

Fallow

A converted country house on the Welsh border, no phones, porridge, and £460 a night for the privilege. Ruth Harker hands over her phone, sits down, and finds out what she's like.

BY RUTH HARKER

06.30 SITTING

The drawer is in the hall, at the foot of the stairs, in a piece of furniture that was a dresser before it was a vault, and it has a brass key, and the key is kept by a woman called Cerys who is twenty-four and wears an apron with a pocket, and in the pocket is her phone, which rang while she was turning the key on mine. She looked at it. She let it ring. She said, “Suppliers,” and finished turning the key, and then she took the call in the boot room with the door shut, and I stood in the hall with my hands at my sides and understood that I had just paid a great deal of money to watch someone else answer a phone.

I should say about the money now, because it is the second paragraph and I promised myself the second paragraph. The house costs £460 a night. Seven nights, which is the shortest stay it offers, is £3,220, plus travel, and the magazine

paid it, all of it, at the rate on the website, as a matter of policy, so that nobody could say I had been comped. I was not comped. I was paid. My fee for this piece is less than the price of the week by an amount I have put in a footnote, because it was what I first wanted to look up when I got here, which was how much less, exactly, after tax, and I couldn't, because I had just watched the drawer close on the thing I would have looked it up with.¹

Before the key turned I had signed a page. It is headed *Participation Agreement* and it is two sides, and its fourth clause reads: “I understand that the absence of connectivity may cause discomfort or distress, and that the house does not provide access in response to either.” I read the clause twice and signed under it, which is what you do with a clause like that once you have paid. The brochure, which had arrived in the post in an envelope with a wax seal I have kept, calls the stay “a fallow week,” and describes it on its second page as “seven nights without screens, notifications, or the expectation of being reach-

1. Written at 07.10 on the first day, in the hall, on the back of the timetable: *How much less than the week is the fee, after tax.* Answered on the Sunday, at the services on the A40 outside Ross, in about a minute, with a calculator. £1,780 less, or, put the other way, I was paid, after tax, a little under half of what it cost to have me here. On the fifth day, in the library, I worked it out by hand and got £1,580, which is wrong by two hundred pounds, and which I believed for two days, and which I record because being wrong for two days about my own money, with nobody to correct me, was a new experience and not, on balance, a bad one.

able, in a house that asks only that you notice.” The title of this piece is the brochure’s word. I have not improved on it and I have not tried, because the brochure should have it, and because by the end of the week I had found out what it meant, which the brochure had not.

“I understand that the absence of connectivity may cause discomfort or distress, and that the house does not provide access in response to either.”

Sitting is at half past six in what the brochure calls the morning room, which faces east and earns the name, and there are cushions on the floor in two rows and chairs at the back for what the brochure calls “those who prefer them,” which by the third day was most of us. You come down in silence. You take a cushion or a chair. The proprietor, whom I will come to at three o’clock because that is where he lives, sits at the front and says one thing, which is the same thing every morning, and the thing is: “Notice.” Then a bell, and forty minutes, and the bell again.

On the first morning I lasted eleven minutes. I know this from the clock on the mantelpiece, which I consider a design flaw, and because at eleven minutes I had noticed everything in the room, twice, and had begun to resent the breathing of the man behind me, which had a click in it, and had begun to notice that I wanted to know what time it was in a way that had nothing to do with the clock. I wanted the number that arrives when you touch the glass. I wanted it as you want a cigarette in a place you can’t smoke, which is to say physically, in the hand, and I looked at the hand and it was on my knee, palm up, in the position the brochure recommends,

and it was, I saw, faintly cupped, as if it were holding something the size of a phone. I turned it over. The woman on the next cushion, who I would later know as Marian, did not open her eyes, and I had the impression she had seen it anyway.

On the fourth morning I noticed, at about the thirty-minute mark, that I had been thinking about a single question for the entire sit, and that the question was not a large one, and that in the world I had come from it would have been answered in the time it takes to say it and I would have moved on to the next one and would not, now, be able to tell you what either of them had been. Here I still had it. It was about a bird.² I had turned it over for thirty minutes as you turn a stone in a pocket, and it had not worn smooth, and it had not been answered, and it had, by the bell, become something I could describe to you in a paragraph, which is the most attention I have paid to a question since school.

Notice, he says. I noticed that.

08.00 BREAKFAST (SILENT)

There is a card. It is laminated and it stands in a small wooden holder at each place and it is headed *Breakfast Signals*, and I copied it into the margin of the timetable on the first morning because I saw at once that it was the most important document in the house.

BREAKFAST SIGNALS

Open hand, palm up: please pass.
Two fingers on the table: more, please.
Hand flat on the chest: thank you.
Hand over the cup: no more.
A nod towards the door: I am leaving the table.
Please keep signals small.

There is no signal for *what is this*, which I needed on the first morning for a jar of something dark that turned out to be a compote,

2. Written at 07.05 on the fourth day, in the morning room, after the bell: *What is the small grey bird that walks down the trunk head first*. Answered on the Sunday in ninety seconds. A nuthatch. I had known that. I had known it at some point in my life and had let it go because it could be fetched, and I had spent thirty minutes on a cushion not being able to fetch it, and when it came back on the Sunday it came back as a word on a screen and not as the bird, and the bird was better.

damson, Pat said later, from the tree by the boot room, and no signal for *I have had enough of this but not of breakfast*, which I needed on the second, and no signal at all, the whole week, for the thing everyone at the table wanted to say, which was *how are you finding it*. You could not ask. You could ask for butter. I have thought since about the design of that, and I think it is a good design, and I think it is a cruel one, and I do not think those are different things here.³

Breakfast is porridge. There are other things, eggs, bread, the compote, but the porridge is the breakfast, and it comes in a pan to the table and is served with a ladle by whoever is nearest the pan, which on the first morning was me, and I served eleven people in silence with a ladle and did not spill, and I have never been prouder of anything at eight in the morning. It is good porridge. It is made by a woman called Pat who has made it for the house for six years and who did not, when I asked her on the fifth day what the secret was, say salt, which is what everyone says. She said the pan.

Eleven guests. I sorted them at that first breakfast by their hands, because there was nothing else to sort them by and because hands with nothing in them are, it turns out, a kind of face. Four people held their spoons the whole meal, between mouthfuls, as a thing to hold. Two kept their hands under the table, which I took at first for calm and later for the opposite. One man, in his thirties, first stay, kept touching his left thigh where a pocket would be, and I stopped noticing that on the third day because I had caught myself doing it. Marian ate with one hand and kept the other flat on the table beside her bowl, palm down, as if the table might leave, and she was the only person at the table who looked as though she had done this before, which she had, three times.

Marian is sixty-three and this is her fourth week at the house and she is, for this piece, what the fair essays used to call a native guide, though

she would object to native and would be right. She knows which chair gets the sun after eight, which is the one at the end by the window, and she had it every morning, and on the third morning she stood up before I arrived and moved to the next one along and put her hand flat on the sun chair and looked at me until I sat in it, and lifted the hand only when the back of my knee touched the wood. She knows that two fingers on the table gets you more porridge but that two fingers on the table with the other hand over the cup gets you Pat, who will bring the pan herself and look at you, and that this is the nearest the silent breakfast comes to a conversation. She knows the butter signal, which is not on the card, and which stays hers.

The proprietor sits at the head of the table and says nothing at breakfast, and eats porridge, and once, on the fourth day, passed the compote before anyone had asked for it, to the man with the pocket, who looked at it and then at him and then ate some. That was the only time all week I saw the proprietor do anything at breakfast that was not eating, and I saw that it worked, and that I would have found it unbearable if it had been done to me, and that it had not been.

10.00 UNRESOLVED QUESTION HOUR

This is the house's own invention and it is on the brochure and on the website and, I am told, in a trade magazine for the retreat sector, where it was called "signature." What it is: an hour, in the library, in which each guest sits with a question they would ordinarily look up, and does not.

The proprietor introduces it on the first morning, and the introduction is the longest he speaks all week except at three, and what he says is that we have all lost the experience of not knowing something, that it used to be a normal condition of a human life and is now a thing you

3. Written at 08.20 on the first day, under the card: *Who designed the signals*. Answered on the Sunday, from the house's website, in two minutes. The proprietor, in the first year, with the help of, in the site's words, "a former colleague with a background in interface design." I thought about that for the rest of the drive. It is an interface. It has six commands and no help function, and the help function was the thing everyone at the table wanted, and its absence was designed by someone who had spent a career designing help functions and had decided that this one would do without.

have to pay for, and that the hour is an offer, and neither a punishment nor a test. He said that the question could be anything. He said the only rule was that we did not answer each other's, and that if someone asked you theirs out loud you were to say nothing, kindly. He said this last with a look round the room that I understood on the third day, when someone did.

The hour is like nothing, which is the point, so I will describe what it produces instead. It produces, in me, questions. Not one. The brochure says to sit with a question and what I found was that a question, sat with, has children, and by twenty minutes I had six, and by forty I had stopped being able to hold them and had begun writing them in the margin of the timetable, small, with the golf pencil from the bedside drawer, which I think is what the golf pencil is for. I have them still. They are the footnotes to this piece, all of them, in the order I wrote them, some in the hour and some before breakfast and one under a jar, with the answers, because on the Sunday I looked them all up, and the looking took, in total, about nine minutes, and I have put beside each answer what the nine minutes did to it.⁴

Marian's question is the same every day. She told me so on the second day's walk, when we could speak. She said she had brought the same question to every hour of every week for four years and had never looked it up and never would, and that this was, she thought, the practice, all of it, that the hour was not about the question. I asked what it was. She said no. I asked whether it was about a person. She said, "Everything's about a person," and stepped over a stile.

The young man broke on the third day. He is the one with the pocket, and he had lasted two hours, which is a long time, and I had not lasted eleven minutes, and on the third day at about the half-hour, in the library, in the silence, he said, out loud, to the room, in a voice that was trying to be light, "Does anyone know the capital of Mongolia?"

Nobody answered. That is the rule. What nobody answering is like is the centre of the hour and the reason it is on the brochure, so here it is. Eleven people who knew the rule looked at the floor or the ceiling or the shelves, and the young man looked at each of us in turn, and it was clear from his face that he had thought the asking would be a relief and had found it was the opposite, and it was also clear, to me, watching, that at least one person in the room knew, because knowing a thing changes what you do with your face when you are not saying it. She was in the corner, sixties, second stay, and she looked at the shelf above his head with an expression of great patience, and I would find out at lunch that she had taught geography for thirty-one years.⁵

The proprietor said, after a moment, "Thank you," and the young man said, "Sorry," and the proprietor said there was nothing to be sorry for, and the hour went on, and the young man did not ask again that week, and I do not know whether he found out on the Sunday, and I did not ask him, because by the Sunday I understood that it was his.

I have my own version of that morning, which I am less proud of. On the fifth day, at about the same point in the hour, I found that I had written a question in the margin and then, without

4. Written at 10.45 on the first day, in the library, first of the six: *Who owns this house*. Answered on the Sunday, in four minutes, from a companies register. The house is one of four run by a group with a name that has the word *still* in it, and the group is majority-owned by a fund whose largest other holding is a company that sells oracle access to schools. I do not say this as an exposure. The proprietor told me at three on the fifth day, unprompted, when I asked who he answered to, and he said it without embarrassment and said that he thought it was funny and that he had stopped finding it funny in the second year and now found it simply true. I had it in the margin before he told me. I put the margin's version here because the margin came first.

5. Written at 10.35 on the third day, in the library, after the young man asked: *Capital of Mongolia*. Answered on the Sunday, at the services, first of all of them, before the calculator, in eleven seconds. Ulaanbaatar. I had known that too. The geography teacher, whose name is Joan, told me at lunch that she had known and had said nothing and had found saying nothing "extremely hard and extremely interesting," and that in thirty-one years of teaching she had never once been in a room where she knew the answer and the rule was that she could not give it, and that she thought she might have been a better teacher if she had.

any decision I could locate, had begun to work it out. Not look it up. Work it out, from what I had, as you would have before. It was a question about money, mine, and I had the figures in my head, and I sat in the library and did the arithmetic on the timetable in golf pencil, long division, and got an answer. The answer was wrong, by a margin I discovered on the Sunday, but it was mine, and it had taken twenty minutes, and I had not asked anyone, and nobody had told me. I sat with it for the rest of the hour with the feeling you have when you have carried something upstairs that you would normally have had delivered.⁶

12.00 WALK

Talking is allowed on the walk, which is why everyone goes on the walk, and why the walk is the only part of the timetable at which the house is doing exactly what it says.

The lane runs down from the house between hedges that have not been cut since the summer and then up, steeply, onto the hill behind, and from the top of the hill you can see west into Wales, a line of mountains with flat tops that I had been looking at from my bedroom window for two days without being able to name.⁷ The house sits below you with its roof and its two chimneys and the walled garden and, in the lane, the staff's cars, four of them, parked nose-in to the hedge. On the dashboard of the nearest, a phone, face up, catching the light. I looked at it from the top of the hill as you look at a lit window from a cold street, and Marian, beside me, said, "Yes," and we went on.

At the bottom of the drive there is a gate. It is a five-bar gate, wooden, with a latch, and it is not locked, and there is a small wooden sign on it, hand-painted, that says *Guests are asked not to go beyond this point during their stay*, and the sign is the most effective piece of security I have encountered in twenty years of going places I was asked not to, because it asks, and because you have paid to be asked. Nobody goes through it. I watched for four days. People walked down the drive to the gate and put a hand on the top bar and looked at the lane beyond, which is a lane, and turned round.

Guests are asked not to go beyond this point during their stay

On the fifth day I went through it.⁸ I put my hand on the latch and lifted it and the gate swung, and I stepped into the lane, and nothing happened. I had expected something, a bell or a voice or the proprietor at an upstairs window, and there was a hedge and a puddle and a mile and a half of lane to the village, and I walked it.

The village has a church and a pub that opens at six and a shop that is also the post office, and in the shop there is a woman behind the counter and, behind her, on the wall, a telephone. A land-line, cream, with a cord. I saw it as I came in and I bought a newspaper I did not want and a bar of chocolate I did, and stood at the counter with the chocolate and looked at the phone, and the woman said, "You're from the house," and I said I was, and she said, "You're the third this week," and I asked whether the others had used it, and she said one had, and looked at me, and waited.

6. Written at 10.20 on the fifth day: *£1,800 less tax at basic rate, less the week at £3,220: how much less*. Not answered on the Sunday. Answered in the library, on the fifth day, by me, wrongly. See the first note. I have left this one in the sequence, with its wrong answer, because it is the first question of the week I did not look up, and I did not look it up because I had already done the thing looking it up would have replaced, and I found, at the services, with the phone on and the calculator open, that I did not want the right answer as much as I wanted to have got the wrong one myself.

7. Written at 12.25 on the third day, on the hill, standing: *What are the flat-topped mountains to the west*. Answered on the Sunday, at the services, in two minutes, with the mountains forty miles behind me. The Black Mountains, and the nearest of them is Hay Bluff, which I had guessed on the hill and had not been able to confirm, and had said out loud to Marian as a guess, and she had said, "Probably," and we had left it as probably for four days, which is a length of time a mountain can bear.

8. Written at 12.10 on the fifth day, at the gate, with the latch in my hand: *What happens if I go through*. Answered on the fifth day, in the lane, in about a second. Nothing. I am leaving it in the sequence because it is the only question of the week that did not need the Sunday and because the answer was the one I had least expected and had, I think, been paying for.

I did not ask. I would like to be able to tell you why and I have tried several answers on and none of them fits, and the truest is that I was ashamed in front of a woman I did not know, which is a feeling I had not had since I was fourteen and had paid £460 a night to have again. I ate the chocolate in the lane. I put the newspaper in the bin by the church. When I got back to the gate, Marian was on the other side of it, sitting on the bank with her boots off, and she did not ask where I had been, and I did not tell her, and she said, "Chocolate," because it was on my chin, and I wiped it with the back of my hand, which was glad of the job.

13.00 LUNCH

Lunch is the talking meal. It is soup and bread and cheese and whatever the garden has, and it is the meal at which the house's eleven guests, released from the signals, say what they have noticed, because noticing is what they have been asked to do and lunch is where the homework is handed in.

What they have noticed, mostly, is each other. I did not expect this and I should have. The man with the pocket had noticed that Marian kept a hand on the table. Marian had noticed that Joan, the geography teacher, closed her eyes for all of sitting and opened them at the bell as if she had been somewhere. Joan had noticed that I wrote in the margin of my timetable, which I had thought was private, and asked what I was writing, and I said questions, and she said, "For later," and I said yes, and she nodded as though I had confessed to something venial. A woman in her fifties, first stay, had noticed that the proprietor never took the last piece of bread. Nobody had noticed the view, and when I said so, on the third day, there was a pause, and then the man with the pocket said he thought the view was the sort of thing you noticed at home, and that here you noticed people, and that he had not looked at another person's hands in years, and the table went quiet, and he looked at his own.

The woman with the bread I had noticed on the first day, and had written her down, in my head, as a woman who had come to be seen noticing, the kind of guest for whom the week is a thing to have done, who would say "we did a fallow week" at a dinner in the spring in the voice people use for "we did Puglia." I had the sentence ready. I was pleased with it. On the fifth day, at lunch, she said that her daughter had booked the week for her and paid for it, having done one herself the year before and wanted her mother to have it, and that she was finding it hard, and that what she missed was the messages, her daughter's, which came most days and which she had not had for five, and that this was stupid, she said, because her daughter was the one who had sent her. I had her as Puglia. I have left the Puglia sentence in because I wrote it, and I have put what she said beside it, and I have no way to make the two fit, and I am not going to try.

The kitchen porter is called Rhys and he is nineteen and he serves lunch and clears it and is the only person in the dining room who is not, in some sense, working at being there. He has the same phone as I do. I knew because it was in his back pocket, the same case, and on the fourth day, clearing my bowl, he saw me look at it and said, "You've got this one," and I said I had, and that it was in the drawer, and he said, "I know, I saw it go in," and took the bowl.

I asked him, on the sixth day, when the dining room had emptied and he was wiping the table and I was not in a hurry to be anywhere the timetable wanted me, whether he had the Companion. He said no. He said it without heat, and without the thing I had braced for, which was any sense that the question had a class in it. He said it cost forty pounds a month, and that he was on the hours he was on, and that forty pounds was forty pounds.⁹ He said his mother had it and he used hers when he needed to, which was for forms, mostly, and once for a letter to a landlord that had worked. He said most of the kitchen had it, and Cerys had it, and Pat had it "for the recipes, she says," and he did the

face of a man who does not believe it is for the recipes. He said he'd get it when he was on more hours. He said, wiping, "It's not like I'm here for the week, is it," and looked round the dining room, which is a fine room with a long table and a view, and which he sees every day, and then he took the cloth back to the kitchen.

I stayed at the table after that. I had come to the house with a point in my pocket about the staff, and the point was that we were paying £460 a night to live for a week as they lived for a year, and I had thought on the first evening that the point was too easy and had decided not to make it. Rhys had just made it for me, in a sentence, wiping a table, and had not meant it as a point, because for him it was only a Tuesday, and the difference between a point and a Tuesday is the difference between what I was doing at the house and what he was.

15.00 LIBRARY

The library is where the proprietor lives, in the sense that he is in it every afternoon at three in the same chair, a leather one with its back to the window, and the timetable says *Library* and means that the room is open and you may read, and nobody does.

It is a real library. Four walls, floor to ceiling, a ladder on a rail, several thousand books, and a smell that the brochure would call "the smell of a real library" and I would call dust and leather and something faintly sweet that I did not

identify until the sixth day, when I found the apples on the top shelf behind the encyclopaedias. On the second afternoon I went round the room and checked the bookmarks. Bookmarks in this house are the house's own, cream card with the word *Fallow* on them, and there is one in every book that a guest has started and put back, and I counted forty-one, and I opened every one, and nobody had passed page sixty in anything.¹⁰ The furthest anyone had got was fifty-eight, in a novel I will not name, and I do not know who it was, and I found on the sixth day that the bookmark had moved to sixty-three, and that was the only thing in the library all week that I would call an event.

The proprietor is in his fifties, tall, in a jumper that is better than it looks, and he was, before the house, in product at a company he will not name and does not need to, because there are four companies it could be and the sentence he uses to not name it narrows it to two.¹¹ He was there eleven years. He left, he says, "when the thing worked," by which he means the Companion, and by which he means that he had spent eleven years making a thing that would always be there and had found, one morning, that it always was. He said that without any of the tone I had come to the library to find. He said it as a man reports a weather event he was inside.

I asked him what "fallow" meant. I had it in the margin.¹² He said it was a farming word. He said a fallow field was one left unsown for a season so that it could recover, and that the point of a fallow field was the next crop, and that a field

9. Written at 13.40 on the sixth day, at the table, after Rhys had gone: *Is it still forty pounds a month*. Answered on the Sunday, in a minute. It is. It has been forty pounds a month for years and I have paid it by direct debit for most of them without once thinking of it as a number, and Rhys thinks of it as a number, and I had never met anyone before who did, and I had paid £3,220 to spend a week in a house where I was the one without it and had not, until he wiped the table, thought of that as a number either.

10. Written at 15.30 on the second day, in the library, with the forty-first bookmark, the last I opened, in my hand: *Has anyone, anywhere, finished a book in one of these houses*. Answered at three on the fifth day by the proprietor, see below, and not looked up on the Sunday, because the proprietor's answer was better than anything a search would give, and because I believed him, and because I had not passed page sixty in anything either.

11. Written at 15.15 on the fifth day: *Which company*. Answered on the Sunday, in four minutes, from a professional network, from the dates he gave and the sentence he used. I found it. It is not going in. He didn't name it and I have decided that his not naming it is the kind of choice a person is allowed, and that mine, on the Sunday, with the phone, was the kind of thing the house is for the absence of, and I did it anyway, and I am not printing what it got me.

12. Written at 15.05 on the fifth day: *Fallow: what does it actually mean*. Answered at 15.06 by the proprietor, and on the Sunday, in forty seconds, by a dictionary, which said what he said, in fewer words, and gave the root, which is Old English and means to break up land, and which I read at the services with the engine running and thought was the first thing all day the phone had told me that a person hadn't told me better.

left fallow for good had stopped being fallow and become abandoned, and the house was not that. He said he used the Companion forty-five weeks a year and would tonight, in his flat above the coach house, after the guests were in bed, because he had a company to run and four houses and a fund that liked figures. He said the house was not against anything. He said he had built it for the seven weeks a year that he took himself, and had found that other people wanted them, and had found what they would pay, and that the number had surprised him and had then stopped surprising him.

I said that the number was £460 a night. He said yes. I said that Rhys was on the hours he was on. He said yes, and that he knew what Rhys was on, to the pound, and that he had sat where I was sitting and made the point I was making, in the first year, to himself, and had not found an answer to it, and had kept the house open anyway. He said: "You're going to write that the guests pay to live as the staff live. Write it. It's true. It's also true that Rhys has the view and they've paid three thousand pounds for it and he's paid to be in it." He said that the house was the only place he had worked where the product was the absence of the product, and that he had come to think this was the only product worth working on, and that he was aware of how that sounded.

I had come in with the sharpest pencil of the week. What happened to it is that it met a man who had already used it on himself, some years ago, and had put it down, and had gone on running the house, and who told me so without asking for credit. I have interviewed a lot of people who were right in ways they had not earned. He had earned it, and it did not make him easier to sit across from, and it did not make the house cheaper.

I asked him, at the end, whether anyone had ever finished a book here. He thought about it. He said not that he knew of. He said the ladder was for dusting.¹³

17.00 SITTING

The evening sit is in the long room, which faces west and gets what the morning room got in reverse, and it is the same forty minutes and the same bell, and by the fourth day I could do it, which I say without pride because doing it turned out to mean only that I had stopped fighting the clock on the mantelpiece and had started, instead, to use it, watching the minute hand as a thing to watch, which is not what the proprietor means by notice and is what I had.

After the bell there is half an hour before supper in which talking is allowed, and most people use it on the terrace, and it was on the terrace on the fourth evening, with the sun going down behind the mountains I could not yet name, that Marian told me about her two years.

She had not planned to. I had asked her, badly, whether the house worked, and she had looked at the mountains for a while and then said that she couldn't answer that because she had done it once before, years ago, before the house existed, for real, and that the house was not that, and that I should know what that had been like before I wrote anything about a week.

She had stopped, she said, at fifty-one. Not for a week. She had cancelled the subscription and deleted the thing and told nobody, and it had been strange for two years. She used the word strange three times and each time as though she had considered the others and rejected them. She said she had been slower. She said she had made mistakes she would not have made, small ones, a train missed, a name wrong in a card, a recipe she'd had to fetch from her mother's handwriting. She said she had lost things she'd looked up before and had to look up again and then, having nowhere to look, had held in her head, and that holding things in her head had felt, for the first year, like carrying shopping in

13. Written at 15.50 on the fifth day, on the way out of the library: *What is the ladder for*. Answered before I had finished writing it. Dusting. I have left it in as the one question of the week I got an answer to while asking it, and the answer was correct, and I had been in the room for five afternoons and had not thought to ask the one person who knew.

her arms because she'd forgotten the bag. She said the second year the bag came back. She didn't know from where. By the end of the second year, she said, something had settled, and she was careful to say settled and not resolved, and I have kept her word.

Then she had come back on. She said it flatly. Her husband had been ill and there had been a year of forms and appointments and questions at three in the morning that had wanted answering and had not been able to wait, and she had gone back to it and it had been there, and it had been, she said, "very good, actually, at three in the morning," and she had not come off it since. She did not tell me about the husband beyond that. I did not ask. It was not the point of what she was telling me and she was not a woman who let a thing become the point that wasn't.

I asked why she came here, then, if she had done the real thing and gone back.

She said: "To have the two years again. In a week. With the ending fixed."

She said it looking at the mountains, and then she looked at me to see whether I had understood it, and I had, and I have thought about the sentence for longer than anything anyone said to me in the house, including the proprietor, and I am not going to gloss it, because it does not need me, and because she made it and it is hers.

14

19.00 SUPPER

The guests eat at seven and the staff eat afterwards, at about half past eight, in the kitchen, at a table under the window with the door to the dining room shut, and on the sixth night Cerys, clearing my plate, said, "You can come through if you want," and I said I would like that, and she said, "Bring your own chair," and I did.

I stayed twenty minutes. The twenty minutes deserve exactness, because the kitchen was the loudest room I had been in all week and the only one in which I was not, in any sense, working.

Seven of them. Pat, Cerys, Rhys, a woman called Ange who does the rooms, the gardener, whose name I did not get, and two I had not seen before, who do the evening turn. Bread and what was left of the guests' supper and a pot of tea the size of a bucket. Every phone on the table. Face up, face down, one propped against the teapot playing something with the sound low, one in Pat's hand, which she looked at between sentences as you look at a clock, and none of them being used for anything I would have called using. They were there. They were on the table as the salt was on the table.

They were talking about the gate. It emerged, over the first five minutes, that the staff run a book on the gate, every week, on which guest will go through it first and on which day, and that the stake is a pound, and that Cerys had drawn me on the second day and had been, she said, "quietly confident," and that Rhys had drawn the man with the pocket and had been robbed, and that Pat never bets because Pat "knows who it'll be by breakfast and it wouldn't be fair." I said I had gone through on the fifth day. Cerys said she knew, she had been in the boot room, she had seen me from the window with the chocolate. Rhys said the man with the pocket had had his hand on the latch on the fourth day for a full minute and that Cerys had seen that too and hadn't counted it, and Cerys said a hand on the latch was not through, and the table agreed, loudly, that a hand on the latch was not through, and I laughed, and it was the first time all week I had laughed with anyone rather than at something.

They were funny. I am going to leave their jokes where they were, in the kitchen, because they were not for me and because the one about the proprietor's jumper would not survive being

14. Written at 17.55 on the fourth day, on the terrace, after she had gone in: *What is settled, as against resolved*. Not looked up. I had the phone on at the services and the margin open and I read the question and found I knew, and that I had known since the terrace, and that Marian had given me the answer in how she said the word, and that the dictionary would have given me the other thing.

written down by a guest. What I can say is that the staff have a word for what we do, which is not the house's word, and that the word is "the fast," as in "she's on the fast." When I asked whether they thought the fast did anything, Ange, who has done the rooms for four years and has seen, she said, "a lot of people cry into a good pillow," said that it did something, yes, and that what it did was Sunday. She'd watched a hundred people walk out to their cars on a Sunday morning and every one of them had been happier than the people who'd walked in, and she'd never once worked out whether that was the week or the Sunday, and then she said, "Doesn't matter, does it, they've had it," and cut more bread.

At about the fifteenth minute I became aware of my phone. This will sound written. It was in the drawer in the hall, two rooms and a corridor away, and I could not see it or hear it and it was off, and I knew, with my body, where it was, as you know where a person is in a house. Seven phones on the table in front of me and the one I could feel was the one that wasn't there. I finished my tea. I said thank you and meant it, and Cerys said, "You're all right," and I took my chair back through to the dining room and put it where it had been and stood in the hall for a moment by the dresser and did not touch it.¹⁵

21.00 LIGHTS

L ights means lights. The house goes dark at nine, the guests' side of it, and you go up with a candle in a holder, and the bedroom is a good bedroom, with a window onto the mountains and a bed with linen that is better than mine, and a bedside drawer with the golf pencil in it and nothing else, and the dark, when

the candle is out, is the whole dark, the kind that is not available where I live. The website describes the rooms under a heading that says *From £460 per night*, and beneath it: "Rooms are free of screens, clocks, and the expectation of sleep." I was in one.

"Rooms are free of screens, clocks, and the expectation of sleep."

I slept badly. Everyone does the first two nights, Ange told me, and then most people sleep as they have not slept in years, and I was most people by the third night and slept nine hours and woke astonished. And then on the sixth night, after the kitchen, I woke at ten past three and did not sleep again, and I lay in the dark and did the thing you do at ten past three, which is to have a question.

It was not a question about a bird. It is not going in. It was about a person, which Marian had said all of them were, and it was a question that, in the world I had come from, I would have put to the Companion at ten past three, in the dark, with my thumb, and would have had an answer to by a quarter past, and the answer would have been good, because it is good at ten past three, and Marian had said so and she was right. I did not have it. I had the golf pencil and the timetable and the dark, and I found the pencil and found the margin by feel and wrote the question down without being able to see the line, and I have the timetable in front of me now and the question is there, in a hand that goes uphill, and I can read it.¹⁶

I lay with it until the window went grey. I cannot tell you it was good for me. It was the longest I had held a question in twenty years, and at the

15. Written at 20.50 on the sixth night, in the hall, by the dresser, before the lights, from memory of the kitchen: *Do they run the book on every week, and has anyone ever not gone through*. Answered on the Sunday, by Cerys, at the drawer, when I asked her, because I had decided in the night that this one was hers to answer and not the phone's. Every week. And yes: about one week in four, nobody goes, and Pat wins, because Pat always has "nobody" and the others always think that's cheating and it never is.

16. Written at 03.10 on the sixth night, in the dark, in a hand that goes uphill: a question about a person. Not answered on the Sunday. Not looked up. I had the phone on and the margin open to it and I turned the page. It is the only question of the week I have not given you. It is also the one I most wanted to put to the phone and did not, and I do not think those are two facts.

end of it I still had it, whole, unworn, and it was mine in a way the answer would not have been, and I did not want it, and I have it still.

Sunday

Sunday is not on the timetable. The card in the bedroom lists the hours, the same hours every day, and then, at the bottom, in the same small type, *Sunday: departures from 10.00*, and that is all, and it is enough.

The drawer is unlocked at ten. Cerys does it, in the hall, with the brass key, with the guests standing about in coats with their bags at their feet, and she opens the drawer and steps back and does not hand the phones out, and I understood that this too had been designed: you go to the drawer yourself, and you find yours among eleven, and you take it, and you have, for a moment, in your hand, the weight, which is less than you remembered. Nobody turns them on in the hall. It is understood to be poor form, though nobody has said so, and on my week nobody did except Marian, who is on her fourth and knows that the form is for first-timers, and who pressed the side of hers with her thumb standing right there by the dresser, and it lit, and she looked at it and put it in her coat and said to me, "Same week next year," and to Cerys, "Thank you, love," and went out to her car.

The car park is gravel, in front of the house, and I watched from the step as ten people got into their cars and sat in them and, one by one, in the privacy of a windscreen, lit their phones, and sat, and I could see the light on their faces, and none of them drove off for a while. The man with the pocket sat the longest. I do not know what he looked up. I got into my car and put the phone face-up on the passenger seat, off, and drove down the drive and through the gate, which was open, and along the lane past the village, and out onto the main road, and forty

miles, to the services on the A40 outside Ross, where I parked at the far end by the lorries and turned it on.

It took nine minutes to get through the margin. Sixteen questions, seven days, nine minutes, some looked up and some read and turned past, and I have given you which, with the engine running and a coffee I had bought so that I would be a woman with a coffee. I have given you what the nine minutes did to each of them. What they did to me was smaller than I had expected and different: I had thought the answers would feel like relief and they felt like post. The timetable was open on the steering wheel while I did it, and I looked at it when I had finished, sixteen questions in golf pencil in a hand that changes with the day, and understood that it was the first draft of this piece, and the only writing I had done in a week, and that this is the first piece in years whose first draft was written by hand, and it was written on a timetable, and the house had not intended that either. Then I opened the house's website, which I had not been able to open for a week, and it took nine seconds to load, and I booked the same week next year, seven nights, £460 a night, with my own card, and the confirmation came before I had put the phone down.¹⁷

I drove home. The mountains were behind me and then they were not, and the road became the road it is, and the phone lay on the passenger seat face-up with the screen dark, catching the light when the road turned, as the one on the dashboard in the lane had caught it from the hill, and I did not look at it, and it was there.

Meridian paid the full published rate for Ruth Harker's stay. She booked her second week herself.

Ruth Harker is a writer. She has contributed to Meridian before, on other subjects.

17. Written at 10.40 on the Sunday, at the services, on the back of the coffee receipt because the timetable's margin was full: *What did I just buy*. Answered in the car, on the M50, without the phone, in about twenty miles. Not absence. I have had absence, for a week, and the staff have it for a year, and it is not what the house sells, because you cannot sell a thing that Rhys has for nothing. What the house sells is an absence with a Sunday in it. The staff have the absence without the Sunday. I had just paid, with my own money, at the rate in the second paragraph, to have the Sunday twice.