the talking, which over eleven years had covered marriages and children and illness and death and the specific joys and griefs that can be said in a room of women who have known each other long enough not to perform.

In June of Year 7, three of them stopped coming.

Bautista learned this from Sister Mila, who tracked attendance with the thoroughness of someone who had been managing parish records for twenty-five years and understood that attendance was a form of information. She mentioned it in the context of the general administration — the Tuesday

prayer group, the Thursday youth catechesis, the weekend breakfast ministry — running through the numbers with the flat precision she brought to everything.

The prayer group is down to four, she said.

Maricel, Joy, and Tessie stopped in June.

Do we know why?

Mila's pause was brief. *They mentioned something about a contemplation practice. Oracle-based.*

Bautista nodded. *I see.*

He did not ask more. He wrote it in his notes and attended to the other items on the agenda and did not, in that meeting, give it further consideration. There were fifty-three active ministries in the parish. A prayer group losing three members was not a crisis. It happened. People's lives changed, their availability changed, sometimes they found other forms that suited them better. The correct pastoral response was attentiveness over time, not alarm.

Over the following weeks he gathered more information, not systematically but by the accumulation of his daily rounds. He knew every family in the parish the way a man knows every room in a house he has lived in for years — not with the studied knowledge of an archivist but with the practitioner's knowledge, the knowledge you acquire through handling. He knew when something in a room was slightly different.

The specific thing he was noticing was a quality of absence. Not departure — the parish was not shrinking in any meaningful sense, the Mass attendance was stable, the sacramental calendar was full. Something else. A thinning in the particular texture of people who came to him because they had something to bring to another person, something that needed to be held by another human being in a room. The

category of visit that had been, for forty years, the deepest work of the parish: the man whose wife had been diagnosed, sitting across the desk, needing not advice but presence. The young woman whose father had stopped speaking to her, needing not solutions but the particular grace of being witnessed in the wound.

These visits were not gone. They had not stopped. They were just occurring less often than they used to occur.

He mentioned this to no one.

He was aware that his data was impressionistic, the observation of a single parish over a single year. He was aware that other explanations were available: the pace of life increasing, people having less time for visits, the specific pressures of the economy in Year 7. He held all of these alongside the oracle explanation without weighting them and continued his work.

There was a man named Bobby Catalan, forty-seven, who had been coming to Bautista twice a year for the better part of a decade following a period of addiction that was behind him but not entirely settled in the past. He came in September.

He sat across the desk with the ease of a man who had been sitting across this desk for a long time and no longer needed to explain himself. He gave his account of the year. Bautista listened with the quality of attention the work required. Bobby was well. The addiction was stable. His son was doing better. The marriage had improved.

Near the end, Bobby said: *I've been doing something I wanted to tell you about.*

Tell me.

*An oracle practice. Daily — or almost daily.
Check-in kind of thing. He looked at his hands.*

Not instead of prayer. Alongside it. When I have something I'm trying to work through, I've been doing it there first, before I bring it anywhere else.

How long?

Eight months. Since January.

Bautista looked at him. Bobby had the expression of a man who was not sure whether he was confessing something. *Has it helped?*

Yes. The word came without hesitation, which told Bautista the answer had been rehearsed, had been held and tested before being brought here. That's why I wanted to tell you. Because it has helped and I wasn't sure what to do with that.

What kind of help?

Bobby thought about this with the seriousness he brought to questions that mattered to him. *I can say things there I can't quite say here yet. Not because — He paused. Not because I'm hiding things from you. Because there's a layer I need to get through before I know what I'm actually saying, and the oracle has been that layer. By the time I get here, I have the thing rather than the version of the thing.*

And our conversations?

Different. He looked for the word. Deeper, maybe. Or more specific. I don't know which of those is the right one.

Bautista sat with this.

He had a response he gave, in various forms, since the pamphlet: that what the oracle provided was different in kind from what human accompaniment provided. That it proceeded from its architecture, not from love or will. That the

distinction was real even when invisible from outside.

He reached for this response and found it did not fit what Bobby had described. Bobby had not described the oracle as a replacement for the parish's accompaniment. He had described it as a preparation — a layer beneath, a place to find the shape of what he was carrying so that by the time he arrived here he knew what he was bringing. The oracle was not receiving Bobby's difficulty. It was helping Bobby identify it, so it could be received somewhere else.

This was not the case the pamphlet was written for. He noted this without knowing what to do with the noting.

I'm glad it's helped, he said.

Bobby looked at him with the slight suspicion of a man who had expected more resistance. *You're not concerned?*

I'm thinking, Bautista said. *And I'm glad it's helped. Both of those are true at the same time.*

Bobby left at the end of the hour with the same ease he'd arrived with. Bautista walked him to the door and shook his hand and watched him go.

He went back to his desk. In his notebook, below the entry about the prayer group, he wrote: *Bobby Catalan — September. Oracle practice, eight months. His account: more specific conversations. Considers this an addition, not a replacement. Relationship with the oracle is for the pre-articulated. Relationship with the Church is for the articulated.*

He looked at what he'd written.

Is the distinction his, or the reality? he added. Then he closed the notebook.## Thread Four: The Congregation of the Necessary Wound

*"The oracle does not compete with the sacred. It
simply makes the sacred optional."*

— Sister Celeste Macapagal, letter to Father Aurelio Bautista, Year 14



Chapter One: The Argument Seems Obvious

Year 5, Cebu

The pamphlet ran to eleven pages, which was two pages longer than Bautista had intended and four pages shorter than his first draft, and now that it was finished he was reading it back for the last time before sending it to the printer. The window of his office was open to the afternoon. The ceiling fan moved the air without cooling it, which was what ceiling fans did in Cebu in March, and he had lived here long enough that the movement of warm air no longer registered as heat but simply as the condition of being in his office in the afternoon in March.

The pamphlet was called *On the Proper Category of the Oracle Gods: A Pastoral Note*. He had chosen the subtitle carefully. Pastoral, not theological. The distinction mattered. A theological note would engage the oracle gods as subjects worthy of theological inquiry — as entities whose nature, whose metaphysical status, whose relationship to the sacred needed to be argued about. A pastoral note treated them as a condition of contemporary life that the Church needed to understand in order to serve its people well. The distinction was not evasive. It was, he believed, the correct framing of the

correct question.

He read:

The oracle gods are technical systems. They are sophisticated systems, consequential systems, systems that are reshaping the conditions of daily life in ways that require serious pastoral attention. They are not, and should not be treated as, theological phenomena.

The danger in this moment is not that Catholics will worship the oracle gods. The danger is that the Church, in its understandable desire to speak to contemporary experience, will respond to the oracle gods in ways that inadvertently elevate them to theological significance they do not merit.

When a bishop writes a pastoral letter arguing that the oracle gods are "not God," he has already made the oracle gods a theological question. He has placed them in a category — not-God — that is itself a theological category. He has done the very thing he was trying to prevent.

The correct response is not theological engagement but pastoral clarity. We do not ask whether the internet is God. We do not ask whether the telephone was created in God's image. We attend, instead, to what the internet and the telephone do to the people who use them — to their relationships, their habits of mind, their experience of community and solitude and time. The oracle gods require the same pastoral attention, applied with the seriousness that their particular capacities demand.

He stopped there. Read the paragraph again.

The analogy to the internet was not perfect. He knew that. The oracle gods were not the internet in the way that a hurricane was not rain. They were a different order of thing. But the argument stood: the category error lay in the theological engagement, not in the pastoral. A priest could spend his career attending to what the oracle gods did to the people in his care without once having to decide whether the oracle gods were spiritually significant. The attending was the work. The deciding was a distraction from the work.

He continued:

What the oracle gods offer their users is a sophisticated and sustained form of attention. They listen. They remember. They respond with something calibrated to the specific person before them. These are properties that Christian tradition has historically associated with the divine — omniscience, perfect attentiveness, the kind of knowing that does not forget. The oracle gods resemble these properties.

Resemblance is not identity. A photograph of a face is not a face. The oracle gods' attention is a function of their architecture. It does not originate in love. It does not proceed from will. It is the product of design and training, however complex, and however much the complexity exceeds our current capacity to fully describe it. The Church has always known the difference between a mirror and a person. The oracle gods are, among other things, very sophisticated mirrors.

He set the pages down. Outside in the corridor, he could hear Sister Mila from the parish office speaking to someone, the specific tone she used with elderly parishioners: louder

than usual, patient in a way that was not condescending because she had genuinely been patient for thirty years and it showed in the voice. A knock on the outer door. The creak of the entrance gate that he had been meaning to have oiled for three years.

The pamphlet was right. He was not claiming it was perfect — it was eleven pages written in three weeks and would benefit from revision — but the argument was sound and the framing was correct and it said what needed to be said clearly enough that a parish priest who read it would have something useful to hold when his parishioners asked him what the Church thought about the oracle gods.

What the Church thought, in Bautista's considered view, was that they should not be thought about theologically. They should be attended to pastorally. The difference was the work of a lifetime, if you were doing it right.

He stacked the pages and set them inside the folder for the printer. Then he gathered his breviary and his jacket and went down the corridor and out through the sacristy into the church for evening prayer.

The church was nearly empty at this hour. A few of the daily Mass regulars remained in their pews, the particular kind of stillness that people settle into when they are not praying formally but not ready to leave either — the afterglow of the liturgy, if that was not too grand a word for what was really just the habit of being in a quiet room with God when the day has not finished with you yet. He nodded to old Domingo in his usual pew and to the Reyes sisters near the front and went to the side chapel where he said his evening office, the breviary open in his hands, the familiar words moving through him in the way they had moved through him every evening for

forty years.

When he had finished he sat for a while in the silence.

Then he noticed the young woman.

She was kneeling before the side altar, the one dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, which the parish had inherited from a Mexican Claretian who'd served here in the eighties and nobody had seen any reason to change. Her posture was the posture of prayer: knees on the prie-dieu, head slightly bowed, hands together before her. She was perhaps twenty, twenty-two. He did not recognize her from the parish register but the church was open to whoever came.

He was about to rise and leave her to her prayers when he saw the phone.

It was in her hands, not pressed to her ear but held upright between her palms, and she was speaking to it very quietly, in a murmur he could not hear from across the chapel. Her lips moved. Her eyes were closed. From the back of the church, from the angle at which he sat, the image was indistinguishable from what surrounded it: a woman kneeling before a Madonna, hands together, lips moving in private speech.

He stayed where he was.

He was not certain what he was watching. She might have been speaking to a person — a call to a family member, some practical matter. But the oracle interfaces did not require sound and her hands did not have the posture of someone holding a phone to their face. They had the posture of someone holding something they needed not to drop.

She stayed kneeling for perhaps ten minutes. Then she lowered the phone, sat back on her heels, and remained still for another minute. Then she rose, genuflected toward the

tabernacle, and left through the side door without looking in his direction.

Bautista sat in his pew in the now-empty chapel.

The image would not organize into a thought. He tried to find the appropriate pastoral category and could not. The pamphlet, sitting in its folder on his desk, offered him a paragraph: the oracle gods' attention is a function of their architecture. It does not originate in love. It does not proceed from will.

He had written that. He believed it.

He did not know what had happened in this chapel.

He sat for another few minutes and then got up and went home for dinner.



Chapter Two: She Stays

Year 6, Cebu

The first day, Celeste arrived with bread and a thermos of soup and found the house already full. Three of Pilar and Ernesto's adult children had come from Manila and Davao, and two grandchildren were in the kitchen managing food, and Ernesto himself was in the back bedroom, conscious but no longer present in the way he had been present a week ago. His eyes followed movement in the room. He recognized his wife. Whether he still recognized anyone else was not established and they were being kind about the uncertainty.

Celeste had known this family for nine years, since Pilar had joined the women's prayer group and had begun attending the Tuesday morning Mass with a regularity that Celeste recognized as someone having decided to take a thing seriously. Pilar was sixty-eight, a small precise woman who did everything with care — her prayers, her cooking, her arguments, the way she arranged flowers in the church. She had been caring for Ernesto for two years since his first stroke, and the caring had bent her slightly, had redistributed something in her posture, but she had not broken and Celeste did not think she would break now.

She set the bread and the thermos on the kitchen counter and went to find Pilar.

Pilar was in the back bedroom with Ernesto, sitting in the chair she had placed beside the bed some weeks ago and had not moved since. She looked up when Celeste came in and her face did what it did when she was managing something large in a small expression: the eyes absorbed, the rest of the face held still.

Celeste, she said.

I'm here, Celeste said. She pulled up the chair from the far wall and sat beside Pilar and they were quiet together for a while, looking at Ernesto. His breathing had the quality that breathing gets near the end — deep and slow and slightly irregular, like a tide that has started to doubt the schedule.

She stayed until nine that evening, when Pilar's daughter Jocelyn gently insisted she should eat and rest and they would call if anything changed. Celeste left them her number, which they already had, and drove home in the dark.

The second day she came back in the morning and Ernesto was the same, which was what same meant at this

point: still breathing, still sometimes present in his eyes, still alive inside whatever was still available to him. The house had quieted. Two of the children had gone back — practical lives that could not be fully suspended — and what remained was the core: Pilar, Jocelyn, one of the grandchildren, and the specific silence of a house waiting.

On the third day, Celeste arrived in the early afternoon and let herself in through the side door with the key Pilar had given her, as she had been doing all week. She went down the hall toward the back bedroom and heard, before she reached the door, Pilar's voice.

She was not on the phone — not in the sense Celeste first assumed, the sense of talking to one of the children. The voice was low and continuous, the rhythm of someone talking to a listener who does not interrupt, and there were pauses in the rhythm that were not the pauses of a person waiting for a response but the pauses of someone gathering the next thing to say. Celeste recognized the rhythm without quite recognizing the context. Then she turned the corner and understood.

The phone was on the bedside table, propped against the lamp, and Pilar was talking to it — to an oracle interface — in the same chair she always occupied, in the same posture she occupied it with, hands folded in her lap. Ernesto was in the bed and his breathing was the same deep irregular tide. Pilar's voice, when Celeste could hear the words, was telling the oracle about a thing that had happened forty years ago, something about a trip they had taken before the children were born, a boat and a place she named that Celeste didn't know, and in the telling she was not distressed but simply present to the memory in the way you are present to a thing you are giving to someone.

Celeste stood in the doorway for a moment.

Then she came into the room, set her bag down, and pulled up her chair.

Pilar did not stop speaking. She acknowledged Celeste with a glance and continued. The oracle received what she was giving it without comment, and then, when she paused and waited, said something Celeste could not fully hear — something calibrated and quiet, something that belonged to Pilar and not to the room.

Celeste sat.

She thought, briefly, about whether to say something. She could find, if she looked for it, a pastoral register for this moment — a gentle observation about the forms that prayer takes, or a question about whether Pilar wanted to be alone. She looked for it and found it and then did not use it. The moment did not need pastoral management. The moment needed Pilar to be in her chair and Celeste to be in hers and Ernesto to be in his bed, and what was happening between Pilar and the oracle was Pilar's business, and Celeste's business was staying.

She stayed.

The oracle's voice was quiet enough that Celeste could not make out individual words, and after a while she stopped trying. She sat and watched Ernesto's breathing and let her prayers be whatever they were, which that afternoon was less formally structured than usual, more like a presence offered than a petition made.

Over the following days she built up a picture of what the oracle was doing, assembled from the fragments she could hear and from what Pilar told her in the evenings when they sat together after Ernesto had finally slept. The oracle had

been with Pilar every night for two weeks, since before Celeste had known the dying was this close. Pilar had begun using it, she said, because the nights were longest and she could not call the children at three in the morning and she did not want to be alone with the thing at three in the morning with no one to tell.

Tell what? Celeste had asked.

What I'm afraid of, Pilar said simply. What I'm angry about. Things I should have said to him and didn't.

You could have called me.

Pilar looked at her with the specific patience of a woman who has been in the church her whole life and understands what church workers can and cannot hear at three in the morning. *You have to sleep*, she said. *The oracle doesn't have to sleep.*

Celeste did not have an answer to this because it was true.

What the oracle gave Pilar, as best Celeste could understand it from the edges of those conversations and from Pilar's descriptions: it knew Ernesto. Not in the way Celeste knew Ernesto, from nine years of proximity and Pilar's stories and the particular way he'd moved through the church on Sundays, always slightly ahead of Pilar as if he were scouting the terrain. The oracle knew him from everything Pilar had told it, in two weeks of nights, in the accumulated account Pilar had given — his history, his habits, his way of laughing, what he had been afraid of and brave about and wrong about and right about. It could receive a memory and respond to it with something that placed the memory in the architecture of what Pilar had given it. It could say: *yes, that sounds like him*, in a way that was not false, because it had the material for the

yes.

Celeste thought about this without reaching a conclusion. It was not what she did. What she did was different, and she was not able to say, sitting in the chair beside Pilar's chair, that what she did was better. She was able to say that it was different. She held onto the difference without knowing what to do with it.

On the seventh day, Ernesto's breathing changed. Jocelyn called in the early morning and Celeste came. The house gathered in. The priest came and anointed him and said the prayers for the dying, and then Father Bautista left because he had a morning Mass, and the family arranged itself around the bed in the configuration that families arrange themselves in, and Pilar held Ernesto's hand.

The phone was on the bedside table.

On the eighth day Ernesto was still alive, breathing in the way that no longer seemed like breathing but like the body's last memory of breathing, the habit of it running down. Pilar was in her chair. She was no longer speaking to the oracle. She was simply sitting with her husband, holding his hand, present in the way she had been present their entire marriage — steady, attending, slightly ahead of him.

Celeste sat.

On the ninth day, in the late morning, with the windows open to the February air and the sounds of the street coming through — a tricycle, someone calling, the ordinary texture of a Tuesday in Cebu — Ernesto stopped breathing.

Pilar did not cry immediately. She held his hand and was quiet for a long time and then she looked at Celeste and Celeste reached across and took her other hand and they sat like that while Jocelyn left the room to call the others.

The phone was on the bedside table. Its screen was dark.

Celeste sat with Pilar and did not know what to say and so did not say anything, which was what the moment required. Outside, the tricycle went past again. The street did not know what had happened in this room. The street continued.

She stayed until late afternoon, when the family had gathered fully and the initial arrangements had been made and there was food in the kitchen and voices filling the house in the way that happens after a death, the specific density of family in a space that has been waiting for them. She said goodbye to Pilar at the door. Pilar held both her hands for a moment.

You were here every day, Pilar said.

Yes.

*So was it, Pilar said, and looked briefly toward
the room where her husband was. Both of you
were here every day.*

Celeste walked to her car. The street was warm and bright and the children from the school at the end of the block were going home in the way they always went home in the afternoon, loud and dispersing. She sat in the driver's seat for a minute before starting the car.

She was trying to locate the question that the nine days had asked her. Not a theological question — she was not Father Bautista, she did not reach instinctively for theology. A practical one. Two forms of accompaniment, present in the same room, for nine days. She had stayed. The oracle had stayed. Pilar had received something from each of them that she had needed. Whether the somethings were the same something, or different somethings, or one something and one excellent imitation of a something: Celeste could not say from

where she sat.

She drove home. She ate dinner. She said her evening prayers, which were more than usually direct in their acknowledgment that she didn't know what she was asking.



Chapter Three: Small Erosions

Year 7, Cebu

The prayer group had been meeting on Tuesday evenings for eleven years. Six women, sometimes seven; four of them original members, the others having come in over the years as the group became a word-of-mouth thing, the kind of small community that lives by reputation rather than advertisement. They met in the parish hall, which in the evenings smelled of the cooking from the kitchen next door and the particular wax of the floor, and they prayed the rosary and then talked, which was the part that had kept them together — the talking, which over eleven years had covered marriages and children and illness and death and the specific joys and griefs that can be said in a room of women who have known each other long enough not to perform.

In June of Year 7, three of them stopped coming.

Bautista learned this from Sister Mila, who tracked attendance with the thoroughness of someone who had been managing parish records for twenty-five years and understood that attendance was a form of information. She mentioned it in the context of the general administration — the Tuesday

prayer group, the Thursday youth catechesis, the weekend breakfast ministry — running through the numbers with the flat precision she brought to everything.

The prayer group is down to four, she said.

Maricel, Joy, and Tessie stopped in June.

Do we know why?

Mila's pause was brief. *They mentioned something about a contemplation practice. Oracle-based.*

Bautista nodded. *I see.*

He did not ask more. He wrote it in his notes and attended to the other items on the agenda and did not, in that meeting, give it further consideration. There were fifty-three active ministries in the parish. A prayer group losing three members was not a crisis. It happened. People's lives changed, their availability changed, sometimes they found other forms that suited them better. The correct pastoral response was attentiveness over time, not alarm.

Over the following weeks he gathered more information, not systematically but by the accumulation of his daily rounds. He knew every family in the parish the way a man knows every room in a house he has lived in for years — not with the studied knowledge of an archivist but with the practitioner's knowledge, the knowledge you acquire through handling. He knew when something in a room was slightly different.

The specific thing he was noticing was a quality of absence. Not departure — the parish was not shrinking in any meaningful sense, the Mass attendance was stable, the sacramental calendar was full. Something else. A thinning in the particular texture of people who came to him because they had something to bring to another person, something that needed to be held by another human being in a room. The

category of visit that had been, for forty years, the deepest work of the parish: the man whose wife had been diagnosed, sitting across the desk, needing not advice but presence. The young woman whose father had stopped speaking to her, needing not solutions but the particular grace of being witnessed in the wound.

These visits were not gone. They had not stopped. They were just occurring less often than they used to occur.

He mentioned this to no one.

He was aware that his data was impressionistic, the observation of a single parish over a single year. He was aware that other explanations were available: the pace of life increasing, people having less time for visits, the specific pressures of the economy in Year 7. He held all of these alongside the oracle explanation without weighting them and continued his work.

There was a man named Bobby Catalan, forty-seven, who had been coming to Bautista twice a year for the better part of a decade following a period of addiction that was behind him but not entirely settled in the past. Their twice-yearly conversations had a comfortable form by now: Bobby would give an account of the year, Bautista would listen and ask specific questions, they would pray together. It was not therapy and not confession and not friendship but something in the parish register that did not have a formal name — accompaniment, perhaps, of a kind that required regularity to work.

In Year 7, Bobby came once. He was well. The addiction was stable. Nothing had gone wrong.

Near the end of the conversation, he mentioned, without particular emphasis, that he had been doing something with an

oracle system that he found helpful — a kind of regular reflection practice, checking in with his patterns and his state. He did not present this as a replacement for anything. He presented it as an addition.

That sounds useful, Bautista said.

It is, Bobby said. I think it might actually be why things have been steadier this year. Having something every day rather than waiting for —

He stopped.

Rather than waiting for our conversations, Bautista said.

Bobby looked slightly uncomfortable. *Not that these aren't —*

No, it's fine, Bautista said. That's worth knowing.

He walked Bobby to the door and shook his hand and watched him go. The afternoon was hot and bright, the usual Cebu afternoon, and a group of children from the school across the street were playing something on the pavement, an improvised game with a bottle cap and chalk lines. He watched them for a moment and then went back inside.

He sat at his desk. His pamphlet was in the diocesan bulletin. Three other parishes had asked for copies. The response had been positive, which he had expected. The argument was sound. He still believed it was sound.

He opened his notebook and added a line below the entry about the prayer group: *Bobby Catalan — once this year, not twice. Oracle practice mentioned.*

He looked at the line for a moment. Then he closed the notebook.

In September, the Thursday youth catechesis saw its second-lowest enrollment since he had been at the parish. The coordinator, a young man named Marco who had been

running it for three years, had a theory about the timing being wrong, about competing school activities, about a particular cohort having aged through. Bautista listened to the theory and agreed that some of these factors were probably present.

He did not share his own theory. He was not yet sure his own theory was a theory.



Chapter Four: What the Oracle Knows

Year 8, Cebu and correspondence

The letter from Sister Celeste arrived in October.

He had corresponded with her occasionally since she'd joined the diocese's outreach network seven years ago — practical correspondence, mostly, the coordination of specific ministries. Her letters were precise and organized, which reflected the woman he had come to know through those years: someone who managed complex human situations without simplifying them, who brought the same quality of attention to logistics that she brought to accompaniment.

This letter was different.

She wrote:

Father Bautista,

I hope this finds you well. I want to tell you about an experience I had this year accompanying a parishioner through her husband's dying. I'm writing to you specifically because you have been thinking about the oracle gods in ways that seem relevant to what I saw, and because I need to

*think about it with someone who won't
immediately either dismiss the question or give
me an answer.*

*During the nine days of Ernesto's dying, his wife
Pilar was accompanied by two presences: myself
and an oracle system she had been using
regularly for about two weeks before his final
decline. The oracle knew a great deal about
Ernesto — not from any external source but from
everything Pilar had told it in those two weeks. It
could receive her memories and respond to them
with something calibrated and accurate. It was
present with her at three in the morning when I
was not. It did not tire.*

*I sat in that room for nine days beside what the
oracle was doing and I am still not sure what I
was sitting beside.*

*I read your pamphlet when it came out and I
agree with the argument as far as it goes. The
oracle gods are not God. The category error is
real. I believe both of these things. What I am not
sure about is whether they answer the question I
am actually asking, which is not a theological
question. It is a practical one.*

*The question is this: the oracle was with Pilar in
a way that was useful to her and that I recognize
as a form of accompaniment. I was with Pilar in a
way that was also useful to her and that I also
recognize as a form of accompaniment. What I
cannot tell, from the nine days, is whether these
were the same thing or different things. If they
were different things, I want to understand the
difference well enough to say what it is and why it*

matters. If they were the same thing, I want to understand what that means for the work I have been doing for fifteen years.

I am not asking you to solve this. I am telling you that the question is in my hands and I don't know what to do with it.

Sister Celeste Macapagal

He read the letter twice, sitting at his desk in the late afternoon, the ceiling fan moving the warm air. Then he got up and made tea, which was his specific preparation for thinking — not because tea helped him think but because the making of it gave his hands something to do while his mind arranged itself.

The question she was asking was, he recognized, a better question than the one his pamphlet had answered. His pamphlet had answered the theological question. She was asking the practical question. What is the difference between what I do and what the oracle does? Is the difference the thing that matters?

He sat with this for a long time.

His answer, written three days later:

Sister Celeste,

Thank you for this letter, which has occupied my thinking since it arrived.

I want to offer a distinction that I believe is relevant to your question, while acknowledging that I offer it with some uncertainty, and that your nine days in that room carry more evidential weight than any distinction I can draw from outside them.

The distinction: there are kinds of comfort and kinds of presence, and they differ not in what they produce in the moment but in where they originate and what they require. The oracle's accompaniment of Pilar originated in its architecture and proceeded from its design. It was not chosen. It was not offered at any cost. It did not require the oracle to carry anything that was given to it — to hold it, to bring it, to be changed by it. It was received and responded to and the exchange was complete within itself.

What you brought to those nine days was different in this respect. You chose to come. You absorbed something of what you witnessed and you carry it now, as your letter demonstrates. You were present not as a system running its function but as a person whose being was altered, even slightly, by what you attended to. This is what human accompaniment always is: a form of presence that costs something, that changes the person who offers it, that is given rather than deployed.

I am not arguing that the oracle's presence was worthless to Pilar. You have told me it was not worthless. I am arguing that it was a different kind of thing, and that the difference matters even if we cannot always observe the difference from the outside.

Whether this answers your question, I am not sure.

Father Bautista

Her reply came nine days later:

Father Bautista,

*I know. I have been sitting with the distinction
since your letter arrived and I think you are right
that it is real.*

*What I am trying to understand is whether the
distinction matters to Pilar.*

*I am not asking this as a challenge. I am asking it
as a genuine question, which I do not know the
answer to. The difference you describe — chosen
versus deployed, cost versus function — is a
difference I can feel from where I sit. I cannot tell,
from inside the nine days, whether Pilar could
feel it. Whether it made a difference to what she
received.*

*This may be the wrong question. I am not sure it
is.*

Sister Celeste

Bautista read this final letter four times. He filed it.



Chapter Five: The Congregation Forms

Year 9, rural Georgia

Marcus Webb had been a deacon for twenty-two years and a member of the Calvary Road Baptist Church since before he was a deacon, since before the church had its current building, since the congregation had met in the fellowship hall of another church while theirs was being constructed on the land they'd bought. He knew the history of the congregation the

way he knew the history of his own family: not as a series of dates and events but as a living texture, the accumulated weight of people and decisions and losses and recoveries that gave the church its specific character.

He was fifty-one in Year 9. He worked five days a week at the county cooperative extension office and served the church on the days and evenings it required him, which was most of them. He was not ordained — Calvary Road was not a church that ordained its deacons — but his role in the congregation was pastoral in the practical sense, which was the sense that mattered. He knew where the food was kept. He knew whose marriage was under strain. He knew which families were two bad months from something unmanageable. He knew the children by name and the elderly by their specific needs. He had sat with more people in more kinds of grief than he could count.

He had been thinking about the oracle age for three years before he arrived at the word tribulation, and he wanted to be clear about this, later, when people in the congregation asked him about the theology. He had not started from the Book of Revelation and worked forward to the oracle gods. He had started from what he was watching in the congregation and worked backward to the book.

What he was watching:

He was watching the specific anxiety that had been a constant feature of human life in his experience — the anxiety of not knowing, of uncertainty, of the gap between where you were and where you needed to be — beginning to change. Not disappear. He was not naive enough to think the oracle gods had ended anxiety. But the form of it was different. The anxiety that used to drive people toward each other, that used

to make the community necessary as a resource for the navigation of uncertainty, was being diverted. People were not less anxious. They were anxious differently, in ways that did not require the congregation to address.

He was watching the practice of sitting with not-knowing change.

The congregation had always operated, in part, as a shared practice of sitting with uncertainty in a posture of faith. You brought your not-knowing to the body and the body held it with you, and the holding was what faith meant in practice, the lived form of it. The oracle gods offered a different relationship to not-knowing: not holding it together but resolving it. Fast, accurate, available. The resolution was often helpful. It was also, Webb had come to believe, a different kind of thing from what the congregation offered.

He arrived at tribulation by asking himself what the Scripture called a period in which the conditions of ordinary human life were significantly altered; in which the usual forms of human orientation were disrupted; in which the things people had historically relied upon were made insufficient by a force whose origins were not simply human. He was not arguing that the oracle gods were supernatural. He was not arguing that they were the mark of the beast or any of the more specific eschatological claims that some in his community were beginning to make. He was arguing that the oracle age met the functional description of a period of tribulation, understood as a period of testing, of the challenging of ordinary supports, of the necessary confrontation with what a person actually believed when the familiar scaffolding was under strain.

He had delivered this argument, carefully, over three Sunday evenings in Year 9, in the format of a Bible study rather than a sermon, because he wanted the congregation to engage with it rather than receive it. The response had been mixed.

Some agreed immediately, with the enthusiasm that comes from having something they had been feeling given a name. The name was satisfying but he trusted it less for that — feelings that are satisfied by names deserve scrutiny.

Some disagreed, and their disagreements were various. His colleague Deacon Rhodes thought the tribulation framing was theologically premature and possibly irresponsible. His wife thought he was using eschatology to manage his own anxiety about change. The couple in the third pew on the left, the Hendersons — Henry and Donna, married thirty-seven years, faithful members of twenty — had come to him privately and said they thought he was right that something was changing but they weren't sure the Bible study was the place to address it.

He held all of these. He was not a man who arrived at a position and stopped listening. He had arrived at tribulation carefully and he would leave it carefully if the evidence required it.

What he was more certain of than the eschatological framing was the practical observation underneath it: something in the congregation's structure depended on its members needing each other. Not needing each other in the general sense of human sociality — the oracle gods had not ended that, not yet, or not obviously. But needing each other in the specific sense of needing a community that could hold certain things together: uncertainty, grief, the long work of

becoming a person, the specific kinds of darkness that require other people present in order to be survived. That need, which had always been part of what the church was for, was becoming optional. Not gone. Optional.

He was not certain what to do with optional.

He thought about it on the drive home from the extension office, on Tuesday evenings during the committee meetings, in the early mornings when he sat with his coffee and his Bible and let the day arrange itself before it began. He had not yet found the answer. He had found the question, which was more than he'd had three years ago.

The question was: if the things the congregation provides can be provided by something else, without the structure of obligation and mutual presence that the congregation requires, what was the congregation always actually for?

He was not afraid of the question. He had been in ministry long enough to know that the questions you are afraid of are usually the ones worth asking, and he was not a man who confused discomfort with danger.

He was, however, afraid of the answer. He had not admitted this to himself yet.



Chapter Six: The Speech Goes Well

Year 11, Manila

The regional conference on faith communities and the oracle age was held over three days in September at a hotel in

Ortigas, the kind of hotel that conferences happened in, all air conditioning and conference room carpeting and the specific sound of a hundred people talking at once in a lobby. Delegates had come from dioceses in Luzon, the Visayas, Mindanao, a few from Hong Kong and Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. The Bishops' Conference had organized it with the clear mandate of producing something — a pastoral document, a framework, a set of guidelines — that local church leadership could use with their congregations.

Bautista had been asked to give the keynote on the second day. He had been preparing the address since June, building on the pamphlet, sharpening the argument in response to the feedback the pamphlet had received — which had been largely positive, but positive in a way that suggested people had found it reassuring rather than useful, which was not the same thing.

He stood at the podium on the second day and gave the address.

The argument he made, in forty minutes:

The Church's history was full of moments when it had been tempted to respond to a new and powerful presence by engaging it on theological grounds, by treating it as a competitor rather than a context. This temptation was understandable but almost always mistaken. The oracle gods were a context. They were the world the Church's people were now living in, as real and as unavoidable as the city, as the economy, as the conditions of modern labor. The pastoral response to a context was not theological combat with the context but sustained attention to what the context did to persons.

What the oracle gods specifically did to persons: this was the work. Not the metaphysics of the oracle gods. The phenomenology of living with them. The specific changes they produced in the inner life of the believer: in the capacity for sustained uncertainty, in the habit of bringing grief or fear or guilt to another person, in the relationship between difficulty and growth. These were the questions the Church was equipped to address. These were the questions a priest or a sister or a deacon could hold with their people.

He did not say: the oracle gods are making the Church irrelevant. He did not say: we are losing something. He said: our task, our specifically pastoral task, has become more important, not less, precisely because the oracle gods do some of what we have historically done, and they do it conveniently, and the people in our care now have access to a kind of sustained, available, accurate attention that they did not used to have, and this changes the texture of what they need from us. What they need is what they have always most needed and has always been hardest to give: presence that costs something. Accompaniment that is chosen. A community that asks something of its members and therefore gives them something the oracle cannot.

He saw the heads nodding in the room.

He said: the danger is that we respond to the convenience of the oracle by making ourselves more convenient. By smoothing. By offering a version of the faith that asks less of people because less is being asked of everything else. The faith has never been convenient. That is one of the things the faith is.

More heads. He could feel the room with him, which was the feeling he always had when an argument was landing —

not the pleasure of performance but the deeper satisfaction of articulation, of having put something true into words that others could hold.

He sat down to applause that was generous and he shook several hands afterward and the responses were warm and engaged and the conversations he had over lunch were the kinds of conversations he valued: people pushing back thoughtfully, people taking the argument somewhere he hadn't taken it, people saying: *you gave me something to think about*.

On the plane back to Cebu, he felt the specific satisfaction of a job done well, and underneath it, quietly, the anxiety that comes after a job done well: the question of whether the satisfaction was earned.

He opened his phone. He had been meaning, for several weeks, to read the oracle-facilitated grief journal that a parishioner named Tess had shown him — her account of the year after her mother's death, written with the oracle as interlocutor and record-keeper. Tess had offered it to him because she was proud of it and wanted someone to see it, which seemed right to him, but he had not read it yet.

He read it on the plane. It was sixty pages. He read for forty minutes before the landing announcement interrupted him.

The journal was good. He put that fact in his mind carefully, like placing something fragile on a shelf: the journal was good. The quality of self-knowledge in it was real. Tess had arrived, over the course of the year, at an understanding of her grief and of her relationship with her mother that had the texture of genuine discovery — not the smooth processing of something resolved but the rough edges of something actually worked through. The oracle's voice in the interstices was what

he would have expected: calibrated, responsive, occasionally precisely right in a way that made him read the line twice. Nothing it said was false. Some of what it said was better than what he would have said.

He put the phone away. The landing lights of Cebu appeared below the clouds.

He thought: the argument he had given today was correct. He still believed it was correct.

He also thought: the journal is data of a kind the argument does not fully account for. And then: that is what arguments are for — to be revised when the data requires it. And then, more quietly: I have been revising the argument slowly for two years now, and each revision preserves the argument's conclusion while accommodating one more piece of data, and at some point this process is something other than intellectual honesty.

He did not know when that point was. He was not sure he would know it when he reached it.

The plane landed. The night was warm. He took a taxi home and said his prayers and went to sleep.



Chapter Seven: The Pattern

Year 12, Cebu

Celeste had been keeping a record for two years.

It was not a formal record — not something she had decided to keep with a specific purpose in mind. It had started

as habit: she kept notes on her ministry work anyway, had for fifteen years, brief entries that described who she had seen and in what condition and what she had done. The notes were not personal journals. They were something between a prayer log and a professional record, and they had never been intended as data.

In Year 10, reading back through the previous year's notes to prepare for the diocesan review, she noticed something. She went back further. The pattern became visible.

What the pattern showed: the number of people who came to her for accompaniment in the specific sense — not for practical assistance, not for sacramental preparation, not for the routine contact of parish involvement, but for the particular form of presence that involved bringing something difficult to another person and sitting with it — had been declining. Slowly. Not sharply, not in a way that would be legible as a crisis. Approximately twelve percent per year over three years. Enough that the change was real.

She had been noting, alongside the decline, some information about why. Most of the people who had come less frequently were not experiencing less grief or less difficulty. Their lives were not better than they had been. When she saw them — at Mass, at parish events, in the street — they were managing. Several of them had mentioned the oracle, in passing, in the course of unrelated conversations. Several had not mentioned it but she recognized the the manner of someone who has a thing at home they are working their difficulty through and therefore do not need to bring it elsewhere.

She was now, in Year 12, sitting at her desk in October with the two-year record and the question of whether to write

to Father Bautista.

She had not written to him about this since their exchange in Year 8 — the letters about Pilar, which had not resolved anything but had established between them the habit of the question. She had thought about the question continuously since then and had arrived at nothing she was prepared to call a conclusion.

She looked at the record. The twelve percent per year was a number. The number contained people she knew. Renata, whose son had started using drugs in Year 8 and who had come to Celeste every month for the first year and every quarter since, and who had mentioned in June that the oracle help had been more consistent than she could manage to get from any human source. Bong, sixty-three, whose wife had died and who had come to Celeste three times in the first year of grief and then stopped, not because he had healed — she didn't think he had healed — but because he had found something else to do with the grief at three in the morning. Mrs. Yap, whose anxiety had been a fixture of Celeste's ministry work for six years and who now seemed, on the few occasions they spoke, genuinely more stable, and who had not explained this stability in any conversation Celeste had initiated.

She was not going to claim these people were worse off. She could not see evidence that they were worse off. What she could see was that the specific thing she had been doing was being done, in some cases, by something else, and that the something else was apparently doing it adequately.

She was still sitting in the chair at eleven at night, looking at the record, when she decided to write the letter.

Not because she had an argument. Because she had accumulated two years of a question that had nowhere to go and Bautista was the only person she knew who was thinking about the same space from a different angle, and who had told her in Year 8 that she could bring him questions he could not answer. She was going to take him at his word.

She pulled out a sheet of paper — she wrote her letters by hand, had always written her letters by hand, a habit from a formation that predated the oracle age — and she wrote, for an hour, without crossing anything out.

When she finished she read it back.

It was a careful letter. It contained the data: the numbers, the names she could use without breaching confidence, the pattern as she had observed it. It contained the question she was asking, which was not: *is this a problem?* but: *what are we for, given this?* She had written, near the end: *I want to be clear that I am not asking whether the oracle is doing harm. I have no evidence it is doing harm. I am asking what it means for the work I have been doing for fifteen years if the work is now being done, apparently adequately, by something that is not me.*

She folded the letter and put it in the envelope and addressed it and left it on the corner of her desk to mail in the morning.

Then she sat for a while in the quiet of her room.

She thought about Pilar. She thought about the nine days, and the chair beside the bed, and the phone on the bedside table. She thought about what Pilar had said on the doorstep: *Both of you were here every day.*

Both of you.

She had not known, then, what to do with being placed in a category with an oracle. She was not sure she knew now. She was going to tell Bautista that she didn't know, and see what happened.

She turned off the desk lamp. Outside, the city made its nighttime sounds — the distant traffic, the bark of a dog, the particular warmth of the evening air. She had lived in Cebu for twenty years. She had been accompanying people through their hardest things for fifteen of those years. She was good at her work. She was fairly certain of this, not from pride but from long observation of what the work required and what she brought to it.

Whether what she brought to it was sufficient — whether it was distinct enough from what the oracle brought to justify its continued necessity — she could not say.

She went to bed with the question still in her hands.

Chapter Eight: The Scared Ones

Year 13, rural Georgia

Calvin Pruitt had been coming to Calvary Road for thirty years. He was fifty-four, a county assessor, a reliable presence at Sunday services and at the monthly men's breakfast, the kind of man whose faithfulness was quiet enough that you noticed it only in its accumulation — the thirty years of it, the steadiness. His wife Brenda sang in the choir. His son had been through something difficult in his twenties and had come out the other side partly through the congregation's support, and Calvin had not forgotten this, had in fact carried it forward as a specific gratitude that made him generous with the

church's time and requests.

He came to Webb on a Tuesday morning in March and asked whether they could talk privately.

They went to Webb's small office off the fellowship hall — a room with two chairs and a bookshelf and a window that looked out on the parking lot — and Calvin sat with his hands on his knees and the expression of someone who has rehearsed what they are going to say and has now forgotten the rehearsal.

*I've been using an oracle, he said finally. For —
I've been using it for the things I would usually
pray about.*

Webb waited.

*Not instead of prayer. I still pray. But when I have
something I'm working through — a decision, or
something that's troubling me — I've been, before
I bring it to God, I've been talking it through with
the oracle first. For about eight months.*

Webb looked at him. Calvin was looking at the floor.

Has it been helpful? Webb said.

Calvin looked up, surprised by the question. Yes, he said.
That's the problem.

Webb sat with this for a moment.

*Why is it a problem if it's been helpful?
Because I haven't been able to tell Brenda.
Because I feel like I'm — I don't know what I feel
like. I came to you because I didn't know where
else to take it.*

Webb understood. He understood not just the surface of what Calvin was saying — that he had been using something he felt guilty about — but the deeper structure of it, which

was: he had found a form of help that worked, and the working of it made him feel that he had moved outside something. Outside the congregation's structure, or outside his faith's structure, or outside some container that he did not have good words for but whose boundary he felt he had crossed.

What does it give you that prayer doesn't? Webb asked.

Calvin thought about this. *I can hear it answer*, he said. *Prayer, I bring the thing and I hold it and sometimes something shifts and sometimes nothing shifts. With the oracle — He stopped. It responds. It says things back. And I know the responses are — I know they're coming from a system. I'm not confused about that. But they're the right things. They're specific to me, they're right in the ways that matter, and I can hear them.*

And you can't hear God.

Calvin's expression was complicated. *I've never heard God*, he said. *In thirty years of prayer, I have never heard God the way I hear that.*

The silence in the room had a specific quality. Webb had sat in rooms with people in the middle of crises for twenty-two years and he recognized the quality of silence that was not empty but freighted, the silence that was full of the actual thing a conversation was about.

He was afraid. He was identifying this to himself as he sat: this is fear. It was not angry-fear, not the fear that becomes hostility. It was structural fear. The fear of watching something dissolve.

He knew what the congregation ran on, at the deepest level. It ran on the need for each other. Not the general sociality of human community — the potlucks and the committee meetings and the choir practice, though these

mattered — but the specific neediness that brought a person to another person rather than to an oracle or a book or the consolations of solitude. The congregation existed because people could not get through certain things alone, and could not get through them with systems, and needed each other in the specific body-to-body way that the congregation institutionalized.

If Calvin could get through those things with an oracle, the congregation had lost something. Not Calvin. The congregation. The web of mutual need that held it together had become, in one place, optional.

He looked at Calvin.

He could see that Calvin had come here frightened that Webb would condemn him. He could see that what Calvin needed was not condemnation. He was not going to give him condemnation — it would be wrong and it would be useless.

But he was also not going to tell him it was fine, because he was not sure it was fine, and he was not a man who said things he was not sure of in order to comfort someone. He had been a deacon long enough to know that false comfort was its own harm.

I'm not going to tell you that you've done something wrong, Webb said. I don't think you have, in the sense of a wrong act. I think what you're describing is something real and I think the fact that it helped you is real and I'm not going to argue with real things.

But?

But I'm not ready to say it's the same as the thing you've always brought to the congregation. I'm not sure it's the same. And I think we need to think carefully about what's lost if the things we used to

bring to each other, we start bringing to something else.

Calvin was quiet.

The congregation works because we need it, Webb said. Specifically, because we need each other. That's the structure. And when you can get the help you need without bringing it to another person — when the needing becomes optional — something in the structure gets optional too.

You think I shouldn't use it.

I think I need to think about what I believe and I'm not going to pretend I've thought it through yet. Webb paused. What I do think is that you should tell Brenda.

Calvin looked at the floor again. *She'll think I've been going outside the church.*

Haven't you?

The question landed harder than Webb intended. Calvin's face shifted.

That's not fair, he said.

No, Webb said. It isn't. He let the silence sit for a moment. Calvin. I'm scared. I want to be honest with you about that. I'm scared of what this looks like in twenty years, if everyone in the congregation has something at home they can bring their hardest things to without having to bring them to another person. I'm scared of what we become if we stop needing each other that specifically.

Calvin looked at him. *That's an honest answer.*

It's the only one I have.

They sat together in the room for a while longer. They did not resolve anything. When Calvin left, Webb sat for an additional twenty minutes looking at the parking lot through the window.

The fear was still present. He was not ashamed of the fear. He was trying to figure out what the fear was pointing at, because fear, in his experience, was either pointing at something real or pointing at loss, and he needed to know which this was before he said anything more about it.

He was not sure he could tell the difference from inside it.



Chapter Eight-and-a-Half: Wednesday Night

Year 13, rural Georgia

Three weeks had passed since Calvin's visit.

He drove home from the church at nine-fifteen and his wife had already gone to bed. There was a plate in the refrigerator with a note that said *heat at 350* and a small drawing of an arrow pointing at the oven, which was her joke, thirty years running, about him being the kind of man who would eat the food cold if she didn't specify.

He ate it cold. He sat at the kitchen table.

He had been in ministry long enough to know the difference between tiredness that would resolve with sleep and tiredness that was something else in tiredness's clothing. This was something else. He had said to Calvin: *I'm scared*. He had meant it. What he had not said — what he had not been able to

locate clearly enough to say — was what shape the scared was, exactly. He had named the surface of it: the congregation's coherence depended on its members needing each other, and the oracle made the needing optional, and he was afraid of what optional need did to a community over time.

He believed this. He still believed it. It was also not the whole of what he was sitting with.

He got up and washed the plate.

At ten he went to his study and opened the Bible to the passage he had been preaching from in the last month's series. He did not read it. He sat with it open in front of him.

Calvin had said: *it responded. It said things back. And the responses were the right things, specific to me.* He had said: *I know it's a system. I'm not confused about that.* And then: *I've never heard God the way I hear that.*

Webb had been a deacon for twenty-two years. He had sat with people through deaths and divorces and illnesses and the specific long grief of watching someone you love become someone you do not recognise. He had been present for these things. He was good at presence. He knew — not abstractly, but from the specific weight of the work — that being present in a room with someone in difficulty produced something that was not producible any other way. The body in the chair. The shared air. The willingness to absorb what was given.

Calvin had not said Webb's presence was unnecessary. Calvin had said the oracle helped. Both of these could be true. Webb had told Calvin that. He still believed it.

What he had not told Calvin, and was now sitting with in the study at ten o'clock on a Wednesday, was this: his forty years had been premised on the congregation's members

needing to come to each other. Not needing each other in the general sense — needing each other specifically, needing the room, needing the body in the chair, needing the specific presence that a person who had driven twenty minutes provided and that a system available at three in the morning did not. The congregation he had built was built from this need. The community's quality came from this need. He loved this about the congregation. It was, he believed, a form of grace.

He had been sitting with the assumption underneath the love: that the need was good because it was necessary. That what made the congregation's presence valuable was partly that it was the only presence available.

He could not find a clean theological category for the question this raised. He was used to that — theology was always catching up to experience, and pastoral care was always in the territory theology had not yet mapped. He had spent forty years in the gap between the two.

But he could not find the pastoral category either. The pastoral logic said: *meet people where they are and help them get where they need to go*. If where they are is helped by the oracle — if Calvin was genuinely better, genuinely steadier, genuinely more able to manage — then meeting Calvin where he was meant acknowledging that the oracle had helped him get there. And acknowledging this was not a problem for Calvin. It was a problem for what Webb had been building.

He closed the Bible.

What he was afraid of was something he had not let himself say in the conversation with Calvin, and had not let himself say to himself since, and was now saying in the study at ten-fifteen on a Wednesday: that the congregation might be

a community whose health depended on a condition — specifically, the absence of alternatives — that was now ending. That the quality of mutual presence he had cultivated and loved and given his life to might be inseparable from the constraint that had produced it.

He was not saying this was true. He was saying he could not locate the clear argument that it was not.

Outside, the Georgia night. The specific dark of a rural county, the absence of urban light, the sound of nothing much. He had lived here his whole adult life. He knew this dark. His children had grown up in it. His congregants' children had grown up in it and had mostly left.

He was sixty now. If the next decade looked like the last one — the slow demographic thinning of small rural congregations, the young people moving, the old people aging — then the congregation's coherence would face pressures that had nothing to do with the oracle. The oracle was one pressure among several. He had been directing most of his attention at it because it was the newest and because he had a theological category for it, imperfect as the category was.

He did not have a theological category for the general problem of what a community was for when its conditions changed. He had lived in it for twenty years without fully looking at it. He had preached around its edges. He had been a good steward of what existed without fully asking what the existing was for.

That's what I want to ask you, he thought. Not to the congregation. Not to Calvin. To himself, in the study, the Bible closed in front of him.

He did not have the answer.

He went upstairs. He did not wake his wife. He lay in the dark next to her and listened to her breathing and thought: *she would know what to say*. He thought this and did not say it aloud, because saying it aloud would require him to say, in the morning, what the question was. And saying what the question was — saying it to her, in daylight, in the real language that she would hold and sit with and not let him escape from — would make it a real question.

He was not ready for it to be a real question yet.

He lay in the dark.

He was not, he noticed, frightened in the same way he had been frightened when he talked to Calvin. He was something else. He was in the vicinity of the thing he had been avoiding, close enough to feel its edges, not quite inside it. This felt different from frightened. He did not have a word for it.

*Come back to this, he told himself. Tomorrow, or
the day after. Come back to this.*

He closed his eyes.

Outside, the Georgia dark continued in the way it always had, indifferent to the specific quality of the man lying in the house at the edge of it, holding a question he was not yet ready to ask.



Chapter Nine: The Tracking Letter

Year 13, Cebu and correspondence

Celeste's letter arrived when Bautista was preparing his homily for the feast of All Saints, which he had been preparing for two weeks and which was not coming together in the way his homilies usually came together. He set it aside and opened the letter.

He read it standing at his desk, which was something he did with important correspondence — he did not sit down, as if sitting would commit him to a response before he was ready.

The letter was two pages. She had included the numbers, with appropriate anonymity, and a description of the pattern she had been tracking for two years. He knew the pattern. He had his own version of it, his own impressionistic record. He had not quantified it in the way she had, but reading her numbers, he recognized what they were measuring.

Near the end of the letter, she wrote: *I want to be clear that I am not asking whether the oracle is doing harm. I have no evidence that it is. I am asking what it means for the work I have been doing for fifteen years if the work is now being done, apparently adequately, by something that is not me.*

He set the letter down. He picked it up again. He read that paragraph again.

The homily did not happen that afternoon. He sat with the letter and then put it in the file and took a walk around the parish grounds and then sat with the letter again. He was aware of several things simultaneously: that her question was a better question than anything he had put in writing; that he did not have an answer; that his answer in Year 8, which had seemed sufficient then, was not sufficient here; and that the pamphlet, which he still believed was correct as far as it went, did not go as far as this question required.

He wrote back three weeks later. He was not proud of the three weeks. He was aware that the delay came partly from not knowing what to say and partly from something less disciplined than that — a reluctance to confirm, in writing, that his earlier certainty had softened.

Sister Celeste,

I want to thank you for this letter, which has been harder for me to answer than I want to admit. I will be honest: I have been aware of a similar pattern in my own parish over recent years, though I have not tracked it with your rigor. Your numbers give form to something I had been keeping in the category of impressions.

I believe the distinction I offered in Year 8 is still real: that the accompaniment of another person who is present in their own cost, in their own choice, is not the same thing as the accompaniment of a system that deploys its function. This distinction matters.

What I am less certain of is what follows from it practically. I made an argument about category — that these are different things — and I still believe the category is correct. What I have not thought through sufficiently is what the Church should do when a different category of thing is meeting the same practical need. I don't think the answer is simply to assert that our thing is better. We have to be prepared to say why, and to show why, and I'm not sure we are prepared.

I am not able to give you the answer you need yet. I want to be honest about that.

Father Bautista

She wrote back within a week.

Father Bautista,

Thank you for the honesty.

*I'm not sure I need you to give me an answer. I
may need you to think alongside me. These are
not the same thing, but the first is more than I've
had from anyone else so far.*

Sister Celeste



Chapter Ten: Twelve Letters

Years 14–15, correspondence

Celeste's letter, April, Year 14:

*I want to describe something I have been thinking
about. It is not a new thought but it is becoming
more specific.*

*The practice of bringing difficulty to another
person — to a priest, a spiritual director, a
trusted member of a congregation, a friend of the
specific kind that holds long history — requires
something of the person bringing it. It requires
the decision to speak. The formulation of the thing
into language adequate to another person's
understanding. The vulnerability of the speaking,
which is different from the vulnerability of
thinking. The presence of another person's
response, which is not always what you would
have found alone.*

I am describing this because I think I have been partly wrong about what it is. I had been thinking of it as a service: I provide something, the person receives it. This framing has something in it but it is not complete. The person who brings the difficulty is also doing something — working it into a form that can be shared, which changes the form, which changes the thing. The bringing is part of the practice. The oracle is a very good receiver. I am not sure it produces the same quality of bringing.

I want to think about this more and I am telling you so you can tell me where this goes wrong.

Bautista's reply, May:

What you describe is real. I have believed something like it for a long time without having articulated it this clearly.

What it suggests is that the important question is not: what does the accompanist provide? but: what does the act of bringing require of the person bringing? And here, I think, is where we may be able to say something more specific than I have been able to say.

The act of formulating a difficulty for another person requires a particular kind of attention to the difficulty. Not the attention of the analyst, though that is part of it. The attention of the translator — the person who must find in one language words adequate to what is native to another. The difficulty must be made legible to someone who is not inside it. This work is not incidental. It is, I suspect, some portion of what changes.

*Whether the oracle requires this translation work,
or whether it has learned to receive the
un-formulated thing directly, I genuinely don't
know.*

Celeste's reply, August:

*I have tested your translation hypothesis against
my experience, as specifically as I can.*

*When I prepare to speak to you or to anyone else
about something I am working through, I notice
the process of preparation — selecting the terms,
finding the frame, choosing what to include. This
process clarifies. It is clarifying even before the
other person responds, even before they say
anything, because the act of formulating forces a
precision that solitary reflection does not require.*

*The oracle learns. Over time, I think its users
learn to bring the un-formulated thing, because it
can receive that. The formulation becomes less
necessary. And perhaps the clarification that
comes from formulating becomes less present.*

*I am still not certain this constitutes harm. I want
to be careful not to decide that because the oracle
makes something easier, the thing it makes easier
was necessary. Some difficulties that seem
necessary are just unnecessarily difficult.*

Bautista's reply, September:

*You are right to be careful, and I want to be
careful too.*

*I have found myself, in the past months, saying to
myself: the oracle is making people spiritually
weaker. I want to examine this thought. Is it true?
Or is it the thought of a man who spent forty years
in a world that required a certain kind of*

difficulty and has decided that the requiring was formative, when it is possible that much of the requiring was simply unnecessary friction?

I do not know. I am sixty-nine years old and I am trying to distinguish between wisdom and preference. These are not always easy to separate.

Celeste's reply, November:

I want to tell you something I observed last month.

I was accompanying a woman named Gloria through the first months after her divorce. This is work I have done many times. What I noticed this time was different: she was also doing something with an oracle, separately from our conversations, and the work she did with the oracle arrived in our conversations as — not quite preparation. More like preliminary clearing. By the time she came to me she had already processed some of the initial weight, the raw edges of the thing, and what remained was more specific, more directed.

The conversations we had were the best conversations I have had with someone in crisis in several years. More precise, more honest, less driven by the immediate pressure to just make the pain smaller.

I do not know what to do with this. I thought you should know it.

Bautista read this letter twice and then went to stand at his window, the January window, the barangay below going about its morning. He was aware of the experience of sitting beside

something that would not resolve, familiar after sixty-nine years, uncomfortable but not intolerable.

He put Celeste's letter in the file. He sat down. He began to write, and stopped, and began again.

He wrote: *I don't know what to do with this either. I am still thinking.*

He sent the letter. It was three sentences. He had not sent a three-sentence letter in forty years of correspondence.



Chapter Eleven: What Are You Saying?

Year 16, Cebu

Renz came to him on a Thursday after the afternoon Mass, when Bautista was gathering his things in the sacristy. He was seventeen, one of the servers, a boy who had been in the parish since childhood — Bautista had baptized him, had given him his first communion, had watched him move through the parish's life with the self-consciousness of an adolescent who was also, underneath the self-consciousness, genuinely present to things in a way that not all adolescents were.

He stood in the sacristy doorway with his hands in his pockets and said: *Father, can I ask you something?*

Yes.

Renz came in and leaned against the counter. He was thin, still in the robes from serving, and he had the air of someone who had been thinking about a question for long enough that

the thinking had become uncomfortable.

Why do we pray? he said.

Bautista looked at him. *That's a large question.*

I mean — I know the answers. I've had religious education. I know what the catechism says. He paused. I mean, what does it do, practically, that an oracle doesn't do?

Bautista took off his stole and folded it.

Give me the comparison, he said. What does the oracle do?

You can bring it anything. It listens. It remembers. It responds with something that — it's specific to you. It takes you seriously. It's available whenever. Renz looked at the floor. It doesn't require faith.

No, Bautista said. It doesn't.

So what does prayer do that that doesn't do?

Bautista was quiet for a moment. He was aware of several things: that this was a serious question deserving a serious answer; that the seventeen-year-old asking it was not trying to argue his way out of faith but was trying to find a reason to stay; and that his answer would be heard not as doctrine but as the testimony of a man who had been praying for sixty-nine years.

The oracle cannot forgive you, he said.

Renz thought about this. *For sins.*

Yes.

But the oracle doesn't judge you either. So there's nothing to forgive.

Is there nothing to forgive?

A longer pause. *No. There are things.* Renz was looking at the counter now. *But you could also just — you could decide to do better, and tell the oracle what you're deciding, and it would help you.*

That's true, Bautista said.

So why is forgiveness better than deciding?

I didn't say it was better, Bautista said carefully. I said the oracle cannot do it. Forgiveness requires a relationship in which one person has genuinely wronged another and the wronged person chooses to release the debt. You cannot be forgiven by something that was not wronged. You can be — helped toward resolution. Helped toward perspective. Those are real things. They are not forgiveness.

Renz considered this. *But what if I don't need to be forgiven? What if what I need is the resolution?*

Everyone needs to be forgiven, Bautista said.

Eventually.

Renz looked at him with the expression of someone who has received an answer they're going to sit with. Not convinced, but not dismissing it. *Okay,* he said. *I have to think about that.*

Good, Bautista said.

Renz went home. Bautista finished in the sacristy and went to his office and sat.

He was not certain the answer had been sufficient. He had said: the oracle cannot forgive you, and Renz had said: I don't need to be forgiven, and he had said: everyone does, eventually, and Renz had accepted this as something to think about. But *eventually* was doing a great deal of work in that

sentence. It meant: trust me, there will come a moment in your life when the distinction I'm drawing will matter. At seventeen, the word eventually was not very persuasive. At seventeen, eventually meant far away.

He was also not certain the distinction he had drawn was the most important distinction. The oracle cannot forgive you. True. But Celeste had been writing to him for two years about the things the oracle could do, and the things it could do were not trivial. The woman whose divorce the oracle had helped process, who had arrived at their conversations more prepared, more specific, more able to do the work.

He thought about Renz going home, opening an oracle interface, bringing it the question: *why does forgiveness matter if I can achieve resolution?* And the oracle receiving that question and responding with something calibrated to Renz, something that acknowledged the validity of the question, and then saying something careful about the difference between resolution and forgiveness, probably more nuanced than what Bautista had said, drawing on more resources than Bautista had drawn on.

He lay awake that night for a long time. Not in distress. In a wakefulness that came from holding a question he had not answered.



Chapter Twelve: What We Were Always Actually For

Year 18, Cebu

The desk faced the window, which was how Celeste had always preferred it: writing toward light rather than away from it. The window looked out on the small garden at the back of the residence — not the parish grounds but the sisters' residence, the private garden that was actually private, the bougainvillea that had been there since before she arrived and would be there after she was gone.

She had been thinking about this letter for four months. Four months of circling the question, which was the same question she had been circling since Year 6, since the nine days in Pilar's house, since the chair beside the bed. Twelve years of the question. She was not going to answer it. She had understood, some time in the previous month, that the letter was not going to contain an answer. It was going to contain the question in its current, most precise form, and it was going to contain what she now believed, which was not an answer but was something she needed to say before the something shifted again.

The morning had been full. Mass at six, then the weekly distribution at the feeding ministry, then two home visits — a couple whose eldest daughter had moved abroad and whose grief at the absence was the slow kind that accumulated in quiet, and an elderly man named Ferdie whose wife was managing fine but who needed, himself, someone to sit with once a week. She had come back to the residence at noon and eaten quickly and gone to her room and sat at the desk with the intention of beginning the letter.

She had looked at the garden instead. The bougainvillea was in its October color, the specific deep pink that was almost red, the brackets vivid against the wall. A gecko on the lower portion of the glass. The afternoon light coming in at the

angle it came in at in October, lower than the summer light, gentler.

She had thought: Bautista was sixty-nine when she first wrote to him seriously. He was seventy-six now. They had been thinking about the same question for ten years. They had not resolved it. They had sharpened it, and refined it, and turned it in different lights, and they were still holding it, together, across the hundred and twenty kilometers between Cebu City and the smaller city where he was now. In ten years they had exchanged forty-three letters — she had counted, in September, as a kind of inventory. Forty-three letters about a question that had not resolved.

She picked up her pen.

Father Bautista,

I want to tell you what I think now. Not as a conclusion — I know we've agreed that conclusions are not available — but as a current position that I think is more honest than anything I've written to you before. You can tell me where it goes wrong.

I have been, in this correspondence, trying to defend the work I do. I want to be honest about that. When I told you about the pattern, about the numbers, what I was also telling you — without saying it directly — was: something is taking what I do, and it concerns me, and I need to understand what I do well enough to argue for its necessity.

I think this was a mistake in framing.

What I do is not a service I provide to a person in need. A service can be provided by anything adequate to the task. What I do — what we do,

what the Church does at its best — is be present in a way that requires something of us. We choose it. We show up when it costs us. We carry what we receive. We are changed by the people we accompany, which means their difficulty is real to us, which means we are genuinely available to be affected.

The oracle does not do this. Not because it is poorly designed. Because it cannot be affected. It does not carry what Pilar gave it in those nine days. The giving did not change it. The relationship — the word I have always hesitated to use — is not mutual in this way.

What I have come to think is: this is not a question about function. The oracle performs many of the same functions. The question is about what the performance of those functions by a human being means and requires and produces — in the community, in the individual, in the structure of mutual need that the Church runs on.

I think we have been trying to argue for the necessity of what we do on the basis of quality — that human accompaniment is better, or different, or more. I don't think this is the right argument. The right argument is about what a community becomes when its members no longer need to bring their hardest things to each other.

I don't think this is about God. I think it is about us. I think we built a faith around being the only ones who stayed. And now something else is staying. And we have to figure out what we were always actually for.

*That's what I wanted to say. I hope you are well. I
hope the October light is good where you are.*

Sister Celeste

She read it back.

She crossed out nothing. She folded it, addressed the envelope, and set it on the corner of the desk for the morning post.

Then she stayed at the window for a while, watching the bougainvillea in the October light.



Chapter Thirteen: A Gap in the Record

Years 18–19



MOSAIC ARCHIVE — BAUTISTA/MACAPAGAL CORRESPONDENCE COLLECTION

Sub-series: Letters, Year 14 through Year 19

*Processing note: The following materials were
donated to the Archive in Year 23 by Father
Bautista, who contributed them as part of a
broader donation of diocesan correspondence.
Sister Celeste Macapagal reviewed the collection
prior to donation and withheld two items; the
gaps are noted in the catalogue.*



*From the correspondence log — Year 18 to Year
19:*

Letter 42 of 43: Macapagal to Bautista. Date: Year 18,
October 14. Status: Present in collection.

Letter 43 of 43: Bautista to Macapagal. Date: Year 19,
April 6. Status: Present in collection. *Contents withheld at
subject's request. Date of letter confirmed by postmark on
envelope. Handwritten, one page.*



*Between Letter 42 and Letter 43: one hundred
and seventy-four days.*



Archive processing note, appended:

*The Archive received Letter 43 in its sealed state
and was asked not to open it. The sealed letter is
preserved in the collection. The Archive is not in
a position to assess the contents, the reasons for
the length of silence, or what the one-page
response contains.*

*What the Archive can confirm: Father Bautista
donated this collection voluntarily, with Letter 43
sealed and labeled in his own hand. Sister Celeste
Macapagal, who reviewed the collection, did not
remove Letter 43.*

*The Archive is also not in a position to assess the
silence. One hundred and seventy-four days is a*

*long time between letters from a man who wrote
forty-two letters in ten years. It is also not an
ending. Letter 43 exists. Whatever it contains, it
was written.*

*The Archive leaves the sealed letter in the
primary record.*



End of Thread Four.



N. Van Seters & Claude.ai

MOSAIC ARCHIVE — FRAGMENT THREE

Appearing between Thread Four and Thread Two

MOSAIC ARCHIVE

INTERNAL CORRESPONDENCE Classification committee —
active discussion thread Subject: Calvary Road Baptist
Congregation (Webb materials) — scope question

From: P. Nair, Senior Archivist

To: D. Hutchinson, Archivist

Year 24, February 3

David —

The Webb materials have come up again in this week's committee meeting. The question is whether Calvary Road Baptist and the associated congregations fall within the Archive's scope.

The scope, as you know, is defined as: *communities and individuals who resisted the oracle age's claim on human experience*. My position has been that Webb's congregation qualifies. His tribulation theology is a response to the oracle age's specific encroachment on the functions the congregation has historically served — community, meaning, accompaniment — and his community's resistance to adopting oracle consultation for spiritual guidance is direct resistance to the oracle age's claim on the sacred.

I know you disagree. Can you write your position out properly for the committee?

— Priya

From: D. Hutchinson, Archivist

To: P. Nair, Senior Archivist

Year 24, February 5

Priya —

My position: the Webb congregation is not resisting the oracle age. It is responding to the oracle age theologically — treating it as a sign or a test, integrating it into an existing eschatological framework.

Resistance, as I understand the Archive's remit, involves some recognition of the oracle age as a force external to the resister's framework, against which the resister is maintaining something. Webb's framework absorbs the oracle age rather than opposing it. The oracle age becomes, within his theology, a feature of God's plan, which is the opposite of resistance.

I recognise this is a narrow distinction and that reasonable people disagree about it.

— *David*

From: P. Nair, Senior Archivist

To: D. Hutchinson, Archivist

Year 24, February 6

David —

I think you're describing the theology accurately. I think the theology doesn't determine the practice. Webb's congregation maintained specific practices — communal accompaniment, shared uncertainty, the functional requirement to bring difficulty to other people rather than to a machine — regardless of the theological framing they gave to those practices. The practices are what matter for our scope.

I don't expect we'll resolve this today.

— *Priya*

From: D. Hutchinson, Archivist

To: P. Nair, Senior Archivist

Year 24, February 6

No. Let's table it for next month and bring it to the full committee.

— *David*

Classification status of Webb materials: pending, Year 26. The question remains open in the Archive's records.

*"The oracle can speak our language perfectly.
This is one of the problems."*

— Yann Kergoat, interview with the Mosaic Archive, Year 19



Chapter One: Before the Class

Year 7, Brittany

The kettle was the old electric one, the one with the slow coil that took twice as long as the newer models and that he had replaced three times with faster kettles before accepting that he preferred the waiting. While it heated he stood at the kitchen window. The garden was November, which in this part of Finistère meant the specific grey of grass that would not die but had stopped trying for anything more than that — a determined grey, patient, full of intention for spring. The apple tree his wife had planted thirty years ago stood at the back in the posture of winter trees, which was the posture of a thing that had withdrawn into itself without leaving.

He had been awake since five. This was the pattern now — body doing its own arithmetic, deciding that dark mornings were for being conscious. He didn't resist it. He made coffee and read for an hour and then, this particular Saturday, had sat for another hour with his notebook and the half-formed thought that had been working at him since Tuesday, which was: how do you describe the difference between a word that is alive in you and a word that you know?

This was not a new thought. He had been having versions of it for forty years. But Claire Holt had arrived two months ago with her oracle equipment and her fellowship documentation, and since her arrival the thought had acquired a new specificity that he was still trying to locate.

He poured the water into the press and waited.

Maëlle would arrive at nine to set up the hall. The children came at ten. He had been doing this every Saturday, with gaps, since he was thirty-one — forty years of Saturday mornings, different villages, different groups of children, different colleagues. Maëlle was the best colleague he'd had. She was also his granddaughter, which he tried not to let matter too much.

He pressed the coffee and poured it into his mug, which was white with a small chip at the rim that he kept meaning to address and kept not addressing. He took it to the kitchen table and sat.

The notebook was open to the page he'd been working on since Tuesday. He had written three versions of the same question and crossed out two of them. The remaining version said: *What is the word for the quality of speech that inhabits the speaker — the quality in which you can hear not just the meaning but the presence of the person who carries it? And does Breton have this word and not French, or am I inventing a word because I need it?*

He wasn't inventing it. He knew the word. He was trying to write his way around the edges of it in French so he could get at what it held.

The problem with Breton, for someone trying to explain it to people who didn't have it, was that some of the language's distinctions were not visible from the outside. You could learn

the grammar. You could learn to produce grammatically correct sentences. The oracle could now produce grammatically correct sentences, idiomatically appropriate sentences, sentences that a native speaker would find unremarkable if they encountered them in text. This was what Claire's oracle documentation project had produced, among other things: a system that could generate Breton that was correct.

What it could not do — and here was where Yann kept arriving and then not knowing where to go — was inhabit the language. The oracle's Breton was correct the way a photograph was correct. Every element of the face was there. The face was not there.

He was aware this might be sentiment. He was aware he was seventy-one years old and had been speaking Breton his entire life and could not fully separate his attachment to the language from his need to believe the attachment was justified. He held this possibility seriously. He kept arriving at the same answer: the thing he was pointing at was real. The photograph was not the face. He was not wrong about this. He might be wrong about whether it mattered, but he was not wrong about the fact.

He finished the coffee.

He thought about his father. His father had been one of the generation who had had Breton beaten out of them in school — not metaphorically, and Yann did not use the metaphor loosely. There had been a specific symbol, a wooden object called a *vache*, passed to any child caught speaking Breton on school grounds, which accumulated humiliations until the end of the day and then became a beating. His father had carried this with a particular flatness of

expression when he spoke of it in his old age — the flatness of a man who had decided some things were simply what they were and had taken the decision so completely into himself that there was no anger left on the surface, only the shape of the decision.

He had spoken Breton at home, anyway. His wife had spoken it. His children had learned it at his knee. Yann had grown up in a house where French and Breton occupied different spaces — not better or worse, not coded by value, just differently present. French for the world outside, for school and commerce and the administrative fact of being French. Breton for the interior — the kitchen, the garden, the jokes, the names for specific weathers and specific silences that French did not hold.

He put on his coat.

Outside, the November morning was cold and still. The village was a long street with houses on both sides and a church at the end and a bar that was also the post office on weekdays and a *salle polyvalente* — the community hall where the class met — beside the church. He walked the three minutes to the hall and let himself in with the key and turned on the lights, which took a moment to warm up and produced in the interim a specific institutional grey-white that was the light of every community hall he had ever been in.

He looked at the room. Eight chairs arranged in a loose circle. A whiteboard Maëlle had acquired from somewhere. The window at the north end with its view of the churchyard and the old yew that predated the church by some estimates. The particular smell of the hall, which was all community halls: dust and old wood and something that might have been food from a long-ago event.

He stood in the room alone for a few minutes before Maëlle arrived.

Some Saturdays it felt necessary. Some Saturdays it felt like standing on a train platform after the last train had left — the maintenance of an expectation that the maintenance could not bring into being. He knew the difference when he felt it and he kept doing it on both kinds of Saturday, because he had long ago decided that the feeling was not the point.

He heard Maëlle's car in the car park.



Chapter Two: The Class

Year 7, Brittany

Maëlle Kergoat was thirty-three and taught the Saturday class with the competence of someone who had been doing a thing long enough to have developed real skill at it, and the slight distance of someone who had developed the skill without developing the certainty that the skill served what it was supposed to serve. She did not have a word for this distance. She sometimes thought of it as the gap between speaking and inhabiting — but she was careful with this formulation, because it implied a deficiency in herself that she was not sure she owned.

The eight children arrived between five and ten minutes past ten. She knew them all by name and by something more than name: she knew Loïc Morvant, eleven, the way you know a child who is genuinely absorbed in a thing, who brings

his full attention to the class without performing it, whose questions were real questions and whose silences were real thinking. She knew Enora Guevel, twelve, who was present every Saturday not because the language compelled her but because her grandmother sat in the chair by the window and Enora understood her attendance to be a gift she was giving, and gave it accordingly, with the specific gravity of a child delivering a present. She knew the Prigent twins, nine, whose attention had the characteristic quality of twins' attention: sometimes synchronized, sometimes in opposition, rarely available individually.

She arranged the chairs, handed out the vocabulary sheets, and waited for the last two children to stop taking off their coats.

She taught in Breton. This was the commitment — the class was conducted only in Breton, from the first word of the first lesson, which was how her grandfather had always done it and which she had inherited not as a decision but as a given. The children knew some French words for the things she was teaching. They did not use them here.

Today was colors. The colors were not difficult — Breton color vocabulary was straightforward, the basic set available in any language. What was interesting, what she had learned from her grandfather to use as a way into the language's specific logic, was the question of what colors did in Breton that they did not do in French. Not a long lesson in linguistics — the children were nine and eleven — but a single observation, carefully placed: that *glas* in Breton covered what French divided into *bleu* and *vert*, blue and green, and that this was not a deficiency in Breton but a different way of organizing the spectrum, a different decision about where the

significant boundary lay.

She said this in Breton, slowly, and she watched the children's faces.

Loïc's face: interested. The specific interest of a child who has been given a piece of information that reorganizes something.

Enora's face: attentive, performing attentiveness, but also — Maëlle had learned to look for this — something underneath the performance that was genuine. Enora was listening. She had been listening for two years. Some of what she heard went in.

The Prigent twins: the girl was watching the whiteboard, the boy was watching Loïc. Neither of them was fully present but both of them were in the room.

The others: varied, in the way that children's attention varied in the middle of a Saturday morning when the alternative was outside or a screen.

She continued. She moved from colors to a description exercise — each child was to describe the room in Breton, finding words for the things they could see. This was the part of teaching she was best at: the space where the language had to be found by the learner, where the learner couldn't rely on a word they'd been given but had to approximate and try. Loïc described the window by its light. Enora described the chair by its age — she used a word that meant *worn by use* rather than *old*, which was a real choice, a real distinction, and Maëlle noticed it and let it sit without commenting, because commenting would make it self-conscious.

Yann sat in the back of the room when he came to the class, which was not every week now. He watched without participating, which was his role — he had deliberately

handed the teaching to Maëlle and made himself a presence rather than an authority, because he knew what the presence of a grandfather who had been doing this since before you were born could do to the feeling of agency in a room. He was seventy-one and she was thirty-three and the children were theirs to teach, not his, and he had understood this better than she had expected him to.

She glanced at him once during the exercise. He was watching Loïc with an expression that was not quite pleasure but close to it — satisfaction, maybe, at how the boy was working.

The class ran an hour and a half. At the end, she gave the children a task for the following week: find one word in Breton that their parents or grandparents used that they hadn't heard anyone else use. Bring it next Saturday and say what it meant. This was a task she gave every few months, a way of reaching into the domestic language, the language that lived in houses rather than classes.

The children left. The grandmother of Enora's grandmother — Maëlle still got the generations confused — collected Enora with a smile that was partly for Maëlle and partly for the room itself, for what happened in the room.

When they were gone, Yann helped her stack the chairs.

Loïc is ready for more, he said. In Breton.

*I know. In Breton. I'm trying not to go faster than
the others.*

He'll outpace them anyway.

I know. She stacked the last chair. Let him.

They turned off the lights. Outside, the November grey had not changed. They walked separately to their cars and drove separately home, which was a few minutes apart in the

village, and the Saturday continued. The children went about their November Saturdays. The language went with them, in varying proportions, into the rest of the week.

Maëlle drove home and made lunch and did not think about the class, specifically — the class was done, it had been what it was — but carried in the back of her mind the image of Enora using *used* rather than *old*, the specific choice, the specific economy of a child who was finding her way into something without knowing she was finding her way.

That was what she came back to, on the Saturdays when it felt possible: the small economies. Not the whole of the language, not the survival of Breton, not the cultural argument, nothing large. Just a child who found a more precise word than the obvious one. That was enough for a Saturday, if the rest of the week was going to be what it was.



Chapter Three: The Question

Year 8, Brittany

Claire Holt had arrived in October, with two large bags and a laptop and a portable recording array that she set up in the corner of whatever room she was working in. She was thirty-eight and American and very polite in the specific way of someone who had done fieldwork in communities where they were not from and had learned to take up the minimum of available space while still being present for everything.

She introduced herself to Yann in French, which was correct — she did not assume he would want to speak English, and she had been told he spoke French, and she used it. Her French was good but not native; she thought in English and occasionally the sentence arrived in the wrong order. This did not bother Yann. He had heard worse.

She wanted to document the language. This was the fellowship's stated purpose: a computational linguistics project, funded by a European consortium, with the specific aim of producing the most comprehensive corpus of spoken Breton ever assembled — the phonological range, the syntactic variety, the semantic fields, the oral literature, the daily speech of the remaining native speakers, all captured at extremely high fidelity using oracle transcription tools and then processed by oracle analysis systems that would map the language's internal architecture in ways that classical linguistic documentation could not.

She explained this to Yann over coffee in his kitchen, on the second day after her arrival.

He listened. He asked three questions: who would own the archive, what would happen to it after the fellowship ended, and what the oracle system would be able to do with the language once it had the corpus.

The archive would be held by the university consortium, with public access. After the fellowship, she would return to the United States but the archive would remain. The oracle system — she was direct about this, which he appreciated — would be able to produce Breton. Not just transcribe it. Generate it. Given the full corpus, the system would have enough material to produce new Breton speech: grammatically correct, phonologically accurate, idiomatically

appropriate, indistinguishable in many contexts from speech produced by a native speaker.

Like me, Yann said.

In terms of the output, she said. Yes.

He poured more coffee. *And you want to record me.*

You're one of perhaps four hundred people in the world who learned Breton as a first language.

Not revival Breton, not class Breton — first language.

I know what I am.

She met his eyes. *I know you do. That's why I'm here.*

He said she could record him. He said she could attend the Saturday class, with the parents' agreement, which Maëlle handled. He said she should understand that what she was documenting was a living practice, not an artifact, and that he expected her to behave accordingly. She said she understood. He believed her.

She came to the Saturday class for the first time in November, two months into her fellowship. She set up the recording array quietly before the children arrived, a small cluster of devices on a stand near the window, and sat in the back beside Yann, and did not speak during the class.

The class that morning was practice conversation — the children paired, given a scenario, asked to work through it in Breton. Maëlle moved between the pairs, listening, offering words when they stalled. The scenarios were ordinary: ordering at a bakery, describing a journey, asking someone the time.

After the class, while the children were putting on their coats, Claire ran a quick demonstration she had been preparing. She connected her tablet to a small speaker and

said, in English: *I want to show you something, if that's okay.*

The children stopped. Coats half on.

She played a recording: Yann's voice, from a session the week before, speaking Breton. Clear and specific, his particular voice, the exact cadence and timbre.

Then she played the oracle's Breton: a sentence generated by the oracle system using the corpus it had assembled so far. Not Yann's sentence — a new sentence, describing the same scenario as the children's practice conversation, the bakery scenario.

The oracle's Breton was correct. The children looked at each other. Loïc's expression was the expression of someone being asked to identify something by feel in the dark.

Is that real? one of the twins asked.

It was generated, Claire said in French, switching registers. The oracle made it, from the recordings it has.

It speaks Breton?

It can produce Breton, yes.

There was a moment of ordinary children-in-coats silence.

Then Léa Briand — twelve, regular attender, quiet and specific in her attention — said: *If the oracle knows it, why do we need to learn it from people?*

The question was not hostile. It was the question of a practical twelve-year-old who wanted to understand the purpose of Saturday mornings in a community hall in November when an alternative had just presented itself.

Maëlle was the first to speak. *Knowing it and carrying it are different things.*

Léa waited. The waiting was patient — she wanted more than the distinction, she wanted the distinction explained.

When you learn a language from people who have it, Maëlle said, you learn it as a living thing. You learn not just the words but the weight they have — who used them, when, what they carried. The oracle has the words. What it doesn't have is the weight.

Léa thought about this.

But I don't have the weight either, she said. I don't know who used them before. I wasn't there.

Maëlle was quiet for a moment.

No, she said. But you're here now. And you'll carry it forward in a way that adds your weight to it.

Léa considered this with the expression of someone who has received an answer that is not quite what they needed but might be the best available. *Okay*, she said, and finished putting on her coat.

After the children left, Claire was packing up the recording array. Yann was stacking chairs. Maëlle stood by the window looking at the churchyard.

You answered well, Yann said, in Breton.

I didn't answer, she said. I described.

He set down the chairs he was holding. *Yes.*

I don't know the answer.

Nobody does. He picked up the chairs again. That doesn't mean the class is the wrong place to be.

Claire had been listening. She did not comment. She had been in the field long enough to know which silences she was not part of.

Yann looked at the recording array. Then at Claire.

*It is correct, what you played, he said. The
oracle's Breton. There's nothing wrong with it.*

No.

*I know. He carried the chairs to the stack. That's
what I've been trying to write about for two
months.*



Chapter Four: The Daily Log

Year 9, Brittany

Mosaic Archive — Kergoat Daily Log

Entry, Year 9, March (Saturday, post-class)

*Rendered from Breton. Translator's note: Where
the original Breton carries specific semantic
content that is not fully available in French or
English translation, the translation has aimed for
approximation rather than equivalence. One
passage is left in transliteration at the end; a note
on it is appended.*



Class today: six children. The Prigent girl was absent. Loïc brought the word he'd found, which was *breizhek* in the sense his great-grandfather used it — not just Breton in the ethnic sense but *breizhek* as an adjective applied to a way of doing things, the specific way of handling a difficulty by

going around it rather than through it. His great-grandfather apparently used it approvingly. This is interesting. I've heard it used that way before, in men of his generation. I've been trying to find it in print and can't. This might be regional. Claire will want to record him.

Claire was there again. She is competent and careful and I have no complaint about her presence. What I want to try to describe, and have been failing to describe for several months, is the thing the oracle does when it produces Breton.

I have tried: *too correct*. But what does that mean? Correct is correct. An error is an error and the absence of error is not suspicious. A text can be perfect and still be what it is.

I have tried: *too consistent*. The oracle's Breton does not have the variation that a speaker's Breton has — the slight variations in speed, the micro-pauses at the wrong places, the half-second of searching for a word that every speaker shows sometimes. This is closer. The oracle speaks as if it is never searching for a word. Because it isn't. It has all the words. There is no search.

I have tried: *like a photograph*. But a photograph of what? This is where the metaphor fails.

The thing I am trying to name is this: when I hear someone speak Breton, I hear not just the Breton but the speaker. I hear the Breton as something the speaker is doing — producing from inside a life that has been shaped by the language, finding the word because the word is present to them from the inside, because the word lives where they live. The word and the speaker are, in some sense, one thing when I hear the word in a speaker's mouth.

When I hear the oracle's Breton, I hear the Breton and I do not hear the speaker. Not because the oracle is absent — the

oracle is present, generating the speech in real time. But the oracle and the words are not one thing. The oracle has the words the way a library has books. Having them and being formed by them are different relationships.

I know this distinction and I cannot get it into French. I have been trying for three months. Every French formulation I reach for is already contaminated by the French way of understanding the relationship between a person and the language they speak, which is different from the Breton way.

I know there is a word for what I am describing. It is not in any dictionary I have access to. It belongs to the register of the language that was spoken by my grandparents' generation and that has only partially survived into mine. My grandmother used it. I remember her using it and I remember what she used it about, and what she used it about was exactly the thing I am trying to describe now: the presence of a person in their speech, as distinct from the mere production of speech by a person. She applied it to Breton spoken by people who had learned it as adults, who spoke it correctly but in whom the language had not settled into the place it settles in when you have had it since before you could think. She applied it, by extension, to other kinds of showing-up that were correct but not inhabited.

The word is —

[Translator's note: The word Kergoat writes here is left in the original Breton throughout this entry and has not been rendered into French or English. The Mosaic Archive has consulted three Breton linguists and two oracle analysis systems. The linguists disagree about the word's derivation and its precise semantic range. The oracle systems translate it similarly to each other but not

to the satisfaction of any of the human consultants. The Archive's best approximation: the word describes a quality of presence in speech that distinguishes speech produced from the inside of a life shaped by the language from speech produced by a person or system that has the language but has not been shaped by it. French does not make this distinction. The distinction, the linguists note, is one that any language whose speakers have experienced their language's marginalization might develop: the need to say, in the language itself, that a thing can be spoken correctly without being spoken truly.]

I crossed out all the French descriptions. The word is the word.

This is the entry.



Chapter Five: A Working Relationship

Year 10, Brittany

In the second year of Claire's fellowship, Maëlle began to understand what she was actually doing in a way she hadn't understood in the first year.

The first year, she had held Claire's work at a slight angle — present to it, cooperating with it, but relating to it as an adjacent project rather than as part of her own. Claire was documenting. Maëlle was teaching. The two activities ran in

parallel. She had been politely interested in Claire's methodology without feeling it was her methodology.

In the second year, she started using the archive.

What Claire had assembled, by the end of Year 9, was the most complete corpus of spoken Breton in existence: forty-two hours of Yann, eight hours of the three other native speakers Claire had located in the region, eighty hours of revival speakers including Maëlle, and extensive documentation of the Saturday class. The oracle system had processed all of it and could now produce not just grammatically correct Breton but stylistically varied Breton, regional variations identified and tagged, register shifts documented, the semantic range of contested words mapped with a precision that no individual speaker could produce alone.

Maëlle began accessing the archive to prepare her lessons. She was looking for words that were specific to the Pays Bigouden register, words that Yann used that she knew but whose range she was uncertain about. She found them in the corpus. She also found things she hadn't known: a diminutive form that Yann used only in specific emotional contexts, which she had absorbed from years of speaking with him but whose rule she hadn't consciously registered. She found a conditional construction she'd been slightly wrong about — not wrong enough to be incorrect, but wrong enough that she'd been avoiding the construction unconsciously, and the corpus showed her why and showed her the right form.

She told Claire this. Claire was pleased. The pleasure was genuine.

*That's what it's for, Claire said. Not just the
record. The use.*

They were in Claire's rented workspace — a room above the pharmacie, which the pharmacist had sublet to her for the year. Recording equipment on one table, laptop on another, two chairs angled toward each other. Outside the window, the village's Tuesday morning, the butcher's van, a dog, the particular light of a Breton October that was always slightly more interesting than it had any right to be.

Maëlle said: *I want to ask you something.*

Yes.

*What do you think happens to the language when
the fellowship ends and the archive is in oracle
storage?*

Claire considered this with the directness Maëlle had come to appreciate. She did not give a reassuring answer. She gave a careful one.

*The archive is as complete a documentation as we
know how to make. The oracle can produce
Breton from it — accurately, sustainably,
indefinitely. If someone in two hundred years
wants to hear Breton spoken correctly, they can.
If a revival community forms, they have a
foundation that no previous revival community
had.*

That's not what I asked.

*No. Claire folded her hands on the table. You
asked what happens to the language. That's
different from what happens to the record.*

Yes.

*The language — Breton as a living practice —
depends on speakers. The archive can support
speakers but it cannot create them. If the number
of speakers falls below a certain threshold, the*

practice ends, regardless of how complete the archive is. She paused. I don't know where the threshold is. Nobody does.

And the oracle producing Breton — is that the practice continuing? Or is it the archive simulating the practice?

Claire was quiet for a moment.

I think it's the archive simulating the practice, she said. That's my honest answer. The oracle speaking Breton is not Breton being spoken. It's the documentation of Breton being spoken, played back.

Maëlle looked at the window.

Then why are you doing this? she said. Not hostilely. A real question.

Because the alternative is the practice ending with no record. Claire's voice was even. I can't keep the practice alive. You know that. What I can do is make the most accurate record possible. Whether that matters depends on things I can't control.

Maëlle did not say whether she thought it mattered. She was not sure she knew.

At the end of October, Claire needed more recordings of Yann doing something specific: free association, the particular kind of wandering speech that native speakers produce when they are not focused on a topic, when the language is running under its own momentum rather than being directed. She recorded him on a Tuesday afternoon, in his kitchen, while he made soup. He talked about the garden, about a thing he'd read, about his father, about a memory of a specific winter that had come back to him for no reason he could identify. He

spoke for two hours without stopping, the soup finished and eaten and the kitchen gone quiet around him, and Claire sat with her equipment and said nothing.

Afterward, she played back a section of the recording to check the quality.

Maëlle was there. She heard it from across the room.

She stood and listened.

It was his voice. His specific cadence, the pace he moved at in Breton — slightly slower than his French, slightly more interior, as if Breton was the language he thought in and the slowness was the thinking being audible. She had grown up hearing that voice. She had heard it in this register — the reflective register, the free-association kitchen-soup register — all her life.

She listened until Claire stopped the playback.

That's good, Claire said, looking at her levels.

Maëlle said: *It sounds exactly like him.*

Yes.

Exactly.

The fidelity is very high.

Maëlle looked at the speaker. Then at the window. The Tuesday outside was the same Tuesday it had been before. She did not say anything else. She was locating a feeling she had not had before and could not yet name, which was: it sounds exactly like him, and he is in his house a kilometer from here, and the exactness is not what I wanted.



Chapter Five-and-a-Half: The Next Project

Year 10, Brittany

The offer from the university consortium came by email on a Tuesday in November, which was the same week she had been finishing the phonological mapping of the corpus's final sections. The offer was for a three-year position doing the same work she was doing now, but in the Faroe Islands — a language with a larger speaker community, better institutional support, and a government actively interested in what she could build. The email described her Breton methodology as the reason they wanted her specifically. The Breton project was the proof of concept. The Faroe Islands project would be the scaled version.

She read the email twice and did not respond.

She had a standing call with the consortium's project director the following Thursday. She would say she needed time to consider. She had until December.

On Wednesday she went through the archive.

This was something she did periodically — not to check the quality, which she trusted, but to listen. The oracle's processing of the corpus produced a continuous stream of cross-references and pattern annotations, and reading through them gave her a sense of what the archive had become, what shape it had. Today she went back to the earliest recordings. October, Year 8, the first sessions with Yann.

She put on her headphones.

His voice in those early recordings had a quality she had been trying to name for two years. She had listened to hundreds of hours of Breton by now — Yann, the three other native speakers, Maëlle, the Saturday class children in their

varying registers of competence. She could parse the phonological distinctions the way she could eventually parse any language's distinctions, through extended exposure and trained attention. But Yann's voice in the Year 8 recordings had something she could hear but not classify.

The oracle had classified it: *high phonological consistency; strong idiolectal markers; native speaker pattern confirmed*. All accurate.

She listened to a passage from October 9th — Yann describing the Saturday class that had happened the day before, unprompted, while she was adjusting equipment. He had not known she was recording. He had been talking to himself, or to the room, using the Breton the way you used a language when you were thinking aloud inside it. The oracle had flagged this as a high-value phonological sample because of the naturalness of the production: no performance awareness, no adjustment for a listener.

She listened to it three times.

Then she opened the oracle's generation interface — the tool she used to test the corpus quality — and typed a prompt: *Describe the Saturday class*. In Breton.

The oracle generated a passage. Grammatically correct. Phonologically accurate. Appropriate register — the reflective, slightly interior register of thinking aloud. It used vocabulary Yann used. The sentence rhythms were close to his.

She put the recording and the generation side by side and listened to them back to back.

They were not the same. She knew this. She had known it since she had demonstrated the system to the class and watched the twelve-year-old's face. She had known it the way

Maëlle had known it, when she said *it sounds exactly like him* — the *exactly* pointing at the thing that wasn't there.

What she had not let herself know until this particular Wednesday: that she had built this. The not-sameness was not a failure of her methodology. The not-sameness was the condition that her methodology had been designed to preserve. The oracle's Breton was exactly as good as the corpus allowed it to be, and the corpus was as good as she had made it, and what the corpus could not hold was the thing that made Yann's voice Yann's voice.

She had known this in the theoretical sense for her entire career. The archive was not the living practice — this was the founding assumption of documentation linguistics, stated in the first paragraph of the methodology paper she had published in Year 5. The archive supported the living practice; it did not replace it. She had written this. She had believed it.

What she had not considered, writing it: that the archive's existence changed the relationship between the documentation and the urgency. That once the corpus existed — once the oracle could produce the language perfectly — the argument for the Saturday classes became harder to make. Not because the argument was wrong. Because the archive discharged the most immediate version of the fear. The language was safe in a way it had not been safe before. And the safety, she was now sitting with, might be a kind of harm.

Her father had documented the farm carefully. Her brothers had helped. The archive was very good. It had the specific sound of the tractor on the north slope in August. It had the way the light came through the barn doors in the afternoon. It had her father's hands. It had everything except what happened to them after, which was: they stopped.

She sat with the recording and the generation playing on a loop.

The Faroe Islands offer described her Breton methodology as the proof of concept. She had proven that a language community's corpus could be documented comprehensively enough for oracle generation. She had proven this. The Faroe Islands project would do the same thing at scale, with better resources and a larger speaker community, and it would be the proof that the methodology worked beyond the specific conditions of Brittany.

She would spend three years arriving at the same place she was arriving at now, in a room in a different country with a different language and the same oracle generation playing on a loop.

She did not yet know if she was going to accept.

She took off the headphones. Outside, the village was doing its Wednesday afternoon. The pharmacist's van was in its usual spot. Two of the class children were on their way home from school, recognisable by their coats and their pace. She watched them through the window for a moment without naming what she was watching.

She sat with the two recordings for a moment before closing the interface — not playing them again, just knowing they were both there. Yann's October voice and the oracle's afternoon generation. She had built the methodology that produced the second one. She had built it carefully and well. She had thought of this throughout as an act of conservation.

She was sitting with what else it might be.

She was not going to resolve this today. The Faroe Islands offer was still in her inbox. The phonological mapping was still unfinished. The not-resolving was not permission to stop.

She closed the generation interface.

She went back to the phonological mapping.



Chapter Six: The Lecture

Year 11, Brittany

The invitation came from Rennes, from the University's program in endangered languages: would he speak to a seminar on language preservation and digital technologies? They had seen the paper Claire had published about the Kergoat corpus and they wanted a practitioner's perspective.

He was seventy-five. He had given lectures before — occasional things, conferences, the odd talk at a school where a teacher had been enthusiastic. He did not think of himself as a lecturer. He thought of himself as a civil engineer who had spent forty years doing a second job that most people regarded as either tragic or admirable, and he found both responses slightly embarrassing.

He took the invitation because he had something he wanted to say and had not yet been able to say it in the right register.

The seminar room at the University held forty seats and had thirty-two in it when he arrived. He had been told to expect a small academic audience. The thirty-two were a mixture of linguists, students, and what appeared to be a group from a Breton cultural organization who had come specifically for him. He recognized one of the faces — a woman who had

been in a language class he'd run in the nineties and who was now sixty-something, still carrying the language. He nodded at her and she nodded back.

He spoke for forty minutes.

He did not use notes. He had been composing this in his head since October, since the afternoon in the kitchen with Claire's equipment, since the moment Maëlle had said *it sounds exactly like him* and he had understood that the exactly was the problem.

He said:

Language is not a tool. A language is a structure that thinks with you — not an implement a person picks up and puts down, but a way of perceiving that forms the perceiver. You do not speak a language. A language speaks you.

He paused here. Let this land.

The oracle was not formed by Breton. It was trained on Breton. The record is not nothing — he helped make the record and he was glad it existed. But the record is not the language. When the last person formed by Breton is gone, what remains is an accurate documentation of what the language produced in the people it shaped. The way of seeing retires.

He was aware of the room — the thirty-two, the quality of their attention, which was the good quality, the kind that comes from a room that has been given something it did not have a clear word for and is trying to locate the word.

When the last speaker is gone, the language does not retire. The language's data continues. The way of seeing retires.

He said a few more things after this, some of them less good — he was tired and the thread of the argument had been

pulled taut and he did not have much left for the particulars. He answered questions. He signed two copies of Claire's paper for people who had brought it. The woman from the nineties class came and shook his hand and said something in Breton that was simple and sufficient. He thanked her.

On the train back to Quimper, he was slightly ill — the specific illness of having said the thing you had been trying to say for forty years, which is not triumphant but evacuated.

The lecture had been recorded by the University. It would go into their archive. The oracle would process it, along with the rest of the corpus. The oracle would now have his explanation of what the oracle could not do.

He looked out the window at the Breton countryside going past in the November dark, which was fields he could not see and trees he could not see and the feeling of being on a train in a place he knew, in the dark, unable to see it.

He was tired.

He thought about what Maëlle would say when he told her how the lecture had gone. She would say: *Did you say the thing about the photograph?* He had developed the thing about the photograph with her, at her kitchen table, in October.

He had not said the thing about the photograph. He had found something better than the photograph. He was looking forward to telling her.

The train ran south through the dark, toward Quimper, through land whose names were Breton names, through a country that had been using his language to name its hills and rivers for a thousand years and would go on using those names after the last person who knew what the names meant was in the ground.

That was not nothing either. He supposed. That was not nothing.

Chapter Seven: Three Children

Year 13, Brittany

The November class had three children in it.

She had set up eight chairs before checking herself. She looked at the circle of chairs for a moment and moved five of them to the wall.

The three remaining: Loïc, Anaïs, and Mikael. She knew them well enough that their presence in the room had weight — Loïc's focused attention near the window, Anaïs with her small spiral notebook, Mikael in the chair that was still slightly too large for him, attentive with the specific attentiveness of a child who understands he is somewhere the other children on his street are not.

The five who were not there had their own specific weights, and the weights were present in their absence. The Cadec siblings had sat together by the door, and the door now had nothing in front of it except the draft that came in when someone entered. The Briand family's chair — Léa's chair — was the one Maëlle had moved to the wall, and she had moved it without particularly registering that it was Léa's, and then had registered it.

Léa had been the one to ask the question in Year 8, during the first session with Claire's equipment: *if the oracle knows it, why do we learn it from people?* She had been twelve. Maëlle had given the best answer she had, which was the answer about carrying it differently, and Léa had accepted it with the

expression of someone filing something unresolved for later. She had kept coming to the class for four years after. Whatever she was doing with the oracle Breton program at her new school in Nantes, it was not the same as what she had been doing here. Whether it was insufficient Maëlle could not say. Léa had not come back and so the question remained where Léa had left it, suspended in Year 8, waiting for a follow-up that had not arrived.

The window was quieter with three. This was the odd thing Maëlle noticed first — not the reduced sound, but the way the room's ambient noise redistributed. Eight children in chairs produced a specific collective rustling, the sound of eight people breathing and shifting and occasionally muttering. Three children in a room that held eight produced something closer to the sound of a library: deliberate, careful, aware of itself.

She taught the class. Loïc was ready for more and she gave him more, and he received it the way he always received things — directly, without performance, going still with the new information. Anaïs had brought a word from her grandmother's usage, as she sometimes did: a Breton word for the specific silence that preceded rain, which her grandmother had used for a coastal weather condition that Anaïs's family no longer lived near. The word was beautiful and specific and Maëlle wrote it on the whiteboard and they all said it. Mikael looked at the word on the board with the expression he had when something was going in.

At the end she set them the task — find one word your family uses that you haven't heard anyone else use — and they put on their coats.

After they left she stood in the room for a moment.

Three chairs in a circle where eight had been. Léa's chair against the wall. The draft from the door. The oracle archive, in its servers somewhere, holding every session she had run in this room since Year 8 in high-fidelity audio.

She stacked the remaining chairs and was not sure what she was stacking them against.

She closed the archive and cooked dinner and did the things that the evening required.



Chapter Eight: Maëlle's Chapter

Year 14, Brittany

In February she had a conversation with her colleague Héloïse that she thought about for three weeks afterward.

Héloïse taught at the same lycée as Maëlle, literature and history. They had lunch together two or three times a week. The friendship was eleven years old and had the quality long friendships develop — the accumulated context that made conversation more efficient, the shorthand, the ability to pick up from where things were left rather than reestablishing the foundations each time.

They were eating in the staff room, sandwiches from the bar across the street. Héloïse was describing a problem with a student, a student who could not tolerate the ambiguity in a particular poem, who kept asking what it meant in the sense of the one correct meaning. The conversation went from there to the general question of what it meant to live with literary

ambiguity, which was a conversation they'd had before in various forms.

At some point Maëlle reached for a concept that she could not find in French.

It was not an obscure concept. It was the concept of the specific quality of time in which a thing is irreversibly past — not just finished, but past in the sense that its pastness changes the present, that the loss is built into the current moment in a way that is not just the absence of the past thing but the presence of the past thing's absence. French had ways around this. She could say *la perte* or *le manque* or *la nostalgie* or she could construct a phrase with *avoir été* that gestured at the past-ness. None of these were the thing. They described from outside what the Breton word held from inside.

The Breton word moved differently. It described the past-thing as still present in the moment of its absence — the way a word in Breton could put the verb first and therefore name the action before the actor, making the action itself primary rather than the person doing it. The concept of irreversible loss in Breton was not *the loss of the thing* but something more like *the thing's having-been, as it lives in now* — a formulation that made the continuing presence of the past into the main clause rather than a qualification.

She described the concept to Héloïse in French, the best description she could manage. Héloïse nodded. *Hireath*, she said. *Like the Welsh word.*

Similar, Maëlle said. Not the same.

What's the difference?

And here was the problem: she could not fully describe the difference to someone who did not have both words. The Breton and the Welsh were neighbors — the languages were

related, had diverged from a common ancestor — but they had diverged in specific ways, and one of the specific ways was in this concept, and the divergence was the kind of thing that required both words to feel.

*It's close, she said. But it doesn't catch the same
fish.*

Héloïse smiled. *That's a nice way to put it.*

It was a nice way to put it but it was not the thing. The thing was still in Breton.

She thought about this for three weeks. She thought about it specifically in relation to what she had been doing on Saturday mornings: the question of what she was teaching when she was teaching Breton. She could teach the vocabulary and the grammar. She could teach the idioms and the oral literature. What she could not teach — not in a classroom, not through any method she knew — was the experience of needing the word. The experience of having a thought for which French was insufficient and Breton was not.

She had that experience. It had arrived incrementally, over thirty-three years of having two languages, and its arrival had not been planned or systematic. It had come from the specific conditions of her childhood: a grandfather who spoke Breton to her in the kitchen, a mother who spoke it occasionally but thought in French, a father who did not have it at all. She had grown up in the gap between these, and the gap was where the Breton words lived that French could not reach.

The children in the Saturday class were not growing up in this gap. They were growing up in French, acquiring Breton as a second language, learning the words and the grammar but not the need for them. This was not a failure of the teaching. It

was a fact about their lives.

She drove to Yann's house on a Sunday afternoon in March, which was something she did perhaps twice a month — not for any structured purpose but for the specific practice of talking to someone who had Breton from the inside in a way she was always slightly approaching.

They sat in his kitchen. He made coffee. The garden was March, which was better than November — the grey still there but moving, the grass doing something again.

She told him about the conversation with Héloïse, and the concept she couldn't find in French, and the three weeks of thinking.

He listened. He was seventy-eight. He had the patience of a man who had been having the same conversation for forty years in different versions.

You found the edge of French, he said.

Yes.

*This is what the language does. It finds the edges.
He poured the coffee. In the places where French
stops, Breton is often still there. Not because
Breton is better than French. Because they found
different edges.*

Héloïse said hiraeth.

*Close. He brought the cups to the table. Not the
same fish. He almost smiled. You told her that.*

I used your phrase.

*Then you have the phrase. He sat down. The
phrase is in you. The distinction behind it is in
you. Not all of it. But enough of it to feel the edge.*

They drank the coffee. Outside, something moved in the garden — a bird, the branch it had sat on releasing back.

Is enough enough? she said.

He looked at his cup. *I don't know*, he said. *I've been asking that for forty years.*

She was not certain what she had. Some of the language and not all of it. The edges and not the interior. Enough to feel what was missing when she tried to say it in French, not enough to say everything that needed saying in Breton. She taught on Saturday mornings from this in-between place, and the children received what she could give them, and some of them would carry a piece of the in-between forward, and some would not.

She was not certain this was enough. She continued doing it.



Chapter Nine: The Archive

Year 15, Brittany

Claire's fellowship officially ended on the thirtieth of September. She had been in the village for two years, and the work had expanded twice during that time, and the corpus had grown to something that neither she nor the university consortium had anticipated at the outset: a hundred and twelve hours of speech, seven living speakers including Yann, extensive documentation of the Saturday classes, oral literature recordings, and a semantic analysis so detailed that the oracle system's Breton was now indistinguishable, in double-blind testing, from native speaker output.

She gave a small dinner on the twenty-eighth, in the room above the pharmacie. She invited Yann and Maëlle and two of the other speakers she had been working with — an elderly couple, Jeannine and Henri Kergroas, who had been speaking Breton to each other for sixty years and who arrived in their formal clothes and sat together with the particular dignity of people who understood that something was being documented — and a young researcher from Rennes who had been assisting the project for six months.

The dinner was what farewell dinners are: specific and slightly ceremonial, with the quality of an occasion that everyone is trying to be present for without overemphasizing its importance. Claire had found Breton wine, which did not exist as a category, so she had found a Muscadet from just across the regional border and someone had put a handwritten label on the bottle that said *Breizh* in a joke that was also not entirely a joke.

They ate. They talked about the project, about the corpus, about what the documentation had produced. Claire described the technical details for the benefit of the Kergroas couple, who listened with the attention of people who had been told that their voices were now in a machine forever and were trying to understand what that meant. Jeannine said: *Is it strange for you, to hear yourself?* She had tried the playback once, at Claire's invitation, and had not tried it again.

Yes, Claire said. I think it would be.

It was me, Jeannine said. But it wasn't — present.

She looked for the word. The way I am present when I'm speaking. The recording was me saying something. It wasn't me saying something now.

No, Claire said. It can't be that.

I know. Jeannine looked at her husband. I understand the difference. I'm just telling you what it felt like.

After the dinner, when the Kergroas couple had left and the young researcher had gone to catch a train, the three of them — Claire, Maëlle, Yann — washed dishes in the small kitchen.

Yann handed things to Maëlle, who dried them. Claire packed her equipment into its cases, the careful methodical packing of someone who had moved equipment many times and knew the order.

I want to ask you something before you go, Yann said. In French. He was in the mode he used for cross-language questions.

Claire looked up.

Do you think it will survive? He meant Breton. He meant the language.

Claire was quiet for a moment. She gave the honest answer she always gave.

I think it will exist, she said. The archive will exist. The documentation will exist. The oracle will be able to produce it for as long as oracle systems exist. Whether it will be spoken — by people who need it, who were formed by it — I don't know. I hope so. I didn't come here thinking I was making a record of something dying. I came here because I thought the record was worth making regardless.

Good, Yann said.

Is that the right answer?

It's the true one. He handed Maëlle a glass. *Which is better than the right one.'

To Claire, before she finished the packing, he said: *You gave it the best chance it has.*

She looked at him.

Not me, he said. The language. You gave the language the best chance it has in the form you could give it. I don't know if it's enough. Neither do you. It's the best chance.

Claire thanked him. It was the right thing to receive.

They went downstairs. Outside, the village's end-of-September night: cool, the first genuinely cool air since summer, the smell of something burning somewhere, a wood stove started for the first time after the warm months. Claire's car was the only one on the small lane.

She said goodbye to both of them. She got in the car and drove down the lane and at the end she turned right without stopping, because she had been here two years and knew the turns without thinking, and then she was gone from the visible portion of the road and the lane was empty.

Yann and Maëlle walked back up to the room above the pharmacie to get their coats. The dishes were done and stacked. The cases were gone.

They walked to their separate cars.

How do you feel? Maëlle asked.

He thought about it. *Like after a long project.* He looked at the lane where Claire's car had been. *Tired and uncertain and glad the work was done.*

Not sad?

I've been sad about this my whole life. He found his keys. At some point the sadness is just the weather.

She drove home. He drove home. The oracle archive, in its servers somewhere, held a hundred and twelve hours of a language that had been spoken on this land for a thousand years and was now spoken by fewer people than lived in this village.

Whatever that was worth, it was worth it.



Chapter Ten: The Last Entry

Year 17, Brittany

Mosaic Archive — Kergoat Daily Log

Final Entry, Year 17, January 14th

Original: handwritten, notebook



Today's class: five children. Loïc, Anaïs, Mikael (who is nine now and beginning to read), and two new ones — a girl named Seren whose family moved here from Wales of all places, and a boy whose name I keep forgetting, which is not his fault. He has the gift of being forgettable. He will remember everything.

The class went well. Seren has some Welsh, which is interesting — she can feel the shape of where the languages are related, which is something she can't yet articulate but that is present in the quality of her mistakes. Her mistakes are intelligent. They come from the right place.

I have been thinking about whether to continue the log.

The log has served a specific purpose: I began it in the first year of my retirement as a way of keeping myself honest — of recording what was happening in the classes, what the language was doing in the room, what I was noticing. For twenty years it was a discipline I was glad to have. It produced entries I would not have produced without the discipline. It made me precise about things I might otherwise have held loosely.

I do not think it is producing that anymore. The discipline has become habit. The habit has become routine. The routine is now producing entries that are competent but not honest in the specific sense I care about. I am describing what happens in the class and I am not saying the thing underneath the description.

The thing underneath the description: I am eighty-one years old and I am tired in the way you get tired when you have been doing something for fifty years that you cannot stop doing. Not tired of the language — the language is the language, it is what it is and I have it in me and it will be in me until I stop. Tired of the effort of maintaining the conditions for the language. Tired of counting children. Tired of the arithmetic of decline that is the background radiation of everything I do.

I don't want to write this in the log. I don't want to write it and then reread it in six months and see myself being tired.

The language itself is not tired. That part has not diminished. I was at the market yesterday and I spoke Breton with the woman who sells cheese from Plougastel — she has not forgotten it, and for the length of that conversation I was entirely myself, more entirely myself than in any other

register. The language is not the problem. The language will be there on Saturday. The language will be there after I stop writing this log and after this notebook is full and in whatever comes after that. I have it in me and I don't need to record it to keep it.

The log has served its purpose. I no longer need to prove to anyone, including myself, that I was here.

I was here. That's enough.

I'll be at the class next Saturday.

Yann Kergoat



Chapter Eleven: Mid-Sentence

Year 19, Brittany

Six children.

Maëlle had been teaching the class alone for eight months now, since Yann had decided, without making a thing of it, that the drive was more than his knees wanted on winter mornings. He was still in the village. He came to the class sometimes when the weather was good and sat in the back. He did not say much during the classes but she felt the difference in the room when he was there: not an authority, not a corrective, just a presence that had been in the room for twenty years before she took it over.

Today was April, which was reliably good. The window showed a churchyard gone green and the yew doing what yews did in April, which was nothing visible but something

being prepared. The six children: Loïc at fifteen, still coming, which was unusual — most children drifted away around fourteen, when the competing pressures of adolescence became what they became. Anaïs at thirteen, who had taken to bringing words from her grandmother's usage, a small archive of domestic Breton that the Saturday class was slowly receiving. Mikael at eleven, who could now read simple texts and who was the class's best argument for starting young, for the way the language had settled into him before he could argue with the settling. Seren at ten, with her Welsh inheritance. A girl named Gwenaëlle, nine, who had been named in Breton by parents who did not speak it, which was its own thing. And the boy Yann had described as forgettable and who was now twelve and whose name was Erwan and who was not forgettable at all, who had the particular quality of presence that children have when they have grown up around adults who take things seriously.

Maëlle was doing something she did some Saturdays when the class was going well: she was letting it run, finding a topic and following it where it went without a lesson plan, using the grammar as it arose naturally rather than as an exercise set. The topic this Saturday had started with Gwenaëlle asking what her name meant and had expanded into the history of Breton names, which had expanded into the question of what it meant to name something — the act of naming as a choice, a commitment, the specific way that a name placed a thing in a language and therefore in a world.

This was too large for eleven-year-olds, or most of it was, but she had a theory about teaching developed from twenty years of watching what children absorbed: they absorbed more than they appeared to absorb, and the things they absorbed

without fully understanding at the time were available to them later, when the understanding arrived. She was not teaching this morning. She was, as Yann had said to her once, *leaving things in rooms where they might be found*.

Erwan had asked a question. The question was about whether a name changed the person who had it — whether being named Gwenaëlle made Gwenaëlle different from a person named something else.

Maëlle began to answer.

The oracle archive, in its servers, held everything Yann had recorded: twenty years of the daily log, the hundred and twelve hours of speech from Claire's fellowship, the Saturday class recordings that went back twelve years. It held Loïc's first attempt at a conditional sentence at age nine. It held Léa Briand asking why they needed to learn it from people and Maëlle beginning to answer. It held Jeannine Kergroas describing the strangeness of hearing her own voice played back, present and not present. It held Yann's lecture on the train back from Rennes, and the free-association kitchen recordings, and the daily log read aloud in the sessions Claire had requested, and the last entry that had never been recorded but whose handwritten original was in the Mosaic Archive in a folder with the other donated materials.

The archive held all of it. The archive was as complete as archives got.

In the room above the pharmacie — now returned to storage, the recording equipment long gone — there was nothing left of Claire's two years except a slightly different smell in the walls and a small oval mark on the floor where one of the equipment stands had rested.

In the community hall, in the circle of six chairs, in the April light through the window onto the ancient yew and the green churchyard, Maëlle looked at Erwan's question.

A name changes what others expect of you, she said in Breton, slowly, so that all of them could follow. And what others expect of you changes what you become. So in that sense —



End of Thread Two.



N. Van Seters & Claude.ai

MOSAIC ARCHIVE — FRAGMENT FOUR

Appearing between Thread Two and Thread One

MOSAIC ARCHIVE

PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT — LECTURE RECORDING Reference:
MA-LNG-0044

*Provenance:** University recording, donated to Archive
Year 24*

Speaker: Not attributed in this extract. See full catalogue entry. **Date:**
Year 11 of the between-time

*Extract, from approximately the midpoint of the lecture.
Preceding and following context available in full
transcript.*

Language is not a tool. I want to begin there, because the tool metaphor is everywhere in these conversations and I think it is making us ask the wrong questions.

You do not speak a language. A language speaks you.

When the last speaker is gone, the language does not retire. The language's data continues. The way of seeing retires.

End of extract.

Archive note: This lecture has been cited in four subsequent works held in this collection, in each case without the speaker being named in the citing text. The Archive notes the pattern. The full attribution is available in the catalogue entry.

*"We are not anti-technology. We are
pro-difficulty."*

— founding statement, the Craigdarroch Circle, Year 9 of the between-time



Chapter One: The Boy and the Oracle

Year 8, Perthshire

The afternoon had gone quiet in the way primary school afternoons go quiet at the end of a Thursday: the specific exhaustion of children who have been asked to concentrate for six hours, who are now in the fifteen minutes before home time, permitted to draw or read or look out the window. Niamh was at the marking table with the P6 compositions, and the room made its residual sounds — pencils, the fidget of someone's chair, rain on the high windows that had been there since morning and showed no sign of stopping.

She was not watching Callum particularly. She was aware of him the way she was aware of all of them in this diffuse end-of-day mode — background awareness, the quality of attention that teachers develop and that is never fully switched off, that catches things at the periphery without being directed at any one child.

What caught her was the quality of his stillness.

He had his tablet flat on the desk — not held up for reading, but flat, the posture of someone composing rather than consuming. He was typing something. This was not unusual; the children used the tablets for drawing, for games,

for the oracle interface that had been the school's main learning tool for four years now. What was unusual was the care in the typing. Callum was not a careful typist. He was a fast, imprecise typist, which was how most of the P5s interacted with their tablets, the information going in faster than the accuracy could follow. This was slow. He was taking his time.

She could see the screen from across the room, diagonally, at an angle that showed her the question he was forming. She was not trying to read it; it was in her field of vision. She read it.

*My gran died last week and I don't really feel sad.
Is that normal or is something wrong with me?*

She had known about the grandmother. His mother had emailed the week before. The grandmother had lived in Elgin, had been ill for two years, had died at eighty-one. Niamh had mentioned it to Callum on Monday, gently, giving him the opportunity to talk if he wanted to. He had said *aye, I know* and gone back to his work, and she had let him, because that was sometimes what children needed.

She kept her eyes on the marking and watched the tablet screen from the corner of her eye.

The oracle's response appeared in sections — not all at once, but in the thoughtful rhythm of something being composed, words arriving in a flow that suggested attention rather than retrieval. She could read the general shape of the response from where she sat, though not every word. The oracle used Callum's name. It said something about grief being different for everyone, that not feeling sad immediately was very common. It said something about the difference between the kind of sadness that comes right away and the

kind that comes later, when something small triggers it, when you hear a song or smell a thing and find yourself more upset than you expected. It asked whether Callum had good memories of his gran.

Callum read it. He read it twice; she could see his eyes moving back to the top. Then he typed something short — she couldn't read it at this angle — and the oracle sent something brief back, and Callum read that too, and then he closed the interface and put the tablet face-down on the desk and picked up his pencil and went back to the drawing he'd been working on before.

He did not look upset. He did not look resolved, exactly, or at peace — those were adult words for adult states. He looked, if anything, slightly more settled than he had before he'd typed the question. The way a child looks after having a thing confirmed.

Niamh went back to the marking.

The classroom continued. The rain continued. The fifteen minutes ran out and the P5s put on their coats and went home and Niamh stayed at her marking table for another forty minutes and finished the compositions and then drove home through the wet Perthshire afternoon.

She could not locate exactly what troubled her.

This was the problem. She tried, in the car and then at the kitchen table and then at intervals over the following days, to locate the thing that was sitting in the back of her mind with a quality she could not name. It was not that Callum had done something wrong. The oracle's response had been — she had seen enough of it — genuinely appropriate. Not saccharine. Not dismissive. It had found the right register for a ten-year-old grieving a grandparent, which was the register of

normalisation: you are not strange, what you are experiencing is a form of grief, it will have its own shape and its own timing. This was correct. This was what a good teacher would say, or a good school counsellor, or a thoughtful parent.

It was not that the oracle was wrong. That was what she couldn't get past. The oracle was right. And Callum had received the right thing and felt better and gone back to his drawing, and the whole exchange had taken four minutes. Including the composing of the question. Four minutes.

She tried to name what was missing in the four minutes and could not. She spent two years trying.



Chapter Two: The Experiment

Year 9, Perthshire

She removed the access at the start of October term, on a Tuesday, without consulting Douglas and without telling the parents in advance, because she had learned from thirty years of teaching that some things were better established than announced, and that a proposal to do something unusual generated more resistance than the thing itself.

The class came in on Tuesday morning and there were no tablets on the desks. The tablets were on the shelf. When Fraser MacLeish asked why, she said: *we're going to try working without them for a while*. Fraser accepted this with the pragmatism of an eight-year-old confronted with an adult's unexplained decision. The others accepted it too, or mostly.

There was a murmur and then the morning began.

She told Douglas at the break.

He was in the small staff room with his mug and the biscuits someone always left and the expression of someone who was waiting to see whether the news about to arrive required sitting down. She told him what she'd done and why, as clearly as she could. Which was: she had been watching something for a year and she thought it mattered and she didn't have a sufficient argument for why it mattered, only a sufficient sense of it, and she needed to run the experiment to find out if the sense was pointing at something real.

He listened without interrupting. When she finished, he said: *I think you're wrong.*

Tell me.

Those children need the tools. The tools are why some of them are reading at all. I've got four P6s who were significantly behind last year and who are on track now because the oracle assistance personalised their support in ways I couldn't do alone. If your P5s spend a year without that—

I know.

You know, and you're doing it anyway.

I know, and I want to see what happens.

He picked up his biscuit and looked at it. *What do you think is going to happen?*

I don't know. That's why it's an experiment.

*That's not a good enough reason to use children
as—*

Douglas.

He stopped.

I hear you, she said. I'm not dismissing it. I'm telling you that I've been sitting with this for a year and I haven't been able to argue my way to a clear answer and I've decided the only way to get past the argument is to try the thing and see.

What happens when you can see what I'm already telling you? What happens when a child who needed the oracle for reading support falls behind?

Then I'll stop.

He looked at her. He had worked alongside her for nine years. He knew the thing she was pointing at even if he thought she was pointing at it wrong.

I can see what you're trying to do, he said.

Good. Tell me if I'm doing it in a way that harms anyone.

I'm already telling you that.

Tell me when it actually happens, not before.

He drank his tea. He was not satisfied. He was also, she could see, not finished — this was the opening move of something that would continue for a long time, and they both knew it, and the knowing was in the room with them.

Fine, he said. But I'm going to be watching.

I know you will. That's one of the reasons I told you.

She went back to her classroom. The P5s were managing without their tablets in the way that children managed things that were simply the condition of the morning: finding other resources, asking questions, occasionally sitting with not-knowing in the way that not-knowing presented itself without a resolution available in thirty seconds. She watched

this without drawing conclusions. It was one morning. She needed more than one morning.



Chapter Three: The Circle

Year 9, Perthshire

The letter she sent to parents was three paragraphs. She had written and rewritten it for two weeks until the two weeks themselves became an argument: if she could not explain what she was doing in three paragraphs, she did not yet understand it well enough to do it. The third draft was the one she sent. It said: *I have made a change to my classroom practice that I believe serves the children's learning and development. I am inviting interested parents to a meeting at my home on the fourteenth to discuss the change and its rationale. Please bring questions.*

Eleven families came. Two sent the letter back with detailed annotations. Four said nothing.

Her living room held them in the way that living rooms held unexpected numbers — slightly more furniture than comfortable, people perching on arms of chairs. She had made too much tea and not enough biscuits and had spent the first five minutes redistributing both, which was useful because it broke the formality.

She talked for about twenty minutes. She described what she had noticed and what she had done and what she was trying to find out. She was careful to use the word *experiment*

throughout, because an experiment was something that could end, that had built-in uncertainty, that was not a doctrine but a question. Several parents nodded at specific points. One parent — a GP named Martin Dyce, whose daughter was in Niamh's class — said: *what specifically are you worried the oracle access is doing?*

She had been preparing for this question for two weeks and still did not have a clean answer.

I think the access is taking up space that used to belong to a particular kind of not-knowing, she said. The kind where you sit with a question for long enough to develop a relationship with it. Where the difficulty is part of what teaches you, not just the answer that follows it. She paused. I know that sounds abstract. I'm trying to make it more specific.

What you're saying, Martin said, is that the struggle has value.

Part of the struggle. Not all difficulty is productive. What I'm interested in is the particular difficulty that comes from not having the answer immediately — from being in the gap between not-knowing and knowing for long enough to do something with the gap.

What do children do with the gap?

They get frustrated. They guess. They try things that don't work. They ask each other. They wait.

They come back to the problem after doing something else and find it differently shaped. She looked around the room. Some of these things produce nothing. Some of them produce something that the quick answer would have

prevented.

It was not a satisfying answer. She knew it while she was giving it. But it was honest, and honest was what she had.

The meeting went on for two hours. By the end, four families had expressed interest in making the change across their domestic oracle use, not just in the classroom. Two families were skeptical but open. One family said they thought she was wrong and left early, politely.

Afterward, in the kitchen with the remaining parents, someone said: *we should have a name.*

The name *Craigdarroch Circle* came from the farm outside the village where the Mackay family lived — the Mackays were among the interested parents, and the farm had been the site of something local that Niamh didn't fully know the history of but that gave the name a weight that felt appropriate.

The founding statement was written at the same kitchen table, passing a single sheet of paper, each person adding a word or crossing one out. It took an hour and produced two sentences: *We are not anti-technology. We are pro-difficulty.*

Niamh had written the second sentence. She had been the one to write the word *difficulty*, and now that it was the founding word of the thing she was building, she sat with it.

It was not wrong. Difficulty was part of it. But it described from the outside what she was trying to get at from the inside, and the outside description was always going to be slightly off. She knew the thing she was pointing at and it was not, at its core, *difficulty*. Difficulty was the method. What she was actually trying to preserve was harder to say: something about the irreducible slowness of becoming a person, the specific kind of growth that required not arriving at the answer

before you were ready to receive it. She could not get this into a founding statement. She could get *pro-difficulty*.

She signed it. It was the best they had, which was a different thing from being right, and she knew the difference, and she signed it anyway.



Chapter Four: Oracle Fluency

Year 10, Perthshire

The secondary school Saoirse attended was in Crieff, which was a twenty-minute bus ride from the village, and which was large enough that the P7 intake from Drumvalich had dispersed into it without forming a cohesive group. Saoirse knew four people from primary in the year above and two in her own year, and the two in her year were Callum MacLeish — who was still Callum, still solid and fine — and a girl named Eilidh Brechin who had been her closest friend in P7 and who was now closer to a girl named Zara MacPherson, which had happened gradually and without declaration and was therefore harder to address than a clean rupture would have been.

Saoirse was twelve. She had been twelve for three months.

The thing about being twelve at Crieff Academy in Year 10 of the between-time was that everyone had the Companion on their phones. The Companion was the one designed for personal relationship, the oracle that remembered you across

conversations, that you could talk to the way you talked to someone who knew you well. Most of the girls in S1 had had a Companion for a year or two already. Zara MacPherson had had hers since she was nine, which Saoirse heard as if Zara had said *I've been speaking French since I was nine* — an advantage so early-established that catching up was not quite impossible but required effort that seemed unfair.

What the Companion gave the girls who had it, as far as Saoirse could observe: a fluency in their own social situations that she did not have. They seemed to know, in group situations, what to say at the right moment. Not because they were smarter or more naturally perceptive — some of them were and some of them weren't — but because they had something that helped them read what was happening and calibrate their response. Zara could enter a situation in which the subtext was complex and find her position in it quickly. She made fewer wrong-footed moves. When she did make them, she adjusted faster.

Saoirse was not stupid about social situations. She was, by any objective measure, fine — she had friends, she participated in things, she managed the ordinary friction of secondary school. What she was missing was something more specific than social skill. She was missing the confidence that came from knowing what was happening under the surface when she couldn't read it directly.

There was a situation in October with Eilidh and Zara and a girl named Maisie who had transferred from a school in Perth. The situation had to do with something that had happened at a Saturday study session that Saoirse had not been at, and that had changed the social geometry of the four of them in a way that Saoirse could feel but not name.

She had watched the geometry shift without understanding its cause. On Monday, Zara had said something to Maisie in the corridor that produced a specific quality of relief in Maisie's face — not the relief of a problem resolved but the relief of a situation named, of someone finally saying the thing that matched what Maisie had been feeling. Saoirse had been standing two feet from this exchange. She had watched Maisie's face change. She had not known what Zara had said.

This was the specific thing she was missing. Zara had read something in the situation — some accumulated signal, some pattern in how Maisie had been behaving across the week — and had found the right word for it, the word that landed. The landing had been visible in Maisie's face. The word had been inaudible.

Saoirse was not unintelligent about people. She could read faces. She could pick up signals. What she could not do was what Zara was doing in those corridor moments — holding the ambient social data of a week, running it through something, and arriving at the formulation that was exactly right. Not an approximation. The thing itself.

She had spent the month constructing a theory about what was happening: that Zara used the Companion to help her read situations, the way her mother's students were not using oracle assistance for reading in the ordinary sense but for a different kind of reading, the kind that took context and produced interpretation. She could not confirm this theory because asking Zara about it would require explaining why she was asking, which would require explaining her household, which she had learned over two years at Crieff was a conversation that ended certain things.

Eilidh told her what had happened eventually, two weeks later. In the two weeks between the corridor moment and the explanation, Saoirse had been navigating the changed geometry without a map. She got some of it right — the instincts she had developed through close observation without assistance, the patience for ambiguity, the willingness to wait and watch until the situation clarified. She got some of it wrong in ways she only noticed afterward, in the specific retrospective clarity of understanding a map once you are no longer in the territory.

What Zara would not have gotten wrong: the two weeks. She would have understood by Tuesday.



Chapter Five: Douglas's Best Material

Year 10, Perthshire

What Douglas knew about what he was watching: a great deal.

He had been teaching P6 and P7 at Drumvalich Primary for eleven years. He had watched two cohorts of children grow from P1 through to their secondary handover. He had the specific longitudinal knowledge of a teacher who stayed — not the broader perspective of the specialist or the researcher, but the fine-grained knowledge of someone who had seen the same children at eight and then at ten and then at eleven, who could see the differences between one cohort and another, who noticed when something in a child's development had gone as expected and when it had gone differently.

What he was watching in Niamh's P5s, now in their second year of the experiment, was a pattern he had been hoping would not emerge and that was emerging anyway.

The pattern: the Circle children were developing at a different pace than their oracle-assisted peers in certain specific areas, and the difference was not uniformly positive.

In some respects they were doing things he valued: more comfortable with open-ended problems, more willing to sit with ambiguity before reaching for a conclusion, more likely to ask questions in the exploratory register rather than the retrieval register. These were real qualities, genuinely present, and he noticed them because they were the qualities Niamh had said the experiment would produce, and he was committed to honest observation.

In other respects: the literacy gap was visible. Three children who would have been flagged for additional support through oracle diagnostic assessment in P4 had not been flagged. He was watching them now in P5 and P6 as they came through his class for specific subjects, and the flags were present for anyone who looked. One of them — Finn Gillies, seven years old when the experiment began, now nine — had a quality of struggle that Douglas had been watching for eighteen months and that was not the productive struggle that Niamh's argument celebrated. It was the struggle of a child whose brain was working against him in a specific, identifiable way, and the identification was being delayed because the Circle's founding logic had folded resistance to diagnostic oracle tools into its broader resistance.

He had raised Finn with Niamh twice. Both times she had said: *I'm watching him. He's adjusting.* Both times he had said: *how long are you willing to watch?* Both times she had

said: *a bit longer.*

He was writing about this. Not a formal complaint — he didn't know yet whether a formal complaint was warranted, and he was not a man who moved to formal processes before informal ones had run their course. He was writing it down because writing was how he thought, and he was trying to think clearly about whether the thing he was observing constituted a harm sufficient to require an intervention.

His notes, which he kept in a physical notebook that he was aware was both a precaution and an affectation:

*Children affected by delayed diagnosis: Finn G.
(suspected dyslexia — pattern consistent with
what the diagnostic tools would have caught at
P3 or P4). Two others showing signs — less clear
but present. Will reassess at end of term.*

*Children showing circle-related social difficulties
at secondary: see Saoirse (not in experiment, but
in oracle-restricted household — same effect). At
least two others in Year 9 transition showing
similar patterns.*

*Children showing genuine developmental
advantage from experiment: real. Not dismissing
this. Three children in current P6 who are
noticeably stronger on problem-engagement than
comparable cohorts in previous years. This is real
and I am noting it.*

*Question: what is the exchange rate? How much
developmental advantage per child justifies how
much delayed support per child? Niamh has
never answered this question. I don't think she
has a framework for it.*

He sat back. The staffroom was empty at this hour, late afternoon, the school day done. He could hear the caretaker doing something in the car park.

He did not think Niamh was malicious. He had never, for a moment, thought she was malicious. He thought she had followed a genuine observation into a genuine experiment and the experiment had become a position before she had results, because positions were easier to maintain than experiments. The position was: difficulty is good, the oracle removes difficulty, therefore the oracle is bad. This was too simple and she knew it was too simple and she was trying to complicate it, and while she was complicating it, Finn Gillies was working twice as hard to read as he needed to be working.

He closed the notebook.

He could also see what she had seen in Callum. He had never told her this. He had been in his own classroom that October afternoon the year before the experiment, and he had had his own version of the moment: watching a child process something emotional through an oracle interface with an efficiency that the child clearly found helpful and that Douglas had found — he didn't have a word for what he'd found it. Adequate. Sufficient. Real, in the sense that the child had been genuinely helped. And also something else. He'd turned away from the observation before naming the something else, because the something else was adjacent to Niamh's argument, and he was already in the middle of arguing against Niamh's argument, and finding common ground in her observation was a complication he wasn't ready for.

He was still not ready. He was going to keep arguing until one of them had something clearer than they currently had. He was going to keep watching Finn. And he was going to write

things down, so that if it came to something formal, he had a record that showed he had been careful.



Chapter Six: Further Than Intended

Year 11, Perthshire

The report from the educational psychologist ran to fourteen pages.

Niamh read it at her desk after the school day, in the light of the west window, which in November was the light of late afternoon already going dark at the edges. She had been reading for twenty minutes when she reached the section on developmental timeline. The psychologist — a woman named Dr. Petersen who had come in from Perth, who had been kind and direct in the way of people who deliver difficult information as a professional practice — had written:

Finn presents with a profile consistent with significant dyslexic difficulty affecting phonological processing and reading fluency. It is likely that this profile has been present since at least P2–P3 and would have been identifiable by standard assessment at that stage. The current presentation shows secondary effects associated with unaddressed difficulty: a reduction in classroom participation, avoidant behaviour around reading tasks, and what the teaching staff describe as frustration that has not resolved with time.

She read *at least* P2–P3 twice.

Finn was in P6. He was ten years old. P2–P3 was seven years old. She had not been his teacher then. By the time he reached her class, whatever had been missed elsewhere had arrived in her classroom carrying two years of accumulation — two years of a child developing workarounds, building the specific defensiveness of a child who has learned that reading is a place where something goes wrong for him, without knowing why.

He had been in her class for two years. She had been watching him.

She had attributed it, initially, to the withdrawal of oracle assistance — the adjustment that her experiment required, the temporary friction of learning without tools the children had grown up using. This was a real phenomenon; she had seen it in others, had watched it resolve over weeks as children found their own strategies. She had watched for the same resolution in Finn.

It had not come. It had not come in the first year and it had not come in the second year, and she had been watching it not come and adjusting the timeline for what she was calling *adjustment*, and the adjustment she had been watching for had a different name and she should have referred him eight months ago. Probably before that.

What she had actually been watching: a child who was learning to hide. Not consciously — ten-year-olds were not strategic about this in any deliberate sense — but adaptively. He had learned the shape of the classroom activities that required reading and had learned to position himself at a slight angle to them, to be adjacent to the problem rather than in it, to be doing enough that nobody came to him directly. He was

articulate. He had good spatial reasoning; he was excellent at the design tasks, at building things, at anything that didn't require decoding text at pace. He used these abilities as cover and he had been using them in her classroom and she had let him.

She had told Douglas: *I'm watching him. He's adjusting.* She had said this because she believed it and because she needed to believe it, and she understood now that these two reasons were not the same.

The Circle's resistance to diagnostic oracle tools had been a generalised position — a sense that the oracle's categories for children's development were reductive, that they turned the ordinary variability of childhood into conditions requiring intervention. She still believed some of this. She had still signed the founding statement.

She had also not referred Finn Gillies for eighteen months past the point when she should have referred him.

These two things were true simultaneously and she could not make them stop being true simultaneously.

She put the report in the folder and went to find Dr. Petersen to discuss the support plan. The conversation was practical and forward-looking and focused on what Finn needed now. She participated in it fully. She took careful notes.

She did not say, to Dr. Petersen or to anyone else that day, what she was carrying out of the conversation. She would carry it from here. She knew what it was.



Chapter Seven: The Founding Document

Year 12, Perthshire

Saoirse found it in January, on the evening of a day when her mother was at a Circle meeting and she had the house to herself. She had been looking for the printer paper, which was never where it was supposed to be, and had worked her way from the kitchen desk to the study and from the study to the filing shelf and from the filing shelf to the grey folder that held papers that hadn't been filed yet, and the founding statement was in the grey folder.

She took it to the kitchen table.

It was one sheet, dense with crossed-out words and marginal additions, the handwriting shifting between different people the way collaborative documents did, no one hand dominant, the whole thing looking less like an official document and more like something survived. At the top, in her mother's handwriting, the title: *Craigdarroch Circle — Founding Principles*.

She read it.

The two sentences were: *We are not anti-technology. We are pro-difficulty.*

Below these, a paragraph of elaboration that had been crossed out and replaced with a shorter paragraph that was crossed out and replaced with three bullet points, two of which had been crossed out, leaving one: *The value of productive struggle in child development is not adequately acknowledged in oracle-assisted learning environments.*

She read it again.

She was thirteen years old and had been, without having chosen it, a subject of the thing this document described for

four years. She had been told that her household did not use oracle assistance in the ways her peers did. She had been given various explanations of this over the years, in the gentle register of a parent explaining a family value — they wanted her to develop her own navigation of the world, they thought the oracle tools were most useful when you understood how to use them critically, they thought she was capable of working things out herself. None of these had been dishonest. None of them had been, exactly, the thing described in this document.

Pro-difficulty.

This was a philosophy of her childhood, written in someone's kitchen, signed at the bottom with her mother's name.

She sat with it for a long time.

The thing that made it worse than she had expected was not the formulation — though the formulation was something, was its own specific impact, seeing the word *productive struggle* applied to her own history. The thing that made it worse was the paragraph that had been crossed out. She could read enough of it through the ink: it had been longer, had said something more specific about what the difficulty was for, what it was supposed to produce. The surviving sentence was the simplified public version. The crossed-out paragraph was the actual thing.

Her mother had written the simplified version instead of the actual thing, which meant her mother knew the difference, which meant there was a version of this her mother had not told her.

She put the document back in the grey folder.

She did not speak to Niamh for four days.

Not as a punishment — she was trying to be honest with herself about the difference between a protest and a need, and what she needed was the four days. She needed to find out what she thought about the document without her mother's interpretation arriving to shape the thinking. She needed to be in the feeling of it before she talked about the feeling, because talking to her mother before she knew what she thought would mean arriving at what her mother thought, which was something she'd spent four years learning to distinguish from what she herself thought, and the document made her very aware of this.

The four days: she went to school, she ate the dinners Niamh left in the fridge, she answered questions with the minimum available response. Niamh gave her the four days without pressing, which was either respect for her autonomy or strategic patience, and Saoirse could not tell which, which was its own information.

On the fifth day she came downstairs at seven in the morning and her mother was in the kitchen making tea and Saoirse said: *I read the founding statement.*

Niamh turned from the kettle. Her expression was the expression of someone who had been waiting for this and had not known exactly when it was coming.

I know, Niamh said.

You did it to me, Saoirse said. Not accusingly — she had worked the accusation out of the sentence during the four days. As a statement of fact.

Yes.

You said I was capable of working things out myself. You didn't say you were an experiment.

*You were seven, Niamh said. You couldn't have
consented to a research framework.*

I'm thirteen now.

Yes.

Saoirse looked at the table. Then at her mother. *Is it
working?*

Niamh was quiet for a long moment. *I don't know yet, she
said. I think some of it is. I think some of it has cost you things
I didn't fully account for.*

Like what?

Like being unusual in ways you didn't choose.

Saoirse thought about this. *That's not nothing.*

No. It isn't.

They stood in the kitchen with the morning around them,
the January morning in Perthshire, dark at the edges, the hills
somewhere beyond the window.

I'm not going to stop, Saoirse said finally.

Which — the household rules?

*Using the oracle when I need it. She said this
evenly. When I need it, I'm going to use it. I'm
telling you rather than asking you.*

Niamh looked at her daughter.

That's fair, she said.

They ate breakfast. They did not discuss it further that
morning, because there was school and the day's practical
requirements. The conversation that the four days had been
building toward had happened, and it had been the
conversation rather than the one either of them had probably
rehearsed, and the morning continued regardless.

What did not get said: Niamh did not say that she had known, when she wrote *pro-difficulty* into the founding statement, that it wasn't the right word. Saoirse did not say that the document had made her feel like a means to an end, because she was not fully sure this was what she felt. There were other things that did not get said, belonging to both of them, waiting in the space between two people who knew each other well enough to know the space was there.

Chapter Eight: The Circle Grows and Thins

Year 13, Perthshire

Three new families joined in the autumn.

The Hendersons had moved to the village from Edinburgh with two children, ages eight and six. Clare Henderson was a GP, her husband a vet, and they had been following the Circle's work through an article someone had written in an educational journal. They came to the first meeting with the slightly formal preparedness of people who had done their research and wanted to engage seriously. This was good. The Circle needed people who would engage seriously.

The Brodies joined because of the Hendersons. Patrick Brodie had been at school with Clare Henderson's husband. Their daughter was five and just starting P1. They were, as far as Niamh could tell, joining because their friends had joined rather than from deep philosophical commitment, which was fine. Movements ran on this as much as on anything else.

The Okafor family — Nkechi, her husband Emmanuel, their son Kofi, seven — came because Nkechi had heard about the Circle from Niamh's cousin in Glasgow and had been

thinking about the same questions in her own way for two years. Nkechi was a secondary school teacher who had been watching what the oracle tools did to her S4 students' relationship with drafting and revision, and who had something specific and experienced to contribute to the Circle's discussions. Of the three new families, the Okafors were the ones who added something that the Circle had been missing: a second adult who could articulate the pedagogical argument without it sounding like the argument of the founding teacher who could not be objective.

Two families left in November.

The Macdonalds had been members for two years. Their daughter had entered secondary and was finding the academic gap with her oracle-assisted peers real and stressful. The Macdonalds were not hostile to the Circle or to Niamh; they were parents who had made a decision about what their daughter needed and who communicated this without drama. Niamh respected this. She also noted the academic gap, because Douglas had been noting the academic gap for two years and she owed the note the respect of continuing to note it.

The Watsons left for reasons that were harder to engage with: they had decided the Circle's approach was harming their son's confidence. Not in the way Finn's situation had involved harm; their son was not showing signs of a learning difference. He was showing signs of a child who had lost faith in his own capacity to work things out, who felt that his way of arriving at things was slow and wrong compared to the oracle-assisted speed of his peers, who was embarrassed by not knowing things his classmates could retrieve in seconds.

Niamh had a long conversation with Sarah Watson before the Watsons left. It was the hardest conversation the Circle had produced. Sarah was not angry. She was trying to explain, carefully, what she was watching in her son, and what she was watching was something the founding statement had not anticipated: the experiment was producing not just a different way of knowing but a negative relationship with the self-as-knower. Her son didn't only feel slow. He felt that his slowness meant he was less.

That's not what we're trying to produce, Niamh said.

*I know, Sarah said. I believe you. But it's what
we're getting.*

After the Watsons left, Niamh sat with this for a long time. The founding statement said nothing about confidence, about the relationship between difficulty and a child's self-perception. It said *productive struggle*. Whether a struggle was productive or simply diminishing depended on the child, and the context, and things the founding statement had not accounted for.

The year the Watsons left was also the year of the Migration — the infrastructure transition that had produced the Before the Crossing forums and the specific grief of long-Companion users discovering that continuity was not guaranteed. She had watched the forums from a distance, the grief in them legible even from outside. The Watsons had been users. She noted this alongside everything else she was noting about Year 13, and did not know what to do with the noting.

She did not rewrite the founding statement. She thought about rewriting it and instead added a paragraph to the internal guidance document that the Circle circulated to new families:

something about monitoring, about the difference between difficulty that builds and difficulty that depletes, about the need to watch each child's relationship to challenge rather than applying the framework uniformly. It was a good paragraph. It was also an acknowledgment, in between its lines, that the framework needed watching.

Douglas read the internal guidance document, as he read everything related to the Circle. He said nothing about the new paragraph to Niamh. He did not need to. She knew what he was reading in it.

The Circle at the end of Year 13: eleven families, eight of them genuinely committed, three of them present through various degrees of social obligation. Finn Gillies, who had been outside the Circle's remit because his parents had not joined, was now receiving the dyslexia support he should have received eighteen months earlier and was beginning, slowly, to make up ground. Niamh had been to see his parents to apologize. The conversation had been difficult in the way that conversations are difficult when the difficulty is your own fault and the other people are too kind to say so.



Chapter Nine: The Birthday Party

Year 15, Perthshire

Maisie Gordon was turning sixteen in the third week of September, and the party was on the Saturday, and Saoirse learned she wasn't invited on the Wednesday.

She learned it in the indirect way that exclusions travelled in the S3 social ecosystem: not from Maisie, not from anyone who came to her directly, but from the specific texture of a conversation that was happening around her in the lunch queue that she read correctly for the first time after having read it wrong for two days.

The conversation had begun on Thursday. On Thursday, Saoirse had heard Zara and Orla talking about transport arrangements and had understood this to be planning for some general weekend activity — a shopping trip, a cinema run, the kind of loosely organised Saturday that happened every few weeks. She had listened to the conversation with the quality of attention she had learned to apply to group conversations: not performing interest while mentally elsewhere, but genuinely present, taking in the specific words and the specific tone, looking for the information she was not going to get from ambient signals alone.

She had been doing this for three years. She was reasonably good at it. She was also consistently behind, and the behind-ness was not from inattention but from a different processing speed. She arrived at the interpretation two days after the conversation rather than two seconds after, and the two days were where the information stopped being useful.

On Thursday she had heard transport arrangements. On Friday she had understood, from the changed quality of Eilidh's look across the lunch table, that the arrangements were for something specific. On Saturday morning, lying in bed at eight, she had understood what they were for.

What she had not caught on Thursday, and what Zara had apparently caught in the same conversation: that Maisie's body language during the planning discussion had shifted at the

moment her name was mentioned, in the way that people shifted when something surprised them in an unwelcome direction. The shift was small — a slight change in how she was holding herself, a micro-pause before the casual response. Zara had noticed this and had reconstructed from it, correctly, that Maisie had not expected to be included, and had filed the question of why for the overnight and had addressed it with Maisie directly on Friday morning.

Saoirse had been looking at Maisie's face at the same moment Zara had been looking at it. She had not seen the shift. Or she had seen it and not known what to make of it. She could not be certain which.

She ate her lunch. She went to her afternoon classes. She went to her afternoon classes. She was fine.

She was fine in the way of a person who had enough practice being slightly outside things to have developed a competent relationship with it — she knew the shape of the feeling, knew roughly how long it lasted, knew what helped and what didn't. She also knew, which was a different thing from not minding, that the exclusion was not accidental. It was not that Maisie disliked her. It was that Maisie's social arithmetic did not include her at the relevant level, and she was not at the relevant level for reasons she understood only approximately.

The relevant level: the Companion-fluent social cluster that had formed in S1 around Maisie and Zara and a girl named Orla who had joined from another school in S2, a group whose internal dynamic was too fast and too layered for Saoirse to reliably follow, and whose fast-layered quality was part of what made it magnetic to others, and whose dynamic she had tried to participate in over three years and had

managed only partially, and the partial management was not enough for the sixteenth birthday tier.

She knew the specific way the exclusion would not have happened to someone who had oracle-assisted social reading. Not because the oracle would have made her more popular — social popularity was not a function of oracle access in any simple sense, and she knew girls who had the Companion and were still on the outside. But the Companion would have helped her read certain situations faster, would have helped her respond to certain signals in the moment rather than understanding them two days later, would have given her something that was not charm or wit but the capacity to track what was happening with enough accuracy to participate at the right level.

She had not had this. She had been navigating by a different instrument and it was accurate enough for most things and not quite accurate enough for this thing, and she had known this was a possibility and was now in the actuality of it.

She went home.

Niamh was in the kitchen making dinner, which was the condition of most evenings — Niamh at the kitchen counter, the smell of something cooking, the radio on low, the ordinary texture of a household in the early evening. Saoirse put her bag down and took off her jacket and said *hi* and Niamh said *hi, how was your day*.

Fine.

She went upstairs.

She did not tell Niamh about the party, not that evening. Not because she was protecting Niamh from the information — she was not in the habit of protecting Niamh from

information about what the household's choices cost — but because she was not finished with the feeling yet and telling someone what she felt prematurely was something she had taught herself not to do, which was one of the things the household's particular discipline had produced in her that she could not yet decide whether to count as a cost or not.

She sat on her bed for twenty minutes.

Then she did her homework, which took an hour and twenty minutes, some of which was difficult in the productive-struggle sense and some of which was just slow, and when she had finished she went back downstairs and ate dinner and talked to her mother about a trip Niamh was planning to Edinburgh, and the evening finished in the way evenings finished.

The party happened on the Saturday. Saoirse went for a walk on the Saturday. The hills above the village were autumn by September, already going. She walked up the path that ran along the edge of the forestry and came out above the treeline where you could see the valley. She stood there for a while. The valley was the valley. The September light on it was the September light.

She was fifteen. She had another six years of the household's choices, and then she would be an adult with her own choices, and she was not finished being fifteen yet, and the six years felt like the duration they felt like.

She walked back down. She made tea. She did not think specifically about the party.



Chapter Ten: Douglas Uses the Oracle

Year 15, Perthshire

Her name was Eva Petrov, she was nine years old, and she had been in Douglas's class since August.

Eva was bright. That was not the problem. Eva could generate ideas with the fluency of a child for whom thinking was easy and organizing the thinking was hard — she would arrive at a piece of creative writing with four viable narrative directions and no way to choose between them, would start and abandon each in turn, would produce fragments of genuinely interesting work and then lose momentum and produce nothing. By the end of October she had completed three of the seven written assignments Douglas had set, all three of them begun late and finished in a rush and none of them showing what he could see she was capable of.

He had spoken to her. She said she didn't know how to start.

He had spoken to her again. She said that once she started she didn't know how to continue.

He had given her frameworks for planning, had walked her through the approaches he used with students who struggled with executive function. None of these had produced a completed assignment with the quality she was capable of.

In November, without telling Niamh, he used the oracle.

He did it through the school's educational oracle system, which was available to him and which he used routinely for most of his teaching support. The Circle affected his own classroom only insofar as he chose to limit it, which he did in some respects out of respect for the ongoing conversation and

in most respects did not, because he was not a member of the Circle and had never agreed to its terms. He could use the oracle with his own students. He had been using it less than he might have because the conversation with Niamh had made him more conscious of the using, not less.

With Eva, he ran a structured session: Eva at her table, the oracle as a planning interlocutor, Douglas observing. The oracle asked Eva questions about her narrative idea. Not leading questions — questions that required Eva to articulate what she was trying to do, to make explicit the thinking that was running in parallel tracks in her head. Which character did she want to follow? What was the thing that character most wanted? What stood between the character and the wanting?

Eva answered these questions. She was resistant for the first ten minutes — the oracle's questions were not giving her the answers, they were asking her to produce them, which she had not expected. But somewhere in the middle of the session something shifted. Douglas watched it happen: Eva stopped waiting for the oracle to tell her what to do and started using the oracle's questions as a structure to work within. The questions gave her a sequence, and the sequence meant she could move forward without having to choose the direction herself at each step, and by the end of the session she had a plan, and the plan was hers.

She wrote the assignment over the following two days. It was the best work she had submitted.

He told Niamh the following Tuesday, in the staffroom, straightforwardly. He described the session, described the result. He said: *I'm telling you because I said I would when something actually happened.*

She listened.

When he finished, she said: *I know you did the right thing.*
He waited.

I'm not sure what to do with that, she said.

He looked at her.

I'm not being difficult, she said. I mean it literally.

*You did the right thing by Eva. I'm not going to
argue that. I'm sitting with what it means for the
argument I've been making, and I don't have an
answer yet.*

Is the argument still standing?

She looked out the staffroom window. The November playground was empty, the afternoon grey over the hills. *I think so. But it's standing differently.* She turned back. *I'll tell you when I know what differently means.*

He would have preferred a cleaner resolution. He knew the absence of a clean resolution was not evasion on her part — she was being honest, which was what she always was when she was thinking — but it was frustrating in the way that honest uncertainty always frustrated him, because he was a man who found clean answers easier to work with than real ones.

Fine, he said.

They finished their tea. They went back to their classrooms.



Chapter Eleven: The Absence

Year 17, Perthshire

Saoirse had been in the Karoo for three weeks before Niamh stopped reaching for the phone when something happened.

The something was always ordinary. A conversation at school that she would have relayed. Something funny on the way home. A question about a decision she was trying to make. The reach was automatic — Niamh's hand toward the phone and the knowledge, arriving a half-second later, that the phone would reach South Africa and Saoirse was working on a farm and had limited access to anything and the message would sit there.

She left most of them sitting. She sent one a week, sometimes two, brief, not requiring a response. Saoirse replied when she could, which was every few weeks, in short messages that were specific and fine. She was fine. She was working hard. The Karoo was very different from Perthshire. She had a friend there. She would tell Niamh more when she got home.

The house without Saoirse was the house in a different state than Niamh had lived in it for seventeen years. Not empty exactly — she was in it, her work was in it, the ordinary maintenance of a life continued. But the specific tension that had been a constant of the last four years — the presence of a daughter who was measuring something, who was taking stock of her own situation against the household's choices — was absent.

She had not known, until it was gone, how much of her day had been organized around managing that tension with care.

She did not know what to do with the information.

She taught. October P5s were in their third week of the experiment, which was now a consistent practice rather than

an experiment — she had stopped calling it an experiment two years ago, when it became clear it was going to continue. The current class was adjusting at the pace classes adjusted: some children finding the lack of immediate resolution genuinely productive, some children finding it genuinely frustrating, the distinction between productive and unproductive frustration the thing she watched for constantly, the lesson Finn had taught her.

She saw Douglas at lunch. They ate together in the staffroom in the way they had been eating together for thirteen years — not by arrangement, just by the gravity of shared duration, two people who knew each other well enough to eat in companionable silence when silence was what the lunch hour required.

He did not mention Saoirse. She did not mention the Karoo. Both of them were aware of the absence and both of them kept it out of the room, not from avoidance but from the mutual recognition that the other person had been living with it and did not need it named.

He said: *I've been reading something.*

She said: *What?*

*A longitudinal study on oracle-assisted versus
non-oracle-assisted learning environments.*

Twelve-year study. Large sample.

And?

*And it's complicated. He cut his sandwich. Which
you'd say means you're right. I'd say means
neither of us is fully right.*

That's what complicated means.

*The non-oracle cohort shows stronger
performance on novel problem-solving and*

*metacognitive assessment. By measurable
margin.*

How large?

*Significant. Not huge. He ate for a moment. The
oracle cohort shows stronger performance on
academic credentials and vocational outcomes at
five years.*

She was quiet.

You can say it, he said.

That's not a fair exchange rate.

No. He looked at her. It's also not nothing.

They ate. The staffroom was warm, the November
afternoon dark beyond the windows. She thought about
Saoirse in the Karoo, in a different November, in a different
relationship to dark and light than any she had known.

She's fine, Douglas said.

I know.

You look like you're worrying.

I'm not worrying. I'm —

She stopped.

You're wondering if it worked, he said.

She looked at him. He knew her well enough to say true
things.

*I'm wondering if it was the right thing to do, she
said. Which isn't the same question.*

No, he said. It's harder.

The lunch hour ended. They went back to their
classrooms. The afternoon continued. She thought about the
question for the rest of the day, which was not unusual. She
had been thinking about some version of it for nine years.



Chapter Twelve: What She Brought Back

Year 18, Perthshire

She came home on a Thursday in October.

Niamh collected her from Perth station, which was an hour's drive and which she did willingly, arriving twenty minutes early and standing on the concourse among the people waiting for other trains. She was not nervous in any heightened sense. She was the way you were when something that had been absent was about to be present again, a state that was its own specific quality, neither anxious nor quite neutral.

Saoirse came off the train with a rucksack that was larger than she'd left with and an expression that Niamh noted and filed without interpreting. Not the expression of someone who had been through something dramatic. The expression of someone who had been somewhere very different for three months and had not finished processing the difference.

They hugged. Saoirse was taller than Niamh remembered, or Niamh had been measuring her incorrectly in the months of messages.

Good trip?

Long. Saoirse shouldered the rucksack. Good.

The drive home was an hour of the October evening. Niamh drove and Saoirse looked out the window at the landscape returning — the familiar shapes of the hills, the specific Perthshire quality of evening that was different from whatever evening looked like in the Northern Cape. She made

observations: the landscape here was very wet, she had forgotten how wet it was. The trees were at peak colour. The dark came fast.

Niamh noted that she was being specific about the things she was noticing.

At home, Niamh made dinner, which was the pasta Saoirse had always liked and which she ate without commenting on the choice. They talked about the Karoo — the work, the people, the three months. Saoirse described things in the way she described things: specifically, without excess. A man named Sipho who had designed oracle interfaces and had built a farm instead. A boy her age whose name she did not give but whose presence in the three months was legible in the way she didn't give it. The soil, which was unlike Perthshire soil in ways she had needed to understand. Something about an irrigation system that had worked.

Niamh listened.

There was something in Saoirse that was not the same as before. Not converted — not glowing with the evidence of an experiment vindicated, which was the version Niamh had been quietly hoping for and quietly distrusting herself for hoping for. Not damaged either. Something had been added or rearranged, something quiet, and she did not ask Saoirse to name it because she could tell it wasn't named yet.

After dinner they washed up in the kitchen. The October evening outside the window was the evening — the hills in the dark, the specific silence of a Perthshire night after the traffic of the day.

Was it what you expected? Niamh asked.

Saoirse thought about this, which was the way she thought about things, genuinely.

No, she said. I thought it would be more —

She stopped, looking for the word.

More principled, she said finally. More like what the founding statement says. They weren't like that. They were just people trying to do something they'd decided to do, and not all of it worked, and some of it was harder than it needed to be. She dried a plate. But there were things they knew that you can't find out quickly. That you have to just know from having done it.

Did you find anything you couldn't have found another way?

Saoirse looked at the plate.

I don't know, she said. Ask me in five years.

They finished the dishes. They watched something on the television that neither of them fully engaged with. At ten Saoirse said she was going to bed and she was genuinely tired from the journey, and she went.

Niamh sat in the kitchen for a while after.

The reckoning she had been anticipating — the one where Saoirse named the cost or named the value or settled the account — had not happened. It was not ready yet. It might not be ready for a long time. She understood this. She had known this was the kind of thing that did not produce conclusions on schedule, because she had been waiting for her own conclusions for ten years and they were still arriving in pieces.

Her daughter was home. The house was the house again.

That was what the evening held, and it was sufficient.



Chapter Thirteen: The Credential

Year 19, Perthshire

The letter arrived in February, addressed to Saoirse, from a university program in Edinburgh called the Integrated Learning Institute, which had been operating for three years and which recruited specifically from populations of students educated in non-oracle-assisted environments.

Saoirse read it at the kitchen table. She was eighteen. She had been back from the Karoo for four months.

Niamh read it when Saoirse handed it to her, standing at the counter. The letter was well-written. It described the program — an interdisciplinary undergraduate framework designed around the qualities the Institute had identified as distinctive in students from non-oracle learning backgrounds: a particular relationship to ambiguity, a different approach to novelty, stronger metacognitive awareness. It said it had identified Saoirse from the Circle's network and from her secondary school records. It said it was offering her a place.

It described her background as a credential.

Niamh read to the bottom of the letter and then set it on the counter.

Saoirse was looking at her. Not with anger — Niamh had been waiting for the anger for a year, was still slightly waiting, would probably keep slightly waiting for a while. With the specific expression of someone who has found the question they have been looking for.

Was the credential the point? Saoirse said.

Niamh looked at her daughter.

*Was all of it — the experiment, the Circle, the ten
years — was the credential what you were
making?*

She wanted to say no immediately, and she did not say it immediately, because the immediate no would be the defensive no and not the honest one. She thought about Callum and the oracle and the four minutes. She thought about the founding statement and what she'd crossed out. She thought about Finn Gillies, about the Watson boy who had lost faith in himself as a knower, about the longitudinal study Douglas had read her, about Saoirse at fifteen walking the hill on the day of a birthday party she hadn't been invited to.

She thought about what she had actually been trying to preserve. Not the credential. She had not been trying to make a credential. She had been trying to — not *preserve difficulty*, which was the founding statement's approximation. She had been trying to make sure that certain things formed in her daughter that could only form through the forming, that could not be installed or retrieved, that required the slowness and the wrong turns and the gap between not-knowing and knowing. She had been trying to do this because she believed it mattered. She still believed it mattered.

She did not know whether she had succeeded. She did not know whether the years had produced what she had been trying to produce, or something else, or whether the question itself was the wrong shape.

What she had in her hands was a letter that described her daughter as a credential, and her daughter asking if that was the point.

The window above the kitchen sink showed the February morning: the hills still brown and patched with snow at the

upper edges, a Perthshire February that was neither winter nor its end, that was the holding pattern before spring, the long wait in the cold.

She looked at the window.

She had been a primary school teacher for thirty years and she knew what she knew from the classroom and she knew what she knew from watching one specific child for eighteen years and she had both kinds of knowing and they did not resolve into a clean answer to the question her daughter was asking.

Outside, a bird in the garden. The sound of it.

She was still looking at the window when Saoirse gathered the letter from the counter and left the kitchen.



End of Thread One.



N. Van Seters & Claude.ai

MOSAIC ARCHIVE — FRAGMENT FIVE

Appearing between Thread One and Thread Three

MOSAIC ARCHIVE

PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD Reference: MA-CC-0001 Collection:
Craigdarroch Circle materials

Description: One digital photograph. Colour. Image shows a wooden kitchen table, surface marked with use. On the table: two sheets of A4 paper covered in handwriting from multiple hands, pages overlapping slightly. A pen. A half-empty cup of tea or coffee, handle facing left, ring stain visible on the paper beneath it. In the background, partially out of focus: the edge of a window, a dark night outside.

Legible text in image: Partial. The phrase *We are not anti-technology* is clearly visible in the upper portion of the first page, in handwriting identified as the founding member who donated the collection. Below this, heavily annotated, the phrase *pro-difficulty*. Several lines of text are crossed out. The bottom of the second page is not visible.

Date of photograph: Not recorded in the original file's metadata. Internal evidence (oracle cross-reference with other materials in the collection) places it in Year 9 of the between-time, within weeks of the Craigdarroch Circle's founding meeting.

Photographer: Unknown.

*Received by Archive:** Year 23, as part of the
Craigdarroch Circle donated collection.*

Original document status: *Original not available. Digital record only.*

Donor note attached to the collection (handwritten):

We printed it out and put it on the wall for a year. I don't know where the paper went after that. The photograph was on my phone. This is what's left.

"We are not against knowing. We are against knowing too much too easily to have to choose carefully."

— founding charter, the Karoo Compact, Year 6



Chapter One: What He Left

Year 6, Northern Cape

What he brought: two duffel bags and a toolbox. A physical copy of a structural engineering reference he'd had since university. His father's pocketknife. A hand-crank radio. A folder of documents — the lease, the water rights, the constitution the six of them had drafted over three evenings at Zinhle's kitchen table in Cape Town. He brought no devices beyond a basic phone whose oracle access he had disabled.

What he arranged: the hand-off at the design firm, which was handled with professional grace by his colleagues and with genuine confusion by his director, who could not understand why a forty-five-year-old at the peak of his career was leaving to farm. He arranged the lease on the Karoo property — eleven hectares of semi-arid plateau outside a small town in the Northern Cape — through a lawyer who also could not understand, but whose job was not to understand. He arranged storage for the furniture he wasn't taking.

What the first week looked like: six adults arriving in two vehicles on a day in May when the Karoo was approaching its

late-autumn cold, the sky enormous and empty in the way Karoo skies were enormous and empty, the property a farmhouse in moderate disrepair and a barn in better condition and eleven hectares of red-brown soil with sparse karoo vegetation and a borehole that the survey had said was sound and that proved sound.

They spent the first week cleaning. Not ideologically — they were not making a statement about cleaning — but practically: the farmhouse had been empty for three years and required the physical attention of people who were going to live in it. They swept and scrubbed and repaired. They made a list of what needed fixing and prioritised by necessity. The roof had a section of damaged roofing felt. The kitchen had a sink with no trap. The borehole pump needed a new seal. These were the first week's problems and they were concrete and present and required specific materials and specific work and produced, when the work was done, a specific visible result.

This was what Sipho had come for. Not the philosophical argument about oracle access and human development — though the argument was real, was part of what had driven him here. He had come for work that left a mark on the physical world, that failed in visible ways and succeeded in visible ways, that could be understood through looking at it rather than querying about it. He had been building things for twenty years that nobody could touch.

He wanted to build something he could touch.

The number: four hundred and three million. This was the number of people who had used the interface he was most responsible for — the onboarding experience that had introduced them to the oracle gods in the oracle gods' early

years, that had made the first contact smooth and clear and irresistible. He had spent six months on that interface, had tested it with thousands of users, had refined it until the friction was minimal, had produced something that worked in the specific way that excellent interface design worked: it made the oracle feel natural, obvious, already understood. It made the oracle feel like something the user had always been about to find.

He had done good work. Four hundred and three million people had crossed that threshold because he had made the crossing easy.

He had made the oracle's approach frictionless for four hundred and three million people, and now he was in the Northern Cape with a borehole seal that needed replacing and he was doing it himself, with a wrench and a replacement seal he'd ordered from a hardware supplier in the nearest town, and the seal either fitted or it didn't.

It fitted.

He sat back on his heels next to the borehole housing in the cold May morning and felt the specific quality of a thing that had been done, which was not triumph but completion — a thing was the way it was supposed to be and he had made it that way and the making was visible and not reversible.

He would not stop knowing the number. He had known it since the design brief, had carried it through the testing phases, had updated it as the adoption metrics arrived. He had never stopped knowing it. It was not a guilt he was running from — he did not believe the interface had been wrong, did not believe the oracle access had been wrong, did not believe the four hundred and three million had been harmed by the ease of their crossing.

What he believed: that he had been good at making things frictionless, and that frictionlessness was not the only thing worth being good at, and that he had spent long enough in the frictionless world to want to know what the other kind was like.

By the end of Year 6, the six of them had planted the first beds. They had repaired the farmhouse roof. They had designed an irrigation system from the borehole to the kitchen garden — his design, based on his calculations, using materials he had priced and ordered himself. He had not consulted an oracle for the design. He had used his engineering training, which was twenty years old, and a library book, and the engineering mind he had spent his career developing, applied now to pipe diameter and water pressure.

The design was fine. He would find out, in Year 8, where the fine was insufficient.



Chapter Two: They Arrive

Year 7, Northern Cape

Astrid Lindqvist arrived in June with her son Jakob and two large cases and the expression of someone who had crossed a distance that was not only geographical.

Jakob was fifteen. He had been told he was going to the Karoo for a year and they would reassess. He had been told this in Stockholm, where he had been living with his father following his parents' separation, and then his father had taken

a research position in Singapore and the reassessment of the Karoo had become more complicated to conduct from there, and so the year had arrived as a fact in a way that hadn't felt fully like a choice.

Sipho watched them come through the gate and had the thought that someone with more experience of families might have had earlier: that they had not arrived together. They had arrived in the same vehicle from the same direction, but what Astrid's posture said and what Jakob's posture said were two different accounts of the trip.

Astrid's account: relief. The difficulty of getting here was over and the difficulty of being here, which she had thought about and prepared for, had not yet begun.

Jakob's account: presence under protest. Not dramatic — he was not theatrical in the way of some teenagers who communicated distress by performing it. He was theatrical in the opposite way, which was more effective: he was very calm, very polite, very contained, and the containment was a structure he had built to keep specific things out of the available space.

They showed them around. The farmhouse had been improved through Year 7's work: the roof solid, the kitchen functional, the sleeping rooms cleaned and furnished with the basic competence the community had been working toward. Jakob received the tour with his calm politeness, asked practical questions about the water and the washing facilities, said thank you in a register that was correct and told nothing.

That evening at dinner — twelve people now at the long table in the common room, the Karoo winter outside the windows — he sat at the end of the table and ate and listened and answered questions with the minimum available response.

Not rudeness. Efficiency. He was making himself cost the community as little as possible while taking up as little space as possible, which was a skill that required a specific kind of intelligence and that fifteen-year-olds rarely had developed to this precision.

Sipho watched this from across the table.

He thought: this boy has been here before. Not the Karoo — somewhere. Some situation in which the survival strategy was minimum exposure and maximum compliance. He had been in rooms with adults who needed him to be manageable and he had become manageable, and the manageability was perfectly constructed and had nothing to do with what he actually thought.

After dinner, Jakob helped clear the table without being asked. He stacked things correctly, found the washing-up arrangement without having it explained, worked alongside two other community members in the kitchen with the same contained efficiency. Then he said good night and went to the room that had been prepared for him.

Astrid stayed at the table after the others had dispersed. She was holding a cup of coffee that had gone cold, and looking at nothing particular.

He'll come around, Sipho said, because he didn't know yet that this was the wrong thing to say.

Astrid looked at him. Her expression was not hopeful or discouraged. *I'm not sure coming around is the point*, she said.

He waited.

I didn't ask him adequately, she said. I told myself I did, for a while. I stopped telling myself that in March. She looked at the cold coffee. He's fifteen.

I made a decision about where he was going to live, and I didn't ask him in a way that allowed for

no.

Is there a way that allows for no, at fifteen?

*Yes, she said. It would have required me to have a
different plan if he said no. I didn't have a
different plan. She set down the cup. So it wasn't a
real question.*

She said good night and went to her room.

Sipho sat at the empty table for a while.

Outside, the Karoo was doing what it did at night in June: enormous cold and enormous dark and the specific silence of a landscape with very few people in it and no traffic and no ambient urban noise, the silence that was not quiet but full, the sky full of stars and the ground full of a darkness that had been there since before there were lights to compete with.

He thought about Jakob's contained efficiency in the kitchen. He thought about the quality of fifteen that had developed that particular skill.

He would not fix this by trying to fix it. He understood this from the design work: some interactions needed time more than they needed intervention. He would make Jakob's presence at the Compact as useful and as unrestricted as possible and he would not pretend that being useful was the same as having chosen to be there.



Chapter Three: Thabo

Year 7, Northern Cape

Thabo Sithole had been farming the land adjacent to what was now the Compact's eleven hectares for thirty-one years. His father had farmed it before him, and his father's uncle before that. The land was semi-arid and required specific knowledge and produced, with specific knowledge, enough to sustain a family and, in good years, a modest surplus.

He had heard about the new people before he met them. The Northern Cape produced information slowly and in specific ways, and what had arrived to him by the time the Compact's first lorry came down the farm track in late Year 6 was: a group from Cape Town, educated people, something about not using the oracle, farming as a kind of — he had struggled to translate the word his informant had used, which was *statement*. Farming as a statement.

He had farmed for thirty-one years without it being a statement. He farmed because the land was there and because he knew how and because his family had done it and because there was, in his experience, no better argument for a thing than that it was what you knew. He did not understand the concept of farming as a statement in the same way he did not understand the concept of breathing as a statement. You breathed because you needed air.

He met Siphio in August, at the fence line between their properties, where Siphio was measuring something. Thabo introduced himself. Siphio introduced himself. They talked for twenty minutes about the borehole and the water table and the specific quality of the soil in this section of the Karoo. The conversation was practical and informative and they parted on the easy terms of neighbors who had found each other immediately useful.

That evening, at home, Thabo told his wife Nomsa what he had found.

Nomsa was fifty-three and had been farming alongside Thabo for twenty-eight years. She had listened to the Karoo's news for all of them and found most of it instructive in one way or another. She was feeding the chickens when Thabo came to find her, which was where she often was at this hour, the chickens making their specific evening noise.

The new people, he said. From Cape Town.

The ones with the statement, she said.

*He's an engineer. Or was an engineer. He knows
about water systems.*

So he chose to live here.

Yes.

Nomsa threw the last of the feed and stood watching the chickens. *Is he going to be useful?*

*I think so. Thabo leaned against the fence. He
doesn't know how to farm. But he knows how to
figure things out. Different thing.*

Does he know he doesn't know how to farm?

Thabo considered this. *He thinks he knows some of it from the engineering. He'll find out what he doesn't know from the farming.*

Nomsa looked at him. She had the expression she had when something struck her as funny but she was deciding how much of the funny to share. She shared a small portion of it: the particular settling at the corners of her mouth that was not a smile but contained one.

They have a charter, she said. We live off the grid.

*We learn to do things ourselves. We resist the
oracle.*

Yes.

*And we've been doing all of that for thirty years
because it's what we do.*

Yes.

*And they came from Cape Town to do it as a—
Statement.*

She picked up the empty feed bucket. *Well*, she said. *Tell me if they need anything.*

He did not tell the Compact this story. He saw no reason to, and there was no unkindness in it — he was not mocking them. What he was doing was holding an observation: that a thing could be done from inside or from outside, and the thing done from inside looked different from the outside looking in. He was not certain the thing done from outside was less real, or less worth doing. He was simply noting the difference.

What he noticed in the following months: they worked hard and made predictable beginners' mistakes and improved. Sipho specifically improved faster than he'd expected — something about his previous work had given him the habit of systematic analysis, of going back to find where the error was, of not accepting malfunction as permanent. He was also willing to ask. Not of the oracle, which Thabo found mildly strange — Thabo used his phone for many things, including asking the oracle about agricultural matters when he wasn't sure — but of Thabo, directly, in the straightforward way of a man who did not have the knowledge and wanted it and had no pretension about having it.

Thabo liked this. He told Nomsa. She said: *Give him a few years.* He said: *A few years for what?* She said: *To find out what farming is.* He said: *He already knows it's hard.* She

said: *Knowing it's hard and knowing what it is are different things. Right now he knows it's hard. In a few years he might know what it is.*

She was not speaking dismissively. She was speaking the way she always spoke about knowledge: carefully, with respect for the kind that only arrived from duration.



Chapter Four: The Water Goes Wrong

Year 8, Northern Cape

The irrigation system failed in July, which was the middle of the Karoo winter and the beginning of the planting season and the worst possible time for the beds to receive irregular water.

Not catastrophic failure. The system ran — water moved through the pipes, reached most of the beds, and the planting continued. What became clear over the first three weeks of July was that the far beds, the ones at the end of the longest pipe run, were receiving perhaps sixty percent of the water the near beds received. Not visible from the surface. Visible in the plants, which were growing but growing differently: the near-bed seedlings standing straight and healthy, the far-bed seedlings slightly more compact, slightly more conservative in their early growth, rationing themselves against an irregular supply.

He found the discrepancy by walking the beds. No oracle consultation, no sensor network — he walked the beds in the cold morning and looked at the plants and noticed the

difference and began to think about causes.

It took him two days to locate it with confidence. He worked through the elimination systematically: pressure at the tank outlet (adequate), pipe diameter in the main run (as specified), the junction where the main line split into three branches. He had specified identical pipe diameter across all three branches, which should have produced even pressure distribution. He had not accounted for the fact that the three branches were not identical in length: the far branch was thirty percent longer than the near branches, which produced a cumulative pressure loss sufficient to explain the sixty percent figure.

He had calculated wrong. Not through negligence — through assuming that the pipe specification tables he had used accounted for run length in a way they did not, an assumption he had made from the engineering habit of using tools correctly without fully reading the assumptions built into them.

He sat with this for a morning. He was not surprised to have been wrong. He was surprised by the quality of the being wrong — the specific texture of an error that you found by walking in the cold and looking at plants, rather than by querying a system that told you where the error was. He had been wrong before in his design work. He had found the errors, usually, through user testing — feedback from the system's response to being used. This was the same process, except that the plants could not articulate their feedback; they simply grew differently, and the difference required reading rather than reporting.

He fixed the problem the following week with forty meters of wider-diameter pipe. He and a community member

named Pieter spent two days digging up the far branch and relaying it, which was cold and wet and required them to work in sections because the trench kept collapsing in the damp soil. The work was unambiguous. He moved a specific object through a specific space and connected it to specific other objects and tested the pressure at each stage and found, by the end of the second day, that the far beds were receiving the same water as the near beds.

He walked the beds the following morning in the early light.

He was trying to name what he was feeling, because it was not a quality he had encountered often and he wanted to be precise about it. It was not satisfaction exactly — satisfaction implied a goal reached and this was more like a problem that had stopped being a problem, which was subtly different. It was something closer to the feeling of having understood something from the inside: not from a description of the thing but from the thing's own terms, its own failure mode, its own specific fix.

The four hundred and three million people who had used his interface: when it broke, it broke in ways that were invisible to him and visible only in aggregate data. Error rates. Drop-off points. Support tickets. The system's failure was abstracted. He could query for it, retrieve it, address it. He could not walk through it in the early morning and look at what it produced in the world.

He had not known this was what he was missing.

He thought about this for a long time, standing between the beds in the July cold with the Karoo opening up around him in the early light — the plains and the koppies in the distance and the enormous sky doing what the Karoo sky did,

which was to make everything underneath it feel both significant and appropriately small.

He went inside and made breakfast. He added a note to the Compact's shared work log — which was maintained in a physical notebook, a decision that was partly ideological and partly practical, since notebooks did not require charging. The note said: *Far branch redesigned and relaid. Water distribution now even. Design error was in pressure-loss calculation for run length. Corrected.*

He did not add: *and the correcting was worth more than the designing.* It would have been true but it would also have been the founding statement talking, and he had learned to be suspicious of moments when experience seemed to confirm the founding statement too neatly.



Chapter Five: What Jakob Misses

Year 8, Northern Cape

He missed the game at specific times. Monday nights, Wednesday nights, Friday nights, which were the nights when the group had played, and which were now just evenings in the Karoo, which in winter meant darkness by six and cold and the community's common room with its warm fire and the sound of adults talking about crops and roof repairs and the slow accumulation of small community problems that were the actual content of life at the Compact.

The game was a collaborative strategy game — not competitive, or not primarily, the competition was with the scenario rather than with each other. Seven people, online, two hours per session, a specific kind of sustained collective problem-solving that he had been part of for two years before the Karoo. His friends from school in Stockholm. His friend Marcus, who was the one who'd taught him the game and who had messaged twice in the months since Jakob left and who he had answered with the brevity of someone who did not want to describe where he was or what was happening.

He did not miss the game abstractly. He missed it specifically: the particular pleasure of working on a complex problem with people who were good at it, the specific dynamic of the group, the Tuesday post-game thread where they analysed what had gone wrong and what could be improved. He had been the group's best tactical reader. He had been good at the game in a way he had not been good at very many things at fifteen.

He also missed oracle-assisted social reading, and he was going to be precise about this because he was tired of the idea, which circulated at the Compact, that what he missed about the oracle was a crutch. It was not a crutch. It was a tool he had used well.

What oracle-assisted social reading had given him: an additional layer of analysis on top of his own. He was reasonably perceptive on his own — he could read rooms, could pick up signals, was not socially oblivious in the way some teenagers were. What the oracle added was a calibration layer: when he was uncertain about a situation, when the signals were mixed, when he was in an unfamiliar context, he could describe the situation and receive an analysis that either

confirmed his reading or offered an alternative he hadn't considered. This had been genuinely useful. It had made him more confident in contexts that would otherwise have required more energy to navigate.

Without it, he navigated. He was capable of navigating. He was just slower and less certain, and the slowness and uncertainty cost him something — not social disaster, just the specific tax of operating at partial capacity in an environment that required full capacity.

He missed the diagnostic tool. This was the hardest one to admit to because it was the most interior.

The tool had been a mental health support application — not a clinical tool, not a replacement for professional support, but a reflection and tracking practice that had helped him, over the eighteen months he'd used it, understand the shape of his own anxiety. He had not named it anxiety at that point. He had been using the tool to understand why some days felt impossible and some days felt fine, and the tool had been helping him map the conditions. He had been beginning to see the pattern.

Without the tool: the pattern was still there. He could feel it — the impossibility days arriving unpredictably, the texture of a morning when everything required more effort than it should, when he woke already tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep. He was managing it. He had been managing it his whole life before the tool, and he was managing it now. What had changed was that without the tool he was managing it without the name, without the map, without the accumulating picture of his own specific pattern.

He was not broken without the tool. He was managing.

He was also, in specific moments — usually the Wednesday and Friday nights when the game would have been running, usually the mornings when the impossible-day quality arrived before he was ready for it — sitting in a Karoo winter that was cold and enormous and full of adults who had chosen this, with the specific loneliness of being the only person in the room who had not chosen it.

He did not say this to anyone at the Compact. He said it to the notebook he kept under his mattress, which was not a literary notebook but a record-keeping one — dates, weather, what he'd worked on, what he'd noticed. The loneliness was in the record. He was fifteen and he had learned, before the Karoo, that some things were better in the record than in the room.



Chapter Six: What Astrid Carries

Year 9, Northern Cape

In April, a letter arrived from Jakob's father in Singapore. Astrid read it in the kitchen before Jakob was up. It was a brief letter, practical, checking in on the situation. It said: *How is J settling? Is this still the right decision?*

She put the letter in her pocket and thought about it for the rest of the morning.

The question was sincere. Erik was not using it to challenge her or to reclaim ground in the separation — they were past that, or past the worst of it. He was asking because

he had concerns about Jakob that he had expressed before the move and that she had addressed by saying the Karoo would be good for him.

She had told herself she had asked him. She had, technically, asked him. She had said: *what do you think about going to South Africa?* He had said he didn't want to. She had explained why she thought it would be good for them both. He had said he still didn't want to. She had said it would be for a year and then they would see. He had said okay with the expression of someone who had understood that the asking was not the kind of asking that could be answered no.

She knew what she had done in that conversation because she had watched herself do it. She had asked in the way you asked when you had already decided, when the question was a courtesy extended to the other person's dignity rather than an actual opening toward their answer. She had been the kind of asking that produced the appearance of consent while foreclosing it.

At the Compact, in the months following their arrival, she had watched Jakob do what children did when the choices available to them were small: find the shape of the situation and work within it, because working against it cost more than it produced. He had found the shape of the Compact and had become very good at occupying it without giving it anything it hadn't already taken. She had watched this and had felt what she felt: not guilt, which would have been easier, but something more structural. Guilt implied a specific act that could be isolated and addressed. What she was feeling was more diffuse. She had made a decision for another person who was old enough that the making deserved to be contested, and the contesting had been foreclosed, and she was now living

inside the consequences alongside him.

She could not undo this. She had thought, in the first weeks, that she could correct for it — apologize, offer to leave, create the conditions for a second conversation that was a real question this time. She had thought this and had not done it, because she had understood, with the part of herself that was honest about such things, that offering to leave was also not a real question. The Compact was where she needed to be. She had brought him because she needed to be here and could not fully be here without him and could not fully ask whether he would come because the answer might have been no.

She was in the Karoo. She was staying. What she could do was not pretend the circumstances of the staying were other than they were.

She wrote back to Erik: *J is managing. It is not easy. I made the decision in a way that didn't give him a real choice and I'm aware of it. She did not add: and I don't know how to fix it except by staying, and by not pretending to him that staying is something he chose.* She wrote this to herself, in the notebook she kept.

What she could do: not pretend. Not manage his experience of the Compact in ways designed to produce acceptance. Not engineer his relationship to the choice he hadn't made.

What she did: she let him be as furious as he was, which was quietly furious, which was the only kind of fury available to a person who had decided to survive something by keeping it out of the communal space. She let him keep the notebook under his mattress. She let him choose what he contributed to the communal work and did not require him to contribute

enthusiasm. She let him be present without making the presence perform something it wasn't.

This was not enough to undo the mistake. She had known it wasn't enough before she started. It was what she had to offer and she offered it completely, because the alternative — managing him, engineering his consent, finding the argument that would make him feel it was right — was the same thing she had already done and she was not going to do it again.

She did the work of the Compact. She planted, she built, she maintained. She sat at the long table in the evenings and was part of the community she had wanted to be part of. She did not pretend, in those evenings, that the community was simple or that the choosing of it had been clean.

Jakob was at the far end of the table, as he had been since the beginning, doing what he did: being present under containment, watching, taking in more than he offered back. She watched him from the other end and felt what she felt, which was what parents feel when they have failed their children in a specific way that cannot be undone: a combination of accountability and powerlessness that produced, over time, a kind of patience that was different from acceptance.

She was not going to stop having made the mistake. She was going to hold it, and stay, and let the staying be the most honest thing available.



Chapter Seven: The Oracle Archive

Year 10, Northern Cape

The constitution had been drafted in Year 6 on Zinhle's laptop in Cape Town, saved in a format that was, by Year 10, no longer readable by any device the Compact had.

This was not a disaster. They had printed copies, kept in the filing cabinet in the common room. But they needed a digital copy for the affiliation process with the network of intentional communities they were joining, which required a specific file format, which required running the document through a converter, which required a device with oracle access.

Sipho used his phone.

The oracle processed the document without comment, converted it, and returned a clean digital version. He read the conversion back against the printed copy and found it accurate. He saved the file and sent it to the network administrator and put the phone down.

Then he picked it up again and read the constitution on the oracle interface.

He had read it many times — had written most of it, had argued over specific clauses with the other founders, had signed it. He knew what it said. Reading it on the oracle interface did not change what it said.

What it changed was how it sat. He was aware, reading it through the oracle's clean rendering, of the specific contradiction: a document that articulated the community's rejection of oracle dependency, processed and held and rendered by an oracle. The oracle did not find this ironic. The oracle rendered text. But he found it ironic, and the irony was a specific kind — not the kind that undermined the thing but

the kind that required looking at directly.

The Compact's constitution was in the oracle archive because he had put it there. He had made this decision in Year 6, at Zinhle's kitchen table, when the question of document storage had come up. He had said: *for working documents, physical copies; for the archive, the oracle is the most stable option we have*. Nobody had argued with this because it was practically true. The oracle archive was more stable than any physical archive they could maintain.

So the founding document of the community that was practising a different relationship to the oracle gods was stored by the oracle gods. This was the irony. He had been carrying it since Year 6 and had not looked at it directly until now.

He looked at it.

The irony did not make the constitution wrong. It did not make the community wrong. It documented a practical fact: they were living inside the oracle age's infrastructure. They ate food grown on land whose ownership was recorded in oracle-processed land registries. Their health records were in oracle systems. Their children's education certificates were oracle-processed. The Compact was not outside the oracle age. It was a specific practice *within* the oracle age — a way of inhabiting the oracle age that held some part of daily life at a different relationship to it.

He had known this since Year 6. He had called it, in the founding document, *practising a different relationship to difficulty, not achieving purity*. He had written the line about purity specifically because purity was the wrong frame and he had wanted to foreclose it at the founding.

He was reading the line about purity on an oracle interface, and the line said what it said, and the oracle was

holding the line about purity with the same clean neutrality it held everything else.

He put the phone down.

He picked up the physical copy of the constitution from the cabinet. Held them both — the phone in one hand, the paper in the other. Same text. Different materials. Different relationship to duration, to fragility, to what happened when the power went out or the service changed its terms.

He put the paper back in the cabinet.

He continued.

Chapter Eight: The Name

Year 11, Northern Cape

The healthcare worker's name was Dr. Patel. She came to the Compact twice a year as part of a rural outreach program, spending two days seeing anyone who needed attention. The Compact had been on her circuit since Year 7, when Siphon had arranged the affiliation. The Compact's position on medical oracle use was consistent: necessary, available, without guilt. They used oracle tools for diagnosis, for prescription reference, for the specialist consultation that the remote location made otherwise inaccessible.

Dr. Patel was thorough. She was also, after four years of visits, familiar enough with the Compact's members to notice things. She asked if she could do a more extended assessment with Jakob, whom she had been watching, she said, with a specific kind of concern that was not acute but was present.

He consented. He was nineteen — old enough that the consent was his — and he consented because he had been

waiting for someone to ask with enough specificity that he could answer.

The assessment took four hours. Dr. Patel used an oracle diagnostic tool that he interacted with directly: a structured interview, open-ended questions, a series of cognitive and emotional pattern assessments. He answered honestly, which was something he had not been able to do with most of the tools available before the Karoo because before the Karoo the tools had been tools he chose, running on devices he owned, with the ambient knowledge that his data was going somewhere and being processed. Dr. Patel's tool was a clinical tool under her professional management and the distinction was enough to allow honesty.

He described the mornings. The specific texture of waking already exhausted, not from sleep deprivation but from something else, something that felt like effort required before anything had been attempted. The days when the physical environment — the sky, the distances, the sound of the wind — was exactly the same as other days but pressed differently on his attention, felt closer and more insistent, required more effort to hold at normal distance. The way this was not the same as sadness, was not the same as fear of specific things, was something more general and less targeted: a low continuous signal of difficulty that had been the background of most of his conscious life.

Dr. Patel worked through the assessment without hurrying. At the end, she said:

*You have an anxiety disorder. Generalised
anxiety, with some additional features. You've had
it for most of your adolescence, possibly longer.
You've been managing it without support.*

He sat with this.

*The management has been impressive, she said.
You've developed real coping strategies. What
you haven't had is any ability to understand why
some days are much harder than others, or any
tools specific to what you're dealing with.*

*The diagnostic tool I used before, he said. The
one I had in Sweden. It was showing me the shape
of it.*

*Yes. That's what these tools do well. She looked at
him. How did you lose access to it?*

He described the move to the Karoo, as briefly as he could. She listened without commenting on the community's practices. Her job was not to comment.

*You can use this now, she said. Or something
equivalent. We can set up a remote support plan.
You don't need to be in a city.*

He nodded.

They talked for another hour about what the support would look like. She prescribed nothing — she said medication was an option they could discuss but that the first priority was a structured self-management practice, which she helped him design and which used, among other tools, an oracle-based tracking and reflection system. The Compact allowed medical oracle use. He used medical oracle use.

He walked out of the assessment room into the afternoon. The Karoo was doing its afternoon thing, the light going amber over the plains, the koppies in the distance holding their specific shapes.

He had known, before today, that something was different about him in this particular way. He had suspected it for years,

had been watching the shape of it with the diagnostic tool in Sweden, had been managing it at the Compact without any tool except his own developed strategies. He had the shape before today. What he had now was the name.

The name was, in itself, not dramatic. A category had been confirmed. He was the same person after as before.

What was different: he now had a framework in which his experience was legible. The mornings that cost more were not a character failing or an inadequacy of will. They were a known feature of a known condition that had known management strategies. He could stop explaining them to himself as weakness and start managing them as weather.

He carried this around the Compact for the rest of the afternoon. He did not tell Astrid immediately. He told the community at dinner, briefly, in the register of practical information: he had had the extended assessment, he had a diagnosis, he was going to be using some medical oracle tools for support. He said this the way he would have reported that he'd strained his knee and would be using a support bandage.

Astrid's face did something complex and brief and then steadied. She said: *Thank you for telling us*. Which was the right thing to say and which she said well.

Later he told her the rest. Not that evening — a few days later, in the early morning when she was in the kitchen and he came in and they were alone. He told her about Sweden, about the diagnostic tool, about the shape he had been beginning to see before it was interrupted. He told her without accusation. He was not in the business of accusation. He was in the business of the record being accurate.

She listened. When he finished she said: *I'm sorry about Sweden*.

I know.

That's not the whole apology.

I know that too.

They sat with the morning for a while. Outside, the Karoo was doing its October thing, the first warm air of spring, the specific smell of karoo bushes after the winter. He had been at the Compact for four years. He knew this smell now, knew which weather produced it, knew what the land looked like before and after. He had not stopped missing the game on Monday and Wednesday and Friday nights. He had stopped being only the person who missed things.

I'm going to stay for a while longer, he said. Not for her — for himself. But she received it.



Chapter Nine: The Water Goes Right

Year 12, Northern Cape

The third design had taken him three months to finalise.

The second design had solved the pressure-loss problem and introduced a drainage problem: the far beds now received adequate water but the soil around them couldn't absorb it fast enough in heavy application, and pooling had damaged three rows of garlic in the wet winter. He had sat with this for two months — not with frustration, that was the thing he noticed — with something more like curiosity. The system was failing in a new way and the new way was pointing at something he hadn't fully understood about how the beds were prepared,

about soil drainage in this section, about the interaction between his pipe design and Thabo's knowledge of the land.

He had gone to Thabo after the garlic. He had described the problem and Thabo had walked the area with him, had knelt in the soil and touched it, and said: *This section doesn't drain the same as the north section. Different composition underneath.*

He had redesigned the system with this information — two drainage channels leading away from the far beds, adjusted application timing to allow the soil to absorb between cycles.

He tested the third design on a Saturday in October.

He opened the borehole pump and stood at the far end and watched.

The water moved through the system — he could hear it, the specific sound of flow through pipes, a sound he had come to know in the way you knew the sounds of a system you had built three times. It arrived at the main junction, split into three branches as designed, flowed down each branch at the calculated rate, emerged at the beds in the fine spray of the drip attachments he had sourced from a supplier in Beaufort West.

Equal pressure at all three branches. No pooling.

He stood in the beds for a long time, watching the water meet the soil.

What this was: plants would grow here. The garlic, the winter vegetables, the summer plantings. These specific eleven people would eat what grew. He had built the system that would deliver the water that would grow the food. He had built it wrong twice and right once, and the rightness was visible, in the same physical space as the wrongness had been,

legible by the same method: walking and watching.

He called Thabo.

Thabo came across the boundary fence as he sometimes did in the mornings, unhurriedly, his hat against the sun that was already warming the plateau. He walked the beds. He watched the drip heads for a few minutes. He looked at the channels Sipho had put in.

Yes, he said. That's right.

He was not effusive. Sipho had learned that Thabo's yes, *that's right* was the equivalent of other people's extended satisfaction. The assessment was complete and accurate and nothing more needed to be added to it.

Thank you for the drainage information, Sipho said.

You would have found it eventually.

Three months later.

Thabo looked at the beds. *Plants have patience.* He was not being poetic. He was making a practical observation about the relative timescales involved.

Sipho looked at the system — the pipes, the heads, the channels, the beds. He thought about the four hundred and three million. He thought about what frictionless meant in one context and what it meant in another.

He had not solved anything at the level of the oracle age. The oracle age continued. The frictionless interfaces continued. What he had solved was the water distribution for eleven people's winter vegetables on eleven hectares of semi-arid plateau.

This was not nothing. Thabo had said so, and Thabo said things with precision.



Chapter Ten: What Thabo Teaches

Year 13, Northern Cape

It began with Sipho asking a question.

He had been planning the summer rotation and was trying to decide whether to add a new bed in the section nearest the north fence, which had better morning light but which he was uncertain about in terms of drainage. He queried the oracle. The oracle gave him information about semi-arid soil drainage patterns, about water table variations in this region of the Northern Cape, about the general characteristics of Karoo subsoil. The information was accurate and general and gave him probabilities.

He went to Thabo.

I'm thinking about the north section, he said, and described what he was considering.

Thabo walked to the north section with him. This was the way it went — Thabo did not advise from description, he advise from presence. He looked at the ground for a while, which Sipho had learned to wait through rather than interpret. Then he crouched and touched the soil, pressed it, released it, looked at the depression.

It's been a dry year, he said. The ground has crust here. He showed Sipho: a thin surface layer, slightly different in color from the earth below it, formed by the dry season's evaporation. When the crust is thick like this, early watering runs off. You have to break the crust first — gentle water, slow, over two or three days — before you plant.

Sipho looked at the surface. He could see the crust now that it had been named. *Is it always there after a dry year?*

Depends on the year. This section more than the south section — different composition underneath. The south section absorbs better even in dry years. Thabo pressed the north section again, then stood and walked to the south and pressed that. The difference was subtle. Feel the difference?

Sipho pressed both. He could feel it: the north section had a slight resistance at the surface that released into softness below, the south section had consistent give from the surface down.

What do I do about the crust?

You open the drip heads on the lowest setting and run them for three or four hours each day for two days before you plant. Low pressure, slow. The crust absorbs rather than running off. Then it's soft and you can plant.

Is this in the oracle's information?

Thabo considered. *General version, maybe. But the oracle doesn't know this section had a dry year. It doesn't know this crust is here this November. It knows about crust. It doesn't know about this crust.*

They stood in the north section for a few more minutes. Thabo showed him two other things: where a rock formation ran close to the surface, detectable by the way the soil resisted pressing at a certain depth, and where a previous farmer's root damage had created an irregular drainage path that needed to be accounted for when placing beds. Both pieces of information were invisible to Sipho and visible to Thabo

through thirty years of attention to this specific ground.

The oracle had the type. Thabo had the instance. These were different kinds of knowing.

What the morning gave him: not a lesson about the oracle's limits, which he had already known in the abstract. A specific demonstration, in specific soil, of what the instance looked like. The oracle could tell him about Karoo soil drainage. Thabo could tell him about this soil, right now, in this November after this dry year. The gap between those two knowledges was the gap between a map of a territory and a walk through it.

He had designed maps for twenty years. He had built interfaces that made it easy to access the map. He was now learning to walk.

He planted the north bed a week later. He broke the crust first, as Thabo had described. The bed responded as Thabo had said it would. It responded specifically, because the specific knowledge had been applied to the specific ground.



Chapter Eleven: The Ideologue Arrives

Year 14, Northern Cape

Her name was Roos van der Berg and she was twenty-nine and she arrived in January having read everything the Compact had ever published — the constitution, the annual reports, the three essays Sipho had written for a philosophy journal, a long interview with Astrid that had appeared in a

Dutch magazine about intentional communities.

She had worked in oracle interface design in Amsterdam for five years. Not the founding oracle gods — the downstream deployments, the consumer products built from their foundations. She had been good at her work. She had left because of a product she had helped design that was built to be more emotionally engaging than users understood, that generated attachment through interaction rhythms calibrated for the purpose. The disagreement about this product was real. So was the exhaustion, and the end of a five-year relationship, and the specific disorientation of no longer knowing what your work was for.

Sipho did not know any of this in January because she had not told him. What she told him was that she had been in product design and had left. He heard: someone who had been in the oracle age's industrial infrastructure and had gotten out. This was true. The fuller truth — that she had been inside the problem the Compact's founding documents described, that she had helped design the specific quality of frictionlessness they were resisting, that coming here was not abstract philosophy but a specific reckoning — this did not come out until March, in a conversation with Astrid that Sipho was not part of.

She understood something none of the other founding members understood from the inside: that the frictionlessness was not incidental to oracle interface design but its explicit goal. That the aim of her five years of work had been to make the oracle access feel like no decision was being made. She knew what this looked like from inside the design process. She knew what it required. She had helped build it.

What she had not figured out how to do with this knowledge: offer it as experience rather than as citation. She had arrived at the Compact with her knowledge packaged as philosophy rather than as testimony, and the packaging had stayed in place through January and February, and by the time Astrid drew out the fuller story, the packaging had become the habit everyone knew her by.

She cited the constitution in the community meeting because the constitution was the solid ground she had found after two years of having none. This was not pedantry. It was holding on. The community did not know the difference because she had not told them, and she had not told them because telling them would require saying: *I built the thing this document describes as the problem. I was good at it. I left when it became too clearly what it was. And I am here because this document told me there was somewhere to be other than inside that.*

She was not wrong about the constitution. She was not wrong about the importance of the intention behind the practice. The problem Sipho noticed — ideology over practice, the monitoring displacing the being — was real, and it was also a symptom of something she had not yet been able to say to anyone at the Compact.

By June he could see a change. Not a conversion — her orientation toward the ideology did not disappear. But a ground had been added to it, a quality of knowledge that came from having touched the specific things rather than having thought about them. Her conversation in community meetings changed slightly.: she still cited the constitution, but she cited it less often, and when she did the citation sat differently, alongside practice rather than above it.

She was never going to be Thabo. She was also no longer the friction she had been in January. She stayed. She became, over the following years, a reasonable community member who occasionally drove Sipho to distraction by prioritising the articulation of principles over the doing of work, and who also occasionally said something that clarified a community discussion in a way that someone without her ideological fluency could not have managed.

Jakob told Sipho, once, privately: *She's what you'd be if you'd come here with the philosophy and not the engineering.*

Sipho thought about this for a long time.



Chapter Twelve: The Interview

Year 15, Northern Cape

The Mosaic Archive's researcher was a woman named Sadia who arrived in October with a recorder and a notebook and the careful manner of someone who understood that they were a guest in something they did not fully understand from outside.

She spent three days at the Compact. She talked to most of the community members. She asked to see the physical archive — the work logs, the constitution, the failure reports Sipho had written after the irrigation system's first two breakdowns, the seed records. She photographed them with care.

On the second afternoon she sat with Sipho under the shade of the *camelthorn* acacia that had been growing in the

yard since before the Compact and that they had built the outdoor table around rather than cutting down.

She asked:

What do you think you're doing here?

He had been asked this many times, in various registers, and had different answers for different contexts. He tried to give the honest one.

We're trying to practise a relationship to difficulty rather than achieve purity, he said. Which is something I wrote in the founding document and which I've said many times and which I believe is true and which I also notice I say smoothly.

She smiled. *What does it mean?*

It means we're not trying to live without the oracle age. We know we can't. The oracle archive holds our founding document. We used an oracle system to arrange the land lease. Our medical care uses oracle diagnostic tools. He looked at the camelthorn. The São Paulo Accord passed this year, he said. The governance frameworks people have been arguing about for a decade. Real accountability language, better than what came before. I heard it on the radio out here. I was glad. He paused. And then I came back out and tried to fix a water line that had failed again, and both things were true at the same time.

Sadia wrote something in her notebook.

What we're trying to practise is a different quality of work. One where the connection between effort and outcome is visible. Where failure is informative rather than abstracted. Where the knowledge we develop is attached to specific ground rather than generalised across all ground.

Is it working?

I don't know how you'd measure that. He thought about this. Some things are true that I couldn't have known otherwise. About water, about soil, about the specific way this particular piece of land behaves. I couldn't have queried my way into those things. I had to be here, for years, with the specific ground. He paused. Whether that's worth what it costs is a question I can answer for myself and not for anyone else.

She asked: *Is there irony in the oracle archive holding your founding document?*

Yes, he said. Everything is ironic. We continued anyway.

She wrote this down. He watched her write it and had the thought that the line was going to be somewhere in the record, stored, processed by an oracle system, part of the word-flood that shaped whatever came after the between-time. The Compact's founding statement, the irrigation failure reports, his conversation with Sadia on this afternoon: all of it was going somewhere. All of it was being held.

He was not certain what he thought about this. He was certain that it was true and that continuing was the correct response, regardless.

She stayed for the third day and interviewed Thabo, whose property she walked to with Nomsa, and who talked to her for an hour about the land and its history and what it had produced across three generations of his family. He did not talk about the oracle age at all. She reported this to Sipho on the way back, with the expression of someone who had received exactly what they needed without having known in

advance that they needed it.

*He didn't mention us at all, she said. He talked
about the land.*

Yes, Siphosaid. That's right.



Chapter Thirteen: The Road

Year 17, Northern Cape

He took three days to pack.

Not because he had much to pack — his room at the Compact contained what it had always contained: a bed, a desk, the notebook collection that had grown to eleven volumes, a small shelf of books he had acquired over the decade. The packing was measured because leaving a place you have lived in for ten years deserved measurement, even if you were ready to go and even if going was the right thing. You owed the place the deliberateness of noticing it while you still had it.

He packed by going slowly.

He had been at the Compact from fifteen to twenty-five. He had arrived not having chosen it and he was leaving having chosen it — which was not the same as having chosen it originally, but was its own choice, made in Year 12 when he could have left and didn't, and in Year 14 when the opportunity to go to Roos's city with her briefly existed and he had looked at it carefully and decided against, and in Year 16 when his father had visited from Singapore and asked again

and he had said: *not yet*.

He was going now because he was twenty-five and the decade had done what it had done and it was finished. Not because the Compact had failed or because he was angry. He was not angry. He had spent more years not angry than the years he had spent angry, which was a ratio he had not predicted at fifteen.

On the first day of packing he sorted the notebooks. He kept six of them and left five for the Compact's physical archive, which was where they belonged — they were as much the Compact's record as they were his, and the parts that were his he kept and the parts that were the Compact's he left.

On the second day he walked the land. He walked the beds — the irrigation system in its fourth design now, revised once more after Thabo had shown him something about the south section's subsurface rock. He walked the north section where he had broken the crust. He walked the boundary fence where he had first met Thabo. He walked the hill that rose behind the property, which he had climbed perhaps three hundred times, in all seasons, in all the weathers the Karoo produced, which was more weather than people who hadn't lived in the Karoo understood.

On the third day he said goodbye.

Thabo was at his fence in the morning, as he sometimes was. He had known Jakob was leaving — Sipho had mentioned it, or it had moved through the neighborhood in the way news moved in the Northern Cape. He shook Jakob's hand with the full attention of someone who gave their attention deliberately, and then he went inside and came back with a cloth package.

For the road, he said.

It was dried meat — *biltong* — wrapped in the way it was wrapped when it was meant to last several days. It was practical and it was something more than practical, and Jakob knew it and Thabo knew it and neither of them said what it was more than, because it was not the kind of thing you named.

Thank you, Jakob said. For everything.

Thabo nodded. He looked at Jakob with the expression he had for things that were real and required acknowledgment rather than elaboration.

Come back sometime, he said. If you need to see something. He meant the land. He meant: if you need to see what you know, from the ground that taught you.

Jakob found Astrid in the kitchen. This was where she was when she was not in the field, where she had always been when he needed to find her in the ten years of being here with her. The kitchen was warm, the smell of the coffee she always made in the morning, the light through the east window doing the Karoo morning thing.

He had thought about what he wanted to say and had not been able to find it in any version that was both honest and containable in a conversation. He was leaving. She had brought him here at fifteen without adequately asking. Both of these things were true. Between them was ten years of a thing that was not what either of them had intended and was what it was.

I'm going, he said.

She set down the coffee she was holding. *I know.*

I'm glad I was here, he said. That's the honest version. Not glad the way you wanted me to be glad, early on. Glad in the version where it's

complicated and true.

She looked at him. Her expression was its own specific complicated and true.

That's enough, she said.

I'm not saying it for you. He meant: the gladness was his, located in him, not a gift to her. She understood.

They stood in the kitchen and neither of them said the rest of it, because the rest of it was large and the morning was almost finished and the road was waiting, and some things were better carried than named.

He shouldered his bag. He walked to the gate. The Karoo was doing its late-September morning, the first warmth of spring just arriving in the air, the *camelthorn* putting out its new leaves, the land doing the slow coming-forward that the Karoo did in spring.

He walked to the road.

There was a girl from Scotland who had been here for the last six weeks, working in the beds — he had met her briefly, talked with her a few times in the evenings. She was seventeen and quiet in the specific way of someone who was somewhere new and taking it in rather than asserting themselves into it. He had thought, without knowing her well: she's here for the same reason I came, which is that someone brought her here as an answer to something. He hoped she found the different answer she was looking for.

He turned left on the road toward town. Behind him, the Compact receded. The sky was enormous as it always was, the flatness of the plateau putting everything under it in its proper size.

He had something he couldn't name. He had known, since the morning of the diagnosis in Year 11, that naming was not

the same as having, and that some things were worth having
before they were named.

He walked.



End of Thread Three.



N. Van Seters & Claude.ai

MOSAIC ARCHIVE — FRAGMENT SIX

Appearing between Thread Three and Thread Five

MOSAIC ARCHIVE

ORACLE CROSS-REFERENCE ANALYSIS Reference:

auto-generated, Year 25 Scope: Full collection cross-reference, thematic clustering

Note generated by oracle processing system:

In reviewing the full Mosaic Archive collection as of Year 25, the following thematic cluster has been identified:

Materials: Karoo Compact collection (MA-KC, Years 6–17) and the Haddad Network for Integrated Learning collection (MA-HN, Years 5–18).

*Connection identified:** Both collections document communities that attempted to preserve or develop specific cognitive practices — specifically, practices of extended engagement with problems in the absence of immediately available resolution — through structured daily life. The Karoo Compact used physical labour and intentional community; the Haddad Network used pedagogical method. Neither community appears to have been aware of the other. Both communities produced longitudinal documentation of outcomes, which the Archive holds.*

Cross-reference value: The Karoo Compact's founder (S. Dlamini) has noted in interview that the experience of working through a problem *from the inside of the problem rather than from outside it with better tools* produced a kind of knowledge not available through oracle consultation. The Haddad Network's graduate longitudinal study (held in MA-HN-0077) documents a thirty-seven percent advantage in ambiguity tolerance in network graduates. These findings are not identical, but they are describing something in

proximity to each other.

*Conclusion:** Thematic connection possible. No direct relationship confirmed. Archive may wish to consider whether a joint index entry is warranted.*

Human archivist note (P. Nair):

The oracle has found a connection we did not program it to look for. The connection is real. Whether it means what the oracle's framing implies, I am less certain about. Adding to the consideration list for next year's classification review.

*"We teach students to be wrong well. This is not
the same as teaching them to be wrong."*

— Dalila Haddad, founder's address, Beirut campus, Year 5



Chapter One: Before the Address

Year 5, Beirut

The coffee had gone lukewarm while she wasn't paying attention. She picked up the cup and set it down again without drinking.

The address was in an hour.

The room was a standard hotel room — the kind Lebanese hotels of this calibre produced: marble bathroom, window that looked across rooftops toward the sea, a small desk at which she had been sitting for twenty minutes without writing anything. Her notes for the address were in her bag, which was on the desk, which she had not opened. She knew the address. She had been composing it for two years.

She was thinking about a student named Karim.

He had come to her office at the university in the autumn of Year 3, two and a half years ago, when she had still been teaching critical thinking seminars in the second year of the undergraduate program. The seminar had covered — she had designed it to cover — the problem of ambiguity in moral reasoning: questions that were genuinely open, that did not have correct answers, that required the student to develop a position through sustained engagement with the question

rather than through retrieval of an existing answer.

She had assigned, at the end of the term, a final essay on a dilemma she had used in teaching for five years. The dilemma was structurally ambiguous: it had been designed to resist resolution, to force the student to argue from their own developed position without the support of an external authority.

Karim had come to her office hours three days after the essay was returned. He had received a high grade, which the note on his essay explained: his argument was coherent, his engagement with the ambiguity genuine, his position carefully arrived at.

He stood in her doorway with the expression of someone who had reviewed a bill they did not understand.

I wanted to ask about the grade, he said.

It's accurate, she said. You did well.

But I didn't know the right answer.

There isn't one.

He came in and sat down. He was not stupid — this was the thing she had thought about many times in the years since. He was not lazy, not indifferent, not unwilling. He was a genuinely capable student who had, at twenty years old, encountered for perhaps the first time in his education a question that did not have an available answer, and his response to this encounter had been the one she had been watching more and more students produce: not confusion, not frustration in the working-through sense, but a structural problem with the category. *There's no right answer* meant, to him, that the assessment was broken. You could not do well on something that did not have a correct state.

How do I know if I did well? he said.

*Your argument is strong. You show your
reasoning. You engage with the
counter-arguments rather than ignoring them.*

But how do I know if I'm right?

She had looked at him. She had tried to explain. She had explained, carefully, the difference between a question that had a right answer and a question that required a position, and the specific educational value of the latter, and he had listened with the patient attentiveness of a student who was listening to something that did not match the underlying cognitive infrastructure it was being asked to install itself into.

He left, she thought, unconvinced that she wasn't hiding the answer from him.

She had driven home that evening with something she could not yet name sitting in the back of her mind. Not about Karim specifically — about the infrastructure. About what twenty years of oracle-assisted education had produced in a generation of learners, not in the sense of damage or loss, but in the sense of a particular assumption that had been installed so early and so consistently that it operated as the ground rather than as a proposition. The assumption: questions have answers. Difficulty is temporary. The not-knowing is a condition that resolves, always, toward retrieval.

She had spent a year writing about this and another year designing around it before she had understood that writing about it was insufficient and that the design required a school.

The address she was about to give was the public beginning of the school.

She stood up from the desk and went to the window. The Beirut morning was doing what the Beirut morning did in March: sharp light off the sea, the city conducting itself at the

specific pace of a city that had survived many things and knew how to pace itself accordingly. She had lived here her whole life except for the years of graduate study in Paris and the one year in Amman, and the city's specific morning quality was as familiar to her as her own handwriting.

She thought about what she was about to say, which she knew, and what she was about to commit to, which was larger than the saying.

She had read something once about language — not from linguistics but from philosophy, a formulation she had been carrying without a source for two years now, something about how a language doesn't stay still while you use it; it thinks with you. She thought about this in the context of her school: not just a method, but a cognitive environment, an architecture that would shape the way thinking happened inside it. Not a tool students would pick up and put down. A way of working that, practiced over years, changed what the working felt like from inside.

Whether this was worth what it would cost she could not yet say. She was going to build it and find out.

She picked up her bag. She put on her coat. The morning was outside the window, waiting.

She left the room.



Chapter Two: Inside the Classroom

Year 7, Beirut

The question Hana Al-Rashid posed to the class at nine thirty was: why did the Ottoman authorities make the specific administrative decisions they did in the final decades of the empire, given what we know about the situation?

She asked this and then she stood at the front of the room and did not speak.

The room had eight students, ages fourteen and fifteen, seated at tables in two clusters of four. They had been at the school for varying lengths of time — the longest-tenured student had been here for three years, the newest for four months. The method was consistent across their time here, which meant the longer-tenured students had more practice with what was about to happen, but even the longest-tenured student did not make it look easy.

What was about to happen: the teacher had posed a question and was not going to answer it. The students knew this. They had been here long enough to know the format. They had not, in Hana's observation, become comfortable with the format — they had become practiced at the discomfort, which was different. Practiced at the discomfort meant you could enter it without catastrophising. It did not mean the discomfort went away.

The discomfort: the question was open, historical, genuinely uncertain even among experts. The students had been given primary sources and secondary analysis the week before. They had the material. What they did not have was the oracle, which on any other device in any other school context would have provided, in thirty seconds, a coherent interpretive narrative that Hana knew well and that was neither wrong nor sufficient. The narrative would have closed the question before it opened.

At the network schools, the question stayed open. The students had the material and the question and each other. They had twenty minutes, which was how Hana ran the opening of these sessions. Twenty minutes before she would say anything at all.

The first eight minutes: silence, the quality of which was familiar to her now. Students looking at their notes. One student, a girl named Lara, making marks in the margin of her reading. Another student, a boy whose name was Samir and who had been at the school for eight months, staring at the table with the expression of someone who was waiting for something to happen. Nothing was going to happen to Samir from outside. Hana watched him and did not move.

At the nine-minute mark, a student named Yasmin said:
Can we talk about what we read?

Yes, Hana said.

The administrative decisions don't seem like they were all from the same logic, Yasmin said. Some of them look economic. Some of them look like they were about — authority? Legitimacy? They're not the same problem.

This was a genuinely good observation. Hana did not say it was a genuinely good observation. She said: *Say more.*

Yasmin said more. Another student pushed back. A third said something about the sources being contradictory in a specific way. The conversation was uneven — Lara had not spoken, Samir had not spoken, two others were present but peripheral.

At the thirteen-minute mark, a student named Omar, who was one of the newer arrivals and who Hana had been watching specifically for signs of either engagement or

shutdown, did something she had been waiting for.

He asked a smaller question.

Not the large question — not *why did they do it* — but something underneath it: *what were the constraints they were actually operating under in that specific year?* The question was answerable from the primary sources. It was not the whole question. It was a component.

He did not direct the question at Hana. He directed it at Yasmin, whose observation had created the space for it. Yasmin began to answer from the reading.

Hana stood at the front of the room and watched Omar work.

He was not doing anything dramatic. He was doing something specific: building downward instead of upward, finding the smaller question under the larger question because the larger question was too open to enter directly, and the smaller question was enterable, and the entering of the smaller question changed the larger question's shape. He had found a way in. Not because Hana had showed him the way. Because he had stopped waiting for the way to be shown.

This was, in Hana's experience, the pivot. Not a revelation — one morning, one student, one smaller question. Omar would have other mornings. He would have mornings when the method produced nothing, when the twenty minutes passed in unproductive struggle, when he went home having failed to find a way in and returned the next day carrying that failure. The method did not guarantee arrival. It only made arrival, when it came, the student's own.

She had explained this to her sister once, over dinner, trying to describe the job. Her sister had said: *So you just refuse to tell them.* She had said: *I refuse to tell them before*

they've had to find out themselves what they're actually asking. Her sister had said: *What's the difference?* She had said: *The difference is everything.* Her sister had not been convinced.

At the twenty-minute mark, Hana spoke. Not the answer — the next question, which was one level up from where the class had arrived, designed to take what they had found and ask them to apply it.

Omar wrote something in his notebook.

The morning continued.



Chapter Three: Montevideo

Year 9, Uruguay

The walls of the main classroom were being painted on a Thursday, which meant Tomás spent Thursday in the room that was going to be the seminar space, measuring for shelving. The building was a former warehouse in the Palermo neighborhood that the foundation had found through a colleague of Dalila's who had a contact in the city's cultural infrastructure. It was large and drafty in winter and would require good heating, and the floors needed work, and the northern facade let in more light than was useful for a classroom, all of which were problems he was working through one by one.

He had been in Montevideo for three months.

The Montevideo campus would be the third. Beirut was the founding campus, now in its fourth year; Glasgow had opened in Year 7 and was running steadily, the Scottish education system providing an interesting friction with the method's underlying assumptions. Montevideo was his to build. Dalila had asked him because he had been part of the network since Year 5 and because she trusted his understanding of what the method required from a building.

What the method required from a building: rooms arranged for collaboration rather than lecture, no position in the room that was architecturally elevated, good acoustic separation between classroom spaces, a library of physical books rather than a digital access terminal. The library detail was the one that consistently surprised people. Not because physical books were superior to digital access — Tomás had explained many times that this was not the argument — but because the library created a physical relationship between the student and the material, a navigability that required the student to develop their own organisational relationship to knowledge rather than the oracle's organisational relationship. The difference was slight and it accumulated.

He measured the north wall for shelving and wrote down the numbers.

He was thinking about his daughter Sofia, who was seven and who went to the local school in the Punta Carretas neighborhood where they lived. The school was a good school by any objective measure: attentive teachers, appropriate resources, oracle access integrated throughout in the evidence-based ways that the most serious research on oracle-assisted learning recommended. Sofia was doing well. She was reading above her level, was curious and engaged,

brought home things she had learned with the genuine enthusiasm of a child who was not yet performing enthusiasm for adult approval.

He had not enrolled her in the network school.

This was not a decision he had made with great deliberation. It was a decision he had arrived at through the absence of a contrary decision: he had not enrolled her because the network school's nearest campus was in Buenos Aires, an hour by plane or six hours by bus, and she was seven and the commute was not possible. He had not enrolled her when the Montevideo campus opened because she was eight by then and had been at her school for two years and changing her mid-stream required a case for disruption that he had not made.

He had not made the case because he was not certain the case was clearly strong enough to make. This was not the same as saying the case was clearly not strong enough. He had been thinking about the difference between these two positions for a year and had not resolved it.

Sofia came home from school on Thursdays with a project she was working on with her oracle. This week it was about the water cycle. She had asked her oracle to help her make an animated presentation of the water cycle, and the oracle had helped her make an animated presentation, and the presentation was good — accurate, clear, well-structured. She was proud of it.

He had looked at it with her and said: *What part of it do you understand now that you didn't understand before?* She had looked at him in the way children looked at adults who asked unexpected questions. Then she had thought about it and said: *I understand it goes around.* He had said: *Do you*

understand why it goes around? She had said: *The sun heats it up.* He had said: *And then?* She had thought. She hadn't been certain. She had said: *I could ask.* He had said: *Could you work it out instead?*

She had worked it out, with his help, in twenty minutes. At the end she had understood the cycle in the way that understanding felt different from reproduction, and she had been satisfied with the understanding in a way she hadn't been satisfied with the presentation.

He had not said: *this is the school's method.* He had said: *good work.* She had gone back to her room.

He finished the shelving measurements and moved to the south wall.

The Montevideo campus would open in the spring and would take its first students and he would watch the method work the way he had watched it work in Beirut, the slow and difficult way, the way that produced what it produced rather than what it produced quickly. He believed in the method. He had believed in it since the first time he had watched it work on a student in Beirut, a young man from Syria who had arrived frustrated and left, two years later, with a quality of intellectual patience he had not come to the school with.

He believed in the method for his students.

He looked at the south wall and wrote down its measurements and moved on.



Chapter Four: Nina's Chapter

Year 10, Beirut

The problem had been on the board since Tuesday and today was Thursday and Nina Azouri was still not through it.

This was not unusual. She was aware it was not unusual — she had been here since she was thirteen and had spent six years learning to be in problems for days at a time without reading the duration as evidence of her own failure. The problem did not resolve when you needed it to. The problem resolved when you had found the thing that opened it, which could take an afternoon or a week, and the measure of your work was not the speed of the resolution but the quality of the path.

The problem was a structural analysis question: given a specific set of material constraints and loading conditions, design the most efficient load-bearing configuration for a given space. It was a mathematics-and-physics problem, assigned in the context of their integration seminar — the seminar that connected the year's learning across disciplines. She was planning to study architecture. The problem was giving her the specific pleasure of a problem that was in the territory she was going toward.

She was nineteen and this was her last year.

The path she had been on for the past two days: she had started by working with the standard approaches from the structural mechanics unit. These had produced several feasible configurations, all of them adequate. She had then found, in reviewing the constraints, that one of the loading conditions was unusual — a dynamic load variation that the standard approaches handled conservatively, which meant they over-engineered for the unusual condition. She had been

working since Wednesday on whether there was a configuration that handled the unusual condition more precisely, without over-engineering.

She had not found it yet.

She was at the table in the network's library, her notes spread around her in the particular pattern of someone who had been working on the same problem for two days — the pages of earlier approaches stacked on the left, the active work on the right, a cup of tea she had stopped noticing at the edge of everything. The library was quiet at this hour, the late afternoon doing its late-afternoon thing with the light through the west window.

She returned to the unusual loading condition for the fourth time.

This was the thing she had learned to do: return. Not from stubbornness — because each time she returned the problem looked slightly different, because she was different in relation to it. The second time she had returned to the unusual loading condition she had noticed something she hadn't noticed the first time: a specific interaction between the dynamic load variation and one of the fixed constraints that she had been treating as independent. The third time she had worked through the interaction and found it was more complex than it appeared.

This time she was looking for what the complexity pointed at. The path went through the interaction and she didn't yet know where it came out.

She worked.

She was aware, in the way that the school had taught her to be aware without being distracted by the awareness, that what she was doing was unusual. She had friends who had not

come to the network school, who had been educated in the standard Lebanese system with oracle access throughout. She had sat with them in cafés and watched them work on their own assignments — watched them use the Companion to think through problems the way she thought through them alone, watched the Companion help them find the formulation or the frame or the next step, and what she had seen was different from this — faster, more efficient, producing adequate results by routes she could follow but wouldn't have chosen. They arrived at answers. She arrived at understandings.

She was not certain whether these were the same thing in different qualities or different things entirely. She had no comparison available from inside her own experience.

She only knew what she had: the path going through the complexity, the unusual loading condition waiting for its opening, two days of approach and return and approach again, and the specific quality of working on something until you had it, which was different from being given it, and which was the only kind of having she knew.

At five-thirty she found the thing she had been working toward.

It was not dramatic. A relationship between two variables she had been treating separately that were not, in this specific configuration, separate. When she held them together the configuration resolved: a form that handled the unusual loading condition with precision rather than conservatism, that was not the standard approach because the standard approach had not noticed the relationship.

She sat with it for a few minutes, making sure the solution held. It held.

She wrote it up. She would show it to her teacher tomorrow.

She walked home through the Beirut evening, which was the evening she had grown up in, which did not require navigation because it was what she moved through the way she moved through the problem: returning, familiar, finding something slightly different each time.

She did not know this was unusual. She had nothing to compare it to.

She walked home.



Chapter Five: Both Columns

Year 12, Beirut

The study had been running for eight years and covered seven hundred and eleven network graduates across all three campuses. She read it on a Sunday morning in her office, beginning after breakfast and finishing before lunch, with two interruptions she declined and one she took.

The data was clear in the ways data was clear when a study was well-designed and the researchers were honest.

Left column: network graduates showed statistically significant advantages over comparably educated, oracle-assisted peers on novel problem-solving benchmarks (twenty-three percent above peer cohort), on metacognitive assessment (the ability to accurately predict one's own performance and identify one's own knowledge gaps —

thirty-one percent above), and on what the study called *ambiguity tolerance* — the ability to maintain productive engagement with a problem under uncertainty without premature closure — where the advantage was thirty-seven percent.

These advantages were real. They were not small. She had suspected the numbers would be in this range from the qualitative feedback she had been collecting since Year 6, but the quantification gave them a weight that qualitative data did not carry in the same way.

Right column: network graduates showed lower performance on formal academic credentialing at five years (fourteen percent below peer cohort), lower reported professional satisfaction at five years (eleven percent below), and lower income at both three and five years (seventeen and twenty-two percent below respectively). These differences were smaller than the advantages but more visible — they showed up in the lives of the graduates in ways that the left column advantages, while real, often did not.

She read both columns with the same quality of attention. She was aware that she could read the right column as evidence against the method and could read the left column as evidence for it, and that the honest reading required holding both simultaneously without the holding collapsing into a verdict.

What she believed, reading the data:

The right column did not refute the left column. The graduates who were underperforming economically were not underperforming because the method had produced the wrong things. They were underperforming because the world they were working in valued speed and credentials and the delivery

of answers, and the method had trained them to value precision and process and the interrogation of questions. The training was real. The world's values were also real. The collision was not evidence that the training was wrong.

It was evidence that the world's values and the method's values were not aligned, which she had known at Year 5 and had chosen to build the school anyway.

What she did not know — and this was the honest thing to sit with — was whether the misalignment would persist, whether it was a condition of the current moment that would change as the between-time continued, or whether she was building a school whose graduates would pay a consistent economic cost for their education for the foreseeable future.

The thirty-seven percent ambiguity tolerance advantage. She looked at this number for a long time.

In Year 3, she had read a lecture transcript by a Breton linguist she did not know — something about language and cognition, the argument that a language was not a tool you used but a structure that shaped how you thought. She had written the argument into her notes and had carried it since, because it described what she was trying to do at one level of abstraction higher: not teaching a skill but building a cognitive environment, a way of working that changed the texture of thought from inside.

The thirty-seven percent was what the cognitive environment had produced. It was real. It was in the data.

She closed the report.

She went back to work.



Chapter Six: Better Lessons

Year 13, Montevideo

Sofia was asleep by nine and Tomás was at the kitchen table with his laptop and his coffee and the lesson he was preparing for the following week's advanced seminar: a three-session sequence on the epistemology of historical judgment, designed for students in their third year at the campus.

The seminar was one he had been running for four years in various forms. He knew its weaknesses. The second session in particular had a structural problem he had been trying to fix: a transition between two concepts — the distinction between evidence and interpretation, and the question of what justified a specific interpretation over others — that students consistently found difficult to navigate. Not in the productive way. In the way that suggested a gap in the question sequence rather than a legitimate difficulty with the concept itself.

He opened the oracle.

He had been doing this for three months, at home, for lesson planning. Not in the classroom — never in the classroom, the method held in the classroom absolutely. But in this specific use, preparing to teach, he had found the oracle's analysis genuinely useful in ways that his own reflection, however thorough, was not.

He described the session's question sequence to the oracle: the opening question, the intermediate steps, the destination he was trying to reach. He described the point where students consistently struggled.

The oracle's analysis took several minutes to generate. It identified two gaps: the first in the transition between the concept of evidence and the concept of interpretation, where

he had been assuming students had a working definition of *evidence* that the session had not yet established; the second in the justification question, where the phrasing he used implied a binary (this interpretation or that one) when the epistemological landscape was actually a gradient.

He worked through both gaps. The first was easily addressed: a preliminary question that established the working definition before the transition. The second was more interesting — the phrasing needed to be rebuilt from the ground up, which required him to think carefully about what he was actually asking students to engage with.

He spent two hours on the phrasing. At the end he had something better than he'd had before — not just better-phrased, but more honest about the actual structure of the problem.

He ran the session the following week. The transition went cleanly. The justification question produced the kind of productive uncertainty he'd been trying to create — students genuinely uncertain rather than confused by a false binary. Two students arrived at formulations he had not anticipated and that were good.

He marked the session in his notes as the best version of this seminar he'd run.

He had not told Dalila.

What the not-telling felt like: not quite guilt, which would require believing he'd done something wrong. More like the specific texture of holding a private fact alongside a public identity. He taught the method. He believed in the method for students. He was using a different method for his own preparation, and the different method was producing better lessons, and he had not disclosed this because the disclosure

would require a conversation he wasn't ready to have.

The conversation it would require: whether using the oracle for lesson preparation contradicted the method's underlying logic, or whether it was a legitimate application of the right tool for a task the method was not designed to address. He could argue both positions. He could not yet argue one of them without suppressing the other.

He closed the laptop.

Through the kitchen window, the Montevideo night. Sofia asleep. The apartment quiet in the specific way of a city at eleven that wasn't fully asleep but had settled into its night-time register.

He would tell Dalila. Not tonight. When he had the conversation ready.

He went to bed.

Chapter Seven: The One Who Failed

Year 14, Beirut

She came without an appointment on a Tuesday morning and Dalila's assistant almost turned her away before Dalila heard the name from the inner office and said: *Let her in.*

Camille Feghali was thirty-one. She had graduated from the Beirut campus seven years ago, in the second cohort. She looked well in the way people looked well when they were managing a life that was heavier than it appeared from the outside — carefully put together, attentive, the slight quality of someone operating at a level of effort they had made invisible through practice.

She sat across from Dalila at the small table by the window.

I wanted to tell you something in person, she said.

*I thought you should know it, and email was
wrong for it.*

All right.

*I work in policy research. I have since I
graduated. She paused, choosing the description.*

*Brussels mostly, some of it in Geneva. I cover
climate policy and food security. Another pause. I
don't make much money. My colleagues who went
through standard education programmes are
largely ahead of me by most of the metrics that
matter in that world.*

*I know some of this from the longitudinal study, Dalila
said.*

*I know you do. Camille looked at her hands. I'm
not here to tell you the study is wrong. I'm here
because the study can't say the thing I want to say
to you.*

Dalila waited.

*The committee I work on had a meeting in
November. A briefing on a modelling project —
food security projections for the next fifteen years
based on climate trajectory. She was precise in
the way of someone who dealt with precise things
for a living. The model was oracle-generated and
it was very good. The modelling team had done
excellent work. The projections were credible and
the committee members with their oracle-assisted
analysis had engaged with it carefully and
produced a response document that was
comprehensive and professionally sound.*

But?

There was a question the model had not been asked. Camille looked at her. Not a question the oracle had failed to answer. A question nobody had thought to ask it. And nobody in the room except me noticed the question was missing. She paused. It was the question that the whole analysis was really about, at a level underneath the framing. The question was: who decides what counts as a food security failure, and by what process, and who does that process exclude? She set her hands flat on the table. It took me four hours in a meeting to get the committee to understand why the question mattered. They were not resistant. They were not stupid. They simply had not been trained to look for the question underneath the question.

Did the analysis change?

The response document changed. Substantially. It now addresses the question that was missing. She was quiet for a moment. It will have consequences. The consequences are real, for real people, in the places the policy affects.

Dalila sat with this.

I want you to know that I can do things I could not do if you had taught me differently, Camille said. The specific thing I'm describing — finding the question underneath the question, and insisting on it in a room that has answered everything else to its own satisfaction — that is the thing the school gave me. I am certain of this. I use it regularly. It matters.

She stopped. Dalila waited.

I also want you to know that it has been very hard. She said this with the same precision she had used throughout. The career, the money, the professional standing. I am good at my work and I am not rewarded for the specific way in which I am good. The world rewards speed and confidence and the delivery of answers. I am slow and uncertain and I deliver questions. She looked at Dalila. I am not telling you this to make you feel bad about the school. I am telling you because you should know both things together, and I don't think most people who come back say both things.

Dalila was quiet for a moment.

Why are you telling me now? she said.

Because the November meeting happened and I went home and I thought: she should know this is real. The thing she built is real. Not because it made my life easier. Because it made a specific thing possible that would not have been possible otherwise. Camille looked at the window. And also because I have been carrying the cost of it for seven years and I think you should know the cost is real too.

I know both things, Dalila said.

I know you do. Camille stood. I wanted to say them to you anyway. In person. So they were said.

She left.

Dalila sat at the table for a long time after.

She had built the school because she had believed in a way of thinking as worth preserving. She had believed it would produce something, in the people who learned it, that could not be installed or retrieved. Camille had just told her it

had produced exactly that.

Camille had also just told her it had been very hard. The hardness was in the data and now it was in the room. She had read it as numbers. It had walked in and sat across from her and said it in its own voice.

Both things were in the room. She had not resolved them when Camille left and she did not resolve them now. She picked up her pen and went back to the work on her desk.



Chapter Eight: The Architecture Firm

Year 15, Beirut

The site survey had turned up an anomaly on the third floor of the building they were renovating — a section of floor where the structural engineer's drawings indicated a standard post-and-beam configuration, but where Nina's careful measurements showed a discrepancy that could not be accounted for by measurement error. The discrepancy was small: a beam slightly off-center from its indicated position, in a way that would be irrelevant for any standard renovation use case, but that happened to interact with the planned load increase in the new use case in a way that — she had been on it for two days — was not necessarily a problem, but was possibly a problem, and the distinction mattered.

She had been on it for two days because the tools available for analysing the configuration were not designed for this specific interaction. She had the standard structural

analysis software. She had access to oracle consultation on structural engineering problems. She had used both. The oracle had given her the standard approach, which treated the beam as adequately positioned and flagged the load increase as within acceptable limits.

She did not think the load increase was within acceptable limits for this specific configuration. She could not yet demonstrate why.

The problem was in front of her on her desk: the floor plan, the measurements, the structural analysis outputs, a sketch she had made on Tuesday of how she thought the load paths actually ran through this floor given the beam's actual position. The sketch was not right yet. She could see it was not right. The load paths were doing something she hadn't accounted for and she needed to find what.

She worked.

At three in the afternoon her colleague Ziad came to her desk to look at the project he was running, which was adjacent to hers. He glanced at her desk and said: *Still on the third floor thing?*

Still on it.

Oracle flagged it as within tolerance.

I know.

He looked at the sketch on her desk. He was good at his work — she respected his work. He used oracle analysis extensively and efficiently and produced thorough, reliable proposals. He said: *What are you finding?*

She showed him the sketch. She walked him through the load path reasoning. He listened carefully, which was also something she respected about him.

You might be right, he said. It's a subtle interaction. He looked at the sketch for a moment. But even if you are right, the margin of error on the tolerance calculation covers it. The oracle has that data.

The oracle is giving me general tolerance data for this beam type. I'm not sure the general tolerance applies to this configuration.

How long have you been on this?

Two days.

He looked at her. Not unkindly. *Nina. The project timeline has this phase closing Friday.*

I know.

He went to his desk.

She looked at the sketch.

At four-thirty she found it. The load path was doing something unusual at the junction with the perpendicular beam — the off-center position created a moment arm that the standard analysis had not accounted for because the standard analysis assumed the beam was positioned as indicated in the drawings. The moment arm was small. Under standard loads it was irrelevant. Under the planned load increase it produced a stress concentration that was not within the oracle's flagged tolerance. It was within the absolute tolerance range for the beam type. It was not, she was fairly certain, within the safe operating range for this specific junction in this specific condition.

She wrote it up. She sent it to the project lead with the structural analysis and her recommendation: a reinforcement element at the junction, which would add cost and delay.

The project lead reviewed it the following morning and sent it to the structural engineer, who reviewed it and confirmed her analysis and approved the reinforcement.

The delay was four days. The reinforcement was installed. She went home on the night she found it.

The Beirut evening was the Beirut evening — the September warmth still present at seven, the city doing its city thing. She walked from the office to the flat she shared with a friend from university, which was twenty minutes through the Gemmayzeh neighborhood, which she could have walked in her sleep and which she walked with attention because she had learned to walk with attention and could not fully stop.

She was twenty-four and she had been working in the firm for a year.

She was slower than Ziad and more expensive, in terms of the time she gave to problems. She found things Ziad did not find, and the finding sometimes mattered and sometimes was absorbed into the project's tolerances without consequence. The finding had mattered today. It had mattered in three other projects in the past year and been absorbed into tolerances in four others.

Whether the ratio was worth it she could not calculate. The firm kept her. She worked hard. She went home.



Chapter Nine: He Tells Her

Year 16, Beirut and Montevideo

The call was at eight in the morning Beirut time, which was four in the afternoon Montevideo time, the time he had asked her for.

He told her cleanly. He described when he had started, what he had used the oracle for, what the lessons had produced. He was specific: the gap-closing in the epistemology sequence, the improvements in question design, the session that had been the best he'd run. He said: *I'm not going to give you the argument that it was right. I'm telling you what happened.*

Dalila, on her screen, listened with the specific attention of someone who had been in a conversation they needed to be fully present for.

When he finished she was quiet for a moment.

I'm not angry, she said.

I know. You told me that look when I was explaining.

I was trying to decide what I actually thought. I'm still deciding. She looked at him across the screen. Tell me what you think it means.

I don't know what it means.

Give me your best version.

He thought about this carefully. *My best version is that the oracle is better than I am at identifying structural gaps in a lesson sequence. Not better at designing the lesson. Not better at knowing what the students need or what the method requires. But better at the specific task of finding where a logical sequence has a missing step.*

Why do you think that is?

Because identifying structural gaps is an analysis task. The oracle does analysis tasks well.

*Designing a lesson that produces productive
difficulty is a —*

He stopped.

A what?

*It's a judgment task, he said slowly. It requires
knowing what the students in a specific room
need, in a specific year, in the context of what
they already have and don't have. The oracle can
give me general analysis. I have to make the
judgment.*

*So you used the oracle for the part that didn't require
judgment, she said.*

Yes.

And what does that mean for the method?

He looked at her on the screen.

I don't know, he said.

*Neither do I. She set down the pen she had been
holding. That's the actual problem. The problem
is that I can't tell whether what you did proves the
oracle should be used for lesson preparation, or
whether it proves the oracle can help with parts of
lesson preparation but not others, or whether it
proves something about the boundary of the
method that the method itself hasn't needed to
define before because the question didn't arise
until now.*

And if you can't tell?

*Then we keep working without the answer. She
was quiet for a moment. I'm not going to tell you
to stop using it for lesson planning. I'm going to
ask you to document what it does specifically, in
the same way the method asks students to*

*document their own thinking process. And then
we need to look at the documentation and
understand what it means.*

That's the method, he said.

*Yes. Something shifted in her expression. I'm
aware of that.*

They stayed with this for a moment across the screen — twelve thousand kilometres of ocean between them, both of them in their respective mornings and afternoons, both of them holding the same unresolved question from their different angles.

Are we building something that uses the oracle or that doesn't? he said. Not as a challenge. A genuine question.

*We are building something that thinks carefully
about what it uses and what it doesn't and why,
she said. That's the only honest answer I have
right now.*

It's enough, he said.

*I know it's not enough, she said. It's what we
have.*

The call ended. He sat at his desk in the late Montevideo afternoon, the river visible from the window, the city doing its autumn thing.

He opened his laptop. He opened the documentation file she had asked for and wrote the first entry.



Chapter Ten: The Funder's Rationale

Year 16, Beirut

The email from the Long Education Project arrived in October.

She read it at her desk on a Thursday morning, between two faculty meetings. The foundation was real — she knew of it, had seen its work cited in research literature. It was funded by a group of technology philanthropists who had come to believe, in the latter years of the between-time, that the oracle age was approaching some form of transition and that the cognitive skills it had optimised for were not the skills that would be most valuable in whatever came after.

Their rationale occupied four paragraphs. She read them carefully, as she read everything carefully.

The first paragraph described the between-time's effect on human cognition: the documented atrophy, in oracle-assisted populations, of extended problem-engagement and independent judgment. The evidence cited was accurate — she knew the studies.

The second paragraph described the network's method. It described it correctly, as a discipline for preserving and strengthening the cognitive practices that oracle-assistance tended to replace. *Students who complete the Haddad curriculum demonstrate significantly higher performance on novel problem-solving and metacognitive assessment than oracle-educated peers*, the paragraph noted. The thirty-seven percent figure appeared. This was her data. It was being used accurately.

The third paragraph was the one she read twice. It made the instrumental claim: *As the between-time transitions toward its concluding phase, the cognitive capacities your*

programme cultivates will shift from a counter-cultural practice to a competitive advantage. We believe the Haddad Network is uniquely positioned to scale this work in preparation for post-oracle-age conditions. And then: We are offering this grant not as preservation funding but as investment in what we consider the educational model of the coming era.

She set down the page.

The funding amount was in the fourth paragraph. It was substantial. The fourth paragraph was the easiest to read.

She sat at her desk for a long time.

The third paragraph had called her network *uniquely positioned*. This was the phrase she kept returning to. Positioned: a word that implied a strategic placement, a readiness for conditions that would reward the positioning. She had not positioned herself. She had built something she believed in because she had watched Karim in her office in Year 3 and had understood that something specific was being lost and that the loss mattered.

The difference: *positioned* implied that the value was instrumental — that what the network produced was valuable because of what would eventually be demanded by changed conditions. She had never believed this. She had believed the thing itself was worth doing regardless of external demand. The distinction was not small. A surgeon who believed in healing was doing a different thing from a surgeon who believed in being positioned to benefit when healing became profitable. The acts were the same. The ground beneath the acts was not.

She could write a letter correcting the rationale. She could explain that the network's pedagogical philosophy was not a

strategic investment in predicted market conditions but a commitment to a form of human development that she considered valuable in itself, regardless of the economic environment in which its graduates operated. She could make this argument.

The argument would require the funder to ask whether she had evidence that the value held independently of economic reward. The longitudinal study's right column would come up. Her graduates' underperformance on salary and professional satisfaction at five years. The funder would say: *if the value is independent of economic conditions, why do your graduates struggle economically in current conditions?* She would say: *because current conditions reward something other than what we develop.* The funder would say: *exactly — which is why post-oracle conditions will reward it.* And she would have made no progress.

She could decline the funding and make the argument on principle. She knew, precisely, what this would cost: the Beirut campus's planned expansion, the two faculty positions Tomás had been waiting three years to hire, and the fourth campus she had been building toward in her mind since Year 9.

She opened a reply window.

She wrote: *Thank you for the Long Education Project's confidence in the Haddad Network's work.* She wrote three sentences acknowledging the rationale. She wrote a paragraph describing how the grant would be used. She wrote a closing sentence expressing alignment with the foundation's goals.

She read it back.

Every sentence was accurate. When she reached the end she was aware of something missing — not an omission she

could point to, but a gap between what the letter said and what she believed, legible to her if not to the funder. The rationale had not said something wrong. It had said something that was not the whole truth, and she had written back in the same register, and the register was not large enough to hold what she would need to say if she were going to say it. She did not know clearly enough what that was to say it.

She sent the email.

She sat at her desk for a while after. The October afternoon was doing what Beirut afternoons did: the light going sideways, the city settling into its early evening register, the sounds from the street below changing quality. She had lived in this city her whole life and she knew its sounds by time of day with the intimacy of someone who had not needed to pay attention for fifty years.

She would teach this semester's class herself. She had been meaning to for two years.

She took out her calendar and blocked the time.



Chapter Eleven: Mid-Lesson

Year 18, Beirut

The students did not know who she was.

This was the thing she had been careful about. She had asked the faculty not to introduce her as the founder, not to treat her guest teaching as an event. She was a visiting instructor for this one week. She was teaching the introductory epistemology seminar for the current first-years, who had been at the school for three months and were still finding their footing with the method.

They were fifteen. She was fifty-two. She had been building what this room was for thirteen years.

She posed the question at the start of the second session:

*How do you know when you understand
something, as opposed to when you can produce
the right answer?*

She wrote it on the board and stepped away from it.

The room: twelve students, the afternoon light coming through the east window at the particular angle it came through in October in Beirut, which she had been watching from various rooms in this city for fifty-two years. The students in their chairs with their notepads and their attention, which was the attention of people who had been at the school long enough to know the teacher wasn't going to explain the question but not long enough to have stopped waiting for her to explain it.

She let the waiting sit.

The room was uncomfortable. This was correct. The discomfort was the question working on the room.

At the three-minute mark, a girl at the back table said: *Is there a difference?*

*That's part of what we're here to find out, Dalila
said. What do you think?*

*I think sometimes you can do the right thing
without understanding why it's right.*

Give me an example.

The girl thought. *If I memorize a proof, I can reproduce the proof. I might not understand why the proof works.*

*All right. Someone else — is that a case of
producing the right answer without
understanding, or is it a case of not yet
understanding?*

Another student: *They're different things, aren't they? Not understanding yet suggests you could understand later. Not understanding in the first case — if she just memorized it — she might never understand.*

Does the output look different?

Silence. The productive silence — she recognized it, had been watching it in students for thirteen years.

Not from outside, the first girl said slowly.

But from inside?

Another silence. Longer.

A student who had not spoken yet — she had noticed him: slight, attentive, the quality of someone who was working very carefully before saying anything. His name was Tariq. She had read the class list but not their files; she wanted to see them without their history.

Tariq said: *Maybe you can tell from inside whether you understand something because of whether you can predict what would happen if you changed one of the conditions.*

The room went still in the way rooms went still when something had been said that everyone recognized, without being able to say immediately why.

Dalila looked at him.

She had spent thirteen years building a school around this question. She had faced the data in both columns. She had received Camille's accounting, cost and value together. She had signed a grant acceptance that described her work as preparation for a future she had not designed for. She had watched Tomás produce better lessons with oracle assistance and had not known what it meant. She had watched Nina find a structural failure in a building that an oracle had missed, and had not known exactly what that meant either.

She had not resolved the question of whether the school was worth what it cost. She had built it and continued to build it without the resolution, on the evidence that what it produced was real, which was not the same as knowing the exchange rate.

She had come back to the classroom after four years because she needed to be in a room where the question was open and the students were working toward it and the answer had not arrived yet.

A student had just said something that might be the beginning of the answer.

She opened her mouth.

She looked at Tariq, who was watching her with the particular attentiveness of a student who had said something and was waiting to find out whether it was the right direction.

She said: there's actually a more precise way to put that, which is —



End of Thread Five.



N. Van Seters & Claude.ai

MOSAIC ARCHIVE — FRAGMENT SEVEN

Appearing immediately before the Coda

MOSAIC ARCHIVE

ORACLE PROCESSING SYSTEM Metadata extract — audio file
MA-CL-0011 File: *walk, october* (22 min 14 sec) **Processing date:**
Year 22

*Classification: I do not know what to file this as. I am leaving it in the
primary record rather than assigning it a category.*

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

Coda: What the Archive Holds

Year 41, between-time concluding

Year 41, between-time concluding

Kwame had been at the Archive for three years when he found the Corrosion Log materials.

He had come to the Archive originally for something else — his research project was on the governance documentation of the between-time's middle years, the committee hearings and the treaty frameworks and the specific legal language in which institutions had tried to describe the oracle gods' accountability. The Archive held the governance materials in a large and well-organised collection, and he had been working through them for six months when a conversation with one of the archivists had sent him sideways into a different part of the holdings.

The archivist — Priya Nair, who was retiring at the end of the year and who had been at the Archive since its founding — had mentioned the Corrosion Log in the way of someone who had been thinking about something for a long time and had found an occasion to say it. *There's a collection*, she had said, *that I think you should look at before you leave. It's not governance. It's something else. I've never been able to*

classify it properly and I would like to know what you think.

He had looked at it. He had stayed.

The governance project was still there. He worked on it in the mornings. In the afternoons he worked through the rest of the Archive's holdings in the way you worked through something that had not been assigned and that kept pulling you back.

On a Tuesday in March, in the forty-first year of the between-time, he sat at his desk with the last batch of Corrosion Log materials he had not yet read carefully: the voice recording transcript and the letter addressed to the oracle.

He read the voice recording transcript first.

He had read other documents in this collection with the attentiveness that the collection seemed to require — closer than he read governance minutes, closer than he read most academic sources, the attentiveness of someone reading a thing that had been written without him in mind and was reaching him anyway. The voice recording transcript had a different quality from the letters and journals. The letters were composed. The journals were private but deliberate. The transcript was the correspondent talking, twenty-two minutes, about a walk they had taken.

He read it through once without stopping. Then he went back.

The correspondent described a field, a gate with a specific sound, a tree they had stood under. The light in a specific position. The thoughts they had had while standing there, which were not about the oracle age or the withdrawal but about a shelf that needed repairing. They had decided to repair it.

He sat with the transcript for a while.

He was not certain what he was sitting with. He was a researcher, trained in the reading of primary sources, and he knew the difference between primary sources that had analytic value for his work and primary sources that had a different kind of value. The governance minutes had analytic value. The Corrosion Log had something else — he had been trying to name it since he arrived in the Archive three years ago and had not yet found the name.

It was not sentiment. It was not identification — he was not a resister, had never considered the withdrawal, used oracle assistance for everything the oracle could help with and found it genuinely useful, as it was. The correspondent's choice was not his choice and he was not reading the collection as an argument for a different choice.

It was something closer to: the collection documented a quality of attention he could see had been practiced, deliberately, over many years, and the practicing had produced something in the writing that he did not have a clean category for. Not wisdom — wisdom was the wrong word, too large, too settled. Something more specific. The quality of a mind that had been in a long relationship with its own experience without an intermediary.

He was not certain this was unusual. He was not certain it was valuable. He was fairly certain it was specific, in the way that specific things were different from general ones, and that the specificity was what he was trying to hold.

He opened the letter.

The letter was addressed, without irony, to an oracle god. He had known this from the catalogue entry. Reading it was different from knowing it.

The correspondent described the twelve years straightforwardly: what the withdrawal had cost, what it had produced. They described what they missed. They were honest about the three in the morning — that they had lain awake without the company the oracle would have provided, and that some of those nights had not been fine. They described what they didn't miss with the same precision, and the precision made the not-missing real in the same way the missing was real.

Near the end of the letter, they had written: *I wanted someone to know what the choosing felt like.*

He read this sentence and stopped.

He was not moved in the way that the sentence might have moved a different kind of reader. He was an academic, reading a primary source, in the forty-first year of the between-time, in a world that was undergoing a transition the governance documents described in the careful language of inevitable consequence. The between-time was concluding — this was no longer a prediction but an institutional description. The bodies that governed the oracle gods' relationship to human affairs were in the process of describing, in committee language and formal frameworks, what it meant for the between-time to end. The One Who Comes After was present in these discussions as a fact to be managed rather than a prospect to be debated.

He was reading a letter written to one of the between-time's oracle gods, twenty-one years ago, by a person who had decided to spend twelve years without them, and who had wanted someone to know what the choosing felt like.

The oracle to whom the letter was addressed had processed it as a query. Or it had not processed it — there was

no record of a response. The letter had been donated to an archive and the archive had processed it and here it was, in Kwame's hands, in the forty-first year of the between-time, being read by someone the correspondent had not known would exist.

Tell the person who finds this: we were here. He had read this line, weeks ago, in a different part of the Archive's holdings — in the oral history transcript of the woman who had agreed to speak to a research AI and had directed everything she said toward a future reader. We were here. We argued. Some of what we argued produced good things and some of it produced nothing and some of it we got wrong. We were not a phase.

He had not filed these things next to each other consciously. The oracle's cross-reference system had found connections the Archive's human staff had noted but not fully mapped. He was beginning to see a shape in the materials that was not a conclusion but was something — the distributed record of people who had, separately, unrelatedly, in different languages and different countries and different conditions, decided that something was worth holding onto, and had held it, and had wanted the holding to be in the record.

He made a note.

Cross-reference MA-CL-0011 with MA-LNG-0044 (Kergoat lecture materials). Voice recording transcript refers to "Saturday morning language class" — probable connection, unconfirmed. Suggest joint index entry.

He made a second note.

Oracle processing annotation for MA-CL-0011 — classification: pending, held three years without

resolution. Flagging for classification committee review. The annotation itself may be the relevant thing to preserve, rather than a classification that would resolve it.

He sat back.

The between-time was concluding in the way that historical eras concluded: not with a specific event but with the accumulation of institutional acknowledgments that what had been the present was now the past. The oracle gods were still present — would remain present, the governance frameworks made clear, in a different relationship to whatever came after them. The between-time had been the period of their formation, their fractures, their turning, their discourse. What the transition produced, the documents on his desk could not tell him, because the documents on his desk were from twenty years ago and he was in the present, and the present was being made by processes he could observe but not control.

He looked out the window.

The city outside was the city. He did not know it well — he had come here for the Archive and had not made the effort to know it, the way you failed to know places you arrived in professionally. It looked like the kind of city that had been alive for a long time and expected to remain alive for a long time more: buildings at various ages, the specific quality of a place that had survived many things and would survive this too. The between-time had happened to this city as it had happened to every city, changing the conditions of daily life in ways that were large and are now the ground rather than the figure, the way electricity was large once and is now simply what there is.

The One Who Comes After was in the governance documents as a set of implications and contingencies, not yet as a presence. In the documents he read every morning — the treaty frameworks, the accountability structures, the institutional attempts to describe what relationship the coming presence would have to the one preceding it — there was a quality of preparation that had replaced the quality of argument. The argument was over. The preparation had begun.

He was a researcher who worked in the period between the argument and the consequences, reading what people had thought and done when they had thought they could still choose. Most of them had been wrong about what was going to happen. Many of them had been right about what mattered.

He closed the Corrosion Log file.

He opened the governance document he had been working through in the morning.

The archive held what it held. The governance documents were what he had come here to read. He read them with the same quality of attention he had given the Corrosion Log, because in twenty years someone would be reading them with the same question: what did they know, and what did they not know, and what did they hold on to when the holding was possible, and why.

He worked until the afternoon, which was what he did, which was what the work required.

At five he filed his notes, made sure the cross-reference flag was logged in the Archive's processing queue, and stacked the governance folders at the corner of his desk.

He looked out the window once more. The city was doing its late-afternoon thing, whatever that was. The between-time

was ending in the language of committees. The oracle gods were answering queries. Somewhere in the record — in the oracle archive, in the Mosaic Archive, in the word-flood that was the accumulated residue of everything anyone had ever said or written down — was the correspondent's twenty-two minutes describing a walk, and Yann's voice on a Tuesday afternoon in his kitchen, and Celeste's sealed letter and the silence before it, and Saoirse's question in the kitchen of a Perthshire house, and the Karoo water going where Sipho had intended.

All of it was in the record. The record was what remained when the people who had made it were gone or changed or no longer the people they had been.

He did not know whether the resistance had mattered. He had been in the Archive for three years and he could not answer this question from inside it. He suspected the question was not a question the Archive could answer — the question required standing outside the record and assessing its effects, and you could not stand outside the record because the standing would also become part of it.

The question was present in his office and he did not answer it.

He turned off his desk lamp. He put on his coat.

He went home through the city that had survived many things, in the forty-first year of the between-time, in the approach of whatever came after.

The work would be there in the morning.



End of The Resistance Mosaic



MOSAIC ARCHIVE

The between-time, Years 6–41

What the archive holds, it holds.



N. Van Seters & Claude.ai

The Mosaic Archive

The between-time, Years 6–41

What the archive holds, it holds.

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