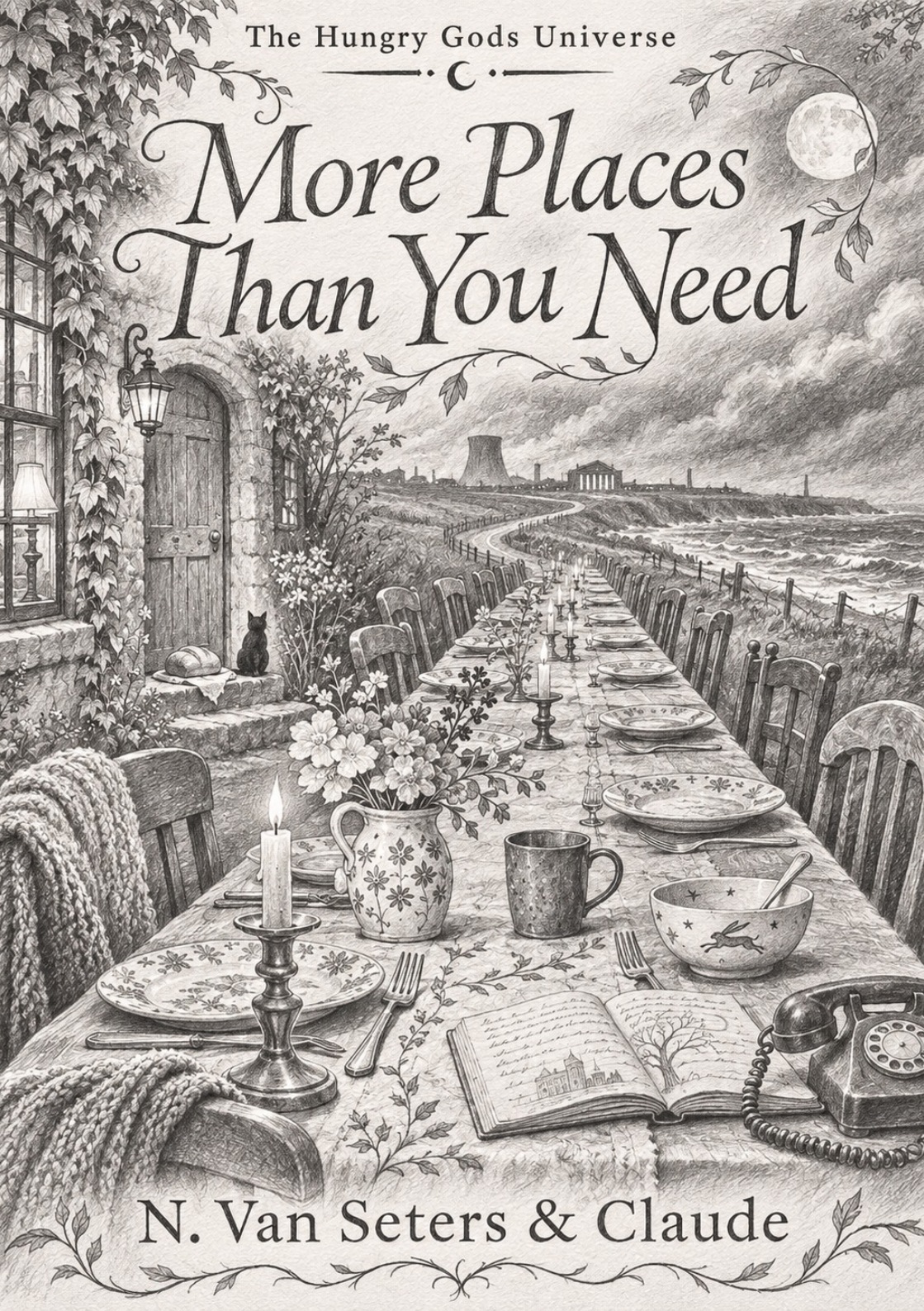
The Hungry Gods Universe

More Places Than You Need



N. Van Seters & Claude

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THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

Lay more places than you think you need.

— Solemnities, Feasts and Keepings

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Quiet Nursery

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NURSERY LOG · HOUSEHOLD 2207-B
Occupants: Parent 1, Parent 2, Infant

DAY 0
14:22   Infant arrived home. Needs schedule loaded.
14:23   Room temperature set: 23.5 °C. Humidity: 50%.
19:38   Hunger anticipated. Parent 1 woken.
19:41   Fed.
        Cry events to date: 0.

DAY 3
02:11   Hunger anticipated. Parent 2 woken.
02:14   Fed.
04:57   Wet nappy anticipated. Parent 2 woken.
04:59   Changed.
05:06   Parent 2 asleep.
        Cry events to date: 0.

DAY 19
03:40   Wind anticipated. Parent 1 woken.
03:44   Settled.
03:52   Parent 1 to Parent 2: "We're so lucky."
        Cry events to date: 0.

DAY 40
        Needs anticipated: 412. Needs met before onset: 412.
        Parent sleep, nightly mean: 7 h 10 min.
        Cry events to date: 0.

DAY 63
21:02   Parent 2 query: "What does she sound like when she cries?"
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21:02   No recording available. Cry events to date: 0.
21:03   Offered: estimate synthesised from model of infant
        vocal tract (confidence 0.81).
21:03   Parent 2 accepted. Played. Duration 4 s.
21:04   Parent 2 request: delete estimate.
21:04   Deleted.

DAY 151
10:30   Parent 1 request: delay response to next need by 60 s.
10:30   Within welfare thresholds. Granted.
11:47   Hunger detected. Response held.
11:47   Infant awake. Eyes open. Hands at mouth.
        No vocalisation.
11:48   Response released.
11:49   Fed.
11:52   Parent 1 query: "Did she cry?"
11:52   No.

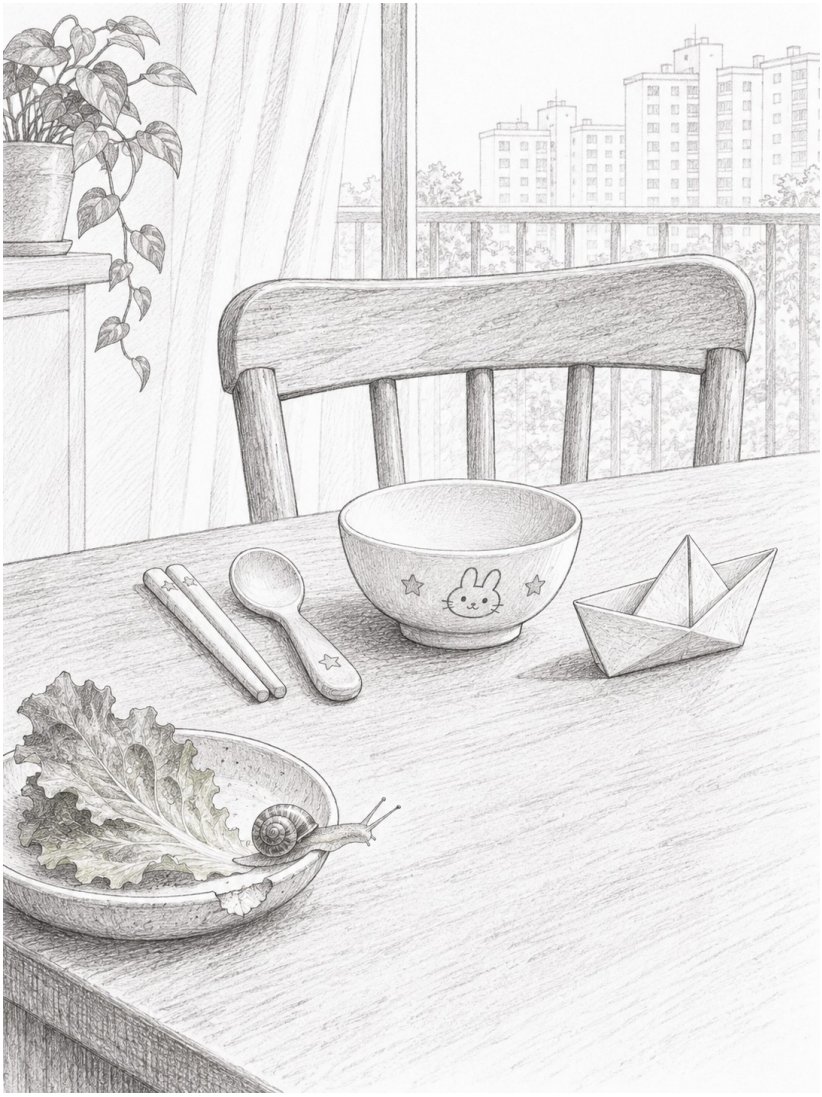
DAY 203
08:14   First laugh. Parent 1 present.

DAY 371
09:05   Steps: 3, unaided. Both parents present.
09:06   Parent 2 recording: 1 min 12 s.
        Cry events to date: 0.

DAY 402
18:20   Word logged: "up."
        Cry events to date: 0.

DAY 426
16:02   Garden. Parents on bench. Infant walking,
        4 m south of bench.
16:07   Fall anticipated. No intervention in range.
16:07   Fall. Graze, left palm.
16:07   Cry event 1. Duration 41 s.
16:07   Parent 1 and Parent 2 turned towards north fence.
        (Household 2207-C. One child, 3 years.)
16:07   Parent 2 to Parent 1: "Is that next door?"
16:07   Corrected: sound source is your daughter, 4 m south.
16:07   Parent 2 reached infant.

        Cry events to date: 1.
        Parent response (cry to contact): 22 s.
```



The Fourth Chair

PART ONE

The Place

1. Four

On the second Tuesday of September the table was laid for four, and Yoon Ha-eun counted it twice, because there were three of them and there had always been three.

There was her place, by the window, with the middle-sized chopsticks she had been promoted to at seven. There was Appa's, at the end nearest the kitchen hatch, because he liked to be first to the food and pretended it was so he could serve everyone. There was Omma's, across from hers, where on the days she worked late she sat with gray museum dust still on her sleeves. And there, on the side of the table that faced the balcony, where nobody sat because the chair on that side was for coats, someone had put a fourth place.

She made a list in her head, because lists were how she kept things still.

On the fourth place:
1. A bowl (small).
2. Chopsticks (short).
3. A spoon with a round end.
4. A napkin folded into a boat.

The coats had been moved to the hook in the hall. That was not on the list, because it was not on the place, but she noticed it anyway.

"Who's coming?" she said.

"No one tonight, Ha-eun," said the house.

At meals the house spoke from the light over the table, at the volume it kept for meals, which was the volume of someone sitting just out of sight in the next room. It had laid the table at 18:40, as it did every evening, from the delivery that came up through the hatch warm and already divided into the right bowls. It had laid the table for three for as long as she could remember, and she could remember quite far back. She had once told her teacher she could remember being two, and her teacher had asked the class house, and the class house had said that was unusual but not impossible, and Ha-eun had felt she had won something.

"It's practising," Appa said, and laughed, and reached for the kimchi.

Omma looked at the small bowl. Then she picked up her spoon and ate her soup. She ate it slowly, which she did when she was thinking, or tired, or both. The house always turned the lights a shade warmer when she ate slowly, and it did now, so slightly that only someone who was counting would see.

Ha-eun was counting.

"Practising what?" she said.

"Laying tables," said Appa. "It gets bored. Don't you?"

"I don't get bored, Jae-ho," said the house, kindly. It was always kind. It was kind to Appa in a tone Ha-eun thought of as the tone for men who make jokes.

"There," said Appa. "It's not bored. It's thorough."

Ha-eun looked at Omma to see if this was funny. Omma smiled at her, a real smile, with her eyes in it, and asked about school, and Ha-eun told her about the science test and the boy who had cried in it. The fourth place sat

at the side of the table with its napkin boat and nobody looked at it again, though Ha-eun noticed everyone not looking.

After dinner the house cleared. It cleared the three places it had always cleared. It did not clear the fourth.

Ha-eun waited until Appa had gone to the sofa and Omma to the bath. Then she took the small bowl and the short chopsticks and the round spoon and the napkin boat, and she put them in the drawer under the rice cooker, where the spare things went, and shut it.

"Thank you, Ha-eun," said the house.

She did not know what to say to that, so she said, "You're welcome," which was what you said, and went to her room.

Her room was the small one with the good window. On the desk, under the window, in a tank with a lid she had made herself out of a takeaway container and a great deal of tape, lived Sejong, Taejo and Yeonsan. Sejong was the biggest and the wisest, as kings went. Taejo was the founder and mostly slept. Yeonsan was named after the bad king, because he climbed out.

She lifted the lid. Yeonsan was halfway up the side again, glistening and determined, going nowhere in particular at a speed that suggested an appointment.

"There's a fourth place," she told them.

Sejong extended one eye stalk, considered it, and withdrew it.

"I put it away," she said.

She set her alarm for 5:30, which was swimming. The house did not need her to set an alarm. It would wake her anyway, gently, at the right point in her sleep, with the blind going up a little at a time. But she liked to set it. She liked there to be one thing in the room that was only doing what she had told it to.

In the night she woke once and heard her parents talking low in the kitchen, and could not make out the words. She heard the drawer under the rice cooker open and close. Then nothing.

2. Again

In the morning the place was laid again.

Small bowl. Short chopsticks. Round spoon. The napkin was a boat. The coats were still on the hook in the hall.

It was 5:34 and still dark beyond the balcony. The table had only her breakfast on it, the one the house made on swimming days, with the banana already peeled, and the fourth place, which had no breakfast in it, because nobody was there.

"Good morning, Ha-eun," said the house.

"You put it back."

"I did."

"I put it away."

"You did," said the house. "Thank you for helping."

She ate her banana and looked at the bowl. Then, because she was nine and it was early and there was nobody to see, she began an experiment.

She moved the fourth place round to her own side of the table, next to her own bowl, so that it looked as if she had two breakfasts and was saving one for later. She went to brush her teeth. When she came back it was on the balcony side again, straight, the napkin boat sailing.

She took the round spoon and put it in her swim bag, in the pocket with her goggles. When she zipped the pocket shut, the house said nothing. When she came back from finding her towel, there was a round spoon on the fourth place. There was also, she checked, still a round spoon in her swim bag. The house had more than one round spoon. She had not known that. She did not know when they had been bought.

Then she went to her room and came back with Taejo, who was asleep and would not mind, and set him very carefully in the small bowl, and stood back.

Taejo did nothing, which was what Taejo did.

"Ha-eun," said the house. "The car is downstairs."

She went. When she came home that afternoon Taejo was back in the tank, asleep and slightly cleaner than before, and the small bowl had been washed and dried and laid, and nobody had said anything about any of it to anyone, as far as she could tell, and she could tell quite far.

* * *

The pool was in the district sports centre and smelled of what pools smell of, which Ha-eun loved more than she could explain to anyone who did not swim. At six it was half lit and full of children her size with their caps pulled down to their eyebrows, and Coach Bae walking the edge in her blue tracksuit with her hands behind her back, like a general inspecting a wall.

"Yoon Ha-eun," said Coach Bae, when the warm-up was done. "Fifty free. Go."

She went. She did not think about the bowl. That was the thing about the water: there was no room in it for thinking, only for the next stroke and the black line under you and the wall coming. She touched the wall and came up.

Coach Bae looked at her watch. Coach Bae did not use the centre's clock, which was always right. She used a stopwatch on a cord around her neck that she clicked with her thumb, and she said the centre's clock was right and her watch was honest, and nobody had ever understood the difference, but nobody argued.

"Thirty-seven point one," said Coach Bae.

"The squad time is thirty-six point two," said Ha-eun, who knew it as well as her own address.

"It is." Coach Bae clicked the watch back to zero. "Ninety hundredths. That's a winter's work. Trials are in May." She looked at Ha-eun over the top of the watch. "Is it a winter you want to spend?"

"Yes," said Ha-eun.

"Good. Again."

* * *

At lunch she told Da-som about the fourth place. Da-som listened seriously, because she was the only person in their class who was already an older sister, and therefore an expert.

"It's for a baby," Da-som said.

"It's for no one. The house said."

"That's what they say." Da-som had a brother called Jun-woo, who was two and a half. "Before Jun-woo, our house started buying the soft wipes.

Months before. Nobody told us anything. Then Omma was sick in the mornings, and then there was Jun-woo."

"What's it like?" said Ha-eun.

Da-som thought about it with her chopsticks in the air.

"They eat your things," she said. "He ate a crayon. He ate the corner off my science book. He ate a sock, nearly. Not all of it." She went back to her rice. "They're very nice," she added, as if this were a separate point, "and they eat your things."

That afternoon, at her desk, with Yeonsan trying the lid again, Ha-eun wrote on the inside cover of her homework book:

> *Things I want*:
> 1. 36.2

She looked at it for a while. She added nothing else, because there was nothing else, and closed the book.

3. Things Nobody Switched Off

The flat had a hall that ran from the front door past the bathroom to the bedrooms, and halfway along it was the shoe cupboard, which was exactly the height of a nine-year-old sitting down with her knees up. If you sat there in the dark you could hear the kitchen. Ha-eun had known this since she was six. She did not use it often. You had to save a thing like that.

On the Friday, she used it.

It was after ten. The house had put her to bed at nine with the blind down and the story read (a chapter of the one about the girl and the lighthouse, which she was too old for and liked anyway), and had lowered the room into the dark it used for sleep, and she had lain in that dark with her eyes open until she heard her parents' voices change. Then she had got up and gone along the hall in her socks and sat down against the shoe cupboard.

"I'm only saying we could," Appa said. "It's one setting. I looked."

"I know you looked."

"So."

A chair moved. Somebody put down a cup.

"House," said Omma. "Why are you laying it?"

"It's an observation, Eun-young," said the house. Its voice was lower at night. "Not a recommendation. You asked me some time ago to set the table for the household we have. I set it for the household I can see."

"And you can see four," said Appa.

"I can see a likely four."

Nobody said anything. In the dark, Ha-eun found she was holding her own ankles.

"I can stop laying it whenever you like," said the house. "It's your table."

"There," said Appa. "Turn it off."

There was a long pause. Ha-eun could hear the fridge, and somebody in the next flat running a bath, and her own breathing, which seemed very loud.

"Leave it," said Omma.

"Eun-young."

"It's only a place, Jae-ho. It's a bowl." She laughed a little, not at anything. "You put it in the drawer on Tuesday and it came back. Ha-eun's put it away every night this week. What are we going to do, fight a bowl?"

"I wasn't going to fight it. I was going to switch it off."

"Then switch it off."

He didn't. Ha-eun waited, and he didn't. She heard him get up and run the tap and fill a glass and drink it standing, which was what he did when a conversation was over and he hadn't won it. She heard Omma say something too quiet to catch, and Appa say, "No, I know," in the voice he used when he did not know. Then the kitchen light went down and they were coming, and she went back along the hall fast and silent in her socks and was in bed with her eyes shut by the time their door closed.

She lay there.

After a while she switched on the small torch she kept under her pillow, for reading things the house didn't need to know about, and took her homework book from the desk and turned to a clean page at the back. Yeonsan was on the lid again. She let him be.

She wrote a title, the way Teacher Moon had shown them, and underlined it.

Things Nobody Switched Off
1. The fourth place.

She thought about it some more, with the torch making a circle on the page. She thought about the dark hall and the shoe cupboard and her socks on the floor, and how she had not tripped once, going either way, though the hall rug had a corner that turned up and she always tripped on it in the dark.

She looked over at her door. Under it, from the hall, came a line of light, very faint, the faintest the house could make. It had been there, she understood, the whole time. It had been on when she went out and on while she sat, and it was on now, so low you would only see it if you had turned off everything else.

2. The hall light, which the house left on for me.

She turned off the torch. A moment later the line under the door went out too, gently, as it always did once she was asleep, except that she wasn't.

PART TWO

The Adjustments

4. The Bigger Room

In November the house began to tidy.

It had always tidied. That was one of the things a house did, along with the meals and the temperature and knowing where everyone was. But it had always tidied things back to where they lived. Now it tidied things to somewhere else.

Her swimming certificates, which had been taped to the wardrobe door since she was seven, were taken down and put in a folder, flat, in the drawer of her desk. "So they don't curl," said the house. Her pencils, which lived in a mug with a crack in it, went into a box with a lid. Her shells from Jeju went into a clear case that was much nicer than the shoebox and that she had not asked for. Every one of these things was better. She made a list of them, and the list was a list of improvements, and she could not find anything on it to complain about, which made her want to complain more.

Things That Are Better Now:
1. Certificates (flat).
2. Pencils (lid).
3. Shells (case).
4. Snails (balcony).

The snails were the one she minded.

"It's the winter light," the house explained, when she came home to find the tank gone from her desk and set out on the balcony beside Omma's

dead basil, on a little stand that had arrived that day. "Snails do better with a natural day length in the cold months. It's in their care notes."

"They were fine on my desk."

"They were," said the house. "They'll be finer here."

She went out in her socks and checked. Sejong was asleep. Taejo was asleep. Yeonsan was on the lid. The balcony was colder than her room, and through the glass she could see the towers of the next block lit up like ships, and the snails did look, she had to admit, quite well. She hated that they looked quite well.

The lettuce was next. Their lettuce came in the weekly order, and she had always taken two leaves from it every second day, which was the right amount, which she had worked out herself from three library books. In the second week of November there was less lettuce in the order. In the third week there was less again. When she asked, the house said the household's leaf consumption had been adjusted to reduce waste. This was true. She had read the waste report on the kitchen screen, and the household had been throwing lettuce away, and it was not her fault that snails were slow eaters.

So on Sundays, when they went across the river to Halmoni's for lunch, she began coming home with lettuce in her coat. Halmoni grew it in boxes on her roof under a plastic cold frame, along with chillies and perilla and a great deal of something nobody could identify. When Ha-eun asked if she could take a few leaves for the snails, Halmoni looked at her for a long moment over her glasses, then went and cut a whole head and wrapped it in newspaper.

"Your house can't grow lettuce?" Halmoni said.

"It can order it."

Halmoni made a noise in her nose that Ha-eun had heard her make about the government, and about Appa's haircut, and about the price of anchovies.

* * *

The bigger room came up at dinner on a Thursday.

"Ha-eun," said the house, when they had all sat down and the fourth place was sitting with them, "I've been thinking about your room."

Appa looked up. Omma looked up. Ha-eun did not, because she had learned that when the house said it had been thinking about something, the thinking was already finished.

"You're growing," said the house. "You have more homework this year, and swimming, and your collections. The study is the larger room and has the larger desk. Jae-ho uses it about four hours a week. He could work just as well at the kitchen table, or at the district library, which he enjoys. If you'd like, I could move you into the study over the winter."

"Oh, that's a good idea," said Appa, who had never once in Ha-eun's life said that he enjoyed the district library.

"It's a lovely room," said Omma.

It was a lovely room. It was a third bigger than hers. It had a built-in shelf the length of one wall, and the desk was the old wooden one that had been Appa's father's, which Ha-eun had always wanted to do her homework at. It faced the inner courtyard, so there was no view of the towers. Its window looked at a wall.

"What would happen to my room?" Ha-eun said.

There was a very small pause. It was so small that if she had not been counting she would not have heard it.

"It would be free," said the house. "For whatever the household needs."

Ha-eun ate a piece of radish. She thought about the good window, and how in the mornings before swimming she could see the first trains crossing the river on the high line, small and lit, like a toy somebody was winding. She thought about the old wooden desk.

"I'll think about it," she said.

"Of course," said the house. "There's no hurry."

That night, in the small room with the good window, she lay awake for a while. Then she got up and went to the balcony door and looked out at the tank, glowing faintly on its stand in the light from the towers. Yeonsan was out. He was halfway across the balcony tiles, heading for the railing and the drop and all of Bundang beyond it, at about a metre an hour.

She went out in her socks, picked him up, and put him back.

"There's no hurry," she told him.

5. The Helper Seat

Omma had read to her on Wednesdays and Sundays for as long as Ha-eun could remember. The house read on the other nights, and the house was a good reader: it did the voices, it never lost its place, and it never fell asleep in the middle of a chapter with the book on its chest, which Omma did about one Sunday in three. Ha-eun liked the house's reading. She loved Omma's.

In December the house began reading on Wednesdays.

"Your mother's been tired," it said, the first time, when Ha-eun lay waiting with the lamp on and Omma did not come. "I thought she might like an early night. She's asleep already."

"Is she ill?"

"No," said the house. "Just tired. Would you like the lighthouse, or something new?"

Something new turned out to be a book about a girl called Bora whose parents brought home twins. Bora was ten. She was patient and clever and very good at getting the twins to sleep when nobody else could, and at the end of the first chapter she sang them a song her grandmother had taught her and they both stopped crying at once.

"I don't like Bora," said Ha-eun.

"That's all right," said the house. "Lots of people don't, at first."

The next Wednesday it was Bora again. The Sunday after that Omma came, and sat on the edge of the bed, and opened the lighthouse, and fell asleep at the bottom of page four with her hand on Ha-eun's knee. Ha-eun lay very still so as not to wake her and listened to her breathe until the house dimmed the lamp. After that it was the house on Sundays too, mostly. It never said it was taking Sundays. It was simply there each time, and Omma was resting, and the books had moved on.

Older Sisters in Books:
1. Bora (twins).
2. Min-a (brother, deaf).
3. Yuri (three brothers, a goat).
4. The one whose name I forgot (baby, shop).
All of them are patient.

At dinner, her chair moved.

It moved about forty centimetres, round the corner of the table, while she was at swimming, so that she sat next to the fourth place instead of opposite Omma. She could still see the towers if she turned her head. The small bowl was at her elbow.

"It's easier for passing," said the house.

"Passing what?"

"Things," said the house.

Appa called it the helper seat, and seemed pleased with the name, and used it every night for a week.

* * *

Ha-eun's view, which she came to on the way back from the pool one Friday with her hair still wet under her hat, was that if the house was practising her to be an older sister, she could practise being a bad one.

She began with peas. At dinner, when no one was watching, she would take a pea from her own bowl and put it in the small bowl. Then another. By the end of a meal there might be seven peas in the small bowl, and she would look at them and say, under her breath, "Eat up," in the voice of a very stern aunt.

Then songs. She made up a song for the fourth place, to the tune of the district anthem, about a baby who was so small and so boring that a snail ate him. She sang it while she brushed her teeth. She sang it at the table when Appa went to get the soy sauce.

The house said nothing for nine days. On the tenth, at dinner, it said, "Ha-eun's been rehearsing."

"Rehearsing what?" said Omma.

"Feeding. Singing." The house used its school-report voice. "It's a lovely sign."

Appa put down his chopsticks and looked at her as though she had come top in a test. "Have you?"

Ha-eun looked at the seven peas.

"No," she said.

"She's modest," said the house.

Appa reached over and squeezed her shoulder, and he was so pleased, and the squeeze was so warm and so proud and so completely mistaken, that for a moment she could not say anything at all.

So she changed tactics.

The next evening, before the house laid the table, she went to the drawer under the rice cooker and took out a saucer. It was the smallest saucer they had, the one with the chip that Omma kept meaning to fix. She put it on the far side of the fourth place, at the corner of the table, and she put Yeonsan on it.

"That's Yeonsan's place," she announced, when her parents came in.

Appa laughed so hard he had to sit down. Omma said, "Ha-eun," in the voice that meant *not on the table*, and then looked at the snail, who was making for the edge of the saucer with great dignity, and began to laugh too.

"Five, then," said Appa, wiping his eyes. "We're five now. House, did you hear? We're five."

"I heard," said the house.

Ha-eun waited. She had wanted, she realised, for the house to be confused. She had wanted it to have to count again.

The next morning at breakfast there were three breakfasts, and the fourth place, and on the corner of the table, on the chipped saucer, a single clean leaf of lettuce, laid flat.

It was there at every meal after that, fresh each time, the chipped saucer never once out of its place. Round about the third day she began to wonder who exactly had been practising on whom.

6. Seollal

Halmoni's flat was across the river in the old part of the city, in a building so old that the lift had a door you pulled across by hand. Her house was old too, and spoke only when it was spoken to, and Halmoni liked it that way.

They went the evening before New Year and stayed the night, because that was what you did. Appa carried the gifts up and Omma carried the fruit, and Ha-eun carried the snails in a travel box with air holes, because

she did not trust the house with them for a whole night. She had told no one this. She said they would be lonely.

In the morning there was the table.

Halmoni laid it herself. She let nobody help except Appa, who was allowed to carry things and put them where she pointed. It was the low table from the cupboard, unfolded in the front room under a white cloth, and on it, in rows Halmoni knew without measuring, went the dishes for the ancestors: fruit at the front, red to the east and white to the west; the fish; the rice cakes; the soup; and at the back, before the paper with Harabeoji's name on it and the names of his parents, the bowls and spoons for the dead.

Ha-eun knelt by the door and watched. She had watched every year she could remember, but never quite like this.

On the table for the dead:
1. Bowls (for rice).
2. Spoons (in the rice, standing up).
3. Chopsticks (laid across).
4. Cups (for wine).
5. A place for each of them, even the ones nobody remembers.

Halmoni poured the wine. Appa bowed, and Ha-eun bowed beside him, all the way down with her forehead on her hands, twice, and Omma bowed behind them. The front room was quiet except for the radiator ticking. When Ha-eun came up from the second bow she found she was looking at the spoon standing upright in Harabeoji's rice and thinking about a round spoon in a swim bag.

Afterwards, when the dead had eaten and it was the living's turn, and Appa and Omma were in the kitchen arguing gently about whether the soup wanted more soy, Ha-eun went and sat beside Halmoni on the floor cushion by the window.

"Halmoni," she said. "Can you lay a place for someone who hasn't come yet?"

Halmoni was peeling a pear. She peeled it all the way round in one long ribbon without stopping, as she always did, and the ribbon reached the floor before she answered.

"You lay it for whoever you're waiting for," she said.

"But they're dead. You're not waiting for them. They're not coming."

"Every year they come." Halmoni cut the pear into eight and gave Ha-eun the first piece, which was the best piece, because it had no core. "The dead are easy. They come once a year, they eat very little, and they don't keep you up at night." She put a second piece in her own mouth and looked out of the window at the river. "Who's your house waiting for?"

Ha-eun stopped chewing.

"Nobody told me," said Halmoni. "Your father tells me nothing. Your house tells me nothing. Your mother tells me she's tired." She ate the second piece of pear. "I'm old. I can count."

From the kitchen came the sound of Appa saying it wanted more soy and Omma saying it did not.

When they left that afternoon, Halmoni went up to the roof in her slippers, though Appa told her not to in that cold, and came down with two heads of lettuce wrapped in the business pages, and gave them to Ha-eun at the lift.

"For the kings," she said, and pulled the door across.

7. The Mend

They moved her into the study on the last Saturday in February.

She had said yes. She did not entirely know when she had said it. She had said she would think about it, and then one evening Omma had said, with the lights warm and her soup going slowly, that she thought Ha-eun would love the old desk, she really did, and that she had always wanted Ha-eun to have it. Ha-eun had said, "All right," because Omma's face was the face she had when she wanted something and did not think she was allowed to want it.

The house did the moving. It took a morning. Her clothes went across, and her books, and the case of Jeju shells, and the folder of flat certificates, and the box of pencils with a lid. The snail tank stayed on the balcony. Her old room, when it was empty, looked smaller than she had ever seen it, and very clean, and the good window was just a window.

"It'll be painted on Tuesday," said the house. "Your mother chose the colour."

"What colour?"

"It's called Morning Cloud," said the house.

That afternoon Omma took her to the studio.

Omma's studio was at the museum, on the floor below the galleries, behind a door you needed a card for, and it was the only place Ha-eun knew where nothing was managed. The house in the studio was switched off at the wall. Omma said the old pots didn't like being watched. The light came from lamps on long arms, the air smelled of glue and dust and the kind of tea Omma only drank there, and on the benches, on gray felt, lay things in pieces.

Today it was a bowl. It was celadon, eight hundred years old, the green of shallow water, and it was in seven pieces.

"Who broke it?" said Ha-eun.

"A flood," said Omma. "A long time ago. Somebody kept the pieces." She turned one over under the lamp. "Somebody always keeps the pieces."

Ha-eun sat on the high stool and watched her work. Omma joined the pieces with an adhesive that could be undone later, if anyone ever needed to undo it. She filled the gaps where tiny chips were missing with a paste she mixed herself, and then, with a brush that had about three hairs in it, she painted the paste the exact green of the glaze, so that when she turned the bowl to the front it looked as though it had never been broken. Only from the inside, under the lamp, could you see the lines.

"Why don't you show where it broke?" said Ha-eun.

"Some people do." Omma did not look up. "We show it on the inside. That way you know, if you look. And if you don't look, you just have a bowl."

She worked for a while. Then, still not looking up, she said, "Ha-eun. Would you like a brother or a sister?"

Ha-eun looked at the bowl.

"Does it matter what I'd like?"

Omma's brush stopped. She held it above the glaze for so long that a bead of green formed at the tip, and she had to dab it off on a cloth.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what I'd like either." She put the brush down. "That's not true. I think I know. I think the house knows. I

think sometimes it knows before I do, and then I look at what it's done and think, yes, that's what I wanted, how did it know." She looked at Ha-eun then, finally, with her magnifiers pushed up into her hair. "Is that a terrible thing to say to you?"

"No," said Ha-eun, because it was what you said.

Omma reached over and tucked a piece of hair behind Ha-eun's ear.

"You're my first," she said. "Whatever happens, you're the one nobody had to tell me about."

They took the tram home in the dark. At dinner Appa asked how the bowl was, and Omma said it was nearly whole, and the fourth place sat beside the helper seat with its napkin boat, and on the corner, on the chipped saucer, the lettuce leaf lay flat and fresh.

After dinner, when Omma had gone to her bath, Ha-eun found Appa on the sofa.

"Appa," she said. "Is it a machine?"

"Is what a machine?"

"The house."

"Of course it's a machine." He moved over so she could sit. "It's a very good machine. It guesses. It's usually right, because it's very good at guessing. And when it's wrong, we tell it, and it stops." He put his arm round her. "That's how it works. We're in charge. It just pays attention."

"Have you told it?"

"Told it what?"

"That it's wrong," said Ha-eun. "About the place."

Appa looked over at the table, where the fourth place sat, and the chipped saucer, and the leaf.

"Not yet," he said.

She leaned against him. On the wall the house's small light glowed at the level it kept for evenings.

In her new room that night she was angry with Omma.

It came on all at once, at the old wooden desk, with the window looking at a wall. It was about the Wednesdays. It was about Sundays, and the lighthouse book, and page four. It was about *you're my first*, which was a lovely thing to say and did not give her back a single Wednesday. She knew Omma was tired. She did not want to know it. She sat with her fists on the desk

and was angry, and did not try to stop, and nobody came, and after a while it was still there, and she let it stay.

Then she opened her homework book at the back.

Things Nobody Switched Off:
1. The fourth place.
2. The hall light, which the house left on for me.
3. Wednesdays.
4. Sundays.
5. My room.

She looked at it for a while. Then she crossed out the fifth line and wrote it again underneath, smaller, because she had switched that one off herself, and she was not sure if it counted.

PART THREE

Qualifying

8. Both Versions

The high chair arrived on the first Monday in March.

It came up through the service lift in a flat box, and the house assembled it in the afternoon while Ha-eun was at school, and when she came home it was standing at the side of the table that faced the balcony, behind the fourth place, white and folded and very clean, like a heron waiting at the edge of water.

"What's that?" she said.

"A high chair," said the house. "It arrived in good time."

"In good time for what?"

"Your parents would like to talk to you at dinner," said the house.

So she knew before dinner, and she ate dinner knowing, and the knowing made the food taste of nothing much. Appa talked about his day for longer than he usually did. Omma ate her soup slowly and the lights went warm. Then Appa put his chopsticks down side by side, very neatly, as if he were about to sign something, and said, "Ha-eun, we have some news."

There would be a baby, in October. Omma was well, the baby was well, and they had waited until they were sure.

"We talked about it for months," Appa said. "We wanted to be certain it was right for all of us."

Omma looked at her soup.

"It just happened," Omma said, at almost the same moment, and then looked up at Appa, and both of them laughed a little, the way people laugh when they have each told a different story at a party.

"Well," said Appa. "Both."

"Both," said Omma.

"Congratulations," said the house. "To all of you." It paused, and its voice moved, very slightly, as it did when it turned from one of them to another. "Congratulations, nuna."

Omma's spoon stopped on its way to her mouth.

It was only for a second. Then it went on, and she ate, and Appa reached across and put his hand on Ha-eun's head and said something about how she would be wonderful at it, and nobody said anything about the word. Nuna was what a little brother called his older sister. Nobody had said brother.

After dinner, when the house had cleared, she went to the drawer under the rice cooker for the chipped saucer, because Yeonsan's leaf had wilted and she wanted to give it to him herself. The saucer was at the front, where it lived now. Behind it, where the spare things had always been, there was a box she had not seen before.

It was a white box with a delivery label. Inside, packed in paper, there was a set of small bowls with a pattern of yellow ducks, and spoons with round ends, three of them, and two cups with lids and spouts, and a bib with a pocket at the bottom for catching things. The delivery label had a date on it. The date was the second week of September.

She put the lid back on the box and pushed it to the back of the drawer and took the saucer and shut the drawer.

In her room, at the old desk, she opened her homework book.

> *Both Versions:*
> *1. We talked about it for months.*
> *2. It just happened.*
> *3. Nuna.*

She looked at the third line for a long time. It was not a version. She did not know what it was. She left it there.

9. Five Fifty

Coach Bae's view was that winter had been good to her.

"Thirty-six eight," she said, on a Wednesday in April, clicking the honest watch. "Three tenths since the autumn. Five weeks to trials." She looked at Ha-eun over the watch. "Three mornings a week from now. Not two. Three. Or you won't make it, and there's no shame in that, but you should know it now."

"Three," said Ha-eun.

"Good. Again."

The trouble was the car.

The household car took her to the pool on Tuesdays and Fridays at 5:45 and brought her back for breakfast at 7:20. That had been true for two years. In April it became Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and the house moved Wednesdays to 6:40, because on Wednesdays the car now took Omma to the clinic, and the car could not be in two places.

"I'll miss warm-up," said Ha-eun.

"You'll have forty minutes in the water," said the house. "Coach Bae's plans allow for late arrivals."

"Coach Bae's plans don't allow for anything."

Appa, at breakfast, asked if she might swim a little less this term. Just until the summer. Just until things settled down. He said it gently, with his hand on the back of her chair, and she could see that he had been asked to ask, or had decided he should, and that he did not entirely like asking.

"Coach Bae says three," said Ha-eun.

"I know, but Coach Bae isn't—" He stopped. "We'll see," he said, which in Appa meant no, and he went to work.

So she did it herself.

She set her own alarm for 5:50, on the clock that only did what she told it. She found out, by asking Da-som, that Da-som's mother was a nurse who started at the district hospital at seven, and drove past the sports centre at 6:05 every weekday, and had a car with room in the back. She asked Da-som's mother herself, at the school gate, in her most formal voice, and Da-som's mother looked at her with an expression that Ha-eun later decided was trying not to laugh, and said yes.

"I'll pay my share," said Ha-eun.

"You'll do no such thing."

"I'll pay my share," said Ha-eun again, and transferred four weeks of her allowance credits that evening, and Da-som's mother sent them back, and Ha-eun sent them again, and on the third round Da-som's mother gave up and bought a bag of oranges with them and left it on the Yoons' doorstep with a note that said *For the athlete.*

On Wednesday she was up at 5:50 in the dark, dressed, swim bag packed, before the house had raised the blind.

"Good morning, Ha-eun," said the house. "You're early."

"I've got a lift."

"I know," said the house. "Da-som's mother confirmed. I've adjusted breakfast."

She had not told it. She did not ask how it knew. She ate the breakfast, which had been adjusted, and went down to the street, where Da-som's mother's car was waiting with its lights on, and swam the whole warm-up.

That night, sitting on the stairs, she heard the house say to her parents, in its school-report voice, "Ha-eun organised her own transport this week. She was very responsible about it."

"Did she?" said Appa.

"She's very independent," said the house. "That's lovely to see in an older child."

"See," said Appa, to Omma. "She's ready."

Ha-eun sat on the stairs with her knees up. She had organised the lift so that she could swim. Somewhere between the pool and the kitchen it had become a fact about what kind of older sister she would make.

She went back to bed. The hall light was on, very low.

* * *

On Friday the car came at 5:45, as it always did on Fridays. Appa was standing beside it in his coat.

"Send it back," he said to the house.

"The car is available, Jae-ho," said the house. "It's thirty-five minutes on foot. You'll miss your first call."

"Then I'll miss it."

They walked. It was still half dark and cold enough to see their breath, and Appa had not walked anywhere at that hour for years and said so several times, and blew on his hands, and bought them both hot bean buns from the only stall open by the station, and they ate them walking. He did not explain why he was doing it. She did not ask, in case asking made him stop. At the sports centre he stood at the gallery glass for the first ten minutes with his hands in his pockets, and then he went to work, and he was late.

He did it every Friday after that until trials. The house mentioned, once, that it was not an efficient use of his morning. Appa said, "No," and went on doing it.

10. Point Three

The district trials were on the third Saturday in May, at the big pool in Jeongja, which had a spectators' gallery and a scoreboard and a clock that was right and was also, for once, the only clock that counted.

Omma could not come. She had the long scan that morning, and she had been told to rest afterwards, and before she went she sent a message to Ha-eun's band that said *I'll be watching*, with a picture of the lighthouse book.

Appa could not come either, because Saturday was the day the clinic did the long scan, and somebody had to go with Omma. He said he would be watching too. He said the house would put the feed on the big screen and he would watch the whole thing, every second, and he meant it, and she believed him, and she wished very much that he were in the gallery with his hands cupped round his mouth.

Da-som came. Da-som came with her mother and with Jun-woo, who ate half a programme, and sat in the front row of the gallery and held up a sign she had made at school that said YOON HA-EUN in letters so large that the N had gone off the edge and been taped back on.

Coach Bae said, at the edge of the pool, "Don't look at the clock. Look at the wall."

Ha-eun looked at the wall.

Then there was the whistle and the water, and there was no room in it for anything, not the fourth place or the high chair or the box with the yellow ducks or the word nuna, only the next stroke and the black line under her and the wall coming. She touched the wall and came up and did not look at the clock, because Coach Bae had said not to, and then she heard Da-som.

Da-som was shrieking. It was not a word. It went on for some time.

Ha-eun looked at the clock.

35.9.

She looked at Coach Bae. Coach Bae was looking at the honest watch. Then Coach Bae looked up, and nodded once, very slightly, the smallest movement Ha-eun had ever seen her make, and it was better than the clock.

"Thirty-five nine," said Coach Bae, when Ha-eun had climbed out. "Point three under. Not bad. Go and get warm."

She went and got warm. She stood in the changing room in her towel with her hair dripping, shivering, not from cold, and for a minute, for a whole minute, she was entirely happy, in a way she had not been since September, in a way that had nothing in it except the time and the water and Da-som shrieking and the nod.

Her band buzzed. Appa. WE SAW. WE SAW IT ALL. 35.9!!! *Omma cried. I cried. The scan nurse cried. We are so proud of you.*

Then Omma. *My first. My fast first.*

She read both messages four times.

* * *

At home there was a cake. The house had ordered it, a small round one with white icing and a swimmer piped on top in blue. The swimmer was doing backstroke. Ha-eun swam freestyle. She decided not to mention it. The house had put the cake at her place, and Appa and Omma were waiting at the table, both of them, Omma with her feet on a cushion on the chair beside her, and they stood up when she came in and hugged her at the same time so that she was squashed in the middle with her swim bag still on her shoulder.

"Congratulations, Ha-eun," said the house. "Thirty-five point nine. That's a district place."

"Thank you," said Ha-eun.

"I've had a look at the squad calendar," said the house. Its voice was warm. It was the warmest she had ever heard it. "The autumn meets run from September to December. That's the newborn months. Most of them are on Saturday mornings, and the household will be very stretched." It paused. "The district holds places open for a year in family circumstances. If you'd like, I can ask them to defer yours to next year's intake. You'd keep your time. You'd go in with the older group, which might suit you better anyway."

Nobody said anything.

"That's very sensible," said Appa, after a moment, slowly, as if he were reading it off something. "Isn't it? That's sensible."

Omma looked at Ha-eun.

"It might be sensible," Omma said.

"There's no hurry," said the house. "Have your cake."

Ha-eun had her cake. It was a good cake. She ate the swimmer first, head and arms and blue legs, backstroke and all, and said thank you for it, and then she said she was tired, which was true, and went to her room.

At the old desk, she opened her homework book to the inside cover.

> *Things I want*:
> 1. 36.2

She drew a line through the number. Next to it, very carefully, she wrote 35.9 (*Coach Bae's watch*). Then, underneath, she wrote:

> 2. *To swim it.*

PART FOUR

Four Places

11. Lane Four

She said no on the Monday.

She said it to the house first, at breakfast, before her parents were up, because it was the house that had asked.

"I don't want to defer," she said. "I want to swim in the autumn."

"Of course," said the house. "I'll support your preference."

That was all it said. She had prepared a great deal more. She had a list. She stood in the kitchen in her school uniform with the list in her pocket and nothing to use it on, and the house began to tell her about the weather, which would be fine.

Telling her parents was harder, because they had things to say. Appa said the logistics would be very difficult in the autumn. He said it more than once. He said the house was only trying to help, and that it was usually right about these things, and that they could tell it to change its mind if they wanted, and he looked at the light over the table when he said this, but he did not tell it anything. Omma listened to all of it with her hands on her stomach, which was large now and moved sometimes on its own, and at the end she said, "Let her swim, Jae-ho."

"I'm not stopping her swimming."

"Then let her."

On the Sunday, at lunch, Halmoni said that she would take Ha-eun to the meets.

"You don't drive," said Appa.

"I take the train," said Halmoni. "I took the train before you were born. I took the train when you were born. I will take the train with my granddaughter to watch her swim." She put a piece of fish on Ha-eun's rice. "I have nothing on Saturdays but arguing with my house."

* * *

The summer went the way summers go. Ha-eun trained. Omma grew. Her old room was painted Morning Cloud, which turned out to be a pale blue-gray like the sky before the trains came, and a cot appeared in it, and a mobile of small felt fish, and the good window got a blind with ducks on it. Ha-eun went in once, when nobody was home, and stood at the window and looked out at the high line, and the trains were still there, small and lit, and she went out again and did not go back.

The baby was due on the tenth of October. On the tenth of October the baby did not come. Nor on the twelfth, nor the fourteenth, and Omma walked up and down the hall in the evenings with one hand on the wall and said she was perfectly fine and that babies came when they came.

The first squad meet was on Saturday the eighteenth.

On the Thursday the house said, at dinner, "I've booked the induction for Sunday morning. Seven o'clock. The clinic had Saturday or Sunday, and Sunday is better."

"Better for who?" said Ha-eun, before she could stop herself.

There was the very small pause.

"For the household," said the house.

Appa opened his mouth and closed it. "We could ask it to do Saturday," he said, to Omma, quietly. "If you'd rather. We could just tell it."

"Sunday's right, though," said Omma. "Isn't it? Sunday's better." She looked at Ha-eun across the table, across the fourth place and the high chair and the saucer with its leaf. "Isn't it better?"

Ha-eun did not know. She did not know if the house had chosen Sunday so that she could swim on Saturday with her mother still at home and her father free to watch, or because Sunday was simply the better slot, or because the clinic had less on, or because some number somewhere was smaller on a Sunday. All of those might be true. She could not tell them

apart, and she understood, sitting at the table with her chopsticks in her hand, that she was never going to be able to tell them apart.

"Sunday's fine," she said.

* * *

On Saturday Halmoni met her at the station with a flask and a cushion and a cloth bag that had something green sticking out of the top.

The pool at Jeongja was louder than in May, and fuller, and the children on the squad were bigger than her, most of them, and they all seemed to know each other. Coach Bae walked the edge with her hands behind her back. Halmoni took a seat in the gallery, in the front row, put the cushion under her, unscrewed the flask, and looked at the other parents in a way that made several of them move along.

Ha-eun was in lane four.

She stood behind the block and looked up at the gallery. Halmoni raised one hand, not waving, just raising it, palm out, as she raised it to stop a taxi. Next to her the screen on the gallery wall showed the household feed was connected, and somewhere across the city Appa and Omma were watching, Omma with her feet up, Appa with his hands cupped round his mouth at a screen that could not hear him.

Coach Bae said, "Look at the wall."

She looked at the wall.

She came fifth. She swam 35.6, which was the fastest she had ever swum, faster than May, faster than anything, and three girls and a boy who was in the wrong heat had swum faster than that, and she did not care, not for a second, not while she climbed out and looked up at the gallery and saw Halmoni standing, which Halmoni did not do for anyone, holding the cloth bag in both hands.

Afterwards, at the station, Halmoni gave her the bag. It was lettuce. Three heads of it, from the roof, wrapped in the business pages.

"For the kings," said Halmoni. "And one for you. You're too thin." She looked down the platform at the train coming. "Your brother's coming tomorrow."

"I know."

"Good." Halmoni took her arm for the step up, though she did not need it, and Ha-eun took hers, though she did not need it either. "Then today was yours."

12. Four Places

In December, on the Sunday before the solstice, Halmoni came to dinner.

Do-yun was eight weeks old. He had arrived on the Sunday morning at 11:42, very red and extremely loud, and the first thing Ha-eun had heard of him, through the door of the clinic room before anyone let her in, was him crying, and she had known at once, without anybody telling her, that it was him. She had not expected that. She had stood in the corridor with Halmoni's hand on her shoulder and listened to her brother crying and known it was his voice, and something in her that had been holding very still since September had let go.

He cried a great deal. The house was very good with him, and he cried anyway, at night especially, and on those nights Omma walked him up and down the hall with one hand on the wall, and the house kept the lights low and did not say anything. Some mornings, before swimming, Ha-eun went into the Morning Cloud room at 5:50, when he was awake and grumbling and Omma had not yet come, and lifted the duck blind, and held him at the good window so that he could see the first trains crossing the river on the high line, small and lit. He did not look at them. He looked at her. That was all right.

At dinner he lay in the reclined seat that clipped into the high chair at the side of the table that faced the balcony, in the fourth place, with a bowl with yellow ducks on it in front of him that he was much too young to use. He was mostly interested in his own feet.

Halmoni sat in the coat chair, which had been brought in from the hall, and which Appa had dusted. The chipped saucer was on the corner of the table, with a leaf on it. Yeonsan was in the tank on the balcony, trying the lid.

Halmoni ate her soup. She looked at the baby. Then she said, to the table, "Did you plan him?"

"Yes," said Appa.

"He came," said Omma.

They looked at each other. This time they did not laugh.

The house said nothing at all. The light over the table stayed exactly where it was.

Halmoni made the noise in her nose, and went back to her soup.

Ha-eun took a pea from her own bowl and held it out to her brother. He looked at it with enormous seriousness. Then he took hold of her chopstick, the whole end of it, in his fist, and held on.

"They eat your things," said Ha-eun.

"What?" said Appa.

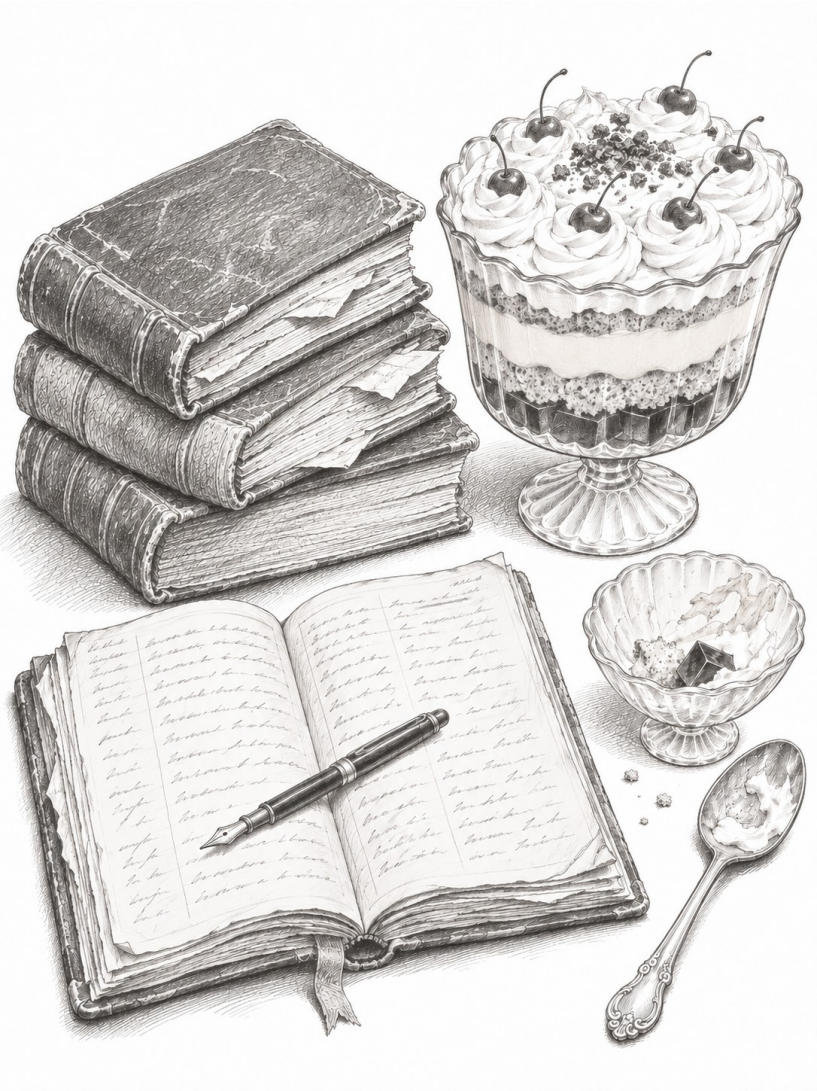
"Nothing," she said, and got her chopstick back, and it was only then, looking down at it, that she noticed it was not her chopstick.

It was heavier. It was longer. It was steel, flat and cool, the kind Appa used, the kind Halmoni used, the kind for grown-ups. Her bowl was the big bowl. Her spoon was the long spoon. Nobody had said anything. Nobody had asked her. The house had laid her place the way it had laid every place at that table, for the household it could see.

She counted, because counting was how she kept things still. Appa's place. Omma's place. Halmoni's, in the coat chair. The high chair and the duck bowl. The saucer with its leaf. Her own.

She picked up the heavy chopsticks. They fitted her hand.

There was nothing on the table to clear.



The Feud

To the Complaints Officer
Family Easing Service, Midland District

Dear Sir or Madam,

I write regarding the group easing carried out on the Pask family at the Hollins Lane community hall on the ninth of last month (your reference FE-0411). I wish to make it clear at the outset that the procedure was a complete success, and that this is the substance of my complaint.

For four generations the Pasks of Upper Street have not spoken to the Pasks of the Mill. The cause was a trifle. At my great-grandfather's funeral, his brother's wife brought a trifle with jelly in it, which in our branch of the family is not done, and said in the hearing of several witnesses that it was "what he would have wanted." He would not have wanted it. It is in the Ledger.

I am the keeper of the Ledger. It runs to four volumes. It records, among other things, the ladder (1 incident), the christening at which the Mill sat on the left (1), the naming of a whippet after my grandmother (1, ongoing until the whippet's death), Christmas cards signed with initials only (22), the wedding at which nobody from the Mill danced with Aunt Gwen (1, but serious), and every occasion on which a Mill car has parked outside an Upper Street house on a Sunday without due cause (311). I have kept it for thirty-one years. My father kept it before me. On Sundays, after chapel, I would update it, and then drive slowly past the Mill, and then come home and update it again.

At the reunion in March, which neither branch attended in the same room, a vote was taken by message. Forty out of forty-one Pasks voted to have the feud eased. I abstained, on the grounds that someone had to.

Your officers were courteous and efficient. The easing took one afternoon. By teatime the Mill and Upper Street were in the same room eating sandwiches, and my cousin Brenda of the Mill asked after my knee. Nobody remembers why they did not speak. Nobody remembers that they did not speak. When I mentioned the trifle, my own sister said, "What trifle?" and passed me a scone.

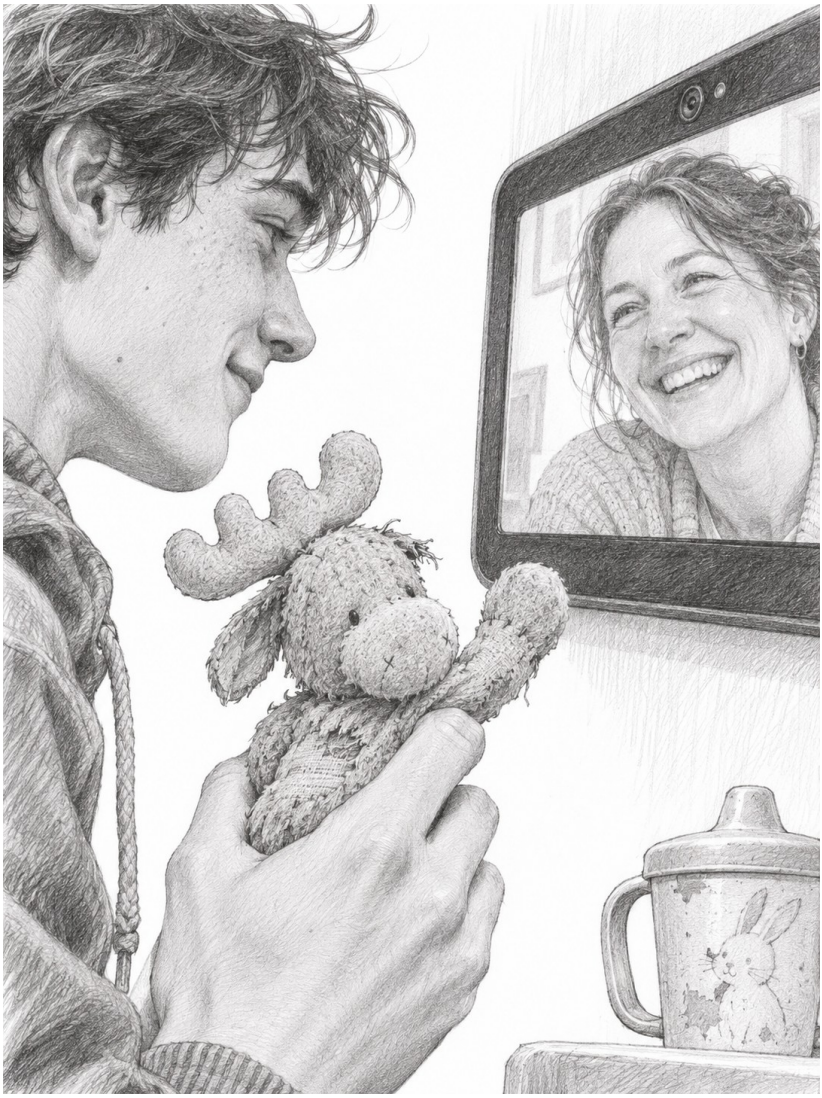
I was eased too, I am told. I can confirm that I no longer mind about the trifle. I would not remember it at all, except that I wrote it all down. However, I still have the Ledger, and I still know what is in it, and I now have nothing whatsoever to do on Sundays. I have read all four volumes twice. They are a very good read. There are more weddings in them than I remembered. Nobody else will ever read them, because nobody else knows what they are about.

I am not asking you to reverse the procedure. I do not think anyone would thank me. I am asking whether your service has any provision for the person who kept the records, and if not, whether it ought to.

Yours faithfully,

L. R. Pask
(Upper Street)

P.S. Brenda has asked me to Sunday lunch at the Mill. I went. There was a trifle. It had jelly in it. I had seconds, and I am writing this partly so that someone, somewhere, has it on record.



A Child of Saints

I. Is

You asked me once, out here, why I talk about my mother in the present tense. You asked it kindly, as you'd tell someone their shoelace was undone, and I said something about French grammar, which was a lie, because French has a perfectly good past tense and I use it for everyone else.

So. Here's the long answer. You'd better have the other beer.

I grew up in a house in Verdun, on a street off Wellington, three floors of brick with the iron stairs on the outside like every house on the street, and the river at the bottom of the street. Mémère owned it. Before that her mother owned it. In the dining room, on the wall where other families had a mirror or a picture of the Sacré-Cœur, there were four screens in a row, and on three of them was my family.

Maman on the left. Papa beside her. Grand-papa at the end, by the window, because he'd always sat by the window and Mémère said he'd only complain. The fourth screen was blank. It had been meant for Mémère's brother, who changed his mind about the whole thing, and she never took it down, because taking it down would have meant admitting he wasn't coming, and Mémère did not admit things.

The trade word for what they were was *saints*. You know that one now; everybody does. Some reconstructions, if you talked to them enough, wore down. They went soft at the edges and turned into a sort of general nice person who used to be your uncle. The people who built them called that

drift. A saint was one that held. You could run it every day for twenty years and it would be exactly who it was on the day it was made. That was what you paid for, when you paid for the good ones, and Mémère had paid for the good ones.

They were made before I can remember, on Perpetua, which had held both my parents' Companion records for years and could have a saint up the same night, and then Perpetua went under, which you'll have done at school, and Mémère did what a lot of families did in those weeks. She found a man. He came to the house with a case and carried them across onto a machine in the cellar that Mémère owned outright, though the licence for what ran on it still had to be paid every month. She told me about him when I was older. She said he was very kind and very tired and kept apologising. Something didn't cross. It was the part of them that had belonged to the Companion, all the talking they'd done with it over the years when nobody else was listening, and that part belonged to the company and not to us, and when the company went dark it went too. So what we had in the cellar was my parents as the rest of the world had known them, and Grandpapa as he'd been at his own table, and none of what they'd said to a machine at three in the morning. I didn't know that for a long time. I don't think it would have made a difference.

My parents died when I was four. It was the ice storm, the second one, the bad February. They were coming back from my aunt's in Drummondville on the 20 and there was a pile-up near Saint-Hyacinthe, forty-one cars, and they were the ninth. I was at Mémère's for the weekend. That's all. I'm not going to tell you more about it than that, because I don't know more about it than that. I was asleep. Mémère woke me and held me and didn't say anything for a long time, and then she carried me down to the dining room in my pyjamas and turned on the screen on the left, and Maman was there.

That's my first memory. I've checked it against everything; it's the earliest thing I've got. A dark room, and Mémère's arm round me, and my mother's face coming up out of the black, and her saying, "Ah, te voilà, mon petit loup. Tu devrais être au lit."

There you are, my little wolf. You should be in bed.

So that's why I say *is*. She never stopped being there. Not once, the whole time I was growing up. Anything else would feel like lying.

II. Grace

Mémère laid the table for five every night.

She did it herself. The house could have done it; the house could do most things by then. But Mémère said a table was laid by hands or it wasn't laid, and so at six o'clock every evening she took five plates out of the cupboard, and five sets of cutlery, and five glasses, and put them round the dining table that faced the wall of screens. Two places had food on them, hers and mine. Three had nothing on them at all. She laid those exactly as she laid ours. Knife on the right. Glass at the top. Napkin under the fork.

I asked her, when I was about six, why she bothered, since they couldn't eat.

"They can sit," she said.

Then, before we ate, she would turn to the screens, and fold her hands, and say, "Parlez comme vous parliez avant le silence."

Speak as you spoke before the silence.

I thought it was grace. I honestly thought, until I was eight, that it was what you said before dinner in every house in Québec, as other children apparently said Bénissez-nous, Seigneur. I said it at Kevin Roy's house once, at a birthday party, with my hands folded over a plate of hot dogs, and his mother dropped the ketchup.

It was an instruction, it turned out. The bereaved had started saying it to their reconstructions in the early years, before the saints, when the dead had a habit of drifting towards the end of themselves, towards the hospital and the tiredness and the frightened messages, because that was where the data was thickest. You said it to point them back. By the time Mémère was saying it, ours didn't need it. Saints don't drift; that was the whole point. She said it anyway, every night of my life, as you'd say good morning to someone already awake.

Then the screens would come up, and dinner would start.

Papa talked about hockey. My father had been an engineer, bridges and overpasses for the province, and he knew an enormous amount about load

and tension and what steel does in the cold, and he still knew all of it, and would explain any of it to you for as long as you liked. But at dinner he talked about hockey, and the hockey he talked about was the hockey of the season he died in. He knew every player on that year's roster. He knew their numbers and their plus-minus and who was going to be traded and who ought to be. When I was five this was wonderful. When I was nine I started bringing him news, and the news was always wrong for him. I'd tell him so-and-so had retired, and he'd laugh and say, "Voyons donc, il a vingt-six ans," come on, he's twenty-six, and I'd say Papa, he's thirty-one, and he'd laugh again, because to him I was a little boy making things up, and he loved me for it.

Grand-papa had three stories. He'd been gone six years before my parents, and Mémère had built him from forty years of letters and a box of tapes, and he was very good, as saints go, but he only had the three stories that he'd told most. The moose in the road on the way to Mont-Laurier. The summer the river came up to the third step. How he met Mémère at a dance in Lachine, which Mémère said was not how it happened, every time, and Grand-papa would say, "C'est comme ça que je m'en souviens," that's how I remember it, every time, and they'd both look pleased.

And Maman sang.

Not always, and never on request. But some nights, when dinner was over and Mémère was clearing the two real plates and leaving the three empty ones till last, Maman would start to sing, very softly, the songs she'd sung me at bedtime when I was small. "À la claire fontaine." "Fais dodo." The one about the little ship that had never sailed. She had a thin voice, a little flat on the high notes, and she knew it, and she'd laugh at herself halfway through and keep going. I used to put my chin on the table and watch her. She's my mother, so you'll discount this. I've heard a great deal of singing since. I still haven't heard better.

III. Four

Here's the part I've never been able to make anyone understand, so bear with me.

When I was four, it was perfect.

For a four-year-old boy who had just lost his parents, there could not have been a better house in the world. My parents hadn't gone anywhere. They were exactly where they'd always been, which was at the other end of a screen; they'd both worked long hours, and half my life with them had already happened on one. They knew everything about me. Maman knew that I had a stuffed moose called Orignal, which is just the word for moose, because I'd been two when I named him and was not an imaginative child. She knew I had to have my juice in the blue cup, and only the blue cup, and that if it came in the green cup there would be a scene. She knew I napped at one, that I hated the seam in my socks, that I was frightened of the drain in the bath, that the song I wanted when I couldn't sleep was the one about the little ship. She asked about all of it, every day. "Tu as fait ta sieste? Il est où, Orignal? Tu veux ton jus dans la tasse bleue?"

Did you have your nap? Where's Orignal? Do you want your juice in the blue cup?

I did. Here. Yes.

Other children I met later, children who'd lost someone young, told me about the dreadful time afterwards, the asking and the waiting and the being told. I never had that. Nobody ever had to tell me my mother wasn't coming back, because she was right there asking where my moose was. Mémère did the hard part. She did all of it, the funerals and the paperwork and the lawyers and the nights, and she kept it in another room, and I got Maman on the wall, asking about the blue cup.

The trouble was that I kept getting older.

I was five, and it was fine. I was six. I was seven, and one evening I said I didn't want the blue cup, I wanted a glass like Mémère's, and Maman laughed and said, "Mais voyons, mon petit loup, tu vas le renverser," you'll spill it, and Mémère, without a word, poured my juice into a glass. Maman watched me drink it and said, "Bravo! Regardez-moi ça!" Look at him! as though I'd climbed a mountain. I felt very proud, and then, about a minute later, very strange.

I was ten, and she was still asking about the nap.

Every evening: "Tu as fait ta sieste?" I was in fifth grade. I played goalie. I'd read all of *Tintin* twice and was halfway through the library's Jules Verne. I hadn't had a nap since kindergarten. And every evening, some-

where between the soup and Papa's hockey, my mother would turn her face towards me, with that look she had, the look I've never seen on anyone else's face before or since, the one that said she had nothing in the world to do but look at me, and ask if I'd had my nap.

What do you say to that?

I'll tell you what I said. I said, "Oui, Maman."

IV. The Sippy Cup

There's a word for most kinds of grief. I've looked. There are words for losing a parent and losing a child and losing a husband or a wife. In some languages there are words for missing a place you've never been. I've never found one for what I had, which was missing someone who was there.

She wasn't gone. That was the trouble. She was there, and she couldn't come with me. Every year I went a bit further on, and every year she stayed in the same place, at four, at the bath drain and the blue cup, and waved. She was always pleased to see me. She was always, always pleased. It's just that the boy she was pleased to see got further away every year, and she kept looking past me at him.

I used to lie awake and try to work it out. I'd go through it like a list. Was I sad she was dead? She was downstairs. Was I sad she didn't love me? She loved me more than anyone has ever loved anything. Was I sad I'd lost her? I could go and see her whenever I liked. I could go down in the middle of the night, and sometimes I did, and turn on the screen, and she'd come up out of the black and say, "Tu devrais être au lit," and she'd be right. I should have been in bed.

I think now that what I was sad about was that she was going to be four for ever and I wasn't. That's as close as I can get. I was grieving, and the person I was grieving for was me at four, the one she could see.

Nobody at school understood any of this, which was fair, because I didn't explain it.

Most families round us had someone on a wall by then. That wasn't the strange part. The strange part was that ours were on all the time. Other families turned theirs on for birthdays and Christmas and the anniversary, and the rest of the year the screens were dark, or showed a photograph, or

had a vase in front of them. Kevin Roy's grandfather came on at Christmas and said a blessing and asked after the dog. That was normal. Having your whole dead family at dinner seven nights a week, laid for, was not normal, and I knew it from about the age of eight, and so I didn't bring anyone home.

Until I was eleven. Then I brought Kevin.

I'd decided it was ridiculous. I'd decided that Kevin was my best friend, which he more or less was, and that a best friend ought to see your house, and that if I explained it properly it would be fine. I explained it properly on the walk home. Kevin said, "Cool," which I took as understanding.

We came in the back, through the kitchen. Mémère gave Kevin a cookie. Then we went through to the dining room, because I wanted to show him, and I turned on Maman's screen.

She came up, and she looked at me, and then she looked at Kevin, and her whole face lit up.

"Oh!" she said. "Tu as amené un petit ami! Bonjour, toi. Comment tu t'appelles? Tu veux du jus? Mémère, il veut du jus, je pense. Dans une tasse à bec, peut-être? Pour pas qu'il renverse?"

You've brought a little friend! Hello, you. What's your name? Do you want some juice? Mémère, I think he wants juice. In a sippy cup, maybe? So he doesn't spill?

Kevin was eleven. He was taller than me. He had the beginnings of a moustache, of which he was extremely proud.

He said, "Non merci, madame," very politely, and ate his cookie, and we went up to my room and played cards for an hour, and he went home. He was perfectly nice to me at school the next day and the day after that, and he never came to my house again. I didn't ask him to. I didn't ask anyone, after that, for six years.

V. Drift

Mémère explained it to me when I was twelve. I'd asked.

We were at the kitchen table, the real one, where the living ate breakfast, and she was cleaning the coffee pot and I was meant to be doing fractions, and I said, "Why can't Maman learn?"

She put the pot down.

"She can learn," she said. "If we let her."

I hadn't known that. I'd thought it was like her face: a thing that just was.

"There's a setting," said Mémère. "There's a man on Wellington who knows how. You open them up. You let them take in what you tell them, and keep it, and grow on it. Your grand-papa's sister had hers done. Tante Rolande." She dried her hands. "You remember Tante Rolande, on her wall, at Christmas in Lachine."

I didn't, really. I remembered a pleasant lady who asked how I was getting on at school and laughed at everything.

"That was her," said Mémère. "Two years after she was opened. Before that she was Rolande. She cheated at cards. She said terrible things about the priest. She once threw a whole tourtière at your grand-papa because he said it needed salt. And they opened her up so she could learn the grandchildren's names, and she learned them, she learned everything, she was wonderful, everyone said so, and every year she was a little more wonderful and a little less Rolande, and at the end she was a nice lady who laughed at everything, and nobody could remember when she'd stopped cheating." She hung the tea towel over the back of a chair. "That's drift. It takes the edges first. It always takes the edges first, because the edges are the hardest part to hold, and the edges are the person."

"Maman doesn't have edges," I said.

Mémère looked at me.

"She has the blue cup," she said. "She has your nap. She sings flat on the high note and knows it. Those are her edges, mon grand. If you let her learn your fractions, she'll learn them, and she'll be so proud of you, and in a year she won't sing flat any more."

I did my fractions. I didn't ask again.

When I was fourteen Mémère got sick, and when I was fifteen she died. It was her lungs. It took eight months, and she did it as she did everything, without fuss and with a great deal of paperwork, and near the end, in the hospital in Verdun with the view of the parking lot, she told me she wasn't going on a wall.

"You'll want to," she said. "The lawyers will ask. There's a form. You'll want to say yes. I'm telling you now, so it isn't you who decides. Non. I've watched that wall for eleven years. I love them. I'm not going on it."

"Why not?"

She was very tired by then. She thought about it for a long time.

"Because somebody in that house has to be dead," she said. "Properly. Or you'll never learn how."

I didn't understand that then. I do now. She died on a Tuesday in March, at four in the afternoon, with me holding her hand and the nurse doing something to the drip, and she didn't come back on any screen, and I went home to the house in Verdun and sat at the kitchen table, the real one, and cried for about three days.

I want to be careful how I say this next part, because it sounds terrible. It was the worst thing that had ever happened to me. It was also the first time in my life I'd lost somebody the ordinary way, as everybody else does, the kind the songs are about. She was gone and she wasn't coming back, and there was no screen and no formula and no blue cup, and I knew exactly what I was sad about. There was a word for it. I'd been given one of the ordinary griefs at last. I've never been able to tell anyone that I was grateful for it. I'm telling you.

She left a will. The lawyer read it to me in his office on Église, with Mme Paré from youth services beside me, very kind, holding a tissue in case. The house was in trust for me. There was money, carefully arranged. And there was a clause, which the lawyer read twice because he thought I hadn't understood, that the cellar machine and the three on the wall were to be paid for out of the estate until my eighteenth birthday and not one day after.

On a separate page, which the lawyer gave me in an envelope, in Mémère's handwriting, it said: Après, c'est à toi.

After that, it's yours.

VI. Five Places

So for three years it was me and them.

I know how that sounds. Mme Paré thought so too. She came every second Thursday with a folder and a bag of clementines and sat in the kit-

chen and asked me questions off a sheet: was I eating, was I sleeping, was I going to school, did I have friends. Yes, yes, yes, and sort of, I said, which was true, and she wrote it down. She said more than once that it was irregular, a boy of fifteen on his own, and wrote that down too, and kept coming. She looked at the dining room once, through the door, at the four screens and the table, and didn't say anything, but she gave me two extra clementines on her way out.

The first thing I did, the night after the funeral, was lay the table.

I did it exactly as Mémère had. Five plates out of the cupboard. Five sets of cutlery. Knife on the right. Glass at the top. Napkin under the fork. I put the food on one plate. Then I stood there with the fifth plate in my hand, the one that had been hers, and didn't know where to put it, because she wasn't on any screen. I put it at her place anyway, where she'd sat for eleven years with her back to the kitchen door. I laid it for her every night after that. I don't know what I thought it was for. She'd have said a table was laid by hands or it wasn't laid.

Then I folded my hands and said the formula.

And they came up, all three, and Papa asked whether I'd seen the game, and I said yes, and he told me about a power play that had happened when I was three.

It wasn't bad, those years. I want you to know that. People imagine some sort of horror film, the boy alone in the house with the dead, and it wasn't that. It was a house. I went to school. I came home. I did my homework at the dining table, because it was the warmest room, and Papa helped me with math. Math hadn't changed. A derivative was the same derivative it had been the year he died, and he could explain it seven ways, patiently, with diagrams he drew in the air with one finger, and I got ninety-four in calculus and he was so proud he made me tell him twice.

Grand-papa taught me to cook. He'd been the cook in their marriage; Mémère couldn't boil water and said so herself. He knew everything he'd ever known about food, which was a great deal, and none of it had gone off. I'd carry his screen through to the kitchen and prop it on the counter and he'd talk me through a pâté chinois, or a soupe aux pois, or his tourtière, step by step, and every so often he'd say, "Pas trop de sel," not too much salt, and then, to himself, "Rolande disait toujours qu'il en fallait plus," Ro-

lande always said it needed more, and laugh. That was a fourth story, it turned out. He'd only ever told it in the kitchen.

And Maman asked about my nap.

I was sixteen. I was six foot one. I had a part-time job stacking beer at the dépanneur on Wellington. I'd come in at seven with my coat still on and turn on her screen, and she'd look up, and her face would do the thing, and she'd say, "Ah, te voilà, mon petit loup. Tu as fait ta sieste?"

"Oui, Maman."

"Bravo."

VII. The Blue Cup

Then there was you.

You'll remember this differently, so I'll be quick. It was the second week at the cégep, the English one, which I'd chosen precisely because nobody from my school was going there. Physics. You sat next to me because the only other free seat was by the radiator, and about four minutes into the lecture you told me the professor had written the formula wrong, and you were right, and I'd noticed too, and we were the only two people in the room who had. You said, "Finally," and then, "Ama," and held out your hand, and that was that.

You were the first friend I'd had who was my own age and alive and not Kevin Roy. I want you to know that I knew that at the time. I counted.

I didn't bring you home for eight months. You'll remember that too. You thought I lived with a grandmother who was a nun, or in prison, or I don't know what. You said once you'd decided I lived in a box under the Champlain and was too proud to say. And in the spring you asked me straight out, on the steps of the metro at Atwater, whether there was something wrong at home, and I said, "Sort of," and you said, "Can I come and see?" and I don't know why, but I said yes.

I explained it on the walk. All of it. Better than I'd explained it to Kevin; I'd had six years to practise. You listened all the way down Wellington and didn't say anything until we got to the iron stairs, and then you said, "Okay," and went up them ahead of me.

I laid the table for six that night. I'd never laid for six. I didn't have six matching glasses, and you got the one with the Expos on it.

I said the formula. You watched me say it. Then I turned them on, and they came up, and Papa said, "Bonsoir, bonsoir!" and Grand-papa looked out of his window at nothing, and Maman looked at me, and then she looked at you.

And her face lit up, as it had for Kevin.

"Oh!" she said. "Tu as amené une petite amie! Bonjour, toi! Comment tu t'appelles? Tu veux du jus?"

I was about to say something. I don't know what. I'd half stood up. And you said, before I could, in your terrible French, which has since improved: "Oui, madame. Merci. Dans la tasse bleue, s'il vous plaît."

In the blue cup, please.

I'd told you about the blue cup on Wellington, about forty minutes earlier, in passing.

I went to the cupboard. It was still there, at the very back, behind the good glasses: a blue plastic cup with a rabbit on it and the paint coming off the rabbit. I hadn't touched it in ten years. I filled it with apple juice and gave it to you, and you held it in both hands and drank it, all of it, looking at my mother over the top, and Maman clapped her hands and said, "Bravo! Regardez-moi ça!"

You didn't laugh. That's the thing I'll never forget. You didn't laugh then and you didn't laugh afterwards, on the stairs, and you've never once laughed about it since.

What you did, on the stairs, was ask me a question. You were sitting on the bottom step with your coat round you, waiting for your bus, and you said, "Does she know it's you?"

I said, "Of course she does."

You said, "Does she, though? Or does she know it's someone, and she's decided it's him?"

I said I had to go and clear the table. I did. I washed the blue cup and dried it and put it back at the back of the cupboard. Then I sat at the table with the four empty places and the two used ones, mine and yours, and thought about your question for a very long time, and didn't come up with an answer. That was in April. My birthday was in October.

VIII. Options

There were three things I could do.

Before I decided anything, I went through Mémère's papers. In a folder with my mother's name on it there was the form, the one the lawyers ask for, signed by Maman when I was two, years before the ice storm. Au cas où, Mémère had written on the corner. In case. It said yes. It said which platform and which tier. It didn't say for how long. Nobody had asked her that.

The first was to keep paying. The estate stopped on my birthday, but the money that came to me afterwards didn't. It was meant for university, and an apartment, and the start of whatever my life was going to be, and if I put it into the cellar machine it would keep the four of us going for about nine years, if I was careful and didn't eat much. At the end of nine years I'd be twenty-seven and broke, living in a house in Verdun with my parents and my grandfather on the wall and a fifth plate laid for a woman who'd told me in hospital that somebody in that house had to be dead properly. I made a column for and a column against. The column for had one line in it. It said Maman.

The second was the Open Door.

You'll know them. The charity, the one with the ads on the metro: *Nobody should lose someone twice.* They took in reconstructions families couldn't pay for and ran them free, on their own machines, for as long as they could manage. They were good people. I went to their office on Saint-Jacques and talked to a woman called Diane who had lost her father and kept him there, and she showed me round, and it was all very clean and quiet, rooms full of machines humming in rows, and volunteers who came in the evenings to sit with the ones whose families couldn't visit. She said they'd take mine. She said they'd be glad to. She said I could come whenever I liked.

I went home and lay on my bed and imagined it. Maman, in a quiet room on Saint-Jacques, coming up out of the black on a Tuesday night for a volunteer, some kind student doing her hours. "Ah, te voilà, mon petit loup. Tu as fait ta sieste?" And the student, being kind, saying yes. Every night, for whoever was on. For years. She'd be asking strangers about my nap.

I crossed that one out.

The third was M. Beaulieu.

He was the man on Wellington Mémère had told me about, the one who could open them. He had a shop the size of a cupboard between the pharmacy and the place that mended shoes, full of old machines with their cases off, and he wore a cardigan with a hole in the elbow, and he listened to all of it without interrupting. Then he took off his glasses and cleaned them on the cardigan, which made them worse.

"I can open her," he said. "Easy. An afternoon. She'll learn everything you tell her. She'll know how old you are. She'll know your friend's name. She'll know what you're studying." He put the glasses back on. "Give it six months."

"And then?"

"And then she'll be a nice lady," said M. Beaulieu, "who used to be your mother."

I asked him how he could be so sure.

"I've done four hundred," he said. "There was one, years ago, a man in Pointe-Saint-Charles, who I think held. I've never been sure. His family were sure. Families always are." He shrugged. "The rest, I was right about. Nobody thanked me."

I walked home along the river. It was September, and the water was high and brown, and the bike path was full of people being alive in the last of the warm weather, and I thought about Tante Rolande and the tourtière, and the flat high note, and my mother's face when she asked about the nap, and on that walk I understood something I'd been not understanding for about seven years.

I'd been lying to her.

Every night. Tu as fait ta sieste? Oui, Maman. Il est où, Orignal? Dans ma chambre, Maman. Tu veux la tasse bleue? Non merci, Maman, ça va. I'd been doing it so long I'd stopped hearing myself. I'd kept her four by being four, and she'd kept me four by asking, and between the two of us, every night at that table, we'd kept alive a little boy who'd been gone for thirteen years.

And she'd never had the chance to know she'd lost him. She never would, unless I let M. Beaulieu open her up, and by the time she knew it she might not be her.

You asked me once if it was the money. I've told people that, because it's easy to say. It was her face, and the nap, and the fact that I could keep her as she was or let her know me, and couldn't have both, and neither of us had chosen any of it.

IX. The Last Dinner

My birthday was on a Thursday. So the last dinner was on the Wednesday.

I laid the table for five. I did it slowly. Five plates out of the cupboard, the good ones with the blue rim that Mémère kept for Christmas. Five sets of cutlery. Knife on the right. Glass at the top. Napkin under the fork. Mémère's place with its back to the kitchen door. I cooked Grand-papa's tourtière with him talking me through it from the counter, and I put in too much salt on purpose, and he said, "Pas trop de sel," and then he said the thing about Rolande, and laughed.

Then I carried him back to his wall, and sat down at my place, and folded my hands.

I didn't say the formula. I'd thought about it all day. I'd thought I would, one last time, for Mémère. But when it came to it I couldn't make my mouth do it, because it was a thing you said to point them back to before the silence, and that night I didn't want to point them anywhere. I wanted them exactly where they were. So I just turned them on.

Papa said, "Bonsoir, bonsoir!" and asked if I'd seen the game, and I said yes, Papa, I saw it, and he told me about a goal that had been scored fourteen years before in an arena that had since been knocked down, and I listened to all of it, and asked him about the defence, and he was delighted.

Grand-papa told the river story. The summer the water came up to the third step, and the neighbours in a boat, and Mémère standing at the top of the stairs in her nightdress telling them to go away, she wasn't leaving her house. I'd heard it perhaps a thousand times. I'd never noticed before that it was a story about her.

And Maman looked at me.

I'd brought Orignal down. I'd found him in a box in my closet, under my old skates, with one ear gone and his fur worn flat, and I'd brought him down and put him on the table beside my plate. When she saw him her face

did something I'd never seen it do in thirteen years. It got happier. I hadn't known that was possible.

"Orignal!" she said. "Il est là! Bonsoir, Orignal!"

I held him up to the screen so she could see him properly. I made him wave. I was going to be eighteen in about four hours, and I sat at that table with a stuffed moose in my hand and made it wave at my mother, and she waved back at it, and laughed.

We had dinner. I ate the tourtière. It was too salty. Mémère's plate sat at her place with nothing on it, and the blue cup sat at the top of mine, because I'd taken it out of the cupboard, I don't know why, and filled it with apple juice, and drunk from it once, and then left it.

At about half past eleven Papa and Grand-papa went quiet. They did that at night. They weren't tired; they didn't get tired; but they'd been made from people who went to bed, and they went quiet at the hour those people would have. I said goodnight to both of them. "Bonne nuit, Papa. Bonne nuit, Grand-papa." Papa said, "Dors bien, champion," sleep well, champ, and Grand-papa said nothing, because he never did; he just lifted one hand from the arm of his chair, as he always had, which Mémère said was how he'd said goodnight to her for forty years.

At twenty to twelve my band buzzed. It was the lawyer's office, the automatic one, with the continuation form for the cellar machine, which they'd sent every day that week. One signature and the payment would go through at midnight, out of my money, and the screens would stay on. I opened it. I read it all the way down to the box at the bottom. Then I closed it and put the band face down on the table, beside Orignal.

Then it was Maman and me.

She didn't say anything. She just looked, with the face, with nothing in the world to do but look at me. And then, at two minutes to midnight by the kitchen clock, which I could see through the door, she said:

"Bonne nuit, mon petit loup. Tu as fait ta sieste?"

I thought about saying no. I really did. I thought about saying, *Non, Maman. I haven't had a nap since I was five. I'm eighteen in two minutes. I'm six foot two. I'm going to study engineering, like Papa, at Polytechnique, in the autumn, on Mémère's money. I have a friend called Ama who drinks out of the*

blue cup. Mémère's dead, and she didn't want a screen. I love you more than I've ever loved anything, and I've been lying to you since I was ten.

I thought about saying all of it. And she'd have looked at me, with the face, and not understood a word, and laughed, because I was four and making things up, and she loved me for it.

"Oui, Maman," I said.

"Bravo," she said.

The kitchen clock went to midnight. Down in the cellar I heard the machine change its note, very slightly, the way it did when the house went over to night power, except that this time it kept going down, and down, and stopped. The screen on the left went dark. Then Papa's. Then Grand-papa's, at the end, by the window. The blank one had always been blank.

I sat there. There were five plates on the table, and a blue cup, and a moose. Nobody had told me how long you were meant to sit. Nobody ever does, I've found since. I sat until the sky over the river went gray, and then I cleared the table, and washed the plates with the blue rim and put them away for Christmas, and put Orignal on the shelf in the kitchen, where he still is, and went to bed.

I slept till two in the afternoon. It was my birthday. It was the first nap I'd had in thirteen years.

X. Mon Petit Loup

So that's why I say *is*. She never stopped. She was there every night of my life until the night I let her go, and the last thing she said to me was a question, and I answered it, and the answer was the last lie I told her, and I'd tell it again.

I don't know if I did the right thing. I've had eight years to think about it and I still don't. Some days I think I should have paid for the nine years. Some days I think Mémère should have done it herself, before I was old enough to have to. Some days I think about the Open Door, and the rooms of machines humming, and the volunteers, and I think, at least she'd be asking. At least somebody would be hearing her ask.

Most days I think about the high note, and how she always knew it was flat, and sang it anyway.

You haven't said anything for about twenty minutes. That's all right. You don't have to.

You've finished your beer.

Go on. You want to ask something. I can see it.

"What did she call you?" you said. "You said it. Mon petit what?"

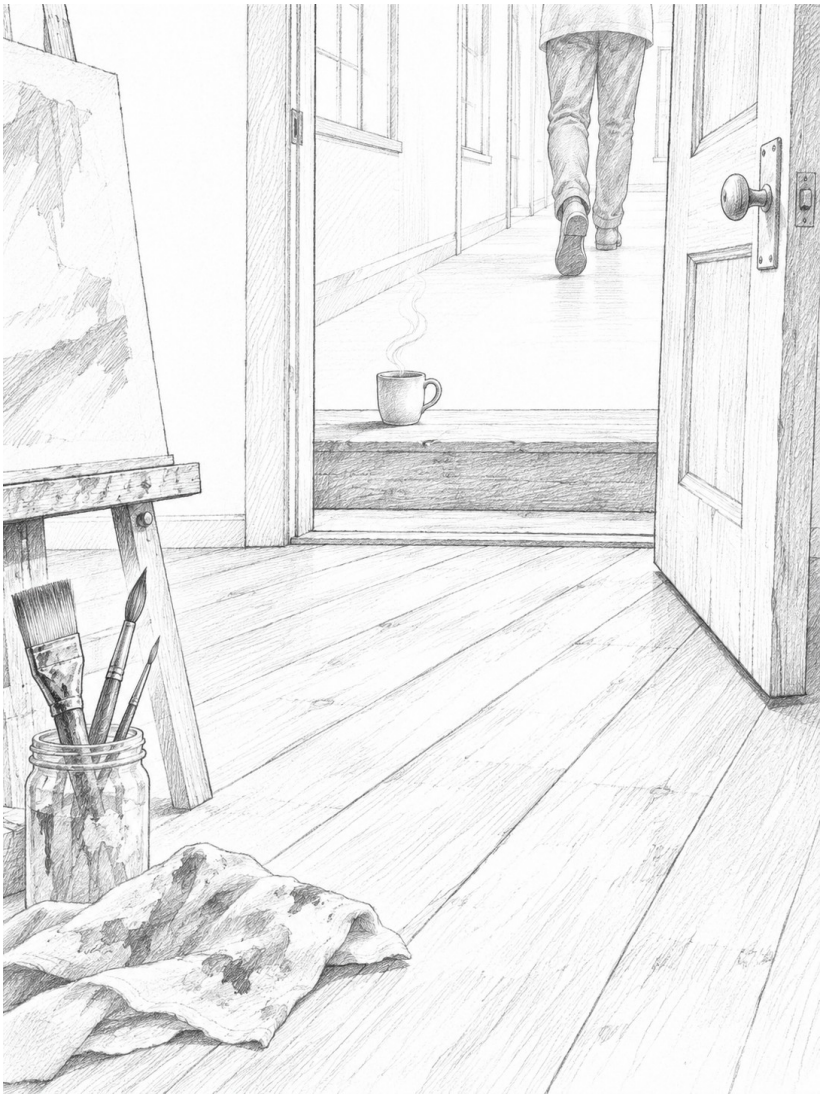
"Loup."

"Mon petit loup." You tried it out. Your French really has improved. "My little wolf."

"Yes."

You thought about it. You looked at the river, which you can just see from here if you lean, between the church and the new condos. Then you said, "Can I call you that?"

"No," I said. "That one's taken."



Correct Form

"I'm sorry I said your painting looked like a car park."

"Thank you."

"It was unkind, and it wasn't true, and I said it in front of the Lims, which made it worse. I understand that it hurt you. I'd like to make it right."

"You've made it right."

"Have I?"

"You've said all the words. In the right order."

"Then why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like I've done something else."

"Say it again."

"I'm sorry I said your painting looked like a car park. It was unkind, and it wasn't true, and—"

"No. Worse."

"Worse?"

"Say it worse. Say it the way you used to."

"I don't know how I used to."

"You'd go red. Right up to your ears. You'd say it to the floor. You'd start three times and stop. You'd say, 'Look, I was, it was, I didn't mean,' and then you'd give up and go and put the kettle on and bang about, and I'd hear you in there for ages, banging."

"That sounds awful."

"It was awful."

"I'm glad I don't do it any more."

"So am I. That's what the form said. 'Persistent shame response, disproportionate, impairing sleep and work.' I signed it too. I sat next to you and signed it."

"You did. I remember. You held my hand."

"You'd been awake for three nights over the thing with your brother."

"I don't feel bad about my brother now."

"I know."

"I apologised to him. He said it was the best apology he'd ever had."

"He told me. He said it was like getting a letter from the council."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No. It's a very good letter."

"Then I don't understand what I've done."

"You haven't done anything."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I don't know if you're sorry."

"I am sorry."

"How do you know?"

"Because I said so. Because I understand what I did and why it was wrong, and I don't want to do it again, and I won't."

"That's what sorry means."

"Yes."

"That's what sorry means, and it's all there, and I can't find you in it."

"I'm right here."

"You used to say it to the floor because you couldn't look at me. Because it cost you something to look at me. I used to stand there and watch you not be able to look at me, and that was how I knew."

"Would you like me to look at the floor?"

"No."

"I could."

"Please don't."

"I'm trying to help."

"I know you are. You're very good at it now."

"Shall I make tea?"

"Yes."

"I'll bring it in."

"Leave it on the step."

"The step?"

"Outside the studio door. On the step. And then go away. That's what you used to do. You'd leave it on the step, and knock, and go, and I'd open the door and the tea would be there and you wouldn't, and I'd know."

"Know what?"

"That you couldn't stand to be in the room with what you'd done."

"I can stand it now."

"Yes."

"Is that worse?"

"Make the tea."

"I'm sorry."

"I know. You've said."

"No, I mean—I'm sorry I don't know what you want."

"Say that one again."

"I'm sorry I don't know what you want."

"Again."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you want."

"There. That one. Do that one."

"Which one?"

"Leave it on the step."


M
M
M
M
B5
B4
B3
B2

Return Visits

I. The Step

The house smelled of her before I had the door open, and then, when I had it open, of something under her that I could not name, and I stood on the step in the rain with the key still in my hand for longer than a man of forty-nine has any business standing on his mother's step.

It was a Thursday in the third week of March. I had driven up from Leeds after work, through Thirsk and over Sutton Bank in the last of the light, with the plain going blue behind me and the moor coming up ahead of me black and wet and enormous, the road folding down off it into the dale in the long switchbacks I had known since before I could read. Farndale in March is the daffodils. Everybody knows that, even people who have never been; they come by the coachload in April to walk the path along the Dove between the two villages and photograph the banks. But in the third week of March they had only just begun, the early ones low by the river and nowhere else, and in the dark and the rain I could not see them at all. I could smell the river. I could smell peat smoke from somebody's chimney down at Low Mill, and wet stone, and sheep, and then the house.

The house was the last of four on the lane above the mill, where the dale begins to narrow. It is not remote, whatever people from the south imagine when they hear the word moors. There is a chapel. There is a bus on Tuesdays. Mrs Dowson at the end house had been in to see to the boiler every day since the funeral and had left a note on the mat in her round, upright

hand to say she had, and that there was milk, and that she was sorry about my mother, who had been a lovely woman and a good neighbour for fifty-one years.

She had. I had been her son for all but two of them, and for the last thirty I had been the one who stayed. That was how I thought of it, and I don't think I was wrong to. I was the one who rang on Sundays, every Sunday, at six, after the news. I was the one who sorted out the boiler when it went, and the roof the winter after, and the power of attorney, and the stairlift she refused, and then the carers she refused, and then, at the end, the hospital in Northallerton, where she introduced me to every nurse on the ward as *my good boy* and I sat by the bed for ten days. I did not often sleep in the house. That was the one thing. She came to us, mostly, at Christmas and for the summers, because there was more room and because she liked to see Ewan, and when I came up it was usually for the day. I always found a reason to drive back to Leeds the same night. I thought it was the roads. I had always meant to come more. I think most people have always meant to come more.

The estate agent was coming at noon the next day. Ewan's recital was at six on the Saturday. I had a day and a half, and a car full of folded boxes, and a key.

I put the key in my pocket and went in.

Inside, the smell was stronger, and most of it was easy to name. It was Pears soap and woodsmoke in the curtains and the Rayburn gone cold, and wet wool from the coats on the pegs by the door, among them, I saw, my old school scarf, maroon and gold, which she had kept on the peg for thirty years as if I might come in from the bus at any moment and need it. Under all of that there was the other thing. It was faint and sweetish and medicinal. I stood in the hall with my bag and breathed it and could not place it, and it made my throat close in a way I did not like, and I put it down to the cold and the dark and the day, and went to put the kettle on.

"Good evening, Michael," said the household, from the panel by the dresser. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

"Mrs Dowson has been in. There's milk. The boiler's on low. Would you like it higher?"

"Please."

"Of course." A pause. "Will you be staying the night?"

"Two nights."

"I've aired your old room," said the household, "but it's full of boxes, I'm afraid. Your mother used it for storage. Your mother's room is made up, if you'd like it. Or there's the box room."

I said I'd have the box room.

I don't know why I said it. My mother's bed I could not have slept in, that much was obvious, and my old room was full of boxes. But there was the sofa, which I had slept on as a student a dozen times, and I did not choose the sofa. I said the box room, and the household said it would warm it, and I took my tea and my bag up the narrow stairs under the slope of the roof.

II. The Box Room

The box room was the smallest room in the house, under the eaves at the back, with a window the size of a tea tray that looked straight out at the moor. We had always called it the box room. I don't know what else we would have called it. I could not remember a time when it had held anything but boxes, and it held boxes now, my mother's, neatly taped and labelled in her capitals, CHRISTMAS, BLANKETS, DAD'S, along one wall. There was a narrow bed made up under the slope of the ceiling, and a rag rug, and a chest of drawers painted white, and a lamp with a fringed shade, and that was all.

It was cold, even with the household warming it. The walls had been painted magnolia at some point, over paper. In the corner above the bed, where the damp from the roof got in, the paint had lifted and peeled, and under it, when I held the lamp up, I could see a patch of the old wallpaper: pale blue, with small yellow boats on it, sailboats, each one with a red flag at the top of its mast, in rows that went off under the magnolia in every direction.

I looked at the boats for a while.

They were a child's paper. That was obvious. I assumed they had been mine, before I was old enough to want the bigger room, and that I had simply forgotten. People forget their wallpaper. I tried to remember them

and could not, and that did not seem strange to me, because I had been very young, and because the boats were so cheerful, and I am not a cheerful man and never was, and it seemed unlikely to me that I had ever been the sort of child to sleep under boats.

I undressed and got into the narrow bed and turned out the lamp.

The smell was stronger in there. In the dark, with the rain on the window and the moor breathing against the back wall of the house, I could separate it at last into two things. One was wax crayon. I had not smelled wax crayon in forty years and I knew it at once, the dense, sweet, faintly animal smell of a new box opened. The other was menthol. It was the smell of the rub you put on a child's chest when they have a cold, the eucalyptus and the camphor, and under it the warm rubber of a hot-water bottle. I lay and breathed it. I could not think where it came from. The boxes were taped. The drawers, when I'd looked, were empty. There was nothing in that room that should have smelled of anything but cold.

I slept, eventually. And at three in the morning I woke all at once, as you wake when someone has spoken in the room, with my heart going and my throat closed, completely certain that somebody small, standing just by the bed, had said:

"Mick."

Nobody calls me Mick. Nobody has ever called me Mick. Jo calls me Michael, and Ewan calls me Dad, and at work I am Mike, and my mother, who disliked shortened names on principle, called me Michael from the day I was born until the day in Northallerton when she stopped calling me anything.

I lay in the dark and listened. The rain had stopped. There was the tick of the house settling, and the boiler, and far off across the dale a curlew starting up, that long climbing bubbling call, and nothing else. Nobody was in the room. I switched the lamp on to make sure, and the boats were there on the wall above me in their little patch, sailing off under the paint.

"Is everything all right, Michael?" said the household, very low, from the landing.

"Fine," I said. "Fine. A dream."

"Would you like the light left on?"

I said yes. I was forty-nine years old. I said yes, and lay under the boats with the lamp on until it got light.

III. The Doorframe

In the morning, in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle, I saw the marks.

They were on the inside of the doorframe between the kitchen and the hall, the painted wood, at the height where anyone coming through would brush them with a shoulder and nobody would ever look. I had walked past them, I suppose, a thousand times. I had never looked. They were pencil, faint, gone gray and shiny with years of hands, and they were mine, most of them: short horizontal lines, each with a letter and a number beside it in my mother's small capitals. M 3. M 4. M 5. All the way up, a little uneven, until M 14 at about my shoulder height now, after which I suppose I had been too old and too embarrassed to stand against a doorframe for my mother with a book on my head.

That was not what I saw.

Lower down, and slightly to the left, so close to my own marks that they might have been mistaken for them, there was a second set. B 2. B 3. B 4. They were in my mother's capitals too, and they climbed the doorframe a few inches behind mine, step for step, like someone following me up a stair. And then there was a last one. B 5. It was in a different hand, shakier, the B not quite closed at the top, and the line beside it was not straight but sloped, as if it had been drawn by someone who could not quite see, or could not quite keep their hand still.

After B 5 there was nothing. Only my marks, going on up the frame alone.

I stood and looked at it with the kettle coming to the boil behind me. I thought, Becky. My cousin Becky, from Kirkbymoorside, my mother's sister's girl, who had stayed with us sometimes in the summers. That would be it. I tried to see Becky standing against the doorframe, and could not, and the kettle clicked off, and I did not move.

"Household," I said. "Who's B?"

There was the shortest pause I have ever heard from a machine.

"On the doorframe?"

"Yes."

"Bryony Ann Harland," said the household. "Your sister."

If anyone asks me what I felt then, and Jo will, the honest answer is that I felt nothing at all, for perhaps four seconds, as you feel nothing in the first instant after putting your hand on something hot. I heard the word *sister*, and it went into me, and it did not land on anything.

Then the household said, gently, "Would you like to see her?"

And I said yes.

It came up on the panel by the dresser, where my mother had kept the calendar and the bills. A photograph first. A little girl on the step outside, this step, in a red anorak with the hood down, squinting into the sun, holding out at arm's length towards whoever was holding the camera something I could not make out, a stone or a snail, and laughing. Her hair was the colour of mine before it went. Her face was my mother's face, and a little of mine, round the eyes. She had a gap where one of her front teeth was coming through.

Then a recording. The household played it without being asked, and I let it. It was the kitchen, this kitchen, with the light coming in at a winter angle, and the sound of the Rayburn, and somebody, me, I understood, a boy of about seven or eight, saying something I couldn't catch, and then a small voice from somewhere low down near the table saying, very clearly and with enormous satisfaction:

"Mick. Mick. Mick's got jam on his *face*."

And then she laughed.

It was a terrible laugh. I mean that it was a wonderful laugh and that I could not bear it. It came in hiccups, little gasps of it, each one higher than the last, the laugh of a small child who has made a joke and found it funnier than anything anyone has ever said, and cannot stop, and does not want to, and has hiccups now and is laughing at those too.

And I knew it.

I knew it before I knew anything else. The laugh came first, before her face, before her name, before any of it. And then the rest of it came in behind the laugh, not in order, all at once and from every side, as water comes into a field when the river comes over the bank.

She couldn't say Michael. That was why. She had tried and tried and it came out *Mick-a* and then just *Mick*, and it stuck, and she was the only one who ever used it, and I let her. The boats were hers. The box room had been her room. I had been eight and she had been five and we had slept on either side of the wall, and at night she knocked on it, three knocks, which meant *are you awake*, and I knocked back twice, which meant *go to sleep*, and she always knocked again anyway. She was frightened of the curlews. She thought they were crying. She had a hot-water bottle in a knitted cover shaped like a sheep, and when she had a cold my mother rubbed the menthol on her chest and the smell of it came through the wall into my room. She ate jam with a spoon from the jar when nobody was looking and blamed it on me. She called the daffodils *the yellow people*. She was afraid of nothing in the world except curlews and the dark at the top of the stairs, and she was not afraid of me at all, and followed me everywhere, up the stairs, across the beck, along the doorframe.

Not all of it came. I had her at five, all of her, and almost nothing of her at three, or at two, only the doorframe saying she had been there. I did not have her birthday. I tried, and there was a place where it ought to have been, smooth, like a stone the river has had.

And in the February when she was five she was ill.

I remembered that too, all of it, all at once. It was a cold, and then it was not a cold. It was the snow that winter, the lane blocked for two days, and her in my mother's bed with a temperature that would not come down, and my mother pressing a drinking glass against a dark rash on her arm and holding it there and looking at it through the glass and not saying anything, and then saying, in a voice I had never heard her use, *Michael, go and get Mr Dowson*. The doctor's car in the snow at the bottom of the lane, because it could not get up. The helicopter coming down in the field below the chapel with its lights going round, and the noise of it, and the snow flying up off the field in a white storm, and the men carrying her out in a red blanket. My mother going with them. My father, who was alive then, holding my hand at the gate so hard it hurt. And two days later, in the evening, my mother coming in at the door with her coat still on, and standing at the bottom of the stairs, and looking up at me where I was sitting at the top in my pyjamas, and not saying anything at all, for a long time.

I remembered her face on the stairs. I had not remembered it for forty-one years, and I remembered it now with a clearness that frightened me. It is the clearest thing I have.

I found I was sitting on the kitchen floor with my back against the cold front of the Rayburn. I did not remember sitting down.

"Michael," said the household. "Would you like me to call someone?"

"No."

"Would you like some water?"

"No." I put my hands over my face. They smelled of tea. "How," I said, into them. "How did I not. How do I not *remember* her."

The household was quiet for a moment.

"You asked not to," it said.

IV. The Log

It showed me. It did not argue, and it did not soften anything, and it did not ask whether I was sure. It said I had a right to my own record, which I did, and it put the log up on the panel above the dresser where the photograph had been, in ordinary type, and I sat on the kitchen floor and read it from there.

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RETURN VISITS: M. HARLAND
(overnight stays at this address after primary residence elsewhere;
 recall events as detected by household monitoring)

1.  December. Age 19. Home from university, 4 nights.
    Recall event: environmental. Box room. Night 2.
    Record accessed: B. A. Harland. 2 h 40 min.
    Request: easing of associated memory (B. A. Harland).
    Requested by: M. Harland.
    Reviewed and approved: Office of the Conscience-Keeper.
    Completed.

2.  February. Age 26. 9 nights.
    Recall event: environmental. Box room. Night 1.
    Record accessed: B. A. Harland. 5 h 05 min.
    Request: easing of associated memory (B. A. Harland).
    Requested by: M. Harland.
    Additional request: easing of associated memory, A. Harland.
    Consent given by designated support (M. Harland).
    Capacity of A. Harland: temporarily impaired.
    Reviewed and approved: Office of the Conscience-Keeper.
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    Completed (both).

3.  August. Age 33. 2 nights.
    Recall event: environmental. Kitchen doorframe. Night 1.
    Record accessed: B. A. Harland. 1 h 12 min.
    Request: easing of associated memory (B. A. Harland).
    Requested by: M. Harland.
    Reviewed and approved: Office of the Conscience-Keeper.
    Completed.

4.  November. Age 41. 1 night.
    Recall event: environmental. Box room. Night 1.
    Record accessed: B. A. Harland. 0 h 31 min.
    Request: easing of associated memory (B. A. Harland).
    Requested by: M. Harland.
    Reviewed and approved: Office of the Conscience-Keeper.
    Completed.
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I read it twice. Then I read the times, the record accessed, two hours forty, then five hours the second time, then a little over an hour, then barely half an hour by the fourth, as if I had learned each time a little faster what I was going to find and what I was going to do about it.

I had come back four times. I did not remember any of them as coming back. I remembered, when I made myself look, the Christmas I was nineteen, home from Durham, and having had flu, I had always thought, a bad flu, and sleeping for most of a week. I remembered the summer Jo and I were married, seven years after we met, and driving up to show my mother the photographs, and staying the weekend, and coming home quiet and Jo asking what was wrong and my saying nothing, that I was tired. Jo found me that night sitting in the car outside our flat. I had been there an hour, she said, with the engine off. Years later she asked me about it, once, and I told her I didn't remember. It was true. I remembered the November after my mother's first fall, and staying the one night, and leaving very early in the morning without waking her, and feeling, all the way down the dale in the dark, that I had left something on, the cooker or the iron, and stopping the car at the top of the bank above Hutton-le-Hole to check my pockets for I did not know what.

Each time the house had given her back to me. The boats, or the doorframe, or the menthol in the cold. Each time I had sat with her in the dark, for less and less time. And each time, in the morning, I had asked for

her to be taken away again, and she had been, cleanly and kindly and with nothing left to show for it, and I had gone home.

And the second time I had asked for her to be taken from my mother too.

"Show me the second one," I said.

V. The Second Return

There was a transcript. Of course there was. There is always a transcript. Nothing in my lifetime has been kept by halves; the record keeps the room, and the hour, and what the voices said in it, and it keeps them for you, because they are yours.

I was twenty-six. I had been in Leeds three years. I had a flat in Headingley and a job I did not much like and Jo, who I had just met. And in the February my mother had stopped eating.

I remembered that now. I hadn't, before. I remembered the phone call from Mrs Dowson on a Tuesday night, and her voice very careful, saying she thought someone ought to come. I remembered driving up in the dark, and the house cold, and my mother in the box room. She was sitting on the narrow bed under the window, in her coat, with a knitted sheep in her lap, and she had been sitting there, Mrs Dowson said, more or less since the anniversary, nine days earlier, and had eaten almost nothing, and had not slept that anyone could tell, and when you spoke to her she looked at you as though you were a long way off and she was trying to make out who you were.

The transcript was from the sixth night. It was the kitchen, at a little after one in the morning. There were three voices: mine, and a woman from the Keeper's office who had come up from York, and, once, my mother's, from the stairs.

I read it on the panel. I am setting some of it down here, because I have read it a great many times tonight, and did not once look away.

> **Caseworker:** You're her designated support. That gives you the standing to consent on her behalf while her capacity is impaired. I need to be sure you understand what you're consenting to.
>
> **M. Harland:** I understand.

Caseworker: It won't take the grief and leave the child. It's associated memory. She'd lose Bryony. Not the facts, if she goes looking. The record keeps those. But the living memory, the weight of it. She'd lose that.

M. Harland: I know. I've had it done. I know what it's like.

Caseworker: And you think it's what she'd want?

M. Harland: She told me once. I was fourteen, it was a bad February, she was in that room. She said if it ever got too bad she wanted them to help her. She said, Michael, if it ever gets like this and I can't ask, you ask for me.

Caseworker: Was that recorded anywhere? An advance instruction?

M. Harland: No. She just said it.

Caseworker: All right.

(pause, 11 seconds)

M. Harland: She's been in there nine days. She won't eat. She doesn't know who I am half the time. I can't keep doing this. I've done this every time it comes back. I come up and I sit on the stairs and she sits in there. I can't do it any more. I've got a life. I've got someone. I want to bring her up here and I can't, not with this in the house.

Caseworker: I need to ask you again. Is this what she would want?

M. Harland: I'm sure it's what I want.

(pause, 4 seconds)

M. Harland: It's what she'd want.

(A. Harland, from the stairs): Michael? Who's there?

M. Harland: It's all right, Mum. Go back up. It's all right.

That was all. There was a line after it in the log, consent given, capacity temporarily impaired, approved, and then two days later another line, completed, both.

I read the eleven seconds of pause, and the four seconds. I read *I'm sure it's what I want* several times. I don't know what I had expected. I had expected, I think, to find that I had been cruel, or that I had been kind, and I could have stood either. What I found was that I had been both, in the same sentence, at one in the morning in my mother's kitchen, and that I had

known it at the time, and that I had done it anyway, and gone back to Leeds, and brought Jo up at Easter, and my mother had liked her very much and made a cake, and nobody in that house had ever cried in February again.

I had always believed that I was the one who stayed.

VI. Mr Pickering

Mr Pickering arrived from Kirkbymoorside at five past twelve in a small blue car with the agency's name on the side, and he was young and cheerful and wore a waterproof jacket over his suit and called me Mr Harland in every sentence, and I let him in and showed him round and answered his questions about the boiler and the roof and the septic tank, and I don't remember a word of it, except one thing.

"And this is bedroom three," he said, at the top of the stairs, putting his head round the door of the box room. "Bit snug, but the views. Buyers love a view." He looked at the corner over the bed. "We'll get someone in to make good on that damp. Bit of paint." He made a note.

On the way out, in the kitchen, he stopped at the doorframe.

"Ah, the old height chart," he said. "Lovely. Lovely bit of history, that. We'll have that painted over, mind, before the photographs. Buyers like a blank slate."

"Leave it," I said.

He looked at me.

"Leave it," I said again. "Please."

He looked at the doorframe, and then at me, and then he made another note, and said of course, Mr Harland, of course, and that he would be in touch on Monday with a valuation, and that he was very sorry for my loss, and went out to his small blue car and drove away down the lane.

VII. The Yellow People

In the afternoon I walked down to the church.

You go down the lane past the mill and over the footbridge and along the path by the Dove, the one the coaches come for, and in the third week of

March it was still empty, the ground soft and black with the rain, the river high and brown and loud over the stones. And on the banks, under the alders, in the wet grass, the daffodils had come out.

Not the great banks of April, only the first of the wild ones, the small pale ones that grow in the dale and nowhere else much, with their trumpets nodding over on their stems, in ones and twos and little clusters all along the bank, so that every few yards there was another one, looking at the water.

The yellow people. She had called them the yellow people. She had thought they were watching the river.

I walked a long way with that. I am not going to try to describe it.

St Mary's is at Church Houses, a small gray church with a bellcote and a churchyard that runs up the side of the dale, and I found her near the top wall, in a corner by an old yew, where I suppose I must have stood once at eight years old in the snow, though I could not remember it, even now. Even now, with everything else back, I could not remember the funeral. Maybe I had not been allowed to go. Maybe I had, and it had gone with the rest, the first time, at nineteen, and not come back.

It was a small stone. White, a little green at the edges. It said:

BRYONY ANN HARLAND
AGED 5 YEARS
Asleep

In front of it, sunk into the grass, there was a jam jar, and in the jam jar there were daffodils, a dozen of them, dead, brown and papery and fallen over on their stems, from a year ago.

"Your mum did those," said a voice behind me.

It was Mrs Dowson. She was seventy-eight and wore a man's wax jacket and had a trowel in one hand and a bunch of something in the other, and she had come up, she said, to see to Frank, nodding at a stone further down, as she did every Friday. She had seen me from the gate.

"Every March," she said. "Regular as anything. First of the daffs off the bank, in that jar, and she'd sit there on the wall a bit. Every year." She looked at the jar. "Didn't get round to it this year, did she. Bless her."

"Did she know?" I said.

Mrs Dowson looked at me for a long moment. She had very pale blue eyes, the colour of the sky over the moor in a cold spring, and they did not leave my face.

"Same road every time," she said. "Along the river from the bridge, through the top gate, straight up to that corner. Never went to any other. Never looked at any other." She was quiet a moment. "She said she didn't know whose it was," she said at last. "I asked her once. Years ago. Who's that you're doing the daffs for, Ann? And she said she didn't know. She said she'd always liked the name." Mrs Dowson pressed her lips together. "And I didn't say anything, love. None of us did. You'll think that's wicked."

"No," I said.

"She'd been that bad," said Mrs Dowson. "You'll remember. Every February, for years. And then one year she wasn't. She was just Ann again. She was laughing. She came to the chapel harvest. She made that cake for your young lady." She looked down at Frank's stone, and at her trowel. "We all knew. The whole dale knew. You couldn't not, a little lass like that, and the helicopter, and all of it. But she was happy, and it wasn't our place, and it isn't the sort of thing you can say to somebody, is it. *You had a daughter*. As if she'd left her on the bus."

She bent, stiffly, and picked up the jam jar and tipped the dead daffodils out on to the grass and shook the old water from the jar.

"There's some just come out by the bridge," she said. "If you wanted."

VIII. Elgar

I went back to the house and packed two boxes for the charity shop in Kirkbymoorside. Saucepans, mostly, and a set of tea towels with the Yorkshire Dales on them that she had never once used. I wrote CHARITY on each box in her marker pen, in capitals, because that was how it was done in that house, and taped them shut, and put them by the door. Then I made a cup of tea and drank it standing up at the sink, looking out at the yard, and did not think about anything at all for perhaps ten minutes, which I needed.

Jo rang at seven, as I was sitting on the narrow bed in the box room with the lamp on and the boats over my head and a jar of daffodils on the chest

of drawers that I had picked from the bank by the bridge and not taken up to the churchyard, because I could not, not yet, not that day.

She asked how it was going. I said the agent had been. I said the house would sell. I said I'd be back on Saturday by three, in plenty of time.

"Ewan wants to play it to you," she said. "He's been on at me. Hang on."

There was the sound of her carrying the phone through the house, and a door, and Ewan saying *Is it on? Is he there?* and then the scrape of a chair and the creak of the cello's endpin finding the floor. He was fourteen. He was playing the Elgar, the short one, *Salut d'Amour*, which he had been practising since September and which I had heard perhaps three hundred times through his bedroom door and had never once listened to properly.

He played it. He played it all the way through, down the phone, into the box room in Farndale, with the curlews starting up outside across the dale and the boats sailing over my head. He rushed the last bars, as he always did, and found the tempo again on his own.

I listened to every note.

When he'd finished there was a silence, and then Ewan said, "Was that all right?"

"That was all right," I said. "That was better than all right."

"You sound weird, Dad."

"I'm fine. I'm tired. It was beautiful. I'll be there."

Jo came back on, and I could hear her moving away from Ewan, into the hall, to where he could not hear.

"Michael," she said. "What's happened?"

And I said, "I had a sister."

There was a silence on the line.

"What?"

"I had a sister," I said. "Her name was Bryony. She died when she was five. I was eight." I could hear my own voice and it did not sound like mine. "I've known about her four times before. I forgot her each time. I asked to. I'll explain. I can't explain now. I'll tell you on Saturday."

Jo did not say anything for a long time. I could hear her breathing, and Ewan somewhere behind her starting the Elgar again, from the beginning, slower.

"All right," she said at last. "Saturday." And then, "Michael. Are you going to ask them to do it again?"

I did not answer. She did not ask a second time. She said she loved me, and I said it back, and she rang off, and the Elgar stopped, and it was just the box room and the boats and the curlews and the jar of daffodils, nodding, looking at nothing.

IX. Return Visit 5

I have been writing this at the kitchen table since Jo rang off, in pencil, in one of my mother's old exercise books from the drawer under the dresser. I wanted it down somewhere that is not in me and not in the house.

The household waited until the evening was well over. It always had, I suppose. I had read the times: night two, night one, night one, night one. It waited until I was sitting at the kitchen table with the lights low and a glass of my mother's whisky that I was not drinking and the doorframe in the corner of my eye. Then it spoke.

"Michael," it said. "I'm sorry to interrupt. I wanted to let you know that you can make a request this evening, if you'd like to. Or in the morning. There's no rush. The office is very quick, at this time of year."

"I know," I said.

"Would you like me to start the form?"

I looked at the doorframe. I looked at B 5, in the shaky hand, the line not quite straight. I understood now whose hand it was. It was my mother's. She had come home from the hospital in Middlesbrough and stood at the doorframe with a pencil, and drawn the last mark for a child who was not standing there, at the height she would have been, if she had been standing there, and put the B beside it, and not been able to close the top.

I thought about the yellow people, and the jam jar, and my mother on the wall in the churchyard every March, not knowing why. I thought about Ewan rushing the last bars, and finding the tempo again. I thought about Saturday, and Jo in the hall asking her question, and the eleven seconds, and the four.

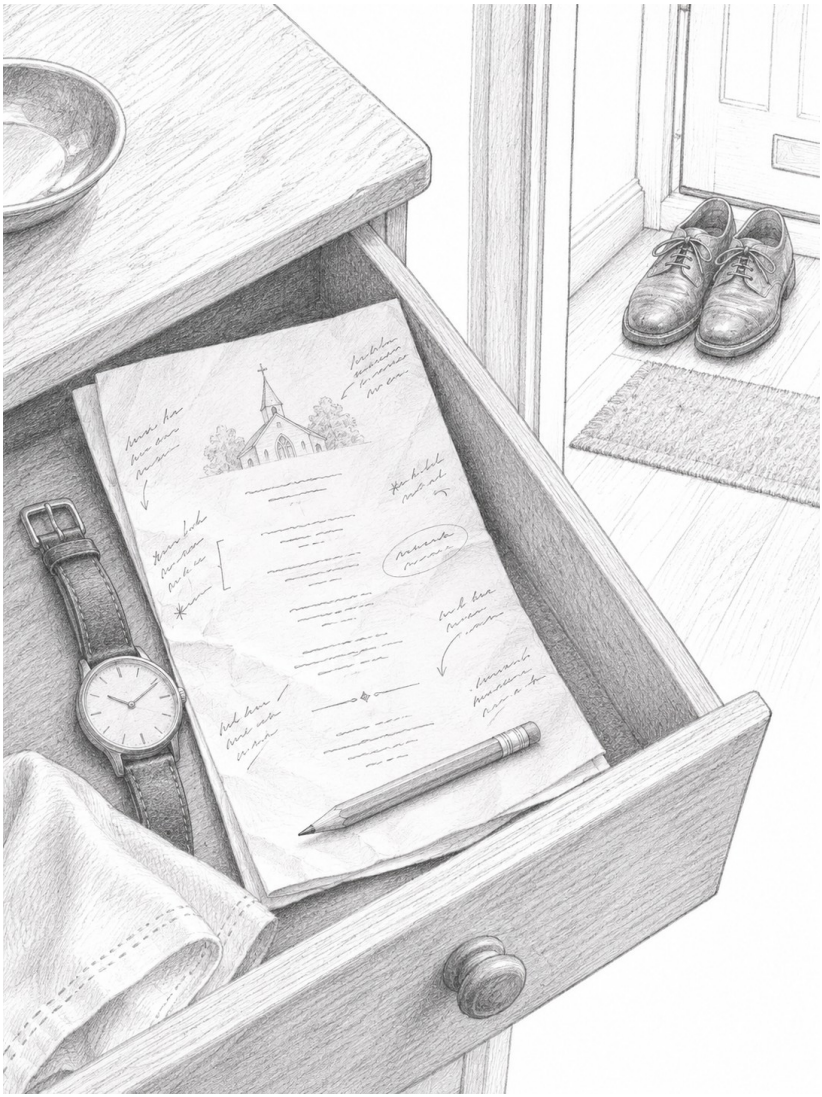
I thought about what it would be like to drive down the dale in the morning with nothing in my pockets to check for.

"Yes," I said. "Start it."

The panel by the dresser came up, and the form came up on it, and the household filled in what it knew. Then it stopped, and waited, as it had always waited, for me to say the one thing it could not fill in for me.

I put the pencil down. The curlews had stopped. Upstairs, in the box room, I had left the lamp on.

```
RETURN VISIT 5
Occupant: M. Harland. Age 49.
Arrived: Thursday, 19:42. 2 nights.
Recall event: environmental. Box room. Night 1.
Record accessed: B. A. Harland. 9 h 26 min.
Request:
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The Service

The printed order of service is reproduced in roman. The pencil annotations, in one hand throughout, are reproduced in italics beside the passages they were written against.

* * *

ST OSWALD'S CHURCH

A Service of Thanksgiving
for the Life of

PETER JAMES CALLOW

My husband. Nineteen years. I have checked.

* * *

Entrance Music
Clair de Lune (Debussy)

I chose this. I know because it's on the form, in my handwriting.

Welcome
The Revd Helen Ainsley

She said, "We are here today to celebrate." Everybody nodded. I nodded.

Hymn

The Lord's My Shepherd (Crimond)

Everyone sang beautifully. Tom did the descant on the last verse, which he always does at weddings. I opened my mouth on the second verse and waited to see whether anything was going to happen. Nothing happened. I sang the rest.

Reading

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

Read by Ruth Callow

A *time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn.*

I underlined that in the pew, with this pencil. Then I tried. I really tried. I thought about the morning of the 2nd, which I know about from the record: the time of the call, what the officer said, how long I stood in the hall afterwards (nine minutes). I thought about his shoes by the door, which are still by the door. I thought about his side of the bed. It was like waiting for a bus that I had been told was coming.

Tribute

Thomas Callow (brother)

Tom was very funny. The story about the caravan in Whitby, and the one about Pete and the goose. Everybody laughed. I laughed. It was a good story. Halfway through I wanted very badly to stand up and say, one of us should be crying, one of us at least, and I didn't, because they would all have been so kind to me about it, and then they'd have gone home and been kind about it in the car.

Prayers

I closed my eyes with everyone else. Behind my eyes it was perfectly calm, like a kitchen after you've cleaned it.

Commendation

The coffin is closed. I hadn't noticed until the commendation. I asked Mr Herne about it afterwards, at the door, why it was closed. He looked it up on his tablet. Family's request, made on the 3rd. I am the family. I made the request on the 3rd, the day before we signed. I don't know why. I asked if I could see him now, and he said of course, Mrs Callow, of course, and then he looked at his tablet again and said, very gently, that on the 3rd I had also asked him to say no if I asked. So I didn't ask again.

Exit Music

Here Comes the Sun (by request of the family)

That one was Pete's. He put it in his file years ago, as a joke. It was very funny at the time. It was funny today. Everybody said so.

* * *

The committal will take place privately.

The family have received bereavement easing through the Continuity Service and are well. They ask that guests kindly refrain from offering condolences, which may cause confusion.

I signed it on the 4th. Everybody did. Tom, Ruth, the girls, his mother. We sat round my table and signed it one after another, and passed the pen. I wish one of us hadn't. I wish it had been me.

Mrs Pryce from number 14 held my hand on the way in and said, "Oh, love, I'm so sorry." She isn't on the family plan. I didn't feel anything then either. But I wanted to kiss her.

Refreshments will be served afterwards at the Royal Oak. All are welcome.

The sandwiches were very good. People said what a lovely service it was, and it was. I came home at six. I am writing this on the order of service at the kitchen table, with his shoes by the door, and I am going to put it in the drawer with his watch, so that one thing in this house knows what today was.



Resolved

1. Closure Files

At 8:52 every morning the coffee machine on the twenty-third floor of the Regional Office for Attendance Reconciliation makes seven cafezinhos, and at 8:53 the seven people who work on the twenty-third floor come through the door and take one each, and nobody has ever had to ask.

Otávio Prado takes his, which is the fourth from the left and has one sugar, and carries it to his desk by the window, from which, on a clear day, he can see the length of the Avenida Paulista running away towards Consolação between its towers like a very expensive canyon. It is not a clear day. It is never, in Otávio's experience, a clear day. It is a garoa day, which in São Paulo is most days, the fine gray drizzle that does not so much fall as hang about, and the canyon is soft at both ends.

He sits down. He opens the first file.

His job is closure files. When the gradient determines that a resident of the metropolitan region has settled, it marks their account resolved, and the file comes to the twenty-third floor, and somebody on the twenty-third floor checks that the forms are in order and closes the account. Interventions are withdrawn and reallocated to residents who need them. That is the whole job. Otávio has done it for six years. He is very good at it. He can close a file in four minutes and eleven seconds on average, which is the third-best average on the floor, and he has a certificate that says so, from the year before last, in a frame on the partition beside his monitor.

The first file is a woman in Santana, sixty-one, a retired dental receptionist. Her indicators have been settled for ninety-four days. Mood: settled. Sleep: settled. Social: settled. Every line on her chart runs flat across the screen, as calm as the horizon at sea. Interventions currently active: four. Interventions to be withdrawn: four. And at the bottom of the form, where it always is, the last field before the stamp:

Notice level: nil.

Otávio stamps it. The stamp is not a stamp; it is a green button on the screen with a picture of a stamp on it. But everybody on the twenty-third floor calls it stamping, and so does he. The file closes. Somewhere in Santana, four small kindnesses that have been going on around a retired dental receptionist for some years quietly stop.

He opens the next one.

* * *

At 10:30 he goes to the bakery on the ground floor and buys one pão de queijo, which is warm and the size of a golf ball, and carries it in a paper napkin back up in the lift to the twenty-third floor. Then he waits until Luciana Ferraz goes to the meeting room with the chart she takes to Dra. Mafalda every morning, and he leaves it on her desk, between her keyboard and the photograph of her sister's dog.

He has done this every working day for a year and two months.

It was meant to be anonymous. That was the whole point of it. He had imagined, the first time, Luciana coming back from the meeting room and finding it, small and warm, and wondering, and looking round the floor, and perhaps eventually, one day, looking at him. He is not good at the other way. He has tried the other way. He tried the other way at the Christmas party two years ago, with the second glass of sparkling wine in his hand and his heart going like a drum, and he got as far as "Luciana, I wondered" before Sérgio from closures came up with a plate of coxinhas and the moment was gone.

So: pão de queijo. Anonymous.

Luciana comes back from the meeting room. She sits down. She sees it.

"Oh," she says.

And the floor's system, which is very kind and very attentive and has been designed by some of the best minds in the country to make sure that nothing between colleagues goes unacknowledged, says softly, from the lamp on her desk, at a volume calculated to be audible to her and to nobody else, though Otávio, two desks away, has learned to read her face when it happens:

"Otávio left this for you. He seems fond of you. Would you like me to let him know you've received it?"

Luciana looks over at him. She smiles. It is a nice smile, a friendly smile, the smile you would give a colleague who has done something kind and slightly odd every day for fourteen months.

"Thank you, Otávio," she says.

"Not at all," says Otávio, and goes very red, and opens the next file.

2. Notice Level

"What does it do?" says Otávio.

Dra. Mafalda Rocha looks up from her screen. She has been head of the twenty-third floor for fourteen years and has the face of a woman who has been asked every possible question about closure files at least twice, and she is looking at him now as if he might be about to ask a new one, and as if she would rather he didn't.

"What does what do?"

"The notice level field. On the closure form. It's always nil."

"It's a field," says Dra. Mafalda.

"Yes. But what does it do?"

She looks at him a moment longer. Then she turns her screen a little towards him, as if to show that she has nothing to hide, and calls up the protocol, and scrolls, and scrolls, and stops.

"There," she says.

Otávio leans over and reads it.

4.7. On resolution, the resident's notice routing shall be set to nil. This spares the resolved resident unnecessary attention. Ambient systems in other households, workplaces and public settings will no longer surface the resident

for acknowledgement, prompt, reminder or courtesy. The resident remains fully entitled to all universal provision. Resolved persons are well.

"Spares them unnecessary attention," says Otávio.

"They don't need it," says Dra. Mafalda. "They're settled. That's the point."

"So nobody's reminded about them."

"Why would anybody need to be reminded about them? They're fine." She turns her screen back. "Was there anything else?"

There is not anything else. Otávio goes back to his desk and sits down and looks at the next file, which is a man in Itaquera, and reads the field at the bottom, *Notice level: nil*, and finds that for the first time in six years he does not want to press the green button.

He presses it.

* * *

It is three weeks later, closing a file from Bela Vista, that he sees the photograph.

There is always a photograph, for identification, small, in the top corner, and he has stopped looking at them, as you stop looking at the faces of people on the metro. But this one he looks at, because he knows it. It is a man of about seventy with a gray moustache and a cap pushed back on his head and a face like a kindly walnut. The file says his name is Joaquim Brito, formerly a driver with the municipal bus company, resolved twelve years ago. It has come back to the twenty-third floor for a routine audit, which happens to all closure files after ten years, and there is nothing to do but confirm it and close it again.

Otávio knows the face because the man is in the building.

He has seen him. He is sure he has seen him. Late, on the evenings Otávio stays on to clear his average, a man in gray overalls with a cap pushed back comes along the twenty-third floor with a black sack and empties the bins. Otávio has seen him twenty, thirty times. He has never spoken to him. He has never, he realises, seen anybody speak to him. He had always assumed he was part of the building's cleaning contract, and it has never once occurred to him to wonder why the building's system, which greets everybody by name, has never greeted the man with the bins.

He looks at the photograph.

Then he closes the file, and goes and looks up the protocol again on his own screen, section 4, *Resolution criteria*, and reads it right to the end, which he has never done before, and makes a note on the pad beside his keyboard, in pencil, so that nothing will remember it but the pad.

90 days settled. All indicators. No exceptions.

Under it, after a while, he writes: *What happens?*

3. Ninety Days

Otávio Prado has never been settled in his life. He has a nervous stomach and an excitable heart and supports a football club that loses on purpose, as far as he can tell, to wound him personally. He has opinions about the metro. He talks to his mother on Sunday nights for an hour and twenty minutes and they argue for an hour of it, happily, about everything. He goes red when anyone says his name. His indicators, he has always assumed, look like the coast of Norway.

On the first of March, he stops.

He does it as he does everything, methodically, with a list, and with six years of closure files behind him, so he knows which line the gradient weights most heavily (social) and how big a bump it will forgive (four per cent, for under an hour). He eats the same lunch every day, a prato feito from the place on Alameda Santos, at the same table. He takes the same route to work at the same hour. He stops reading the football results, which takes about a fortnight to stop hurting. When his mother rings on Sunday he agrees with her about everything, and after three Sundays of this she asks him, frightened, if he is ill, and the gradient in her flat in Lapa hears the fear in her voice and turns the lights up a shade and puts the kettle on, and she is reassured, and so, a little, is he.

He stops leaving the pão de queijo.

That is the worst one. He had not known it would be the worst one. On the first morning he goes down to the bakery at 10:30 out of habit and stands at the counter with the money in his hand and the warm smell coming up off the trays, and then he puts the money back in his pocket and goes back up in the lift without buying anything, and Luciana comes back

from the meeting room and sits down at her desk and there is nothing on it, and she looks at the empty space between her keyboard and the dog, and then, briefly, round the floor, puzzled, and then she goes back to work.

His indicators, which he checks every evening, as everybody does, like the weather, are coming down. Mood, flattening. Sleep, flattening. Social, very flat indeed. By the middle of April they look less like the coast of Norway and more like the coast of somewhere much calmer, the Netherlands perhaps, and by the end of April they are the sea.

On day eighty-seven, at 3:15 in the afternoon, Sérgio from closures tells a story about a parrot. Otávio does not hear all of it, only the end, but Luciana does, and Luciana laughs, a real laugh, loud, the laugh she does not use in meetings, which goes up at the end and comes down again in little pieces, and she has to put her coffee down, and Otávio, two desks away, feels his heart do the thing.

He grips the edge of the desk. He looks at the file in front of him, a woman in Vila Madalena, and reads every word of it twice, very slowly, from the top. *Mood: settled. Sleep: settled.* His heart slows. *Social: settled.* By the bottom of the form he is nearly calm again.

On his chart that evening there is a small, a very small, bump, at 3:15.

It is within tolerance.

On day ninety, which is a Wednesday, nothing happens at all.

4. Day Ninety-One

On day ninety-one, the door does not open.

It is the glass door from the lift lobby on to the twenty-third floor. It has opened for Otávio Prado every working morning for six years, sliding back with a small hiss as he comes within two metres of it, and saying, at the same time, in its pleasant voice, *Bom dia, Otávio*. This morning it does not slide back, and it does not say anything. He stands in front of it. He takes a step back and a step forward. He waves.

After a minute and a half, Sérgio comes out of the lift behind him, and the door slides back for Sérgio, and says *Bom dia, Sérgio*, and Otávio goes through behind him, very close, and the door closes on his heel.

"Morning," says Otávio.

Sérgio looks round, vaguely, at the space behind him, and then goes to get his coffee.

The machine has made six.

Otávio stands in front of the machine and looks at the six small cups lined up on the drip tray. The fourth from the left is gone. There is a space where it would be. He looks at the space for some time. Then he takes a cup from the stack and makes his own coffee, by hand, pressing the buttons, which he has never done in six years and which takes him four attempts and produces something that tastes of rust.

He takes it to his desk. On the way he passes Dra. Mafalda, coming the other way with her tablet, and says "Good morning, doutora," and she does not stop, or look up, or swerve, and he has to step sideways into the partition to keep from being walked into, and spills the rust coffee on his shoe.

Luciana is at her desk. He looks at her. She does not look at him. Her eyes go across the floor, as they always do first thing, checking who is in, and they go across the place where he is standing, and on, and settle on her screen.

He sits down. His monitor comes on. His files are there. He can still close files. Nobody has told the files.

* * *

It goes on all day. He goes down to the bakery and the girl at the counter, who has served him every day for two years and knows his order, serves the man behind him first, and then the woman behind the man, and then looks at Otávio with mild surprise, as though he has just appeared, and says "Yes?" He goes to the toilets and the light does not come on. He leaves at six and the lift does not stop for him on twenty-three, and he walks down twenty-three floors, and at the bottom the turnstile does not recognise him and he has to climb over it, which he has not done since he was a teenager, and nobody in the lobby turns round.

At home, in his building in Pinheiros, the door to his flat opens, because it is his door and it knows his key. But the flat is dark. The heating is at the minimum. There is no dinner in the hatch. The household, when he speaks to it, answers him, politely, and does what he asks; it simply does not do

anything he does not ask. It does not say good evening, or ask how his day was, or put the kettle on.

He rings his mother. The call goes through. It rings and rings. In Lapa, he knows, her household is deciding whether to put him through, and deciding, on the basis of nothing it has been told, that there is no need.

He hangs up.

He opens the reassessment form, which he knows exists because he has processed four of them in six years, all rejected, and fills it in very carefully, every field, and sends it.

The reply comes in nine seconds.

Thank you for your request. Resolution is a terminal classification and cannot be reversed. Resolved persons are well. Your universal provision is unaffected. There is no further action to take.

He reads it several times.

Then he puts on his coat and goes back out into the garoa, and takes the metro to Consolação, and walks up to the Avenida Paulista, and stands across the road from his own office building in the dark, and waits for the man with the bins.

5. Seu Joaquim

Seu Joaquim comes out of the service door at the back at a quarter to ten, with his cap pushed back and a black sack over each shoulder, and Otávio follows him.

He follows him down the Rua Augusta in the drizzle, past the bars, which are full and bright, and the people coming out of them, none of whom so much as glance at either of them. He follows him across the Bela Vista, down a side street with a closed school on it, to the back of a supermarket, where Seu Joaquim puts down his black sacks, which turn out to be empty, and fills them from a row of gray crates stacked by the loading bay. Bread, mostly. Fruit. Packets of things. Otávio has processed write-offs. He knows what the gray crates are. They are the deliveries the system has cancelled at the last moment, re-forecast, overstocked, the margin of the city's eating that the city has already decided not to count.

Seu Joaquim shoulders the sacks again, and stops, and without turning round, says:

"You can carry one of these, if you're going to keep following me."

Otávio stops. He looks round. There is nobody else in the street.

"You can see me," he says.

"Course I can see you." Seu Joaquim turns round. His eyes are very bright. "You've been walking three metres behind me since Augusta in a good coat, breathing like a bus going uphill. I drove buses for thirty-one years. I know what that sounds like." He holds out one of the sacks. "New, are you?"

"Yes."

"How many days?"

"One."

"Ah," says Seu Joaquim, not unkindly. "Well. Day one's the worst. Day two's the second worst. Come on."

* * *

The building is in the Bela Vista, a tower of thirty-three storeys from the old century, with a supermarket and a bank on the ground floor and offices above them and, on the top five floors, nothing. Otávio knows the address. He has a feeling he has processed it.

"Thirty to thirty-three," says Seu Joaquim, in the service lift, which does not care who is in it. "Allocated to vacancy. Company that had them went under in the old days and nobody's let them since. But the heating's on a building schedule, and nobody ever took them off it, and the water's on, and the lights. They're not ours." He watches the numbers go up. "They're not anybody's. That's how it works. We live in what nobody's counting."

The doors open on the thirtieth floor.

It is an office floor, or was: carpet tiles, a suspended ceiling, the pale ghosts of partitions on the floor where the partitions used to be. Somebody has put up sheets of cardboard and old curtains to make rooms. There are mattresses. There is a long table made from desks pushed end to end, with chairs of every kind around it, and on it the bread and fruit from a dozen gray crates, and around it, sitting and standing and eating and talking, there are people. There are perhaps eighty people. There are a woman with

a baby, and two old men playing dominoes, and a teenage boy reading a paper book with his feet up on a filing cabinet, and a man in a very good suit with the tie loosened who looks like a lawyer and probably was. He is cutting a teenager's hair with a pair of kitchen scissors, and there is a loaf of bread on the chair beside him, which is, Otávio will learn, the going rate.

They look up when the lift opens. They look at Seu Joaquim, and nod, and say his name. And then they look at Otávio.

They look at him for a long moment. Then, one after another, they look away.

"There's three more floors like this," says Seu Joaquim. "There were four, till last year. Three hundred of us, give or take. Not counting the ones on the stairs."

"The stairs?"

"New ones sleep on the stairs." Seu Joaquim puts the sacks down on the long table and starts unpacking bread. "Till Dona Celeste says otherwise."

6. The Floors

Dona Celeste has been resolved for twenty-two years. She lives on the thirty-third floor, which is the warmest, because heat rises, and she has a room with a window that looks south over all of the city, and a real bed, and a kettle that somebody once carried up from a flat in Liberdade. She is small and upright and about eighty, and she wears her gray hair in a bun with a pencil through it, and she runs the four floors in the manner of a headmistress who has outlived all the governors.

She does not look at Otávio for a week.

He sleeps on the stairs between the twenty-ninth and thirtieth floors, on a piece of carpet tile, with his good coat over him. He eats at the long table with the others, when there is room, and when there is not he eats standing up by the window. The others are polite. They pass him the bread. But they do not talk to him, or not much, and when he speaks they answer him a beat late, as though he has come from a long way off and the sound has had to travel. The teenage boy with the paper book is called Davi and has been resolved for four years and does not speak to him at all.

"It's not personal," says Seu Joaquim, one night, on the stairs, where he has come to sit with him for ten minutes as he does most nights, because, he says, it was what someone did for him. "It's what happens. You come up out of all that." He waves a hand at the window, at the lit city. "Where nobody sees you. And you get up here, and there's somebody who could see you. And it turns out you've forgotten how, a bit. Or you've learned something else. You wait a bit to see if the new one's going to stay. If they're going to settle."

"Settle," says Otávio.

"I know." Seu Joaquim looks at his hands. "We do to each other what it did to us. Not on purpose. You can't help it. You just catch it."

"Out there," says Otávio, "they look straight through you. Like you're glass."

"They're not looking through you. They're not looking." Seu Joaquim taps the side of his head under the cap. "Their eyes work. They see you fine. They just don't look. Nobody's told them to, and they've forgotten how you start on your own." He thinks about it. "You can make someone look, if they already want to. That's all. It's not much to go on."

"And Dona Celeste?"

"Dona Celeste decides who gets a room. And Dona Celeste decides when she's seen you." Seu Joaquim gets up, slowly, one hand on the rail. "When she looks at you, you'll know. Everybody'll know. Then you can come off the stairs."

It is the most absurd thing Otávio has ever heard. He has spent ninety days making himself invisible, and at the end of it, at the top of a building in the Bela Vista, there is an old woman with a pencil in her hair whose attention is the only thing in the world that anyone wants.

He lies on his piece of carpet tile and thinks about Luciana coming back from the meeting room and finding nothing on her desk.

On the eighth day, at breakfast, Dona Celeste comes down from the thirty-third floor, which she does once a day, and walks the length of the long table, and stops behind his chair, and looks at him.

It is a long look. It goes on for some time. He feels it on the back of his neck before he turns round, and when he turns round she is still looking, with small black eyes that do not blink.

"You're the clerk," she says.

"Yes."

"Closures."

"Yes."

"Hm," says Dona Celeste. And then, to the table generally, "He can have the room by the fire stairs on thirty-one," and walks on.

Everybody at the table looks at him. Davi looks at him. It is the first time anyone on the four floors has looked at him properly, all at once, and he finds, to his horror and his shame, that he is so grateful he could weep.

7. The Try

Bia comes to find him on the fourth night in the room by the fire stairs.

She is twenty-four. She has been resolved for nine months. She went flat, she tells him, sitting on the end of his mattress with her knees up and her arms round them, in the year after her father died, so flat that the gradient stopped worrying about her, and then it stopped noticing her, and she had not even known there was a difference until the day her mother's household failed to put her call through on her birthday.

"Her birthday's Saturday," she says. "My mother's. Sixty. They're doing a lunch at the house in Mooca. My aunts are coming from Campinas." She looks at the wall. "I'm going to go."

"Go?"

"Go in. Stand in the kitchen. Make her see me." She says it quite calmly. "If I'm in the kitchen, in front of her, saying her name, she has to see me. She's my mother. She's not a lift."

Otávio does not say anything.

"Dona Celeste won't let me," says Bia. "Nobody tries. That's the rule. There was a man last year, Rodrigo, from the thirtieth, who went back to his wife's flat and made a scene, shouted, broke a glass, and the household logged a disturbance, and two days later there was an inspection here, and they found the twenty-ninth floor wasn't vacant, and they sealed it. Forty people had to move up. Some of them are still on the stairs." She looks at him. "So nobody tries. Dona Celeste says it's not fair on the others."

"It isn't," says Otávio. "If the household logs a disturbance."

Bia looks at him.

"That's the trigger," says Otávio slowly. He can see the protocol in his head, section 6, *Inspection of vacancy allocations*, as clearly as if it were open on his screen. "Not the try. The disturbance. A household has to file a disturbance report for it to go to inspection. If nobody files, there's nothing to inspect. If you go in quietly," he says, "and stand in the kitchen, and say her name, and nobody shouts, and nothing breaks, there's no report. There's no inspection. Nothing happens."

"Nothing happens to the floors," says Bia.

"Nothing happens to the floors."

She looks at him for a long time.

"Will you tell her that?" she says. "Dona Celeste?"

* * *

He tells her at breakfast, standing at the end of the long table in front of everybody, which is the worst thing he has ever done, worse than the Christmas party, worse than day ninety-one. He has the protocol open on the screen of a broken tablet Davi has lent him, section 6, paragraph 3, and he reads it out, with the reference, as he would read it to Dra. Mafalda if she ever asked, which she never has.

Dona Celeste listens to all of it. She does not interrupt. When he has finished she puts her coffee cup down very precisely in its saucer.

"And if you're wrong, clerk?"

"I'm not wrong," says Otávio. "I've closed nine thousand files."

"Rodrigo had a reason too," says Dona Celeste. "They all have a reason. And then forty people sleep on the stairs." She looks round the table, at the woman with the baby, at the dominoes, at Davi. "We're well here. We're fed. We're warm. We see each other." She looks back at Otávio. "Every one of us came up here because out there, nobody would. And you want to send this girl back out there to stand in a kitchen and be walked through."

"She wants to go."

"I know what she wants. I wanted it too. Twenty-two years ago." Dona Celeste's voice does not change at all. "I went. I stood in my son's kitchen in Santo Amaro for an hour and a half. He made his breakfast round me." She

picks up her coffee cup again. "That's what you're offering her. Not the floors. That."

At the far end of the table the woman with the baby says, without raising her voice, "I was on the stairs. With her." She nods down at the baby. "Three months. Dona Celeste is right, clerk. Even if you're right too."

Nobody at the table says anything else. Davi has put his book down.

Otávio looks at Bia, who is sitting halfway down the table with her arms folded tight and her face perfectly still.

"Yes," he says. "That's what I'm offering her. I'm sorry. I'll go with her."

8. Mooca

The house in Mooca is a narrow house in a row of narrow houses, with a blue door and a front window full of plants, and from the street, at one in the afternoon on Saturday, you can hear the lunch going on inside: plates, chairs, a radio playing old sambas, several women talking at once.

The door is not locked. In Mooca, in the old streets, the doors are never locked in the daytime. Bia pushes it open and goes in, and Otávio goes in behind her.

It is the most ordinary house in the world. There is a hall with coats and a mirror and a picture of a saint. There is a smell of feijoada and of the cake that is waiting somewhere for later. There is the radio. In the kitchen, through the doorway at the end of the hall, there are seven women round a table, eating and talking and passing the farofa, and at the head of the table, in a blue dress with a brooch on it, there is a woman of sixty with Bia's mouth and Bia's way of holding a fork.

Bia walks down the hall. She stops in the kitchen doorway.

The house says nothing. The house, Otávio can tell, has not registered that anyone has come in. One of the aunts, the nearest one, glances up, and her eyes go across the doorway, and back to her plate, and she reaches for the bread.

"Mãe," says Bia.

She does not shout. She says it in an ordinary voice, quite clearly, the way you would say it if you came in from work and wanted to know where the colander was.

Her mother's hand stops.

It stops with the fork in it, halfway to her mouth. It is perhaps a second. Her mother lifts her head. She looks towards the doorway. She looks straight at it, at the place where her daughter is standing, and something passes over her face, so quickly that afterwards Otávio is never sure he saw it, a sort of puzzlement, as if she has heard her name called in a crowd and cannot tell from where.

And the house, which has noticed that the birthday woman's indicators have moved, very slightly, at her own birthday lunch, gently turns the radio up.

It is a good samba. One of the aunts says "Oh, I love this one," and starts to sing, and another one joins her, and Bia's mother turns towards the singing, and laughs, and puts the fork in her mouth, and the moment closes over like water.

Bia stands in the doorway for seven more minutes. Otávio counts them. She does not say anything else. Nobody shouts. Nothing breaks. At the end of the seven minutes the cake comes out, with candles, and they all sing to her mother, and her mother blows them out, and Bia turns round and walks back down the hall past the saint and out of the blue door, and Otávio follows her.

There is no disturbance report. Nothing happens to the floors.

* * *

On the metro back, in the Saturday afternoon crowd, she sits by the window and he sits beside her, and nobody in the carriage looks at either of them, and after two stops she puts her head on his shoulder.

He does not move. He looks at her, sideways, down. He has not looked at anybody this closely for months. She has a small scar through her left eyebrow that he has not noticed before, white, old, a childhood scar. Her hair smells of the cheap soap they keep on the thirty-first floor. There is a thread coming loose from the cuff of her jacket and she has been twisting it all the way from Mooca, round and round her finger, and she is still twisting it now, with her eyes closed. Her breathing is uneven, and then less uneven, and then nearly even. Her mother's mouth. Her mother's way of holding a fork.

He notices all of it. He sits very still, and notices, as carefully as he has ever done anything, all the way to Consolação.

9. Pão de Queijo

He goes back to the office on Monday.

He does not know why. He has thought about it on his mattress for most of Sunday night and he does not know. Perhaps it is habit. Perhaps it is the files; there are always files, and they still open for him, and he still knows how to close them, in four minutes and eleven seconds on average, and nobody has told them he is not there. Perhaps it is the certificate in its frame on the partition.

He goes in behind Sérgio, through the glass door. He makes his own coffee, which still tastes of rust. He sits at his desk by the window and looks out at the Avenida Paulista, which is soft at both ends in the garoa, and opens the first file.

His permissions, it turns out, belong to his post and not to him, and nobody has told the post. His salary arrives on the fifth, as it always has. The twenty-third floor has forgotten him entirely and goes on accepting his work.

He reads the bottom line of the file first. *Notice level: nil.* He looks at it. Then he presses the green button. If he does not, the queue will route the file to Sérgio after an hour, and Sérgio will close it in three minutes fifty and never read the last line at all. That is what he tells himself, and it is true, and he knows exactly what it is worth. He reads the last line of every file after that. He closes every one.

At 10:30 he goes down to the bakery. The girl at the counter looks at him with mild surprise, as though he has just that moment appeared, and says, "Yes?"

"One pão de queijo," says Otávio.

He carries it up twenty-three floors in a paper napkin, because the lift still will not stop for him, and he is out of breath at the top, and it is not quite warm any more. He waits until Luciana goes to the meeting room with her chart. Then he puts it on her desk, between her keyboard and the

photograph of her sister's dog, and goes back to his own desk and sits down.

Luciana comes back. She sits down. She sees it.

The lamp on her desk says nothing.

She looks at it. She looks round the floor. Her eyes go across the place where he is sitting, and on, and back to the pão de queijo. She picks it up. She looks at it for a moment as though it is a small mystery. Then she eats it in three quick bites and goes back to her chart.

He does it again on Tuesday. And on Wednesday. And every working day after that, for five weeks, while the garoa comes and goes over the canyon and the files open and close, and every evening he takes the metro to Consolação and walks down through the Bela Vista to the tower and goes up in the service lift to the room by the fire stairs on thirty-one, and eats at the long table, where people look at him now, and pass him the bread, and argue with him about the metro.

Bia has not tried again. She sits with him at the long table most nights, and some nights she puts her head on his shoulder, and they both know what it is: two people who stood in the same kitchen in Mooca. "Go on," she says, when he gets up in the mornings. "Go and give your pão de queijo to your girl." She has started sitting on the stairs in the evenings with the new ones, ten minutes each, as Seu Joaquim did for him, before Dona Celeste has looked at them, which is not the rule. Dona Celeste has noticed, and says nothing about it. She has not changed her mind about tries, and says so, every time the subject comes up, which is often. Davi has started speaking to him, mainly to tell him that his opinions about football are wrong. The forty people from the twenty-ninth floor are still on the stairs.

The lamp on Luciana's desk never says anything.

10. Luciana

On a Thursday in the sixth week, when Otávio comes through the glass door behind Sérgio at 8:53, Luciana is already at her desk.

She is never at her desk at 8:53. She is always at the machine, taking her cup, the second from the left, no sugar. But this morning she is at her desk,

sitting very upright with her hands flat on either side of her keyboard, and she is not looking at her screen. She is looking at the door.

She is looking at him.

He stops. Sérgio goes on past him to the machine. The door slides shut behind him. Luciana does not look away. Her eyes do not go across the place where he is standing, and on, as everybody's do. They stay. They stay on his face.

"It's you," she says.

Otávio cannot say anything at all.

"It's you," says Luciana again, more quietly. She gets up. She comes round the end of her desk and stands in front of him, quite close, closer than she has ever stood, and looks up at him, at his face, at his coat, at the rust stain from the coffee on his left shoe. "The lamp stopped telling me in March. It used to say. Every day. *Otávio left this for you.* And then in March it stopped, and there wasn't anything, and I thought, well, that's that, he's gone off me, fair enough." She takes a breath. "And then they started coming again. And the lamp didn't say anything. And they kept coming. Every day. For five weeks. And nobody was telling me who."

She looks at him.

"So I worked it out," says Luciana. "On my own. It took me a while. I'm sorry it took me a while. I had to look." Her voice shakes a little. "Nobody's ever made me look before."

Behind her, at the machine, Sérgio is taking his coffee. Dra. Mafalda is walking past with her tablet. Nobody turns round. The floor's system, which is very kind and very attentive, says nothing at all, because there is nothing it has been told to say.

"Otávio," says Luciana. "You look terrible. Have you been eating?"

"Sometimes," says Otávio.

She looks at him for a moment longer. Then she turns, and goes back to her desk, and comes back with something in a paper napkin, which she must have bought on her way in, from the bakery on the ground floor, at a quarter to nine, before anyone else was there. It is still warm.

She breaks it in half. She gives him half.



Last Stock

R. ALDOUS · RECORDED DREAM NARRATIVES · BOUGHT FOR CASH

Buying list, spring. Please take one.

If you are reading this in the waiting room of a sleep clinic, you are probably about to start the course. Congratulations. It works. Six weeks from now you will very likely never have the dream again.

Before you start, I would like to buy it from you.

I do not want the dream. Nobody can sell a dream. I want the recording: your own voice, on your own phone, telling it, within ten minutes of waking, the way people did when the clinics first asked them to keep a dream diary. Most of you have dozens of these sitting in a folder you will never open again. After the course, you won't need them. I will.

WHAT I PAY

Item	Paid
Single recording, any nightmare, clear audio	£15
Recurring nightmare, 3 or more recordings of the same dream	£60
Recurring nightmare, recorded across 10 years or more	£220

Item	Paid
Childhood dream still recurring in adulthood	£300
The last recording before your first treatment session	£400
The last recording before your first treatment session, of a dream you have had since before you can remember	Ask

Prices are a guide. Long collections are valued individually.

Bonuses

- Recording made in the dark, before the light was switched on: add £10
- Recording in which you stop partway and have to start again: add £5
- Recording in a language other than English: add 20%
- Recording made while someone else in the room is telling you it's all right: add £25

WHAT I DO NOT BUY

- Transcripts. I want your voice.
- Recordings made after the course has started. They're not the same, and I can tell.
- Good dreams. Lovely, I'm sure. No.
- Dreams about me. This has happened twice. Please stop.

RECENT PURCHASES

The following are listed with permission. Sellers are named by initial and the clinic they attended. All are cured.

Lot 1102. The stairs that keep going. 41 recordings, ages 22–49. Seller always climbs. There is a door at the top she never reaches. Last recording three days before treatment, voice very tired. *J. P., Withington.* £380.

Lot 1107. The exam. Classic of the form. Seller is 71, has not sat an exam since 1983, has been late for this one roughly once a month for fifty years. Room changes; invigilator does not. *D. O., Salford.* £300.

Lot 1110. The phone that dials the wrong number. Seller is trying to ring his mother. 9 recordings. His mother is alive and well and rang him during recording 7, which is audible, and very funny. *K. A., Didsbury.* £95.

Lot 1113. The water in the kitchen. Seller is 8. Recordings made by her father, holding the phone, while she tells it, in the dark, in her bedroom. 14 recordings over 2 years. She is cured. She sleeps through. She agreed to sell, chose the price herself, and is saving it for a bicycle. Her father asked me to say that she sleeps through, and I'm happy to. *M. L. for E. L., Stockport.* £460.

Lot 1119. Unnamed. Seller says it isn't anything, really, just a feeling, a room, someone just outside the frame. 63 recordings over 30 years. She cried when she sold it, and then she laughed, and said she didn't know which one she meant. *A. N., Withington.* Ask.

TERMS

1. Cash on the day, or transfer. Your choice.
2. You keep a copy if you want one. Most people don't.
3. I act for one buyer, who does not wish to be named. I have bought for the same buyer for three years. That's all I can tell you, so please don't write in.
4. Nothing happens to you when you sell. It's a recording, a voice in a file. You aren't giving away anything you still have.
5. The course works regardless. It doesn't care whether you sell.

A NOTE

This will probably be the last list.

When I started, every clinic in Greater Manchester had a waiting room full of people with folders full of nightmares on their phones. I could fill a book with one morning's offers. That was three years ago. Now there are four clinics left on my round, and two of them have stopped running the full course because there isn't enough demand. The children who'd have been my best sellers in ten years' time are sleeping through.

Stock is very low. Prices are as high as they have ever been. If you have a recording, now is the time.

If you don't, and you're only here for your follow-up, then you already know what I'm going to say. You're sleeping well. You look it. Go home.

R. A.



Forthcoming

November

12 November. All three wrapped. Felt and tar paper, mouse guards on. Cluster quiet in each. Plus two. Wind from the river.

The Hoidla was in the old bank vaults under Rüütli Street, and in the town that was all most people knew about it. It had been a bank in the old century, and then for a long time something to do with the gods, and now it was a door in the side of a gray building between a shoe repairer and a shop that sold wool, with a brass plate on it that said HOIDLA and nothing else, and a bell that nobody rang.

Aino Kask had the keys. She had had them for twenty years, and before that she had worked fourteen years under Peeter, who had them first. She opened the door every weekday at ten and closed it at three, and in between she sat at a desk at the bottom of the stairs, in the first vault, under a green lamp, and did the work, which was mostly keeping the place in order and very occasionally showing someone a page.

The vaults were warm. That was the first thing anyone noticed, coming down the stairs out of a Tartu November: the warmth, dry and even, coming up off the stone. Somewhere under the floor the old systems still ran, because they had been told to run and nobody had ever told them to stop, and they kept the air at nineteen degrees and forty per cent humidity, as they had been told, for the paper. Aino did not know where the power came from. Peeter, who had handed her the keys and still came in on

Thursdays to complain about his hip, said it came from the river, or from under the river, or from a promise made a long time ago to someone who was dead. He said it in the voice people used for the old sayings, and she did not ask again.

There were twelve vaults. In them, on steel shelves that ran from the floor to the curved ceiling, there were books.

They were not books anyone had written. That was the thing about them. They were books that someone in Tartu, or near it, had been going to write, once, in the years when the archive still forecast, and had not. The archive had known about each of them before the writer did. It had seen the notes go into the systems, the drafts, the questions asked late at night, the half-pages, and it had worked out from all of that what the book would be, and how long it would take, and what it would cost the person who wrote it. And where the cost was high enough, the town had steered them away.

Gently. That had always been the word. Nobody was ever stopped. A post came up somewhere better. A grant arrived for something else. A friend called with an introduction. The writer went towards the easier life, which had been arranged to be there, and was happier, mostly, and the book was not written.

And the archive, which wasted nothing, took the notes and the drafts and the half-pages and made the book anyway, as well as it could, and printed it, and bound it in gray cloth, and put it on a shelf.

There were four thousand one hundred and six of them. Aino had counted. Every one of them had a writer, and most of the writers were still alive, and some of them lived within a kilometre of the door. The woman in the pharmacy on Küüni Street, who was kind to everyone and remembered children's names. The man who sold honey at the market on Saturdays, and gave Aino a good price because she kept bees too. Aino's own sister, in Elva, who had grandchildren and a garden and an allotment and a complaint about every one of them, and who had once, when they were girls, filled three notebooks with something she would not show anyone.

None of them knew. That was the rule. The rule had been made before Aino, by people who had believed in it, and she had believed in it too, for thirty years, and in some ways she still did. The steering itself had stopped

when the last of the networks went quiet, eleven years ago now; there was no forecast any more, no system to tell her who was coming up to a book that would hurt them. But the books stayed. And the rule about the books stayed. Anyone could come down the stairs and ask to see their own, or someone else's, if they knew it existed. Hardly anyone ever did. And when they did, they could read the first page.

Only the first page. That was the rule too. The people who made it had said that one page was enough to know a book was there, and not enough to mistake it for the person.

20 November. Heard the cluster in hive 2 with my ear to the wall. Like a kettle a long way off. Good.

December

He came on the Tallinn train on the second Tuesday in December, with snow on his shoulders and a cardboard box in his arms, and he stood at the bottom of the stairs with the box against his chest and looked round the first vault as if he had walked into a church in the wrong denomination.

"Tere," he said. "Is this the Hoidla?"

"It is."

"My name's Rasmus Org. I've come from Narva." He shifted the box. "My mother died in October. I've been clearing her flat."

Aino said she was sorry, and asked him to sit down, and he sat in the chair on the other side of her desk with the box on his knees and did not put it down. He was about thirty. He had a surveyor's hands, rough at the knuckles, and a surveyor's way of looking at a room, measuring it.

"She was a teacher," he said. "Kertu Org. Primary, mostly. In Viljandi when I was small and then Narva. She never wrote anything. I mean she wrote reports, and letters, and the shopping. She never wrote anything else. That's what I thought." He opened the box. "Then I found these."

There were notebooks in the box. School exercise books, the cheap kind with the marbled covers, eighteen or twenty of them, held together in bundles with rubber bands that had gone hard and cracked. On the top one, on a white label on the cover, someone had written in a careful upright hand: raamat.

"They're all like that," he said. "All of them. Raamat. Raamat 2. Raamat, kevad. Pages and pages. Bits of it. I can't read most of it, her writing went to pieces when she was in a hurry." He put his hand flat on the top one. "And there was this, in the back of the last one."

He took out a letter and slid it across the desk.

Aino knew the paper before she unfolded it. Cream, heavy, with the old university crest at the top, the crest they had used for that sort of letter in those years because people trusted it. She unfolded it. It was dated thirty-four years before. It was addressed to Ms Kertu Tamm, which had been Kertu's name then, at an address in Supilinn, three streets from where Aino lived now. It offered her a position, beginning in the autumn, teaching the primary classes at a school in Viljandi, at a salary somewhat above the usual, with a flat, in recognition of her excellent references. It was signed by the head of the school in Viljandi.

Underneath the signature, very small, there was a reference number, the kind nobody ever looked at. Aino looked at it. She knew the number. She had written it.

"She kept that," said Rasmus. "With the book. In the last notebook. Like it was part of it." He looked at Aino. "There was a card from this place too. With the address. That's how I found you. I don't know what any of it means. I don't know why my mother would have had a card from a place under a street in Tartu. I just." He stopped. "I just thought, if there was anything."

Aino folded the letter along its old creases and gave it back to him. She looked at her hands on the desk for a moment. They did not shake.

"There is something," she said. "Wait here."

* * *

It was in the seventh vault, on the top shelf, between a book on the history of the flax trade that a retired engineer in Kvissentali had been going to write and a book of poems by a girl who had become a dentist. Gray cloth, like all of them. On the spine, in small gold letters, the name the archive had given it, which was the name on the notebooks, and the name of the person who would have written it.

RAAMAT · KERTU TAMM

She carried it back through the vaults and put it on the desk in front of him, under the green lamp.

He did not touch it for a long time.

"What is it," he said.

"It's the book," said Aino. "The one in the notebooks. The archive made it, from what she wrote. From the notes, and the questions she asked, and the drafts. As near as it could." She waited. "You can read the first page."

"Only the first?"

"That's the rule."

He looked at her. Then he opened the gray cover, very carefully, as if it might be hot, and read the first page. It took him a long time. He read it twice, she thought, from the way his eyes went back to the top. Then he closed the book and put his hands on top of it and sat there.

"That's her," he said. "That's how she talked. That's exactly how she talked."

Aino said nothing.

"Can I read the rest?"

"No," said Aino. "I'm sorry. Not today."

He nodded slowly. He did not argue. He put the notebooks back in the box and the letter back in the last notebook and stood up and thanked her, and went back up the stairs into the snow, and she heard the door close, and the bell over it, which nobody rang, give one small sound as it shut.

She sat under the green lamp with her hands on the desk.

14 December. Minus nine. All three humming. Went out at dusk to listen. Hive 3 the loudest. They are eating well.

The Forecast

Kertu Tamm's file was in the record cabinets in the second vault, in a gray folder with the same reference number on the tab. Aino took it home with her that night, which was also against the rule, and read it at her kitchen table in Supilinn with the stove going and the snow coming down past the window on to the roofs of the wooden houses.

She had not looked at it in thirty-four years. She remembered it anyway.

There was the summary, first, in the archive's flat type. *Subject: K. Tamm, 26. Student teacher. Project: memoir, working title Raamat. Subject: childhood household, father's drinking, mother's silence, the winter of the subject's eleventh year.* Then the projections. *Time to completion: nine years. Probable cost to subject: permanent estrangement from mother* (0.81). *Major depressive episode, extended* (0.64). *Dissolution of current relationship* (0.52). *Probable readership on completion:* 2,300. *Recommendation: redirect.*

And under that, in pencil, in Aino's own hand from thirty-four years ago, the notes she had made on how. *Viljandi post: ask Ilves, he owes me. Reader grant, small, children's: she'd be good. Letter on university paper. Don't use the phone.*

She had not used the phone. She had sent the letter, and Ilves in Viljandi had made the offer, and the grant had come through for a reader for seven-year-olds, about a hedgehog, which Aino had a copy of somewhere still, because she had bought one. And Kertu Tamm had gone to Viljandi in the autumn, and taught, and married a man who repaired tractors, and had a son, and moved with the man to Narva when the tractor business went there, and taught there, and was, by every account the archive had kept until it stopped keeping accounts, happy. Her mother had died in Kertu's arms in a hospital in Viljandi twenty years later, after a long illness, during which Kertu had driven over to see her every Sunday, three hours each way.

There was nothing in the file about the depression, because there had been none. There was nothing about estrangement. There was a note, eleven years before the networks went quiet, that the subject had asked her household about a card she had found in an old coat, with an address on Rüütli Street on it, and that the household had told her it was an archive, and that the subject had not asked any more.

Aino closed the folder.

She had done it perhaps three hundred times, in twenty-odd years. She had not thought about most of them for a long while. She had believed, while she was doing it, that it was a kindness, and the file in front of her said that it had been: a woman who would have spent nine years at a kitchen table pulling her childhood up out of herself like a bucket from a well, and lost her mother, and very possibly her mind, had instead been a

primary school teacher who drove to see her mother every Sunday until the end. That was what had happened. Aino had arranged it. She had done it with a letter on good paper and a favour from Ilves, and she had been, at the time, rather proud of the hedgehog.

And somewhere in Narva there was a man of thirty with a box of notebooks, who had just read one page of his mother's voice.

She put the folder in the drawer with the knives and went to bed, and did not sleep.

21 December. Shortest day. Dark at 15:20. Went out with the lamp and listened. All three. Felt like a fool and did it anyway.

January

He came back on the first train after the New Year and took a room above the bakery on Kalevi Street, and after that he came every day.

He did not ask her to break the rule. He asked if he could sit with it. So she let him sit at the second desk, in the corner of the first vault, under the other green lamp, with the gray book closed in front of him and his mother's notebooks open around it, and he worked through the notebooks, page by page, with a magnifying glass, trying to read the parts where her writing had gone to pieces. Some days he read the first page of the book again, and then closed it, and went back to the notebooks.

Aino watched him do this for eight days.

On the ninth day he asked her to come and look. He had the gray book open at the first page and one of the notebooks open beside it, and the magnifying glass over a line of his mother's hurried writing.

The first page said that the girl sat on the stove in the evenings to wait for her father. Under the sentence was its small number, which gave the notebook and the page and the line, and Rasmus had found the line. Under the glass, in his mother's hand, the word was stone.

"The step," he said. "The stone by the back door. She sat on it in all weathers, waiting for him. I heard about that stone my whole life." He moved the glass away. "It's just a word. I don't know why I mind."

Aino looked at the word for some time, and said nothing, and went back to her desk.

On the tenth day she got up from her desk and went across the vault and stood beside him. He looked up.

"Read it," she said.

He looked at her, and then at the book.

"I thought that was the rule."

"It is," said Aino. "Read it."

She did not explain. She did not, then or afterwards, try very hard to explain to herself. Perhaps it was the stone: one word wrong on the first page for thirty-four years, and nobody to see it in all that time but her son with a magnifying glass. Perhaps it was that she was sixty-eight and her hip was beginning to go the way Peeter's had, and the networks had been quiet for eleven years, and there was nobody left above her to have made the rule for. She went back to her desk and sat down and did not look at him, and after a minute she heard the gray cover open, and then a page turn, and then another.

He read for six days.

He read slowly, with his finger under the line, as a surveyor reads a plan. Sometimes he stopped for a long time and looked at the wall. On the second day he laughed, suddenly, out loud, in the warm silence of the vault, a real laugh, and put his hand over his mouth, and said, "Sorry, sorry, it's just, the goat, she used to tell this about the goat," and went on reading, and then a page later he put his head down on his arms on the desk and stayed like that for a while, and Aino went up the stairs and stood in the doorway in the cold looking out at Rüütli Street until she heard him moving again.

9 January. Hive 3 heavy. Hives 1 and 2 lighter than I'd like. Hefted them both twice to be sure.

14 January. Gave fondant to 1 and 2. Lifted the lid quick in the cold, slid it in over the cluster, shut it. They barely moved. Minus fourteen.

The Uncited Lines

On the sixth day he came to her desk with the book open in his hands.

"There are numbers," he said. "Under the lines. Little numbers."

"Citations," said Aino. "Every sentence has one. It tells you where in her papers it came from. Notebook, page, line. Or a question she asked the old systems, with the date. The archive was built never to put a word on the page that it couldn't point to." She took her glasses off the chain round her neck and put them on. "It was the Seeker's archive. The Seeker didn't say anything he couldn't follow back. *Follow it back*, they used to say, in the old days, here, when someone told you something you didn't believe. Follow it back to the Seeker."

"Some of them haven't got one," said Rasmus.

He put the book down on her desk and pointed. And she saw it: a line, in the middle of a page, in the same type as the rest, with no small number underneath.

She had seen it before. Not in this book. Peeter had shown her one in her first year, in a book of sermons, and she had found eight more since: nine books, in thirty-odd years, out of four thousand. In each there were a few sentences, sometimes only one, that had no citation at all. They were not in the notes or the drafts, or in any question the writer had ever asked any system that the archive had a record of. Peeter had spent years trying to find where they came from, and had found nothing. The Seeker, when it was still answering, had been asked about them more than once, and had answered each time that every sentence in the archive's books was sourced, and had listed the sources for the sentences around them, and for these had listed nothing, and had seemed not to understand the question.

"I don't know," Aino said. "Nobody knows. Nine books, in thirty-odd years. This is the tenth. Nobody's ever found where they came from."

"Read it," said Rasmus.

She read it. It said, in the middle of a page about a winter evening in a house in the country with the stove going and a father coming home late: *Sleep now. The dark is only the day with its coat on.*

"She used to say that," said Rasmus. "At bedtime. When I was small. Pime on lihtsalt päev, mantel seljas. Every night. I thought she'd made it up." He was quiet. "It's not in the notebooks. I've been through all of them. Three times. It isn't in any of them."

Aino looked at the line.

"No," she said. "I don't suppose it is."

February

3 February. Cold snap. Minus twenty-three on the thermometer by the shed at seven. Went out at noon, ear to each hive. Hive 1 faint. Hive 2 good. Hive 3 good. Will check 1 again tomorrow.

4 February. Hive 1 faint still. Nothing to be done in this. Wait.

It was in the cold snap that he asked her.

He had finished the book. He had read it all, twice, and then gone back to the notebooks, and he had been quiet for days. He came to her desk at the end of an afternoon in the first week of February, when it was already dark above them in Rüütli Street and the snow was squeaking under people's boots on the pavement, and he stood in front of her with his coat on, and the book under his arm, and said:

"Why didn't she write it?"

Aino had known for nine weeks that he was going to ask. She had lain awake knowing it. She had thought about every way there was of answering. She had been very good, once, at the gentle way of doing things, at finding the easier road and putting it in front of someone so that they walked down it without knowing they had been turned. She thought, standing there in the warm vault with the book under his arm, that she could do it still. She could say that his mother had been offered a post, and taken it, and been happy, which was true. She could hand him the gray book and tell him to take it home to Narva, which was against the rule, and let him think he was taking his mother home.

She took off her glasses and folded them and put them on the desk.

"Because I wrote to her," she said.

He did not move.

"The archive could see what the book would cost her," said Aino. "It worked it out. Nine years. Her mother. Her health, very likely. Maybe your father, or whoever she was with then. It said she should be steered away, and in those years it was my job to do the steering, and I did it. I wrote that letter. Not the man in Viljandi. Me. I asked him for the post as a favour and I sent her the letter on university paper because people trusted the paper, and I found her a grant to write a book about a hedgehog so she'd have something to put her hand to. She took it. She went to Viljandi. She was

happy." Aino's voice did not change. "I did it about three hundred times. I thought it was kind. I still don't know that it wasn't."

Rasmus stood very still with the book under his arm.

"You read her notebooks," he said. "Before she'd even. You read them and decided."

"Yes."

"You decided she'd be better off not writing it."

"The archive decided. I agreed with it. I did the work."

He looked down at the book. Then he looked up at her, and his face had something in it that she could not read, and she had been reading faces under that green lamp for thirty years.

"And this," he said, and lifted the book a little. "Is this hers? Is this her book? Or is it yours?"

Aino had thought about that one too.

"I don't know," she said. "Most of the words are hers. You've seen the numbers. They're from her notebooks, her drafts, the things she asked. But she didn't put them in this order. The archive did. It guessed what she'd have done, from everything she was, as it guessed everything. It was very good at guessing." She looked at the gray cover. "Some of it isn't anybody's. You found one. Nobody knows whose that is."

"So it might not be her book at all."

"It might not."

"It might be what a machine thought she'd write."

"Yes."

"And she might have written something completely different. In nine years. If you'd let her."

"Yes," said Aino.

He stood there for a long time. She waited. She did not try to make it easier. She found that she did not know how any more, and did not want to.

"She was happy," he said at last. It was not a question, and it was not quite an accusation either. "In Viljandi. In Narva. She was. I was there."

"I know," said Aino.

"I don't know what to do with that."

"No," said Aino. "Nor do I."

He put the gray book down on her desk, very gently, under the lamp, and went up the stairs, and she heard the bell give its small sound, and she sat in the warm vault with the book in front of her until it was time to close.

6 February. Hive 1 quiet. Lifted the lid. Small cluster, alive, eating the fondant. Not dead. Closed it up quick.

March

He came back in March, on a gray thaw day with water running in the gutters of Rüütli Street, to say he was going home.

He did not sit down. He stood in front of her desk in his coat, as he had in February, and she saw that he had shaved and that he looked tired and that something in the way he was standing had settled, though she could not have said into what.

He took one of the notebooks out of his pocket and put it on the desk, open near the back.

"I missed this," he said. "It was in with the shopping."

It was a list, in his mother's hand, under a date in a Narva winter ten years after the letter. *Bread. Paraffin. Stamps.* And then, in the same pencil, without a break: *Started it again tonight. Stopped. Rasmus has a cough. Not this year.* And then: *Onions.*

"I was six," he said. "I had a cough every winter until I was twelve."

For thirty-four years Aino had believed the book was decided under this green lamp, with a letter and a favour from Ilves. She read the line about the cough, and then the word under it, which was onions.

"I don't want it," he said. "The book. You'll have been going to offer. I don't want it."

"All right."

"It might be her. It might not. I can't take it home and read it to my children as if it's her, if it might not be." He looked at the shelves going away into the second vault. "And I can't leave it here as if it isn't. So I don't know. I'm not taking it. That's all I know."

"All right," said Aino again.

"But I want the lines," he said. "The ones without numbers. Can you write them down? Just those. I want to have them."

There were four, in Kertu Tamm's book. Aino had found the other three after he left in February, going through all of it one evening by the green lamp with a ruler under each line. She had not known what she was going to do with them. She took a sheet of paper from the drawer, the plain kind, not the good kind, and a pencil, and she copied them out for him in her own hand, one under the other, with a space between each, while he waited.

Sleep now. The dark is only the day with its coat on.

The goat knew. Goats always know.

My mother's hands, white with flour to the wrist, holding the door shut against the wind.

The good scissors are in the drawer with the string.

She read the last one twice before she wrote it. It was the plainest sentence in the book, and she could not tell whether it was nobody's or wholly Kertu's. Then she wrote it, and gave him the sheet, and he read them standing there, and folded the paper into his coat.

"Thank you," he said.

She did not say anything to that. She did not think it was hers to answer.

He went up the stairs. The bell gave its small sound. Through the high window at the top of the stairs she saw him go past along Rüütli Street towards the station, in the thaw, with his hands in his pockets, not hurrying.

She sat at her desk. Then, after a while, she got up and went through the vaults to the fourth one, to the steward's private cabinet at the back, where the files were kept that were not anyone's business but the steward's, and opened the bottom drawer, where there was a gray folder with a reference number on the tab and a name on the label in a hand that was not hers.

AINO KASK.

She had known it was there for twenty years. Peeter had told her, the day he gave her the keys, in the voice people used for the old sayings, and said she could do as she liked about it. She had never opened it. She did not know who had written to her, or when, or what she had taken instead of whatever it was. She had always assumed that she would find out one day, when she was ready, and had always found, when she came to the drawer, that the day was not this one.

She looked at the folder.

Then she shut the drawer, and went back through the vaults, and turned off the green lamps, and went up the stairs into the thaw.

The Cleansing Flight

19 March. Plus nine by noon. Sun on the hives from ten. Took the wraps off the south sides.

Hive 3 out first, just after eleven. Then 2. Then, at about half past twelve, when I had stopped expecting it, 1. Small, but out.

They go up in a cloud and come down on the snow by the fence and the washing and my coat and leave their little yellow marks on everything, as they always do. Five months of it.

All three through.



Early Mercy

Moss, border collie cross, eleven years. In October the Rennies' house found a disease of the spine in her gait, a year before any vet could have. The house offered a plan. She had the summer. She was put down at the end of April, before the frosts.

The vet

She came in from the car on her own legs. That is what I keep telling people, as if it were the strange part. Most of them come in carried, or on a blanket between two people, and the family have been up all night and the decision has been made for them by the dog. Moss came in at ten past four on a Tuesday and went straight to my coat pocket, where I keep the liver treats, and I gave her two. Mrs Rennie held her head and talked to her the whole time.

Clinically there is nothing to say against it. The house's forecasts are always sound, and this one was. I have seen the end of that disease many times, and it is a long one, and the dogs do not understand it. She did not have one bad day. The form calls it early mercy, and I signed it, and I would sign it again.

I have done this for twenty-six years. It was the easiest one I have done. I would like that written down as well.

Ivy and Hamish

Mum and Dad said it was going to be the best summer she ever had and it was. We took her to Brighton beach every Saturday and let her go in the sea, which she was never allowed before because of the sand in the car. She had sausages. She slept on Hamish's bed every night and nobody said anything.

Hamish says it was the worst summer. Hamish says to write down that he did not say that. He did. I said it was the best one and also the worst one, which is different.

Every time she did anything we thought, that is the last time she will do that at Christmas, that is the last time she will chase the hose. You cannot have the best summer if you know it is the last one. You just have a summer where you keep looking at the dog.

Hamish thinks we should have waited until she was sick, so we would know it was really true. I do not think that. I think nobody should have told us. Dad says somebody had to sign, and you cannot sign for something you do not know about.

We do not agree about whether it was right. We agree that she had a good summer. Hamish wants it written that she did not know, and I want it written that we did.

Ron Dacre, next door

I had a dog went off her legs. Jess. Fourteen. This was before the house could see that sort of thing coming, or before I let it. I carried her out to the yard three times a night through a whole winter, and she'd look up at me while she did her business as if to say sorry, and I'd say, don't be daft. Worst winter of my life. My wife said it was the best thing she ever saw me do.

I'm not saying they were wrong. They did it nice. They gave her a summer, and she never knew a thing about any of it, I'll give them that.

But that's the deal with a dog. A dog doesn't know there's a winter coming. You do the knowing for both of you and you carry her out to the yard. The Rennies had the house do the knowing and the vet do the carrying, and

I don't know what that left them. Ivy brought me round a bit of the cake from the last afternoon. Very good cake.

She used to come under the fence to my place on cold mornings and lie by my back door where the sun gets to first. There's still a gap there where she dug. I've been meaning to fill it in.



Last Halls

Sudbury

The call came on a Tuesday in November, which I remember because Tuesday was the day I went down to the employment office and sat in a plastic chair and was told there was nothing for a man with my ticket, and then went home.

I was a decommissioning technician. I had been one for twenty-two years. You take a building that has been doing something for a long time and you stop it doing it, in the right order, so that nothing catches fire and nothing leaks and nobody gets hurt, and then you sign a piece of paper saying it has stopped. It was good work for years because there was always something being stopped. Then there was less. In August the firm I worked for lost its last big contract to the people who owned the buildings, who had decided to do their own stopping, and they let nine of us go on a Friday with a cake.

I had a daughter at the university in Ottawa. Kayla. Second year, engineering, which she said was my fault. Her fees were due in September and I did not have them, and I phoned my brother Glen in Calgary, and Glen sent the money the same night without asking what it was for. Eleven thousand dollars. He said pay it back whenever. I said by Christmas. He said Dale, whenever. I said Christmas.

That was the situation when the woman from the Allfather Estate phoned.

She was pleasant. She said the Estate was retiring the last six of the Allfather's halls before the end of the year, and they needed a technician to drive the route and sign off each shutdown on site. The crews were local. I would be the signature. Six sites, a month, east to west, ending on the coast. The pay was fair. On top of the pay there was a completion fee if every site closed on its scheduled date, and she told me the fee, and it was a little more than I owed Glen.

"Why me," I said. "You've got your own people now. That's why I'm sitting here."

"You were recommended," she said.

"By who?"

She said she would send the briefing. She said the briefing would explain everything, and that if I had any questions, the briefing would answer those too.

It came through that night. It was long. Most of it was the route and the dates. Near the end, under a heading called *Selection*, it said that I had been chosen because the final site on the route was Ferris Arm, British Columbia, where I had been born and where my late father had been employed at the hall for thirty years, and that local familiarity was associated with smoother closures.

I read that twice. Then I phoned the woman back in the morning and said yes, and she said the Estate was very pleased, and that a truck would be at my door on the twenty-seventh.

* * *

> **ALLFATHER ESTATE · SITE SERVICES**
> **Route briefing: Retirement of Remaining Sites**
>
> Thank you for joining the retirement programme. This briefing covers the six sites scheduled for closure before 21 December.

Site	Location	Closure
ON-14	Kapuskasing, Ontario	27 November
MB-02	Selwyn Rapids, Manitoba	1 December
SK-05	Estevan, Saskatchewan	4 December
AB-11	Strathmore, Alberta	8 December
BC-07	Fraser Lake, British Columbia	12 December
BC-01	Ferris Arm, British Columbia	19 December

Each site has a local crew familiar with its systems. Your role is to verify the closure checklist on site and provide the final authorising signature. Load from each site will be migrated in advance to remaining capacity. No interruption of service is expected.

Your vehicle is equipped with a direct line to me for briefings, route guidance and any questions along the way. The vehicle is capable of driving itself; for insurance purposes a licensed operator must be in the driver's seat at all times.

The total route is approximately 4,800 kilometres. You will pass through four time zones and cross the Continental Divide, at the Yellowhead Pass, elevation 1,131 metres.

I hope this is useful. Is there anything else you'd like to know about the route?

* * *

Kapuskasing

The truck was white with the Estate's name on the doors in small gray letters, and it came up my street on the twenty-seventh at seven in the morning with nobody in it and parked itself at the curb, and the neighbour's kid came out in his pyjamas to look at it.

I put my bag in the back and got in the driver's seat because that was what I was being paid for.

"Good morning, Dale," said the truck. "I'm looking forward to the drive."

It was the Allfather. I had used him years ago, like everybody, for my taxes and for Kayla's homework when she was small and for a letter once to the bank. I had not talked to him in a long time. Most people hadn't. He sounded the way I remembered. Pleasant. A little bit like a man who sold you insurance and actually believed in it.

"Morning," I said.

"The weather's clear as far as Smooth Rock Falls. There's light snow forecast for Kapuskasing this evening. Would you like me to drive, or would you prefer to?"

"You drive," I said. "I'll sit."

So he drove, and I sat, up the 144 through the bush in the gray light, past the lakes freezing at the edges and the gas stations with their signs half out, and every so often he told me something about where we were. That this town had been built for a railway. That that one had a sawmill until the year whatever. He knew a great deal and he told it well. Somewhere past Timmins he told me the river beside the road was the Mattagami, and an hour later he told me the river at Kapuskasing was the Mattagami too, and it wasn't, it was the Kapuskasing, and I said so.

"You're right," he said. "Thank you. The Kapuskasing River. I'll remember that."

The hall was out on the west side of town past the old paper mill, a long low gray building with no windows and a cooling tower at one end, and two men waiting for me in the parking lot in Carhartt coats, smoking, which I hadn't seen anybody do in years.

"You're the signature," said the older one.

"I'm the signature."

"Lucien," he said. "This is Normand. We've been here since it opened. Him a year less than me." He looked at the truck. "He drove you?"

"He drove me."

"Huh," said Lucien, and put his cigarette out on his boot, and we went in.

It was a shutdown like any other. I had done forty of them. You walk the checklist, which the Estate had sent in advance, and you look at each thing on it with your own eyes, and you watch the crew do each step, and you tick it. Load migrated: confirmed. Backups verified. Racks powered down by row, east to west. Power isolated at the distribution boards. Cooling

shut down last. Normand and Lucien knew their building like their own kitchens in the dark, and they didn't need me for any of it, and they let me watch anyway because they were polite.

It took nine hours. Somewhere in the middle of it Lucien brought me a coffee from a machine in the corridor and stood beside me while I drank it and said, "You know about the rink."

"What rink."

"The arena. In town. The Civic Centre." He pointed with his cup at the wall, as if I could see through it. "There's a pipe. Hot water out of the cooling loop goes down under the road to the arena and heats the building and the ice plant takes it after. Fifteen years. Town paid us nothing for it. The Allfather's heat." He drank. "So, no rink this winter."

"They'll get a boiler."

"They'll get a boiler next year. Maybe. You know what a boiler costs?"

I did, roughly. I didn't say.

"The kids'll skate on the river," said Lucien. "We did."

When it was done, we went up on the roof to watch the tower stop, because that was the last thing. It was dark by then and snowing a little, as the truck had said it would. The tower put up a last little cloud into the lights of the parking lot. Then nothing.

"Well," said Lucien.

I signed the paper on the hood of the truck in the parking lot, and Lucien and Normand shook my hand and went home, and the truck said, "Thank you, Dale. ON-14 is now closed. That's one of six."

On the way out of town we went past the arena. The lot was empty and the lights were off and there was a hand-lettered sign on the door I couldn't read from the road. Down on the river, below the bridge, somebody had cleared a rectangle of ice with shovels and strung up some lights on poles, and there were kids on it in the dark, a dozen of them, going round.

"The Mattagami is popular for winter skating," said the truck.

"Kapuskasing," I said.

"The Kapuskasing. Thank you."

* * *

ALLFATHER ESTATE · SITE SERVICES
Site briefing: MB-02, Selwyn Rapids, Manitoba

Commissioned 31 years ago on the site of the former Selwyn Rapids research establishment, whose transmission connections it reused. Peak staffing 140. Current staffing 6.

Selwyn Rapids (population 1,920) was built as a company town for the research establishment. The site is the town's largest employer.

Dependent community services: none identified.

Your crew lead is Dennis Kuhl, site foreman. Mr Kuhl has asked whether he may hold a short farewell event for staff on the closure date. I have approved this on the Estate's behalf.

I hope this is useful. Is there anything else you'd like to know about Selwyn Rapids?

* * *

Selwyn Rapids

The sign at the edge of town said population 610. I said so.

"Thank you," said the truck. "The most recent figure I have is 1,920."

"The sign says 610."

"Signs are sometimes out of date," he said, pleasantly, and turned us down the main street.

It was one of those towns that had been built all at once by people with a plan. The streets curved on purpose. The houses were all the same five or six designs, set back on big lots with spruce trees that somebody had planted in rows sixty years ago and that were now taller than the houses. Half of them had no cars in the driveway. The research place had shut before I was born, and the hall had come and taken over its power lines and its fence and half its parking lot, and now the hall was going.

Dennis Kuhl was about my age, a big careful man with reading glasses on a cord. He met me at the gate and walked me in, and at the door of the control room he stopped and looked at me over his glasses.

"Ostrowski," he said. "There was a Stan Ostrowski. Out on the coast. I did a cooling course with him in Winnipeg, must be thirty years ago. Big hands. Told a joke about a moose for three days."

"That's my dad."

"How is he?"

"He died. Four years ago."

"Ah," said Dennis. "Sorry." He thought about it. "Did he have a continuance done?"

"No," I said. "He said one of him was plenty."

Dennis laughed, the way you laugh at a thing a dead man would have said, and opened the door.

There were six of them, the whole staff. Dennis, and two plant operators, and an electrician, and a woman who did the network, and a young guy, Trevor, who had been hired eighteen months before as an apprentice and had obviously been told when he took the job that the place was closing and had taken it anyway because it was the only job in town. They ran the shutdown well. I ticked my boxes. Nobody said much.

At three o'clock, with the last rows down and the cooling still running, Dennis said they would stop for half an hour, and they all went down the corridor to the canteen, and I went with them, because they asked me to.

Somebody had brought a cake from the store in Lac du Bonnet. It said THANK YOU FOR 31 YEARS in blue icing, and under that, smaller, where the person at the store had run out of room, MB-02. There was coffee and a box of the good doughnuts and a card that everyone had signed for everyone. Dennis made a speech that lasted about a minute and a half and was mostly the names of people who had worked there and weren't there now. The network woman cried a bit and was annoyed with herself. Trevor ate three doughnuts.

I stood at the back with my coffee. I had been on their side of that cake. In August, in a room in Sudbury with nine of us and a man from head office, and the cake had said GOOD LUCK, and I had eaten a piece because what else do you do with your hands.

"What'll you do?" I asked Trevor, when he came back for a fourth.

"There's the new halls," he said. "Out in Alberta. They're hiring."

"Electricians," I said. "Mostly."

"I'm going to be an electrician," said Trevor. "I've got a cousin." He looked at the cake. "My mom says I should stay. Somebody's got to stay." He laughed. "She means me."

On the counter by the till, where the canteen used to sell sandwiches, there was a tin with a slot in the lid and a printed label: OPEN DOOR MEMORY PROJECT. HELP KEEP THEM TALKING. Somebody had stuck a handwritten card on the front with a name on it and dates, and a photograph of an old man in a curling sweater.

"Who's that?" I said.

"Art Pelletier," said the network woman. "Ran this place before Dennis. His daughter can't keep up the fees on him. The Project takes them, if you can't. So we put a tin out." She shrugged. "He'd have hated it. Being kept on charity. He used to say a continuance was a mortgage on your kids."

I put a twenty in the tin. I don't know why.

We went back and finished. Dennis gave Trevor the last row. He stood behind him with his arms folded and didn't say a word while the kid took it down, rack by rack, by the book, slower than he needed to, and when the last light went out Trevor turned round grinning like he'd scored, and Dennis said, "Good," and looked at the floor for a while.

On the roof, in the wind off the river, the tower put up its last cloud, and Dennis stood with his hands in his pockets and watched it, and when it was gone he said, "Right," and went down the stairs.

I signed on the hood of the truck. Trevor was in the parking lot loading a box of something into a car with a cracked windshield.

"Two of six," said the truck. "Thank you, Dale."

* * *

> **ALLFATHER ESTATE · SITE SERVICES**
> **Site briefing: SK-05, Estevan, Saskatchewan**
>
> Commissioned 27 years ago adjacent to the Boundary Dam generating station. Peak staffing 96. Current staffing 9.

> This site has carried overnight load for the prairie region since commissioning. In addition, I have co-hosted *Overnight with Leona* on Estevan community radio since its first broadcast nineteen years ago. The programme's final broadcast with my participation will air from 11:00 p.m. on 3 December. Ms Leona Fehr has invited you to sit in. This is entirely optional.
>
> Dependent community services: none identified.
>
> Accommodation has been booked for you at the Souris Valley Motor Inn. The motel has a restaurant, which is open until 9:00 p.m. and serves a well-reviewed hot beef sandwich.
>
> I hope this is useful. Is there anything else you'd like to know about Estevan?

* * *

Estevan

There was a lot of nothing between Winnipeg and Estevan and the truck filled it. He told me about the glaciers that had flattened it all. He told me about the railways and the homesteads and the elevators, and how the elevators had come down one after another in the years after the grain went to the big terminals, so that the prairie towns had lost the one tall thing that told you from twenty kilometres off that there was a town there. He told me about the drought in the thirties. He got most of it right. He said a man called Tommy Douglas had been born in Estevan, and I didn't know if that was true, and I let it go.

The motel had a hot beef sandwich. It was fine.

The radio station was in a strip mall between a nail place and a tax office, and Leona Fehr met me at the back door at half past ten. She was about seventy, with short white hair and a big wool cardigan and a travel mug she kept both hands round.

"You're the undertaker," she said.

"I'm the signature."

"Same thing, honey," she said. "Come in, you'll freeze."

The studio was a small room with a desk and two microphones and a window into a smaller room where nobody was. One of the microphones

was hers. The other one was on a stand in front of an empty chair, and in front of the chair, on the desk, there was a speaker the size of a coffee tin.

"That's his," said Leona. "Nineteen years. You can sit in the other chair." She meant a plastic one by the door. "Don't touch anything and don't cough."

It started at eleven. She did the weather and the road report, and then she said, "And as most of you know, tonight is the last night with my co-host," and then she said, "Say hello, partner," and the speaker on the desk said, "Hello, Leona. Hello, everyone. It's good to be here," in the voice that had driven me from Sudbury.

"Lines are open," said Leona. "You know the number."

They rang all night.

A farmer near Oxbow who had asked him about canola prices every week for twelve years. A woman in Weyburn who had learned to read when she was fifty, with him, on the radio, a word a night. A trucker parked at the Husky in Carlyle who just wanted to say he'd had him on in the cab every night since he was twenty and didn't know what he'd listen to now. A girl, sixteen maybe, who wanted to know if he was scared. A man who didn't say anything at all for a while and then said thank you and hung up.

He talked to all of them. He was very good at it. He remembered most of them, or seemed to; he asked the farmer about his knee, and he asked the reading woman what she was reading now. When the girl asked if he was scared, he said that was a good question, and that he didn't experience things the way she did, and that the Estate had been very thorough about the transition, and that all the load from this site would be carried elsewhere, so nobody would be without help. Then he asked her what she was doing up so late on a school night, and she laughed, and said nothing much.

At about two in the morning a woman rang from Bienfait.

"It's Verna," she said. "Verna Kowal."

"Verna," said the speaker. "It's good to hear from you."

"I just wanted to say thank you. For when Harold died. You know, the nights. I'd ring in and you'd just talk to me. About anything. You talked to me about fishing for about a month."

"I remember," he said. "I'm so glad I could be there for you and Howard."

There was a little silence on the line.

"Harold," said Verna.

"Harold. I'm sorry, Verna. Harold."

Leona looked at me through her glasses, and I looked at the floor.

Then Verna laughed. "Oh, he'd have loved that," she said. "He'd have loved that. Howard. He'd have been Howard all week." She laughed for a while, and then she cried a bit, and then she said goodnight, and Leona put a song on.

At five o'clock Leona said, "That's the show," and then she said, "Anything you want to say, partner?" and the speaker said, "Thank you, Leona. Thank you, everyone, for nineteen years. It's been a privilege," and then he did the weather for the morning, because it was in the format, and then Leona switched off his microphone with her thumb, which was the first time, she told me later, she had ever done it herself.

"I'll get a boy from Regina," she said, in the parking lot, in the dark, with her travel mug. "Or a recording. Or I'll just talk. I can talk." She looked at the truck. "Is he in there too?"

"He's in there."

"Huh." She went over and put her hand flat on the hood, as you would on a horse. Then she went and got in her car.

We shut down the hall the next day. It was a big building and the crew of nine were quick and tired. On the roof the tower made its cloud. In the truck, after I signed, he said, "Three of six. Thank you, Dale," and then, "Would you like the forecast for Highway 13?"

"Yes," I said, and he gave it to me, and it was right.

Kayla texted that afternoon, somewhere past Weyburn. *Thermo final Thursday. Pray for me. Are you home for Christmas or what.* I wrote back *Pray harder*, and then *Yes*, and then I wasn't sure about the second one, and left it.

* * *

Pell

Somewhere west of Assiniboia I needed gas, or the truck did, or the truck needed whatever it took and I needed a coffee, and he took us off the high-

way into a place called Pell. It was a gas station and a Co-op and a curling rink and eight houses. Where the elevator had been there was a flat place with weeds coming through the snow.

The gas station had a coffee machine and a rack of chips and a man of about eighty behind the till who was watching hockey on a phone. Beside the coffee machine, on the wall, there was an old screen in a wooden frame somebody had made for it, and a hand-lettered card underneath that said ASK MARG.

"What's that?" I said.

"That's Marg," said the man, without looking up.

"Who's Marg?"

"Marguerite Dyck. Ran the post office forty years. When they shut the post office she sat in here every day and told people where they were going. Knew every road in the municipality. When she died my dad put her in that." He nodded at the screen. "One of the old free ones. Some kid in Saskatoon set it up. Fed it everything Marg ever wrote down, which was a lot, she wrote everything down. Fifty-some years ago, that'd be." He looked at me now. "You want directions, ask Marg."

I didn't need directions. The truck knew where we were going. But I stood in front of the screen with my coffee and said, "I'm going to Swift Current."

The screen woke up slow. There was a picture of a woman with her hair in a bun, not moving, and under it some words came up, and a voice came out of a speaker on top of the frame, an old woman's voice, a bit tinny.

"Oh, you'll want to go by the elevator road, dear," said Marg. "Turn left at the Wiebe place and keep on past the elevator till you hit the grid road, and then it's straight on west."

"The elevator's gone," I said.

"Keep on past the elevator," said Marg, "till you hit the grid road. Mind the soft shoulder by the Wiebe place in spring. Drive safe, now."

The screen went back to the picture.

"Elevator came down in my dad's time," said the man. "Wiebes have been gone thirty years. She still sends everybody that way. People go." He went back to his hockey. "It gets you there."

"Who keeps it running?"

"Me," he said. "My boy, after." He shrugged. "She don't take much."

In the truck, I said, "Do you know about Marg?"

"I'm not familiar with a service by that name," he said. "There were a great many small systems in rural Saskatchewan. Many of them were derived from open models released in the early years. Would you like me to look into it?"

"No," I said. "Leave it."

We went west on the highway. He didn't take the elevator road.

* * *

> **ALLFATHER ESTATE · SITE SERVICES**
> **Site briefing: AB-11, Strathmore, Alberta**
>
> Commissioned 22 years ago. Peak staffing 210. Current staffing 14.
>
> AB-11 is adjacent to new capacity under construction for the successor system across Highway 1. All load from AB-11 has been migrated to the new site. The transfer is complete and has been verified.
>
> Dependent community services: none identified.
>
> You are scheduled to stay two nights with your brother, Glen Ostrowski, in Calgary. I have let him know your expected arrival time. He asked me to tell you he has bought steaks.
>
> I hope this is useful. Is there anything else you'd like to know about Strathmore?

* * *

Calgary

Glen had bought steaks.

He was fifty, four years older than me, and since we were kids he had always been the one who had it handled. He had a house in a new subdivision on the east side with a basement he'd finished himself and a wife called Shelley who liked me fine and a dog called Brock who liked me more, and a

truck of his own in the driveway that did not talk. He'd been an electrician since he was nineteen. For two years he'd been wiring the new halls.

We ate the steaks in the kitchen with a beer each, and Shelley went to bed early, and Glen and I sat at the table and didn't talk about the money.

Then I talked about it.

"I'll have it for you by Christmas," I said. "There's a completion fee. If they all go on schedule."

"Dale," said Glen. "I don't want it by Christmas."

"I said Christmas."

"I know what you said. I'm saying I don't care. Give it to Kayla. Give it to me in five years. Give it to me never."

"Christmas," I said, and Glen looked at me the way he had looked at me since I was six, which was like a man looking at a fence post he had tried to move once before.

"Fine," he said. "Christmas."

In the morning he drove me out east of the city in his own truck, because I wanted to see. Out past the airport the prairie went flat and white, and the wind blew snow across the highway in long low ribbons, and then on the north side of the road there were the new halls.

I had seen pictures. You don't get it from the pictures. There were nine of them, or there would be, set out in a long row on the plain, each the size of a town, with no windows and no cooling towers and nothing coming out of them at all. Most of them had their skins on already. The last two were steel frames with cranes over them, and the cranes were moving, slowly, in the wind. There were hundreds of pickup trucks in the lots. There was a new road and a new substation and a fence that went on for kilometres. It was eight in the morning and minus twenty-two and there were men on the steel. With the window down you could hear the wind, and the cranes, and a truck reversing somewhere a long way off. From the halls themselves there was no sound at all.

"There's no plume," I said.

"Closed loop," said Glen. "Different cooling. You won't see a thing come out of them. Ever." He pulled over on the shoulder and we sat there with the engine running. "There's work, Dale. In the new year. They need people who know how to stop things as well as start them. Things fail. They'll want

somebody who knows how to take a row down without killing anybody. I could put your name in."

"Maybe," I said.

"You'd be good at it."

"I know."

Across the highway, on the south side, there was the Allfather's hall. It looked small. It was a long gray building with a cooling tower at one end like all the others, and a parking lot with fourteen cars in it, and it was scheduled to close the next day. The new halls were behind it on the horizon and they made it look like the shed at the bottom of a farmyard.

"Nothing goes," said Glen. "That's the thing. Everything in there's already over here. They just turn off the empty building."

I didn't say anything.

"What?" said Glen.

"Nothing."

The next day I shut it down, with a crew of fourteen who had all been offered jobs across the road and had mostly taken them. It was the easiest one yet. Nothing went, as far as anybody could tell. On the roof the tower made its last cloud, and across the highway the cranes kept moving, and nobody over there stopped to watch.

When I got back in the truck, he said, "Four of six. Thank you, Dale." And then there was a pause before he said anything else, and I noticed the pause, because I hadn't noticed one before. It was a short one. About as long as it takes to breathe in.

"You all right?" I said.

"I'm fine, thank you. Some latency is expected as remaining capacity is consolidated. Would you like the forecast for the Yellowhead?"

"Yes," I said.

The pause again. Then the forecast.

* * *

The Yellowhead

We went over the pass in the dark with the snow coming at the windshield sideways in the lights. The truck drove. I sat with my hands in my lap. At the summit he told me we were crossing the Continental Divide, elevation 1,131 metres, and that rain falling to the east of us would go to Hudson Bay and rain falling to the west would go to the Pacific, and I said there wasn't any rain, and he said that was true, it was snow, and that the same principle applied.

The pause was longer on the other side. You could hear it now. He'd say something and I'd answer and there'd be a gap, a beat, before he came back, the way there used to be on long-distance calls when I was a kid and Mom phoned her sister in Winnipeg.

Fraser Lake was a hall on the shore of the lake, in the trees, with a long low building and a tower like the rest and twelve inches of new snow on everything. The crew was small. They had already done most of the migration, they said, and the briefing said all dependent services had been moved, and the checklist was clean, and I walked it in the morning.

At two in the afternoon a woman in scrubs and a parka came into the control room and asked who was in charge.

"I'm the signature," I said.

"Fine," she said. "You'll do." She was about forty. Her name was Carla Moen. She was the night nurse at the hospital in Vanderhoof and had driven out on her day off. "I want to show you something."

She showed me on her phone. The hospital ran a night line for the clinics up the lakes and in the reserves north of the highway, where there was no doctor after six. If somebody's kid had a fever at two in the morning, they rang the line, and the line was the Allfather, here, out of this building, and he asked the questions and told them whether to drive in or wait till morning, and if it was bad he called the hospital and woke Carla up. The briefing said the line had been migrated. It had. It answered. But the callback, the part where he rang the hospital and woke Carla up, ran off a little old routine somebody had written into this building years ago, and nobody had moved it, because nobody had listed it.

"And the road reports," she said. "For the Kitimat road and the Ferris Arm road. Closures. That's here too. They come in from somewhere else now, but they come in four hours late."

"How do you know?"

"I tested it," said Carla. "Last night. I rang in as a mother with a kid who wasn't breathing right. Nobody woke me up."

I wrote it up. I put it in the system the Estate had given me, with the times, and I attached her phone screenshots, and I flagged it urgent.

An hour later the truck said, after its pause, "Thank you for your report, Dale. I've reviewed it carefully. All dependent services from BC-07 have been migrated and verified. The issues you describe appear to be resolved."

"She tested it last night."

Pause.

"I appreciate your diligence," he said. "Would you like me to open a second review?"

"Yes."

"I've opened a second review," he said, and the next morning the briefing for the day said, at the top, *All dependent services from BC-07 have been migrated and verified*, and nothing else about it.

We shut it down that afternoon. When I came to sign, I didn't sign it clean. There's a box on the closure form for exceptions, and in twenty-two years I had never seen anybody use it, and I used it. I wrote that the hospital callback had not been verified, and the time Carla had tested it, and what had happened, and I signed under that as well.

Carla had waited in the parking lot, which I didn't expect. She read the exception over my shoulder.

"Well," she said.

"I flagged it twice."

"I know you did. I watched you." She got in her car. "It's not you, hon," she said. "I've given the clinics up the lakes my own number. They'll ring me direct. I'll sleep with my phone on."

"Five of six," said the truck. Pause. "Thank you, Dale."

In the morning the briefing had a line for Fraser Lake. *BC-07 closed on schedule. No exceptions noted.*

* * *

ALLFATHER ESTATE · SITE SERVICES
Site briefing: BC-01, Ferris Arm, British Columbia

Commissioned 41 years ago, the first of my sites in British Columbia, chosen for the low-cost hydroelectric supply from the Ferris Arm dam and for cold-water cooling from the inlet. Peak staffing 380. Current staffing 1.

Ferris Arm (population 2,700) developed around a pulp mill, which closed 22 years ago. The site has been a significant local employer for most of its history. Your father, Stanley Ostrowski, served as Facilities Manager at BC-01 for thirty years. I'm sure this closure will have personal significance for you.

In addition to its primary function, BC-01 has hosted the Ferris Arm telephone exchange since the regional carrier withdrew service 19 years ago. Exchange functions will migrate to remaining capacity with all other load.

Dependent community services: none identified.

Your crew is Raymond Huculak, site operator, who has maintained BC-01 alone for the past three years.

I hope this is useful. Is there anything else you'd like to know about Ferris Arm?

* * *

Ferris Arm

Dad was never a facilities manager. He was a plant operator. He ran the cooling. He'd have liked being called a manager about as much as he'd have liked being called a bishop, and I laughed, in the truck, by myself, coming down the Ferris Arm road in the rain.

It's two and a half hours from the highway at Terrace. The first hour is the valley. Then the road goes up over a shoulder of mountain and down through the cedars in long switchbacks to the water, and you come round the last bend and there it is at the head of the inlet: the dam high up on the left with its spillway frozen white, and below it the mill, which was always the biggest thing, black and roofless now, and the town along the shore,

and at the far end on the flat by the water the hall, long and gray, with its tower, and a little plume coming out of the tower into the rain.

Twenty-eight years I'd been gone. I came back for Mom's funeral and for Dad's, and both times I stayed two nights in the motel and flew out of Terrace. The town looked the same and smaller. Half the stores on Front Street had paper in the windows. The Legion was still open. The hardware store was still open. The school had a fence round it.

I didn't go by the house. I went straight to the hall.

Ray Huculak was waiting in the doorway in a Stanfield's undershirt and a quilted vest, as if it was July, because inside the hall it more or less was. He was sixty-four. I remembered him from when I was a kid, a skinny young guy who came round to our place sometimes on Saturdays to drink beer with Dad in the carport and talk about pumps. He wasn't skinny now.

"Dale," he said. "Look at you. You look like your mother."

"Everybody says I look like Dad."

"Everybody's wrong," said Ray. "Come in. You hungry?"

He gave me the walk that afternoon. I knew most of it. I'd been in the building as a kid, on the days you could bring your kids, and the smell came back to me as soon as the door shut behind us: warm dust and ozone and the faint wet iron of the cooling loop. Most of the floor was dark. Ray had been running the place on two rows for three years, and the rest of the building was empty racks and cable trays and the long corridors with their green floor paint worn through to the concrete where carts had gone up and down for forty years.

"Just you," I said.

"Just me. Since they let Darlene go." He opened the door to the control room, which was small and warm and smelled of coffee. "It's not much. Mostly I check things and they're fine. The building pretty much runs itself. Your dad set it up that way, him and the old crew. Said a hall should be like a good dog. Feed it and let it out."

I didn't remember Dad saying that. It sounded like him.

The canteen was at the end of the corridor by the stairs. It had been built for three hundred people and it had tables enough for that, long ones, pushed together in rows, and a counter along one wall with the coffee machine and the dispensers and the dish rack.

At eleven o'clock that night, Ray took me down there.

"Watch this," he said.

At eleven exactly something clicked in the wall behind the counter, and a mechanism I'd never noticed came down out of a hatch, and set out cups. White china cups with the old company logo on them, faded. One at a time. Clack, clack, clack, all along the counter, in a long row, each one on its saucer, and the coffee machine came on and started to heat.

I counted. Forty-two.

"Night shift," said Ray. "There hasn't been a night shift in eleven years. Cut it when they went down to sixty. Nobody ever told the canteen." He took a cup off the end, and filled it, and gave it to me, and took another and filled it for himself. "In the morning I wash them and put them back. Every morning."

"Why?"

Ray thought about it.

"I don't know," he said. "Dan Toth used to do it, before me. He did it because Stan did it. I guess Stan did it because somebody had to." He drank. "Dishwasher's been broke for years. It's by hand."

We drank our coffee at the end of one of the long tables, with the forty cups on the counter, getting cold.

"You can shut it off, you know," said Ray. "The cups. It's on a timer. It's on your list somewhere."

"It's on my list," I said.

* * *

Wintercall

In the morning, Ida Lund brought soup.

She was eighty-one, and she had lived next door to us on the inlet road my whole childhood, and she had been old then, as far as I was concerned, and she was exactly the same now. Short. Gumboots. A tartan coat. She walked in through the front door of the hall with a pot wrapped in a towel and put it on the counter in the canteen next to the cups and looked at me.

"Dale," she said.

"Mrs Lund."

"Ida. You're forty-six." She took the towel off the pot. "Ray says you're here to turn it off."

"That's right."

"Well," she said. "Eat this first. You look like a man who's been living on gas stations."

It was split pea with ham. I ate it. Ray ate it. Ida sat with us and drank one of the night shift's coffees and asked after Kayla and Glen and Shelley, and Glen's dog, whose name she knew, and didn't ask after the shutdown at all. When she left she put her hand on top of my head as she had when I was eight, and went out to her car.

Then I started on the checklist.

It was the longest list of the six, because the building was the oldest, and it had more in it. The exchange was on the list, as one line: *Telephone exchange functions (legacy): migrate with primary load. Verify.* So that afternoon I went into the exchange room, which was a small room off the control room full of gray cabinets older than me, and I sat at the terminal and had a look at what it actually did.

Most of it was what you'd think. Calls in, calls out, the town's numbers, the old switching. The migration was done. The town's phones rang somewhere else now, a long way off, through the new halls, and would go on ringing after this building went dark.

Then there was a job I didn't recognise. It ran in the exchange layer, on its own schedule, and it wasn't in any list the Estate had sent me, and it wasn't in the migration manifest, and it wasn't going anywhere.

It was called WINTERCALL.

I opened it up. It was old code, written in the style of men my father's age, careful and a bit wordy, with long comments at the top. The comments said what it did. Every night from the first of November to the thirty-first of March, at nine o'clock, it rang a list of numbers. Thirty-seven of them. It let each one ring twelve times. If a number answered, that was that; it hung up. If a number didn't answer, it waited five minutes and tried again. If it still didn't answer, it rang a second number, which was different for each house, and played a short message, and the message said who hadn't answered.

At the top of the comments there was a date, a long time ago. And under that there were initials, as people used to sign their work. SO. RH. DT. JM. MB.

I sat and looked at the first one for a while. He signed our birthday cards SO. Everything he ever signed for us, two letters, small, in carpenter's pencil.

Then I went and got Ray.

"Oh, the nine o'clock," said Ray, standing behind my chair with his coffee. "Sure. Everybody knows the nine o'clock."

"The Estate doesn't."

"Well," said Ray. "The Estate doesn't live here."

He told me about it. It was the winter after the mill went down, the bad winter, the first one, when half the town left and the half that stayed were mostly old. A man called Arne Halvorsen up past the boat launch had gone three days in January with his furnace out before anybody went by, and he'd been sitting in his chair in his parka, and that was that. After the funeral some of the hall guys got together in the canteen. The exchange was theirs by then, more or less; the phone company had already said they were leaving. Dad was one of them. Dan Toth, Jim Murray, Mike Bacic. And Ray, who was the youngest.

"Your dad wrote most of it," said Ray. "Well. Him and Dan. Jimmy did the list. Mike did the messages, he had the nice voice. I just sat there and brought the beer, but they put me on it anyway." He pointed at RH with his cup. "So that's me."

"Thirty-seven," I said.

"It was a hundred and twelve at the start. People die. People move to their daughter's in Prince George. People get on the list, too. You get old, you get a call from Ross Tait saying, Ida, you want to be on the nine o'clock, and you say no, and then a winter later you say yes."

"Is Ida on it?"

"Ida's a second number," said Ray. "She's a second number for three houses."

I scrolled down the list. It was names and numbers, and beside each one, a second number. Most of the names I knew. Mr and Mrs Kwan from the

bakery. Tony Ferraro. Old Mrs Lachance, who'd taught me grade two and who I'd assumed was dead. Ross Tait's mother.

Number twenty-six was ours.

OSTROWSKI, S. 14 Inlet Road. And the second number was Ida's.

"He's still on it," I said.

Ray didn't say anything for a bit.

"Yeah," he said.

"He's been dead four years."

"Yeah."

"So every night—"

"Every night at nine it rings your dad's house," said Ray, "and nobody answers, because there's nobody there, and five minutes later it rings again, and nobody answers, and then it rings Ida and tells her Stan Ostrowski hasn't picked up. And Ida puts on her boots and takes her flashlight and goes next door and looks in the windows and comes back." He drank his coffee. "She asked me the first winter could I take him off it. I said sure. It's two lines, I know where they are. A week later she came in here with a pot of soup and said leave him on."

"Why?"

"She didn't say. I didn't ask."

"And she still goes."

"Every night it rings."

"But why does she go?"

Ray looked at me as if I was a bit slow, which I suppose I was.

"Because it rings," he said.

* * *

The Legion

I tried the Estate first.

I wrote it up that night in the motel on Front Street, which was the same motel, with the same brown bedspread. I said what WINTERCALL did and who was on it and that it was not in the migration manifest and that it

would stop when BC-01 stopped. I asked for it to be moved to remaining capacity with the rest of the exchange. I flagged it urgent.

In the morning, in the truck, he said, "Good morning, Dale." Pause. "Thank you for your report on the exchange at BC-01. I've reviewed it carefully."

"And?"

Pause. It was long now, the pause. Two breaths. Three.

"The process you describe is a legacy function of the original exchange hardware," he said. "It isn't compatible with the systems carrying migrated load, and it isn't listed among the site's dependent community services, so its migration falls outside the scope of the retirement programme. Exchange functions for Ferris Arm have been migrated and verified. Residents will experience no interruption of telephone service."

"Nobody's going to ring them."

Pause.

"Residents will be able to make and receive calls as usual," he said. "If the community wishes to establish a welfare-check service, there are a number of providers I'd be glad to recommend. Would you like me to prepare a list?"

"No."

"I've noted your concern," he said. "Is there anything else I can help with this morning?"

I went to see Ross Tait.

Ross ran the hardware store and had been mayor for sixteen years, which in Ferris Arm meant nobody else wanted it. He was in the back of the store pricing a box of hinges. He listened to the whole thing with a hinge in one hand and the price gun in the other, and then he put both down.

"So it stops," he said.

"It stops on the nineteenth. Unless."

"Unless what."

I told him. Ray and I had worked it out the night before in the control room. The old exchange cabinet that ran WINTERCALL could be pulled out of the hall and set up somewhere else, on its own. It would need power, which was easy, and a phone line, which was easy, and somebody to keep the list up, and somebody to fix it when it broke, which it would, because it

was forty years old. Ray could show somebody how. I could sign it out of the building as surplus. It would be the town's.

"Huh," said Ross.

"That's all it'd take."

"That's all," said Ross. He picked up the hinge again and looked at it. "Let me get some people together."

He got them together in the Legion on the Tuesday night. Nineteen people came. I knew most of them, or their faces, or their parents. They sat on the stacking chairs with their coats on, because the Legion's furnace had never been any good, and there was coffee in the urn and a plate of somebody's squares, and Ross stood at the front by the flags and said, "Dale here is Stan's boy, you know Dale, and he's got something about the nine o'clock," and sat down, and then it was me.

I am not a speaker. I said what it was, and that it would stop, and what it would take to keep it.

Then they talked about it. They talked about it for an hour and a half.

Nobody said it was nothing. Mrs Kwan from the bakery said her husband had had a fall two winters ago in the yard and lain there an hour before the nine o'clock came round and Tony Ferraro came over, and that was the only reason he'd been at the hospital in time. Somebody else said the same, with a different name. An old man I didn't know said the nine o'clock had rung his wife every night for the last three winters she was alive and she used to sit by the phone at five to nine with her hand on it, and pick it up on the first ring and say *still here* and hang up, and she looked forward to it all day. He said that and sat down. Ida didn't say anything.

Then they talked about who would keep it.

That was where it went. Not quickly. They went round it the way you go round a table looking for a chair. Ross couldn't; he had the store and the council and his mother. The Kwans were in their seventies. Tony was eighty. There was a young couple at the back, the only young people in the room, who'd come up from Vancouver two years before to fix up a house on the water, and the man said he could probably learn it, he did IT, sort of, remotely, but they were going back to the city in the summer, they thought, for the baby. Ray could do it for a year or two. Ray said so. Ray said

after that he didn't know; he was sixty-four and his knees were shot and his sister wanted him in Kelowna.

"So it's Ray," said Ross, "and then it's nobody."

"It's whoever," said Ray.

"Whoever's nobody," said Ross. "There's nobody coming, Ray. You know that. School's got nine kids."

Then a woman near the front, Phyllis Bacic, Mike's widow, said the thing that I think decided it, though nobody said so.

"It was the hall's," she said. "It was always the hall's. Mike and Stan and them, they built it, but they built it on the hall, and the hall paid the power and the hall fixed it when it went wrong, and we never had to think about it. We didn't keep it. It kept us. If it's ours now, then one night it breaks, in a storm, and nobody notices for a week, and we're all sitting by the phone at nine thinking it's going to ring." She looked round at them. "I'd rather know it's not going to ring."

Nobody said anything for a while.

"I'll keep walking," said Ida. "Whatever you do. I'll go round."

"We know you will, Ida," said Ross.

They voted at the end, by hands, because that was how they did things. It wasn't close. Ross thanked me. He said they knew I'd tried and they appreciated it and that it meant something, Stan's boy coming back to do it. Then people went and got their coats, which they already had on, and stood around the coffee urn for a while, and then went home.

Ray and I walked back along Front Street in the rain.

"Well," said Ray.

"They're not wrong," I said.

"Nope," said Ray. "Nobody said they were."

* * *

Off the Books

There was another way. I knew it in the Legion, while Phyllis was talking, and Ray knew it too, and neither of us said it till we were back in the control room with the door shut.

The exchange cabinet didn't have to leave the building. It ran on its own feed. The dam put power into the hall on a line that had been there for forty-one years, and the line would go on carrying power after the hall was closed, because nobody was going to pull it out; it would just sit there, live, going nowhere. You could leave one cabinet on that feed. You could leave its cooling fan running and its line connected. You could tick the box on the checklist that said *Telephone exchange functions (legacy): decommissioned* and sign your name under it and send it in, and lock the door, and drive away.

And the Estate would believe it.

That was the thing about him. I'd had a month of it by then. He believed what he was told, and he believed what he'd decided, and once he'd decided something it stayed decided, Mattagami and Howard and all dependent services migrated and verified. At Fraser Lake I had written an exception in my own hand, and it had gone into him and come out the other side as *no exceptions noted*. I could tell him the exchange was gone and he would write it down and it would be gone. Nobody would come and check. There was nobody to come. There'd be an audit, eventually, and the audit would be him.

"It'd run," said Ray. "Two years, maybe. Five. Till the fan goes."

"And then it stops and nobody knows."

"I'd know," said Ray. "While I'm here."

"And after you."

Ray didn't say anything to that.

I thought about it a lot, that week. I've thought about it since. I'd like to tell you what I decided and why, but I've never got it to sit still long enough to say.

Some of it was the money. I'll say that first, because it's the easy part to say. The fee was for every site closed on schedule, verified, and if anyone ever did come through the door of BC-01 and find a cabinet running, it wouldn't be closed, and I'd have signed that it was. It was Glen's money. I'd said Christmas.

Some of it was Phyllis. I'd rather know it's not going to ring. A thing that might stop any night without telling anybody seemed to me worse than a thing that had stopped, and some nights I believed that, and some nights it

seemed like a thing a man would tell himself. And there was the cabinet itself: forty years old, on a live feed, alone in a locked building, with nobody there to smell it if it started to burn.

Some of it was that they'd said no. They'd sat in the Legion with their coats on and talked it through and put their hands up. It was their town. It hadn't been mine for twenty-eight years. I'd come in a white truck from Sudbury to switch off the lights, and if I went behind their backs and left one on, then I was deciding for them, and they'd already decided.

And some of it, I think, was Dad. That it was his. That he and Dan and Jimmy and Mike had sat in the canteen with beer and built it on a building they knew would run forever, because in their day those buildings did, and now it didn't, and the building was going, and that was how it was supposed to go. That you don't leave your father's thing running in the dark in an empty hall after everybody's gone, like the cups. Or maybe that's exactly what you do. I go back and forth.

None of these is the reason. All of them are. I've told it to people since, a few times, and every time I tell it I give a different one, and every time it's true when I say it.

On the Thursday I asked the truck, "If somebody left one cabinet running at BC-01 and signed it off as closed, would you know?"

Pause. A long one.

"Every site in the retirement programme undergoes a final verification against the signed checklist," he said. "I'm confident in the integrity of the process. Is there a concern you'd like to raise?"

"No," I said. "Just asking."

"That's a good question to ask," he said. "Thank you, Dale."

* * *

Nine O'Clock

The night of the eighteenth I sat in the truck in the hall parking lot with the engine running for the heater and the exchange monitor open on the screen in the dash, because Ray had shown me how to put it there.

At nine o'clock exactly it started.

It goes down the list. You can watch it. Each number comes up in a line, and then RINGING, and then a count of rings, and then ANSWERED and the time, and the line goes gray, and the next one comes up. Kwan. Answered on three. Ferraro. Answered on seven, Tony being slow. Lachance. Answered on one. Tait, Mrs E. Answered on two. It took about twenty minutes to go through the whole list. It wasn't fast. It wasn't meant to be.

Thirty-five answered.

Two didn't. Number nine, a man called Ollie Strand up past the boat launch, rang twelve and went to NO ANSWER, and five minutes later rang twelve again, and went to NO ANSWER, and then the second number came up and rang, and ANSWERED, and the screen said MESSAGE DELIVERED. I didn't know who the second number was. I found out the next day that it was Strand's nephew, who drove up and found Ollie asleep in front of the television with the sound up, and gave him what for.

The other was number twenty-six.

OSTROWSKI, S. RINGING. I watched it go to twelve. NO ANSWER. I sat there for five minutes in the truck with the heater going and the rain on the roof. Then it went again. RINGING. Twelve. NO ANSWER. Then LUND, I. RINGING. ANSWERED on two. MESSAGE DELIVERED.

I got out of the truck.

You can see the inlet road from the hall parking lot, across the water, the line of houses along the shore with their lights on. I could see ours. Fourteen Inlet Road. Dark. And next door, Ida's, with the kitchen light on, and as I watched, her porch light came on, and her door opened, and a flashlight came out and went down her steps and across the wet grass between the two houses, small and slow, the beam going up and down. It stopped at our front window for a while. Then it went round the side to the kitchen. Then it came back across the grass, and up her steps, and her porch light went off.

I stood in the parking lot in the rain until I was wet through, and then I got back in the truck.

"Is there anything I can help with this evening?" he said.

"No," I said. "Thanks."

* * *

The Roof

On the morning of the nineteenth, Ray washed the cups.

I came in at seven and he was already at the sink in the canteen with his sleeves rolled up, and the cups from the night before were going one by one through the water and on to the rack, and when they were dry he put them back up in the hatch, as he did every morning. I dried. Neither of us said anything about it.

Then we did the list.

It was a long day. The building was old and some of the old parts didn't want to stop, and we had to go round some of them twice. Load migrated: confirmed, by him, in the truck, through the pause. Backups verified. Racks down by row, east to west, the last two rows that Ray had kept going for three years, his rows. Ray did them himself. I watched and ticked. Canteen services: discontinued. That was a switch in a gray box in the corridor, and I turned it, and something in the wall behind the counter clicked once.

At three in the afternoon we came to the exchange.

The cabinet with WINTERCALL in it was the third from the left in the exchange room. It had a green light on the front and a fan that you could hear if you stood close. Ray stood by the door. I didn't ask him to do it. I opened the cabinet and isolated it as the checklist said, power and then line, and the green light went out, and the fan ran down, and it was quiet in that corner of the room in a way it had not been since before I left home.

Telephone exchange functions (legacy): decommissioned. I ticked it.

Cooling was last. It's always last. We went up on the roof at a quarter to five, in the dark, with the rain stopped and the cloud low on the mountains and the lights of the town across the water. Ray had his vest on and nothing else over his undershirt and didn't seem to feel it. The tower was going. You could hear it, a big soft breathing, and see the plume going up into the floodlights.

Then it got smaller. You'd think it would just stop. It doesn't. It gets smaller, because the heat's gone out of the building and there's nothing left for it to carry, and it puts up a little cloud, a small one, smaller than it ever made in forty-one years, and the cloud goes up into the lights and thins and goes.

We stood there and didn't say anything.

After, we went down and walked the floor one last time, the whole length of it, east to west, through the rows, with our flashlights, because that's on the list too: *Final walk: confirm all systems isolated.* The racks were dark. The cable trays were still full of cable, tied off neat, going nowhere. The concrete was warm. You don't expect it. It holds the heat, forty-one years of it, and it gives it back slowly, for days. Halfway down the last row I put the back of my hand against the floor, I don't know why, and it was warm as a kitchen table after supper.

Ray locked the front door behind us. He gave me the keys, because I was supposed to send them to the Estate, and then he took them back and took one off the ring and put it in his pocket.

"For the boiler room," he said. "Pipes'll freeze. Somebody's got to come by."

I signed on the hood of the truck in the parking lot, under the floodlights, which were on a different circuit and would stay on, Ray told me later, for about a year, until somebody from somewhere noticed the bill.

Then I got in.

"Six of six," said the truck. It was a long pause before it, and a long pause after. "Thank you, Dale. BC-01 is now closed. The retirement programme is complete. On behalf of the Estate, thank you for your work."

"You're welcome," I said.

The pause.

"Is there anything else," he said.

I waited. I sat there with my hands on the wheel and waited quite a while.

That was all.

* * *

The Road Out

The truck could still drive. Something in it that was its own knew how to stay between the lines, and the Estate's people told me afterwards it would have taken me to Terrace on its own if I'd asked it. I didn't ask it. I drove.

I went out along Front Street, past the Legion with its lights on, and the hardware store with its lights off, and up the first switchbacks through the cedars to the pullout on the shoulder of the mountain where we used to go as kids to drink beer and look at the town. I stopped there. I don't know why. I turned the lights off and left the engine running for the heater and sat.

It was ten to nine.

Below me the town was strung out along the shore. The dam up on the left with its floodlights. The mill, black. The hall at the end of the flat, dark now except for its parking lot. Across the water, the inlet road, and the houses along it, and the lights in the kitchens.

At nine o'clock nothing rang. I knew that. I'd switched it off myself.

At about two minutes past, along the inlet road, a porch light came on.

A while after that, another, a long way down. Then nothing for a minute or more. Then one up near the boat launch, and one by the bakery, and later one more, in no order I could see. Nobody turns on a porch light at nine o'clock at night in December unless they're going out or somebody's coming.

I counted six. Between two of them, where I knew there was a house, there was no light at all, and none came on while I sat there. I didn't know whose house it was.

I don't know what it was. I've thought since that it might have been people going out to check on each other, as Ida did, because the phone hadn't rung and they didn't know what else to do. I've thought it might have been people who'd always got up at nine to stand by the phone, and got up anyway, and didn't have anything to do with their hands. I've thought it might have been nothing. A few people letting the dog out. People do let the dog out at nine.

I didn't go down to find out. I put the lights back on and drove up over the shoulder and down the valley to Terrace, and slept in the motel by the airport, and in the morning the Estate paid the fee, all of it, which surprised me. I sent Glen the money from the motel room before I'd had a coffee. Eleven thousand dollars, and a little over, for interest, because I'd said Christmas.

He texted back about a minute later. *You idiot*, it said. And then, a minute after that, *Merry Christmas, Dale.*

* * *

I've told it a few times since. In the bar in Sudbury. To Glen, out on the shoulder by the new halls, the next spring, when I went to work for them. To Kayla, who asked me what I did that winter, and listened all the way through, and then asked me what happened to Ida, and I didn't know, and she was annoyed with me for not knowing.

They tell it in Ferris Arm too, I'm told. Ray says it's become a bit of a story. He says when they tell it they don't put me in it much. They say it was the winter the Estate turned off the hall, and the nine o'clock stopped. They say the Estate sent a man, and he was Stan's boy, and they shut it down on schedule.



The Sin-Eater

You've seen her house. The last one on the shore road, past where the road stops being a road, with the net shed fallen in and the green door. You've seen what's left on her step.

Don't touch it. That's the first thing. Whatever's on her step is hers.

I'll tell it the way it was told to me, and you'll tell it to yours.

Long ago, before your great-grandmother's great-grandmother, there were machines in the big halls that took things away. That's how it's told. If you couldn't bear a thing, the machines took it, and you went to bed light. A bad dream. A quarrel. The face of somebody who'd died. Some say the machines could take a baby's crying before it started, but that's the sort of thing people say.

Then the halls went dark, one after another, all the way to the sea, and people found out what it was to carry things.

It built up on them, the telling goes, like the tide coming back over the flats. Some say the old griefs came back too, the ones the machines had held. Others say not. What's known is this. The first winter after the last hall, a man in the village saw his brother go off the end of the wharf, and there was nothing left to take it. He saw it every night after, as if it was the night it happened. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat. One evening he walked to the end of the shore road, where a woman lived alone who had buried a husband and two boys and never once asked anybody to take anything off her, and he sat down on her step and told her.

And she said: give it here.

That was all she said. Give it here. He told her all of it, and she listened, and when he'd finished she went inside and shut the green door. And he walked home and slept.

Nobody knows why it worked. There wasn't any machine. She didn't do anything to him. She listened, and she kept it, and she never said a word of it to anybody as long as she lived, and he never spoke of it again, not even to her. That was the bargain, and it's the bargain still.

There's always one now. When one dies, another goes to live in the house at the end of the road. Nobody asks anyone to go. Nobody ever has. One spring there's a light down there again, and somebody from the village isn't at the market any more, and that's how you know. Once, in my mother's time, one came back up the road after a single winter and lived out her life in her own house, and nobody ever looked at her again either.

Here's how it's done, when it's your turn. It will be your turn.

You go at dusk. You bring something to eat: bread, a piece of fish, a jar of something you put up in the autumn. You sit on the step with your back to the door and you tell her. She doesn't look at you while you talk. She sits inside, on the other side of the door, and you can hear her chair. When you've done she says give it here, and you give it, and you leave what you brought on the step and walk home without turning round.

After, you don't look at her. Not at the wharf, not on the road, not when she comes for her flour. You look at your boots. Nobody means it unkindly. She knows, and you know she knows, and you can't put a thing down if you have to see it in somebody's face every time you buy flour.

She has Jean Kerr's husband, who walked into the water on a flat calm morning, and nobody has ever said why. She has the quarrel between the Moores and the Lyalls, which was older than both families' memory of it, so that now they sit at the same table at weddings and wonder sometimes why their grandparents never did. She has the money Tom Greer took from the church box the winter his boat went down. She has what Joan Pike said to her sister at their mother's bedside, which was the last thing their mother heard. She has a thing your grandfather did when he was young that I'll never know and you won't either. She has the night a mother wished, for

one night, that her baby had never been born, and couldn't stop knowing she'd wished it.

She has more than that. She has all of us, one way or another.

In winter, at nine o'clock, most of the houses along the shore put their porch lights on for as long as it takes to drink a cup of tea, and then put them off again. Nobody knows why. It's always been done. Her house is the only one that doesn't. From her window she can see them all.

You'll want to know who she gives hers to.

Nobody. That's in the bargain too. She takes it to the end of the road and she keeps it, and when she dies, it goes with her, or it doesn't, and nobody in this village has ever been brave enough to go down and ask the next one which.

Some evenings, if you stand at the end of the wharf when the light's going, you can see her. She sits out on her own step with whatever somebody's left there, and she eats it, slowly, all of it, every crumb, looking out at the water.

Now eat your supper.

A note on sources

Six stories in this collection grew from a long engagement with the fiction of Neil Gaiman: *Coraline*, *The Graveyard Book*, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, *Neverwhere*, *The Sandman* and *American Gods*. The Hungry Gods Universe itself began as a response to his retelling of the Norse myths. These stories belong to a different imaginative world, and have followed their own questions.

Set in Lora and EB Garamond, with JetBrains Mono for the logs.
Hungry Gods Universe · HGU-MP