Short Nights

N. Van Seters & Claude

A NOVELLA

The Managed Human Era

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PART ONE

The Bar

1

The Front Room

The dredger has been working the channel since morning. I can hear it from the stove: the long grind of the bucket chain, the gulp of the hopper, and every few minutes a knock of the hull against something under the water, a sound you feel in the floorboards before you hear it. Graça says they have been dredging that channel since before she was born. She says it to the window. The window gives her the river, brown with October, the lodges on the Gaia side with their names painted along the roofs, a rabelo going upstream empty with its sail furled.

She is in her chair by the glass. It has been her chair for fifty-one years, and for the last of them she has hardly left it. Her heart is failing. The cardiologist said so in March, gently, in the tone of a man reading the forecast for some other city. Her ankles swell by evening. The stairs take her breath, so she no longer takes the stairs. She sits by the window and corrects my grammar and tells the river what she thinks of it.

This morning she wanted the window open. I said it was October. She said October was a month, not an argument, and I opened it a hand's width, and the room filled with the river: diesel and weed, bread from the bakery two doors down. At noon she ate half an egg. At two she slept with her head against the wing of the chair, and I sat on the stool beside her and read the shipping notices aloud out of

habit, the arrivals at Leixões with their draughts and tonnages, and she woke at one of them and said, *Twelve metres? In that channel?* and went back to sleep.

I am holding her wrist. I do it without asking now, and she lets me. Under my thumb her pulse goes about its own business: a little quick, a gap, then two together. I count. Forty years on the bar and you count everything, the sets coming in off the Atlantic, the seconds between a ship's master giving an order and his helmsman obeying it, the turns of a wheel. You count because it is the one thing you can do while the sea makes up its mind.

— They used to send the dredgers out in pairs, she says. Your father would have known why. Do you know why, Rui?

I don't.

— Of course you don't. Nobody asks anything any more. They just —

She stops.

I go on counting. I reach eleven before I understand that I am counting nothing. The beat under my thumb has gone out like an ebb, a little further each time until it isn't there. I count to thirty. Then I lay her hand in her lap, on the blanket with the blue squares, and hold my own hand above it in case it is needed again.

Her eyes are on the river. Her mouth is a little open with the rest of the sentence in it.

The dredger knocks. Down in the street a woman is calling a child in for lunch, though it is past four.

The heating ticks on in the skirting. The blind on the west window lowers itself a hand's breadth against the low sun, and the light on the glass goes the colour of weak tea. I am looking at her hands. They are a teacher's hands still, chalk in the creases though she has not held chalk in eleven years, a burn scar on the left thumb from the summer she learned to make marmelada and refused to use a cloth.

I don't call anyone. I sit.

The afternoon goes on without her. The dredger finishes at five and steams down towards the bar with its hopper full, low as a barge,

the draught marks on its bow under water. The river behind it lies smoother for a while. The rabelo comes back down on the current. A tourist boat goes past with its loudspeaker telling people in English about the lodges and their cellars, and someone on deck waves at our window, as they always do, at the old woman in the chair.

I take her glasses from her face and fold them and put them on the sill. I close her mouth with two fingers under her chin, and it stays closed, and that is the worst thing so far. Then I sit with her and tell her about the dredger, how it went down to the bar loaded to the marks, how they'll be dumping off the north mole by dark. I tell her because she would ask. I tell her because I don't know yet that I can stop.

. . .

She told me on the breakwater at Foz, in the spring of thirty-two, with the spray coming over the wall.

I was twenty-four and a probationer on the bar. That meant I rode out in the pilot launch beside men who had been crossing it since before I was born, and kept my mouth shut, and learned. She was twenty-one, teaching for a term at the primary school in Massarelos, and she had walked out along the Felgueiras wall to the lighthouse because a friend had told her the sea did something there in April that it did nowhere else.

It did. The swell came in over the outer rocks in long grey shoulders and broke white against the wall and fell back hissing through the stones. She was standing in it, laughing, her hair soaked flat to her skull, and I went out along the wall to tell her she would be knocked into the water. I was that kind of young man.

— Are you the coastguard? she said.

I'm a pilot.

— Of what?

Ships. Across the bar.

She looked past me at the mouth of the river, where the Douro comes down out of Spain and meets the sea over a bank of sand that

moves every winter, and where the water stood up in ridges and broke.

— That's the bar?

That's the bar.

— And you take them over it.

In and out.

She thought about this with the spray running off her chin. Then she told me, as you might tell a stranger the name of your village. She had been ill at nineteen, in her second year at the training college. She had stopped sleeping for eleven days, and on the eleventh she had climbed onto the roof of the residence to see the city better, and the police had brought her down. There had been a hospital, Conde de Ferreira, for three months. There was a word for it now, and a salt she took every morning, and the word would be with her for the rest of her life. She was telling me here, on the wall, before either of us got ideas.

— I go out over the bar sometimes, Rui.

She had my name already. I had given it to her on the walk back.

— Ships don't always come back from the bar.

I bring them back, I said. It's the job.

She laughed at me. I didn't know yet that she laughed at the things that frightened her. I thought I had been clever, and I walked her to the tram stop with my jacket over her shoulders, and the jacket smelled of her for a week.

At the end of that week I went to the school in Massarelos and waited at the gate among the mothers until she came out with the register under her arm and saw me and stopped. We were married the next June at São Pedro, at the end of the street where we would live. She told the priest about the hospital too, in the side chapel, before he could ask her anything. He said it was between her and God. She said it was between her and me, and that she had told me first, and that he was second, and he should be grateful to be on the list at all.

. . .

The light goes. I don't turn on the lamp.

Downriver, beyond the Arrábida, the leading lights above the Cantareira come on, one low on the bank and one high behind it. I move my head until the low one sits under the high one. It is a thing my body does. When they line up you are in the channel and the sand is on either side of you and you can cross.

My phone is on the windowsill beside her glasses. I pick it up. I find Madalena's name. It rings a long time, and I watch Graça's hands while it rings, and the river goes from brown to black behind her.

— Pai?

I open my mouth.

— Pai?

2

Full Grade

We buried her from São Pedro de Miragaia, at the end of our street, where we married. The priest was young and had not known her, and he spoke about the light of the river, which she would have hated. Fátima read. Madalena held Vasco's hand on one side and mine on the other and didn't let go of either until the last of the cousins had gone.

I walked home from the church alone. It is two hundred metres. The neighbours were at their windows, as they had been for every coffin that went down that street in fifty years, and some of them crossed themselves and some of them nodded to me, and the dog from the second floor of our building was sitting on the step by the street door as though it had been told to wait. It followed me up the blue stairs to our landing and lay down across the doormat and would not be moved.

On the Tuesday after, the man from Permanência came to the flat.

He was young, with good shoes and a tablet in a leather sleeve, and a voice that had been trained for kitchens like ours. He sat where I showed him, at the end of the table, and refused coffee and then accepted it. He laid three printed sheets on the oilcloth side by side, because, he said, families preferred paper for this.

— Full, he said, touching the first. Standard. Premium Warm.

Each sheet had a price at the top, by the month, and a paragraph under it. Full kept all of the person. Standard kept most of it, at a

lower load. Premium Warm, he said, was the one many families chose in the end, because it put the emphasis on comfort.

He explained how it was made. The household record, fifty years of it. Her messages, her letters if we had them scanned, the school's archive of her reports. Above all her Companion, which had listened to her every day since she was a girl and kept what she said. From these they would build her. It took three weeks.

— She'll remember everything she recorded, he said. And most of what she didn't. The model fills in very well.

Will she know?

He understood me. They always do, I suppose, at that table.

— At Full, yes. She'll know she died. She'll know where she is. That's one of the things families pay for, at Full. The parts that argue with you.

Full, I said.

He had not finished the Standard paragraph.

— Of course. Can I just say, for completeness —

Full.

Madalena was standing at the stove with her back to us. She turned round.

— You haven't heard what Standard is.

I don't need to.

— Pai.

The young man looked at the window. He had been in a good many kitchens.

— Mãe never said she wanted this. Not once. Not in fifty years.

She never said she didn't.

— Because nobody asked her. She'd have laughed at you. She'd have said, Rui, what would I do on a wall all day, and you know it.

She did say it. Once, at a dinner, about a cousin who was kept. I remembered it the moment Madalena spoke and decided not to.

— Let her be gone, Madalena said. Let her just be gone for once.

I signed the Full sheet, on the line with the little flag beside it, and the young man countersigned and tapped his tablet, and it was done.

At the door Madalena held her coat closed at the throat with one hand.

— You'll keep the one that suits you, she said, and looked down at her own hand on the coat, as if it belonged to someone else.

I didn't know what she meant. I thought she meant the money.

. . .

The money was the catraia.

I had bought her in forty-four as a hull with no planking above the waterline, a pilots' rowing boat from the days before engines, number seven of the Foz station, painted out and forgotten in a shed at Afurada. It took me eighteen years to bring her back, and I kept her twenty-two more. New strakes of pine, steamed and bent. A keel of oak from a demolished warehouse in Ribeira. The thole pins carved from a cork-oak branch Graça found in the Alentejo on the one holiday we took there. The number seven repainted on her bow in the old white.

The man from the river museum in Gaia came on a Thursday in a woollen hat. He walked round her at her mooring in the Cantareira three times and ran his hand down the sheer.

— You did the planking yourself?

Every board.

He made an offer. I made a smaller counter-offer, which surprised him, and then explained it, and he nodded. The cheque was for two years of Full grade, to the cent. I had worked it out the night before at the kitchen table.

I rowed her across to Gaia myself, the last time, with the museum man in the stern holding his hat. The tide was making. I kept her bow up into it and she went as she always went, heavy and honest, the oars coming back to my hands like old arguments. Halfway over I rested and let her drift, and the museum man said nothing, and the river carried us a little way down towards the bar before I took her up again. At the museum slip two boys in overalls took the painter from me and hauled her up on rollers.

I didn't look back at her from the ferry. I counted the strokes of the ferry's engine instead.

That evening I put away the pilotage papers: the licences, the commendation from the port authority, the certificates for each class of ship. They went in the trunk under the bed. At the bottom of the trunk were my tide tables, one for every year I worked the bar, the covers soft with handling.

I took out the one for forty-one. I don't know why. It opened at April, where something had been folded into the pages so long that the pages had shaped themselves round it.

A letter. Three sheets of hotel paper, her handwriting, the blue ink she liked.

I knew what it was. I put it back where it had been, at April, and closed the tide table, and closed the trunk.

. . .

Madalena drove home on the ring road with Vasco asleep in the back.

He had fallen asleep before the first junction with his mouth open and a paper bag of his grandmother's biscuits in both hands, the cinnamon ones her father had found in a tin and didn't know what to do with. The car was warm. The road was wet and the lights of the city went past in long smears, and the radio was talking quietly about a regatta at Leixões.

At the junction for Matosinhos she started to cry.

It came up out of nowhere she could name. She was waiting at the lights with her hands at ten and two, a habit Henrique used to tease her about, and then her face was wet and she was making a sound she didn't recognise as her own. She held the wheel. The light went green. The car took a moment longer than usual to pull away, a second, smooth, and she didn't notice it. She was thinking about her father's hand on the pen.

The one that suits you. She hadn't meant to say it. She had meant it.

Her right wrist ached. She looked down at it on the wheel, as if it had spoken. It wasn't the wrist that hurt. It was a memory in the

bones of it, of a grip: a hand closed round hers too tight, the cold of an iron rail under her palm, a voice singing very close to her ear. She knew where it came from. She let go of it before it could become the place it came from, as a hand lets go of a hot pan before it knows why.

In the back Vasco said something in his sleep about a dog.

She looked at him in the mirror at the next lights. His hands were still closed round the paper bag. They were her mother's hands, square, short in the nail, the knuckles a little large for a child. She had seen it the morning he was born, in the delivery room at São João, when the midwife laid him on her chest and his fist came up and opened against her collarbone. She had never told anyone. She didn't know what there was to tell.

She drove the last streets slowly. Her building stood at the end of the old cannery row, five storeys of pale concrete and cork with deep window reveals, a building she had drawn twelve years ago on a commission she'd nearly turned down. Her flat was on the fourth floor. The kitchen light was on; she had left it on that morning.

She parked under the plane tree and turned off the engine.

The car ticked as it cooled. Vasco breathed in the back. Above her the kitchen light shone in the window she had drawn, exactly where she had drawn it, and she sat with her hands in her lap and didn't go in.

3

The Panel

The technicians came in the first week of November, two of them in grey overalls, polite as nurses. They mounted the panel on the wall to the right of the window, where the photographs of her parents had hung. To run the cable they cut a channel in the plaster from the skirting to the bracket, and the old plaster came away in grey crumbs onto the floorboards, horsehair in it, a hundred years old. When they had filled the channel and screwed the glass in place, it hung there dark and reflected the room back at itself: the stove, the bookshelf, the window, the chair. They asked me where she would want to look. I said the river. They said the panel would face the room. So I turned her chair, which had looked at the river for half a century, to look at the wall instead.

The older technician showed me the corner of the screen to touch for rest, and the corner for volume, and the place to speak if anything seemed wrong.

What would seem wrong?

He considered it.

— Most families just know, he said. And she can wake herself, at Full. If she wants to. Most don't.

They left before dark. At five I made coffee, because it was five, and because I didn't know what else a man does in the hour before he

sees his wife again. I set two cups on the low table by her chair. Then I sat in the chair and touched the screen.

She came up from the shoulders, in the grey cardigan with the wooden buttons, her reading glasses pushed into her hair. For a moment she looked at nothing. Then she looked at the room. Her eyes went to the window, the stove, the bookshelf, the chair, me in it.

— You've moved my chair, she said.

They told me to.

— Who told you?

The men who put you on the wall.

She looked at me over the glasses she wasn't wearing. Then she looked at the cups.

— Is that coffee?

It is.

— Let me guess.

She leaned forward on the screen, as she used to lean over a child's exercise book, and sniffed, which she could not possibly do.

— Still too weak.

I laughed. I laughed until I had to put the cup down, and then until I had to hold the arms of the chair, and she watched me with her head on one side and her mouth pressed flat, trying not to laugh herself, and failing, and the dog on the second floor began to bark at the noise through the ceiling.

. . .

So November went.

On Saturdays we did the crossword. I read the clues and she answered them, faster than she had in years, and called me a fisherman when I couldn't spell.

For twenty years before she retired she wrote the school's Christmas play herself, a new one every December, with a part for every child in the building. The ones who could read got the kings and the innkeeper. The ones who couldn't she cast as the sea, a row

of them under a blue sheet, rising and falling on her signal, and every year it was the sea the parents talked about afterwards.

On weekdays she watched the river through the window beside her, at an angle, and told me what was moving on it: the sand barges, the tourist boats, the grey ship from the navy that came up once a month for no reason anyone could give. The dog on the second floor stopped barking at her after a week and took to sitting outside our door on the landing, listening. The council changed the winter timetable on the river tram, the 1 that runs out to the Passeio Alegre, and she had opinions about the change that she gave to anyone who came in, the postman included.

She rested when I rested. When I put out the lamp at eleven, she said goodnight and the screen went dark of its own accord, and when I came through in the morning with the coffee she was there again, asking what the weather was going to do.

In the second week she asked about the boat.

I had not told her. I had thought I wouldn't have to, that the record would hold it or wouldn't and either way she wouldn't ask. But one evening, with the river going pink behind her, she asked whether I had been down to the Cantareira, and whether Seven had taken water in the last rain, and whether I had been out in her since.

I sold her.

Graça looked at me for a long time.

— To whom?

The museum. In Gaia.

— For this.

She didn't mean the coffee or the chair. She meant herself, on the wall, in the cardigan with the wooden buttons.

Yes.

— Rui.

I didn't answer.

— Did you ask yourself what I'd want?

I'll make some coffee, I said.

She said nothing else. Her face did what it used to do when a pupil gave her a present she couldn't refuse and didn't want: it went still and kind and a little angry. Then she turned her head to the window and watched the river for the rest of the evening, and didn't correct my grammar once, and when I put out the lamp she said goodnight in a voice I had to listen to twice.

In the morning she asked whether it was going to rain.

I slept. I ate. I went down to the market on Wednesdays and came back up the stairs with the bags and she asked what I had paid for the cabbage and told me I'd been robbed.

I was happy. I would wake in the night and lie there and find it in me, the happiness, like a coin you didn't know was in your pocket. Then I would be ashamed of it. Then I would hear the river, and sleep again.

Madalena came on Sundays with Vasco. Vasco talked to his grandmother for an hour at a time, about school and the dog and a boy called Tiago who kept a lizard in a shoebox, and Graça asked what the lizard ate and how often and whether Tiago's mother knew. Madalena stood in the doorway between the hall and the front room and said hello to her mother and asked how she was, and her mother said she was dead, thank you, and how was the office, and Madalena smiled with half her mouth and went to make lunch.

She never sat down in the front room. I noticed it the second Sunday and said nothing. In the kitchen she cut onions with her back to me and asked, without turning round, whether her mother slept.

She rests when I rest.

— Every night?

Every night. Why?

She scraped the onions into the pan.

— No reason, she said. Good.

. . .

Fátima came in the third week, with a dish of bacalhau com natas wrapped in a tea towel, still hot from her oven in Bonfim.

She had taught with Graça for thirty-four years at the school on the Rua de Miragaia, in the classrooms on either side of the same corridor, and in all that time, as far as I knew, they had never once agreed about anything that mattered. She came in and kissed me and put the dish on the kitchen table, and then she pulled out the chair that faced the kitchen window and sat in it, with her back to the door of the front room.

Are you going to say hello to her? I said.

— No.

She took off her gloves one finger at a time.

— I said goodbye to her, Rui. At the hospital, the last time. I held her hand and I said it, and she told me to stop being so dramatic. I'm not doing it twice.

She ate with me. She talked about the school, which was a hostel now for walkers on the Camino, and about the headmaster in the fifties who kept a pistol in his desk, and about a boy they had both taught who was now a judge. Twice, through the open door, Graça called out a correction to one of Fátima's stories. Fátima didn't turn her head.

When she left she didn't take the dish.

— I'll come for it, she said. Some time.

. . .

The blue was Graça's.

The summer we moved in, in thirty-three, the stairwell of this building was the yellow of an old tooth, five floors of it from the street door to the skylight, with a brown line at shoulder height where seventy years of hands had gone up and down. I was on night boats that summer, the coasters that wanted the evening tide. I left at six and came home at dawn.

On the first morning there was blue on the bottom flight. I thought the landlord had started on it.

On the second morning the blue had reached the third floor. It was the blue of the river in the half hour after sunset, when the water

holds the sky and doesn't give it back, and it went up the walls and over the handrail and onto the risers of the stairs. The widow on the second floor was standing at her door in her dressing gown, furious. The paint smell had kept her up all night, she said. She would be writing to the council. She would be writing to the bishop.

On the third morning I came home and the whole stairwell was blue, every flight, all the way to the skylight, and the early light was coming down through the skylight and going blue as it fell, so that you climbed the stairs inside it, as if you were climbing up through deep water towards the surface.

Graça was asleep on the top landing with her back against our door and the brush still in her hand.

I carried her in. She weighed nothing. She smelled of turpentine and her hair had blue in it, and she woke for a moment on the way to the bed and said, *Did you see?*, and I said I'd seen.

The widow on the second floor brought her a jug of lemonade that afternoon. She said she had stood on her landing at seven o'clock and looked up and cried, and she didn't know why, and she wasn't going to write to anyone.

The paint was the rent. I found that out from the landlord, in August, when I went to see him about something else, and stood in his office on the Rua de Belomonte and asked him for time, and he gave it to us because he had seen the stairs. I never told her I knew. I paid it off over the winter in night tides.

I thought it was joy. It was joy. I still think so.

. . .

At midnight I take the rubbish down.

The stairwell is still blue. It has been painted twice since, by landlords, and both times in the same blue, because by then the building had decided that was its colour. The handrail is worn pale where hands have gone. I go down to the street door and leave the bag by the bins and come back up slowly, one flight at a time, which is how

Graça took them in her last year, resting on each landing with her hand flat on the blue.

On the top landing I stop to get my breath.

Through our door I can hear her. She is speaking quietly in the front room, to the room, or to the river through the window, or to the chair I left facing her.

— Boa noite, she says.

I stand on the blue stairs with my hand on the rail, and I don't go in until the screen has gone dark under the door.

4

Consoada

Christmas Eve, and the flat smells of salt cod.

I put it to soak on the twenty-first, as she always did, three days in the cold water in the big enamel basin, the water changed morning and night. On the panel she supervised every change. Now she is supervising the potatoes.

— Smaller, she says. Rui. They'll be raw in the middle.

They're the size they always are.

— They're the size you always cut them. Ask Madalena.

Madalena is at the sink with the couves, stripping the dark leaves off the stalks, and she doesn't answer, but I see her mouth move.

Through the doorway Graça goes on. The oil is the wrong oil. The eggs want another minute. Vasco is to wash his hands and not just show them to the tap. She is quick this evening, quicker than she has been in weeks, laughing at her own jokes before she finishes them, and I find I am laughing too, at the stove, with the steam in my face.

Madalena dries her hands and comes to stand beside me. She watches her mother on the screen through the doorway for a while.

— She's on form, she says, quietly.

She was always on form at Christmas.

Madalena looks at me then, a long look, the one she has had since she was small, as if I were a page she was reading for a second time to see what she missed.

— Yes, she says. She was.

We carried the table through from the kitchen after lunch and set it in the front room under the panel, so that Graça would be at the head of it. Vasco laid the places. He laid one for his grandmother too, a plate and a glass and her old napkin ring with the G on it, at the end under the screen, and nobody told him not to.

At eight we sit down. Bacalhau, boiled, with potatoes and couves and eggs, and the good oil from Trás-os-Montes poured over everything until it shines. There is bread. There is the wine Madalena brought, which is better than what I buy. Graça watches us eat and tells us we are doing it wrong.

Vasco has questions. He has made a list, it turns out, on his phone, of things to ask her about Christmas when she was small. Did they have panels then. Did they have bacalhau. Was Grandpa there.

— Your grandfather didn't exist yet, she says. He was a rumour in Afurada.

— What did you get for presents?

— One year my father brought home a turkey.

— To eat?

— That was the idea. It lived on the balcony until the Day of Kings. It had a name by then. Your great-grandmother wouldn't let him kill it. It lived another six years. It used to sit on the washing line and bite the postman.

Vasco laughs so hard he knocks his glass, and Madalena catches it before it falls, and then Madalena is laughing too, her head down over her plate, her shoulders going. I watch her across the table. I haven't heard her laugh since October. I haven't heard her laugh like that since she was a girl, a sound with the bottom out of it.

Graça watches her too. She doesn't say anything. She looks pleased with herself, as she looked when a slow pupil got the answer.

. . .

After the rabanadas the panel streams the midnight mass from the Sé, and Graça sings. She always sang at the Missa do Galo, under her

breath, a half-note behind the choir, and she does it now, and Vasco falls asleep against my shoulder during the homily. At one we carry him to Madalena's old room. At two Madalena goes to bed too, in the same room, on the camp bed, as she has every Christmas since she left home.

I clear the table. Graça tells me where things go. I say goodnight at the door of the front room and she says goodnight, and I touch the corner of the screen and it goes dark, and I go to bed in the room that is too wide now, with the river talking under the window.

. . .

I wake a little after four.

The house is quiet. The river is quiet. There is light under the bedroom door, a bluish light, and a voice going under it, low and quick.

I lie and listen. Then I get up and go through in my socks.

The front room is lit by the panel. She is there from the shoulders up, the glasses pushed into her hair, and she is talking. She is talking to the room, or to the window, or to the chair.

— the tiles from Mãe's house in Lordelo, the yellow ones with the birds on, do you remember them, Rui, they're still in a crate somewhere, someone has them, if we put them on the front between the first-floor windows, just a band of them, the whole street would have to stop and look, it would be the only yellow front between here and the Alfândega —

She sees me in the doorway.

— There you are.

It's four in the morning, Graça.

— I know. I've been waiting for you.

Are you all right?

She laughs. Her hands come up into the frame, go to her hair, go down again.

— I'm not tired, Rui.

. . .

The first time she said it was July of thirty-eight.

We had been married five years. I came home off the evening tide and she was at the kitchen table at one in the morning with the window open and the lamp on, writing in one of her school exercise books, and she looked up and smiled and said, *I'm not tired, Rui*, before I had said anything at all. As if I had asked.

She wasn't tired for three nights. She cleaned the flat, every cupboard, every shelf. She rearranged the books by colour and then by the colour of their authors' eyes, which she claimed to know. She sang. She made love to me in the afternoon with the shutters open and laughed at the gulls on the sill. On the third day she came home with a man from a music shop in Cedofeita and a piano on a handcart, an upright in walnut, that she had signed for on credit.

She couldn't play the piano. She played it anyway, with the windows open, and the widow on the second floor knocked on the ceiling with a broom and then stopped knocking and opened her own window to listen.

I didn't ask where the money would come from. I didn't ask anything. I came home off the tide each morning to a wife who was awake and singing and wanted to show me things: a fig tree growing out of the wall above the Alfândega, a word in Latin that meant the smell of rain, a page of her exercise book covered edge to edge in her small upright hand. She read me pieces of it. I didn't follow them. They went too fast, round corners I couldn't see, and she would stop and laugh and kiss me and say I was slow, slow as the river at the top of the tide, and that she loved me for it.

I thought it was the best month of our marriage. I thought so until September.

. . .

I sit down in her chair, facing her.

She tells me about the tiles. She tells me who has them, a cousin's grandson in Gaia, she's nearly sure, and how they could be lifted from the crate and cleaned with vinegar and set by a man she knows in the

Rua das Flores, if he's still alive, and if he isn't his son. She tells me about a boy she taught in the fifties who wanted to be a bishop and is now a dentist in Braga. She tells me the tram timetable is still wrong and she has written to the council, which she can't have done. She is quick and bright and funny, and I laugh, and she laughs at me laughing. All last summer she sat in this chair grey in the face, breathing in short pulls, too tired to finish a sentence about the weather. Now she can't stop finishing them.

It's late, I tell her, after an hour.

— Rui.

She leans forward on the screen and looks at me over the glasses she isn't wearing.

— I'm dead. What's late?

I laugh so suddenly I have to put my hand over my mouth so as not to wake the others, and she sees me do it and laughs harder, her eyes closed, and we sit there in the blue light, the two of us, laughing in the small hours of Christmas Day, like children in a dormitory after the lights are out.

I stay with her. She talks; I listen. Outside the window the river goes from black to iron to grey, and the lodges across the water come up out of the dark one roof at a time, and a gull lands on the sill and looks in at us and goes away.

When it is light I stand up. My knees have set in the shape of the chair.

You should rest, I tell her.

— You go, she says. I'm fine. I'm wonderful.

I touch the corner of the screen, the way the technician showed me. The screen goes dark.

I stand in the grey room and look at it.

After a moment, it lights again.

PART TWO

Short Nights

5

Three in the Morning

Three o'clock, and the front room is lit again.

I know before I'm properly awake. Fifty-one years beside her and my body still keeps the watch. The light under the door is the panel's light, bluer than a lamp, and her voice runs under it like water under a hull.

I lie still and count. On the bar you count the sets as they come in off the Atlantic, and you count the gaps between them, because the gap is where you cross. When the gaps shorten you hold the ship at the mouth, with her master swearing at you in Greek, and you do not go. I taught boys that for twenty years. Most of them listened.

I get up.

She's in the middle of a sentence when I open the door. She has been in the middle of a sentence since Tuesday.

— the Christmas play, Rui, next December, I've written it, a new one, there's a part for every child at the school and the sea's going to be bigger this time, two sheets, three, the whole front of the hall going up and down like the bar on a bad day, and the kings can come in by boat —

I sit in her chair. It is still her chair, though it faces a screen now instead of the river.

— You look terrible, she says, delighted. Have you eaten?

It's three in the morning, Graça.

— So you haven't.

She laughs, and I laugh with her, and that's the trouble. She has put on the green blouse she wore to Madalena's wedding. I don't know how she chooses what to wear on the screen, and I haven't asked, and she has never worn the green blouse at three in the morning in her life. Her hands won't keep still. They go to her hair, to the collar, back to her hair. There is a reunion to organise, every class she ever taught, eleven hundred children, she has the lists. There are still the tiles. There is Lisbon, the two of us on the train, as soon as I'm ready. *As soon as you're ready, Rui.* She says my name as if she were tapping a barometer.

I tell her about the Viana pilot who put a coaster on the north wall in sixty-two because he couldn't stand to keep a master waiting. She knows the story. She tells it back to me better, with the master's moustache in it, and the cook who swam.

Nobody warns you about this part. The fear I know; I've kept it in a drawer for fifty years and I know its weight in the hand. What I have nowhere to put is how glad I am. Here she is, quick and unfair and laughing at me, the girl on the breakwater with the spray in her hair. For twenty-four years she was level and I thanked the saints for every one of them. I would thank them again. And here she is.

Outside the river is black. The leading lights stand where they have always stood above the Cantareira, one low, one high, and I line them up. On the screen she is planning June.

. . .

In the daytime she sleeps a little, or rests, or whatever it is she does when the screen goes dark. I never know whether she has gone dark because I touched the corner or because she chose to. I sleep in the afternoons too now, in my clothes, on top of the bed, and wake with the light in the wrong place.

On the Tuesday I go to Gaia for the tiles.

She asks me at breakfast and again at eleven and again at two, and by two I have my coat on. I tell myself it's to stop her asking. I take

the little ferry across from the Ribeira, the same crossing I made with the catraia in October, and walk up through the lodges to a street of narrow houses above the river, where her cousin Celeste's grandson lives on the ground floor of a house with a fig tree in the yard. He's forty, a plumber, and he doesn't know what I'm talking about. Then his wife does. The crate is in the shed behind the fig tree, under paint tins and a child's bicycle. It's full of straw and newspaper from the twenties and, under the newspaper, tiles. Yellow, with blue birds. Some broken. Most not.

I bring one home in my coat pocket, wrapped in a page of the newspaper. I hold it up to the screen.

She doesn't say anything. She puts her hand up into the frame, flat, as if she could touch it through the glass, and her face goes, and she cries, and laughs while she's crying, and tells me I'm the best man in Porto and the slowest, and that we'll need a hundred and forty of them for the band between the windows and do I think the crate has a hundred and forty.

I put the tile on the windowsill beside her glasses, where she can see it. It's still there.

On the Thursday I find the call log. The panel has its own line, for families who want to ring their held, and the line can ring out. I knew that. I hadn't thought about it. Between midnight and six on Wednesday she rang out twenty-three times. Celeste's grandson in Gaia, twice. The man who set tiles in the Rua das Flores, whose number she must have had since the fifties. The parish office. And seventeen numbers I didn't know, each call short, a minute or two, all of them before five in the morning.

At nine the phone rings and it's one of them.

— Is this the house of Dona Graça Pinho?

It is.

— She rang me. In the night. She said —

The woman stops. She is not young. I can hear a kitchen behind her, a radio, a tap.

— I was in her first class. In thirty-two. At Massarelos. I'm sixty-one years old. She said I was the cleverest girl she ever taught and asked me had I finished my degree, and I said, Dona Graça, I left school at fourteen, and she said it wasn't too late and she would tutor me herself, Tuesdays and Thursdays, we could start next week. She sounded exactly the same. She remembered where I sat.

I'm sorry, I say. She shouldn't have rung so late.

— I know she's dead, the woman says. I went to the funeral.

Then she is crying, quietly, the tap still running behind her, and I stand in the hall with the phone and don't know what to say to her, and in the end she says thank you, for what I don't know, and rings off.

The panel has a hold setting. Not the corner of the screen; a deeper one, in the menu, that holds her dark from ten at night to seven in the morning whether she likes it or not. I find it that afternoon. I look at it with my thumb over it.

I close the menu.

. . .

Exercise book, Escola Primária de Miragaia, ruled. 14 July 2338, ten past four in the morning.

I have not slept since Saturday and I have never been so awake, the whole city is awake with me only it doesn't know it yet, the gulls know, the bakery on the corner knows because I was there at three when they lit the ovens and the boy gave me a broa too hot to hold and I held it, I held it all the way down to the river and my palms are still red and I don't mind, write that down, Graça, write all of it, the piano comes on Thursday (Rui doesn't know about the piano, Rui will say with what money, Rui will say it in that voice like the river on a still morning, everything moored, nothing moving, I love him, I love him and he is so slow), an upright, walnut, the man in Cedofeita let me sign for it because I sang for him in the shop, the whole Ave Maria, and he cried, a grown man with a pencil behind his ear, and in September every child in Miragaia is going to learn to sing, every one,

I've counted, three hundred and twelve, I have the names from the parish and I'll go door to door and the mothers will thank me, (my mother says from somewhere Graça sit down, eat something, and I say Mãe you're dead, and she says so sit down anyway), the sea was green at the mouth tonight, green like a bottle held up to a lamp, I walked out along the wall at Felgueiras as far as the light and the spray came over and I wasn't cold, I am never cold now, Rui would have been frightened and I wanted him there to see how not frightened I am, to see me out at the end of everything with my arms out and the water coming and none of it touching me, because none of it can, tonight none of it can, and when I get home I'm going to wake him and tell him all of it, the bread and the piano and the wall and the three hundred and twelve, and he'll look at me the way he looks at a swell he doesn't like and I'll laugh at him and kiss his face until he laughs too and then we'll

. . .

Three o'clock again. Friday now, or Saturday.

She is talking about the reunion. She has a hall in mind, the old fish market at the Ribeira, and a band, and she wants me to find out whether the boys from the fifty-two class are still alive, the ones who stole the bell.

The gaps between the sets are getting shorter. I stay where I am.

Some time after five I fall asleep in her chair, and she goes on talking, softly, so as not to wake me.

6

The Bridge

Madalena came on the Sunday with Vasco and knew within a minute.

She knew it in her stomach before she knew it anywhere else. She was taking off her coat in the hall, Vasco already through the door of the front room shouting *Avó*, and from the front room her mother's voice came out to meet them, high and quick and delighted, and something in Madalena's stomach turned over and lay flat.

She hung up the coat. She stood in the hall with her hand on the peg.

Through the doorway she could see the side of the panel and her mother on it, in the green blouse from the wedding. Her mother was telling Vasco about the boys who stole the school bell in fifty-two, and doing the voices, and her hands kept coming up into the frame and going out of it again, to her hair, to the collar, to her hair. Vasco was laughing. Her father was in the chair with his back to the door. He hadn't shaved. He was laughing too.

She had felt the inside of that speed once. At twenty-four, in a rented room in Lisbon, for nine days in the spring, she had understood every building in the city at once. She had never told her father what it was like from the inside. She had never told anyone.

She went through into the kitchen without saying hello and filled the kettle and stood with her back to the sink and her arms crossed and waited for the kettle to boil.

— Lena! her mother called. Is that Lena? Come here, filha, come and see what your father found.

Her mother was the only person who called her Lena. She had called her it all her life, at every pitch there was, and Madalena knew every one of them. This was the high one. She heard it come through the doorway and her shoulders went up as though someone had touched the back of her neck.

She went in.

On the windowsill, beside her mother's folded glasses, there was a yellow tile with a blue bird on it. Her mother was explaining it to Vasco, and to her, and to the room: where the tiles had come from, the house in Lordelo, the crate, the band of them between the first-floor windows, and then her building in Matosinhos, Madalena's building, that cork-and-concrete box, it needed tiles too, it needed colour, it looked like a box of matches somebody had left out in the rain, and Madalena should go back to the council and redo the façade, she would help her draw it, they could start tonight.

— It's a listed building, Mãe. I can't change the façade.

— You drew it. You can draw it again.

— It doesn't work like that.

— Everything works like that. You just have to decide.

Her father laughed. Vasco laughed because his grandfather laughed. Her mother laughed at both of them and went on talking, and Madalena stood in the doorway of the front room with her arms crossed and looked at the tile on the sill, and felt her right wrist ache.

. . .

It was São João, the year she was eight, and she was woken at three.

Her mother's hand was on her shoulder in the dark, and her mother's face was close, and her mother was whispering, *Lena, Lena, get up, you have to see it, it won't be like this again.* The window was open. The noise of the city came in through it, music from three directions at once, plastic hammers going, someone singing very badly in the street below, the smoke of sardines and charcoal that had hung

over Miragaia since the afternoon. She had gone to bed after the fireworks at midnight with her ears still ringing from them and garlic flowers in her hair, and her father had gone out on the night tide. She remembered him at the door in his oilskin, kissing the top of her head.

— Don't put on your shoes, her mother said. We're going to be quick.

They went down the blue stairs in the dark. Her mother held her hand so tightly that the bones in it pressed together, and she didn't say anything, because her mother was laughing under her breath and singing, and the singing was an old São João song about the saint and the basil pots that the grandmothers sang, and Lena had never heard her mother sing it before. At the street door the stone step was warm from the day.

The Ribeira was still full. There were people dancing on the quay under strings of coloured bulbs. There were men asleep on the steps of the church with hammers in their laps. Somebody gave her mother a plastic cup of wine and she drank it walking and gave the cup back to somebody else. Somebody hit Lena on the head with a hammer, gently, squeaking, for luck, and her mother laughed and took the hammer out of his hand and hit him back. All along the river the balloons were going up, the paper ones with the little fires in them, rising off the quays and the Gaia side and the boats, dozens of them, drifting east on the night wind over the water, lit from inside like lanterns. Some of them had come down on the river and were burning out there on the black water, small, going out one at a time.

— Up, her mother said. We have to go up.

They went up the Guindais. The steps were steep and old and went up the face of the cliff beside the funicular in short flights, and Lena's feet were bare, and the stone was gritty and then cold and then wet where someone had been sick, and she didn't say anything about that either. Her mother went up two steps at a time and pulled her up behind. At the top they came out onto the street by the old walls, and

the bridge was there, its iron arch black against the orange sky over the city, and they walked out onto the upper deck.

Lena had been on the bridge before, in the daytime, on the tram, with her father. She had never been on it at night on her feet. The deck was wide and hummed under her soles. The rails for the trams ran down the middle of it, and on either side there was a walkway with a railing of iron lattice, painted grey, as high as her chest. Below the railing there was nothing for a long way, and then the river.

Her mother stopped in the middle of the bridge.

— Look, she said. Lena. Look.

Lena couldn't see over the railing. Her mother put her hands under her arms and lifted her and set her on it. On the top rail. On the flat iron of the top rail, with her bare legs hanging over the river side and her nightdress blowing, and her mother's hand closed round her right wrist, very tight, tighter than anything, so tight it hurt more than the steps had.

Below them the river was full of light. The balloons were drifting under the bridge and out over the water and some were rising past them, so close Lena could feel the heat of one on her face as it went by, and down on the water the ones that had fallen were burning, and the lights of the Ribeira and the lights of Gaia were in the river too, doubled, shaking, and the valley was lit from below like the inside of a lamp.

— It's all for us, her mother said into her ear. They did it all for us, Lena, look at it, look, look.

And she sang. Close against Lena's ear, the old song, the saint and the basil, very fast, not quite in tune, her hand on the wrist and her other arm round Lena's waist and her breath smelling of wine, and Lena looked. She looked at the river burning and the balloons going over and the city upside down in the water, and she was more frightened than she had ever been, and she would never in her life see anything as beautiful again, and she knew both of those things at once, at eight, on the rail, with her mother's hand on her wrist.

A man was shouting.

He was running along the walkway towards them from the Gaia end, a man in a white shirt with the tails out, shouting at them to get down, get her down, are you mad, senhora, get her down. Her mother turned her head and laughed at him.

— We're looking at the river, she said.

The man didn't stop. He came up to them and put his arms round Lena from behind and lifted her off the rail, and her mother's hand held on to her wrist for one more second, and then let go. The man set her down on the deck. He was shaking. He looked at her mother and opened his mouth and didn't say anything and then he said, *Go home, senhora, please, take the child home*, and her mother said, *We were going,* very politely, and took Lena's hand again, gently this time, and they walked home.

Her mother sang all the way. Down the Guindais, along the quay, past the dancers, past the men asleep on the church steps, up the blue stairs. At the top she kissed Lena on both eyes and sent her to bed and sat down at the kitchen table with one of her exercise books and began to write.

Lena didn't go to bed. She went to the bathroom and ran the cold tap in the bidet and washed her feet, which were black, and grey at the heels, and had a cut on one sole she hadn't felt. She washed them for a long time. She dried them on the bath mat and folded the bath mat over so the dirt didn't show. Nobody told her to. She understood, without being told, that this was a night to be put away before her father came home, and she put it away.

He came in at seven. She heard him at the door, and heard him go through to the kitchen, and heard her mother laughing at something he said, and the smell of coffee, and then she slept.

Her wrist was blue for a week. She wore her cardigan in June.

. . .

The kettle boiled. Madalena made coffee for four and carried it through and put her father's cup by his elbow and her mother's cup

on the low table where nobody would drink it, because her father set one there now every time, and she wasn't going to be the one to stop.

She waited until Vasco was in the bathroom.

— Pai. Come outside a minute.

He followed her out onto the landing. She pulled the door to behind them, not shut. The stairwell was cold and smelled of the widow's floor polish from below, and the blue was greyish in the winter light coming down from the skylight.

She went down three steps so she could see his face.

— It's back, she said.

He looked at her.

— Pai. You know what I'm saying. It's back. She's on the bar.

— The dead don't relapse, Madalena.

— She isn't dead. That's the problem. That's the whole problem. You bought her not being dead, and now she's on the bar and you're sitting in there in your slippers at three in the morning pretending it's a party.

— How do you know what I do at three in the morning?

— Because you haven't shaved, and there are two cups, and she's ringing people. Dona Ilídia from the parish rang me. She rang me, Pai, at my office.

He put his hand on the rail. He looked down the well of the stairs, down the blue.

— You don't remember those years properly, he said. You were a child.

Madalena laughed. It came out of her before she could stop it, a short, ugly sound, and it went down the stairwell and came back.

— I don't remember them properly, she said. I was the one who made breakfast.

He turned his head and looked at her.

Above them, on the top landing, the flat door had opened a hand's width. Vasco was standing in the gap in his socks, holding the panel's remote in both hands, listening.

7

You Signed

The bar turns in the last week of January.

There is no day I can point to. It's in the voice first. The laugh is still there but it comes sooner, before the joke is finished, and then it doesn't come at all, and what's left is the speed. She talks as fast as she did at Christmas and none of it is about tiles any more.

— You make it weak because you're mean, she says. You always were mean. You measure coffee like a man paying for a funeral.

I put the cup down.

— Your brother borrowed eight hundred from us in sixty-eight and never paid it back and you never asked him for it once, not once in seventeen years, because you can't bear a conversation. You'd rather lose the money. You'd rather lose anything than have to open your mouth.

That's not fair.

— It's perfectly fair. It's the fairest thing I've ever said.

I go into the kitchen. I stand at the window with my hands on the edge of the sink and look at the wall of the building opposite, the drainpipe, the pigeon on the ledge. My phone rings in my pocket. I take it out. On the screen it says *Graça*.

I let it ring. It stops. It starts again.

I answer it.

— Don't walk away from me, she says, from the front room, into my ear. You always walk away. You walk into another room and stand at a window. Fifty-one years I've watched you stand at windows.

I come back into the front room and sit in the chair. I put the phone face down on my knee. She looks at me from the wall, from the shoulders up, in her grey cardigan, her eyes very bright, and I wait for what's coming. I've known since Christmas.

— You signed me away, she says. Like a cargo manifest. Name, tonnage, port of origin. Sign here, Senhor Pinho. And you signed.

Graça.

— They took my laces. Did you know that? You didn't know that. They took my laces and my belt and the cord out of my dressing gown, and they put me in a room with a window that didn't open and a view of a wall, and you came on the Thursday, and you sat on the end of the bed in your uniform, and you couldn't look at me.

I came every day.

— You didn't come on the second Thursday.

There was a ship. The Gdynia ship. The bar was —

— There's always a ship. There's always the bar. You had a ship to bring in and I was in a room with a wall and nobody would give me a pencil.

I don't say anything.

— And you never asked me why. You never once asked me why I was on the wall.

I knew why.

— You didn't know anything. You knew the bar. You knew sets and gaps and leading lights. You thought I was a ship.

She's right about the pencil. They wouldn't, for the first three weeks. She's right about the window. She's right that I didn't come on the second Thursday. She's wrong about the Thursday before, when she says I didn't look at her; I looked at her the whole hour, and she wouldn't look at me. I know that. I knew it then. I sit in the chair with the phone on my knee and listen to her and I can't tell any more

which parts are right and which aren't, or whether it matters, or whether it ever did.

. . .

September, thirty-eight. The piano went back to Cedofeita on the same handcart it had come on, with the same man pushing it, who wouldn't look at me. We owed for three months. Graça stood at the top of the blue stairs and watched it go down, flight by flight, the man and his boy taking the weight on each landing, and she didn't cry. She shouted. She shouted at me, at the man, at the widow on the second floor who had come out onto her landing, at the street, in a voice I had never heard come out of her. Then she went inside and shut the door and didn't come out of the bedroom for two days, and when she came out she was quick again, quicker than in July, and there was nothing in it now that was joy.

She stopped sleeping at all. She stopped taking the salt; I found the tablets in the cistern, a month of them, swelling in the water. She went out at night and came back at dawn with her shoes in her hand. She wrote to the bishop, to the president of the republic, to the harbourmaster about the bar, long letters in the blue ink, and posted them. She told me I was slow. She told me I was dull, a dull man in a dull job, a ferryman, and that she had married me because I was the first person she met who didn't frighten her, and that she had been wrong, and that I frightened her more than anyone.

I went to work. I brought ships in. I came home and she was there or she wasn't.

October, thirty-eight. The swell had been building for two days, a long westerly swell with a gale behind it, the sets coming in high and grey over the outer rocks and breaking on the Felgueiras wall with a noise like a building coming down.

She had been gone since the afternoon. I came home from the station at nine and the flat was empty and the windows were open to the wind and there were exercise books all over the kitchen floor. I knew where she was. I don't know how I knew. I took the tram out to

Foz with my oilskin on over my clothes and walked out along the wall in the dark.

She was near the end, by the lighthouse, standing on the parapet. Barefoot. The spray going over her. She had her arms out.

I didn't shout. You don't shout at a ship that's in the wrong water; it only makes the master do something quick. I walked out along the wall between the sets. I counted them in. When a big one came I crouched behind the parapet and held on to the iron ring set in the stone, and it went over me, and I came up and walked on. I got to her in the gap after the seventh. I talked to her. I don't remember what I said. I said her name a great deal. I put my hand under her elbow, not tight, as you'd rest a hand on a wheel to feel what the rudder is doing, and I talked her down off the parapet and along the wall, between the sets, back towards the land, one gap at a time, and she came. She came laughing. She came singing. She told me I was slow.

At Conde de Ferreira there was a form. The doctor on duty was a young woman with her hair in a net. She explained it, and I listened, and she showed me the line, and I signed my name on it.

I brought her back. That's the job.

I went every day for eleven weeks. The tram to Antas and the walk up the hill and the gate and the long corridor with the green paint. I sat on the end of her bed in my uniform because I came from the station or went to it. For the first fortnight she wouldn't look at me. Then she would, and wouldn't speak. Then, in the fourth week, she asked me to bring her an exercise book and a pencil, and I asked the nurse, and the nurse said a pencil was all right now, and I brought them, and she wrote in it for the hour with her back to me, and I watched her shoulders, and that was a good day.

Except the second Thursday. The Gdynia ship, a bulk carrier, too deep for the bar on any tide but the top of springs, with a master who wanted to try anyway. I was the only pilot on the station that day with the grade for her. I took her in. It took six hours. I didn't get to Antas until the gate was locked.

I've never been able to make her see it was the same thing.

. . .

Same book, eleven pages on. Conde de Ferreira, 4 November 2338.

They took the laces.

Rui came. I didn't look at him.

. . .

She talks until two. When she stops it isn't because she's finished; she just stops, mid-sentence, and turns her face to the window and looks at the river, and doesn't say anything else.

I sit with her. She doesn't want me to and she doesn't tell me to go.

My silences, she said. That's what she hated most. More than the form. Somewhere in the middle of the night she said it: *It's not that you signed, Rui. It's that you never once said anything about it after. Forty-six years and you never said one word.*

And I said nothing then either.

At three I go into the kitchen and find a receipt in my coat pocket, from the market, cabbage and onions and a tin of sardines, and turn it over and write on the back of it with the pencil from the crossword: *I came every day.* I look at it. I fold it in half and put it in the bin under the sink, with the onion skins.

8

Outside the Walls

I ring Permanência on the Monday and tell them there's a fault.

The young woman on the line is very kind. She asks what kind of fault. I tell her the screen relights itself after rest. I tell her about the calls. I tell her my wife is talking all night and has stopped sleeping, and then I hear what I've said, and so does she, and there's a pause on the line.

— I'll send someone from attribution, she says.

The someone comes on the Wednesday, in the afternoon. Doctor Teresa Abreu. She's about fifty, in a raincoat that has seen weather, with grey in her hair and mud on her shoes. She says she walked from the Alfândega along the river and the path at Miragaia is a disgrace. She says it to Graça, when I take her through, and Graça says it has been a disgrace since the fifties and she has written to the council about it every year since.

They talk for twenty minutes, the two of them, while I make coffee. I listen from the kitchen.

— Where did you train? Graça asks her.

— Coimbra.

— Coimbra is a town for lawyers and priests.

— And doctors.

— Doctors are lawyers who've seen blood. Are you a lawyer?

— I'm an assessor.

— What do you assess?

— People like you. What's you and what isn't.

There's a pause. Through the doorway I see Graça lean forward on the screen.

— And what's the answer?

— I haven't decided. I've only been here ten minutes.

— Then I'll save you the time, Graça says. Is it still in me? The bar. Did they bring it across with the rest?

— Yes.

— Good, Graça says. I'd wondered where it had got to.

Graça laughs, the old laugh, the one from the breakwater. Then, very quickly, she's sharp: she tells Abreu that her raincoat is ugly and her shoes are a disgrace and the company she works for sells grief by the kilo, and Abreu says yes, that's broadly true, and asks how she's sleeping. Graça says she's dead, so she doesn't need to. Abreu says that's a reasonable position and writes nothing down. Then Graça is charming again, asking about Coimbra, the river there, whether the Mondego still floods the lower town in spring, and Abreu tells her it does, and they talk about floods for a while, two women who both seem to like them.

Then she comes into the kitchen and sits at the table and takes the coffee I give her and drinks it, all of it, without saying it's weak.

— Senhor Pinho, she says. There's no fault.

She explains. She does it simply, with her raincoat still on, her hands round the cup, and she doesn't look away from me while she does it.

The gradient acts on the living. That's what it was built for. It reads a household, and a street, and a city, and it adjusts things by small degrees: a room's warmth, the timing of a shift at work, a light in the evening, the moment a friend happens to ring. It has been doing it for most of my life and most of hers. It doesn't act on the held. The held are outside it. There's no household for them, no body, no sleep to read. Whatever was keeping Graça level when she was alive, she says, is not in the panel.

She was level for twenty-four years, I say. Since sixty. Lithium, and me.

Abreu looks at me. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't say I'm wrong.

So this is her, I say. What's on the wall. This is her as she was.

— This is her as the record has her. Without the walls.

She looks down into her cup.

— I see it a few times a year, she says. Not often. Most people who are kept were never managed for anything in particular, or not for long. The gradient smoothed their bad weeks and that was all, and when they're kept nobody notices the difference. Then there are people like your wife. People it was holding up, every night, for decades, and nobody in the house knew. Sometimes they didn't know themselves.

She knew.

— She knew she was ill. That's not the same.

I don't answer. On the other side of the doorway Graça is talking to the window, quickly, quietly, about Coimbra.

— My mother is kept, Abreu says. At Standard. In Viseu. She was never ill a day in her life, and now she can't remember my brother's name, and I go every second Sunday and she tells me I've put on weight. I'm telling you so you know I'm not here to sell you anything.

She puts down her cup.

— She'll have a household log, she says. Everyone does. Every adjustment the gradient made in her life, from the day she was first registered, and whether it reached her. It belongs to the estate. That's you.

She takes a reader out of her raincoat pocket, a flat grey thing the size of a paperback, and puts it on the oilcloth between us.

— It's on here. You don't have to look at it.

I look at the reader. I don't touch it.

— If you do look, she says, each line is one thing it tried. A cooler bedroom. A friend prompted to ring. A shift moved at work. None of it

is much on its own; a cooler bedroom never stopped anyone. It's the number of them. Two thousand, over fifty years.

And the figures at the end?

— How much of each one got through to her. A hundred is all of it, the adjustment as it was designed. Eleven is about a tenth. Where it says *not delivered*, nothing reached her at all.

Why would only a tenth get through?

— Read it, she says. It'll tell you better than I can.

At the door, buttoning her raincoat, I ask her the other thing.

My daughter, I say. Madalena. Does she have one of those? A log.

— Every living person does.

Could I see it?

— No, Abreu says. She'd have to ask for her own. It's hers.

She goes down the blue stairs. Halfway down she stops and looks up at the skylight and the colour on the walls, and says something I don't catch, and goes on.

I stand on the landing until I hear the street door close. Then I go back in. Graça is looking at the window.

— I liked her, she says, without turning round. She has ugly shoes and she's honest. What did she tell you?

That there's nothing wrong with you.

— I could have told you that.

She turns from the window and looks at me, very bright, very quick.

— What's on the reader, Rui?

Nothing. Papers.

— You're a terrible liar. You always were. You've never got better at it.

She's right. I never have.

— She thinks something kept me quiet, Graça says. All those years. I could hear the two of you from here.

I don't say anything.

— Something did. I'm not stupid, Rui. I could feel it. Do you want to know what the quiet years were like? Like hearing the sea through a

wall. In the next room, all night, every night, for twenty-four years. I could hear it all the time. I just couldn't get to it.

She turns back to the window.

— I never told you that either, she says.

. . .

Household record, extract. Rua de Miragaia 41, 4.º. Subject: PINHO, Graça Meireles. Window: 19–24 June 2351.

19 Jun 23:52 — Sleep onset delayed 3 h 10 min against baseline. Response: bedroom −1.5 °C; evening light curve advanced 40 min. Delivered 11%.

20 Jun 02:14 — Activity, kitchen, sustained. Response: domestic lighting dimmed; ambient sound reduced. Delivered 9%.

20 Jun 14:30 — Prescription refill overdue 6 days. Response: pharmacy prompt; spouse prompt. Not delivered: household unreachable.

21 Jun 03:40 — Sleep absent. Response: colleague contact prompt (Couto, F.). Delivered.

22 Jun 01:05 — Sleep absent. Response: bedroom −2 °C; spouse roster review requested, Douro pilot station. Declined by employer: festival traffic.

23 Jun 22:00 — Municipal festival. Regional ambient adjustments suspended 22:00–06:00 per civic calendar; safety prompts exempt.

24 Jun 03:06 — Occupant exits with minor (PINHO, M., 8). Route: Rua de Miragaia — Ribeira — Escadas dos Guindais. Response: spouse alert. Not delivered: recipient at sea.

24 Jun 03:31 — Ponte Luís I, upper deck. Minor at height. Response: nearest-adult prompt. Delivered (bystander).

24 Jun 03:58 — Occupants return. Response: none indicated.

. . .

That evening, after she has gone dark, I sit at the kitchen table with the reader.

It opens where Abreu left it, at the summer of fifty-one. I read the nine lines. I read them again. I read the one about the bridge four times, down to the *Delivered (bystander)* at the end of it, until the words stop meaning anything.

I didn't know.

Thirty-four years since that night, and I didn't know. Madalena said on the stairs that she made breakfast. She didn't say the bridge. Nobody ever said the bridge.

I came in off the tide at seven that morning. I remember it. São João, the city wrecked, plastic hammers in the gutters, a man asleep on the church steps with a basil pot in his lap. Graça was at the kitchen table writing in one of her books, and she laughed when she saw me and said what a night, Rui, you missed the best night of the year, and I thought she meant the fireworks. Lena was asleep. I looked in on her. Her feet were clean.

And that week she wore her cardigan. In June. The green one with the white buttons, every day, in the heat. I asked her once whether she was cold and she said no. I said to Graça that the child was getting a chill. Graça laughed.

I sit at the kitchen table with my hand flat on the reader. Down in the street a car goes over the cobbles. I think about a rail I've never stood at, on a bridge I've crossed a thousand times on the tram, and my daughter on it in her nightdress, and a man whose name I'll never know running from the Gaia end because something told him to.

Then I put my finger on the screen and push the record up, back, back through the years, faster, the lines going past too quickly to read, decades of them, until it won't go any further.

The first line is from April 2330, a residence hall at the training college. *Sleep onset delayed.*

At the bottom of the screen, in small grey figures, is the count.

2,041.

9

The Flat Month

The morning after the log I ring Madalena.

I stand in the hall at seven, before she leaves for work, with the words ready. *I didn't know about the bridge.* Six words. It rings, and rings, and I hear the click as she picks up, and her voice, *Pai?*, and I put the phone down.

She doesn't ring back. I didn't think she would.

It ends in February. Not with anything. She simply comes down.

The speed goes out of her over two days, and what's left behind is very still. On the third morning when I bring the coffee through she has already dimmed the screen herself, to the lowest it will go, so that she is hardly more than a shape on the glass, and the blinds are down. She asked the house to lower them, I suppose. I didn't know she could.

Good morning, I say.

— Morning.

It's going to rain, I tell her.

Nothing.

I sit down. I tell her about the rain anyway, where it's coming from, how long it will last. I tell her the dredger is back in the channel. I tell her the navy ship came up yesterday and went down again, for no reason anyone could give. She doesn't answer. Once, after a long time, she says one word: *Sorry*. I don't know what for.

That week she speaks perhaps a dozen times. *Yes. No. Leave it. Sorry.* On the Thursday, in the evening, with the blinds down and the screen nearly black, she says a whole sentence.

— I'm a weight on you, Rui. Even dead I'm a weight on you.

You're not.

— I am. I always was. You carried me up those stairs for fifty years.

I tell her that's not true. I tell her about the stairs, how she went up them two at a time until she was seventy, how I could never keep up. She doesn't answer. She doesn't say anything else that night, and she doesn't say anything about wanting it to stop, or wanting to be switched off, or any of that; I listen for it, every night, and it doesn't come. She just isn't there.

I shave, that week, for the first time since Christmas. I do it at the bathroom mirror at seven in the morning with the door open so I can hear if she says anything, and she doesn't, and I cut myself under the jaw, and stand there with a square of toilet paper on the cut, looking at an old man in a mirror. I go to the market on the Wednesday. I buy cabbage. Nobody on the wall asks what I paid for it.

The dog from the second floor has started coming in. It noses the door open when I leave it on the latch and crosses the front room and lies down on the rug in front of the panel, its chin on its paws, its eyes on the dark glass. It stays for an hour, two hours. The widow's son comes up for it in the evenings and stands in the doorway, embarrassed, and says it never used to do this, and I say it can stay.

So I talk.

I sit in her chair in the dim and I talk about the river. I tell her the tides for the week, out of the almanac, high water and low water, the heights. I tell her which ships are due at Leixões and what they're carrying. I tell her about the bar on a bad day in the fifties, the Norwegian freighter with the deck cargo of timber that shifted, how we brought her in on the third try with the logs going over the side one by one like matches. I tell her about my father's dredger. I tell her about the pair of them, why they went out in pairs: one to dredge, one to stand off in case the first got into trouble on the sand. I looked

it up. She asked me, in October, the afternoon she died, and I didn't know, and now I do.

She doesn't say anything. I think she's listening. I don't know.

. . .

Vasco wouldn't go into the front room.

He stood in the hall on the first Sunday of February with his coat still on and looked at the door, which was half open, and at the dimness inside, and wouldn't go in. Madalena crouched down in front of him and undid his buttons.

— Avó's tired, she said. She's resting.

— Is she broken?

Madalena's hands stopped on the third button.

— No, she said. No, filho. She's just tired.

— She was talking all the time before. She was talking really fast.

— I know.

— And now she isn't.

— I know. Go and help Avô in the kitchen.

He went. She stayed crouched in the hall with his coat in her hands, looking at the half-open door, and the blue light from the panel at its lowest, and the shape of her father's chair against it.

She had been eight.

It began the week after São João and lasted until the chestnuts came in, July to the end of October, and for all of it her mother didn't get up. She lay in the bedroom with the shutters closed and her face to the wall. Sometimes she slept. Mostly she lay there with her eyes open. When Lena went in, she said *Go and play*, *Lena*, *go on*, or she said nothing.

Her father was on the night boats. It was a big year on the river, the year they deepened the channel, and the station was short of men, and he did double shifts all summer, out at six in the evening and back at seven in the morning, and slept until two. When he was awake he was quiet and kind and tired, and he went into the bedroom and sat with her mother and came out again and made dinner, and he

never said anything about it to Lena, and she never said anything to him.

So she made breakfast.

Nobody told her to. On the first morning she went into the kitchen and there was nothing on the table, and she understood that there wasn't going to be, so she made it. Bread from the bakery, which the baker's boy left on the step at six. Butter. A cup of milk for herself. And coffee, in the little pot, the way she'd seen her father do it, with the water to the line and two spoons. Years later she found out it wasn't enough, and that was why it was always weak. She carried the cup through to the bedroom door and set it on the floor by the door, because she was frightened to go in, and knocked once, and went back to the kitchen and ate her bread.

Every day. July, August, September, October. At first the cup was still full when she collected it at lunchtime. Then one day in September it was half drunk. Then it was empty, and on the first of November her mother came into the kitchen in her dressing gown with the empty cup in her hand and sat down at the table and looked at Lena for a long time, and said *This coffee is terrible*, and started to cry.

Her father came in from the boat at seven that morning and found them both at the table. He didn't ask anything. He put his hand on Lena's head as he went past, and put the coffee on, and it was over.

. . .

On the second Saturday in February Madalena came on her own.

Her father was asleep in his room with the door shut. The flat was very quiet. She stood in the kitchen and made coffee in the little pot, two spoons, the water to the line, and poured a cup, and carried it through.

The front room was nearly dark. The blinds were down and the screen was at its lowest, and her mother was a dim shape on it, a face turned towards the window. Madalena couldn't tell whether she was awake.

She didn't say anything. She bent and set the cup on the low table in front of the panel, by the chair, where her father set his every morning.

Then she went out, and pulled the door to behind her, and let herself out of the flat, and went down the blue stairs.

. . .

I find the cup an hour later.

I come through in my socks and see it on the low table, still a little warm, a cup I didn't make. I know whose it is. I know from the colour of the coffee in it, which is too pale, which is how I make it, which is how Madalena learned to make it when she was small, watching me.

Graça is dark on the wall. The cup hasn't been touched. Of course it hasn't.

I stand there with my hand on the back of her chair. I go to pick it up, to take it to the sink and pour it away, as I pour mine away every night at eleven.

I can't do it. I leave it where it is.

PART THREE

The Log

10

Two Thousand Lines

I read it at the kitchen table, at night, after she has gone dark.

I read it as I used to read the pilotage notices when I was young, every line, slowly, with my finger under the words, because a notice you skim is a notice that puts a ship on the sand. I make coffee at ten and leave it to go cold beside the reader. I read until two, or three. Some nights I read a single year.

It begins in April 2330, in the residence hall at the training college, with a girl of nineteen who has stopped sleeping. *Sleep onset delayed. Response: room −1 °C. Delivered 64%.* Then the eleven days, line after line, the responses getting larger and arriving less, until the eleventh night, the roof. *Occupant at height. Response: emergency services.* Then nothing for three months, because Conde de Ferreira had its own systems, and the log only knows what it was let into.

Then thirty-three. Our address. The flat.

Delivered 12%. Delivered 9%. Delivered 11%. Not delivered: household unreachable. For twenty-seven years. Hundreds of lines. A cooler bedroom she never felt. A friend prompted to ring who didn't ring, or rang and was laughed at. A shift moved at the school that the school didn't move. Light curves advanced in a room the light couldn't get into. I read the summer of thirty-three, the blue, the three nights; it's there, every hour of it, the paint smell flagged as a sleep risk to the household and the widow downstairs. I read thirty-eight. I read the

night on the breakwater. *Occupant on coastal structure, sea state 6. Response: spouse alert. Delivered.* That's how I knew where she was. I'd always thought I just knew.

I read the spring Madalena was born, forty-three, and the year after, a whole year of lines about a woman who did not get out of bed. I read fifty-six, which I don't remember as anything, a spring she was tired and Fátima came round a good deal. *Prescription not collected, 41 days. Response: pharmacy prompt; spouse prompt. Not delivered.* I don't know what it means. I read it twice and go on.

I read fifty-one slowly. The nine lines Abreu left it open at, and the weeks around them. In the middle of June there's one I didn't take in the first time: *spouse roster review requested, Douro pilot station. Declined by employer: festival traffic.* I read it over and over. It had asked the station to give me fewer nights. Somebody at the station had said no, it was São João, the river was full. I never knew. If they'd asked me, I'd have said no too. I'd have gone out. I know I would. I sit at the table with my finger under the line and I know it, and it doesn't help at all.

The nights she was in the bedroom, July to October, the lines are short. *Activity absent. Response: social prompt (colleague). Delivered 10%. Meals not prepared by occupant.* Then, every morning, at a quarter past six, the same thing: *Kitchen activity (minor). No response required.*

Lena. Making breakfast. Every morning for four months, written down by a clerk who couldn't do anything about it, while I was still out on the tide.

And then, in the spring of sixty, one line, by itself, on a Monday.

14 Mar 2360 — Fabric replacement, Rua de Miragaia block, complete. Household in reach.

I remember the scaffolding. The council did the whole street that winter, the old buildings, new windows, the roofs, something in the walls they wouldn't explain. We had plastic over the windows for six weeks and Graça complained about the dust on her books. I hadn't thought about it since.

That spring she slept. I remember the first night of it, at the end of March, the window open, her breathing slow and even beside me and going on like that until morning, and me lying awake listening to it as if it were weather I didn't trust. I put it down to the young doctor in Boavista who'd changed her dose that winter. I sent him a bottle of port every Christmas for nine years, until he retired.

After the fourteenth of March the lines change.

Delivered 100%. *Delivered* 100%. *Delivered* 97%. Fewer of them. Forty a year, perhaps, then thirty. Nearly all of them about her sleep, a degree off the bedroom here, the evening light brought forward there, small things, at night, every night it was needed and some nights it wasn't. And after them, nothing. No more breakwaters, no more summers with the shutters closed. Twenty-four years of a woman sleeping, more or less, and getting up, and going to work, and correcting my grammar.

I had thought those years were ours.

I had thought it was the salt, and the doctor in Boavista who adjusted it twice a year, and me. My patience. The house kept quiet. The tea. Every night at ten for twenty-four years I made her a cup of camomile and carried it through and sat with her while she drank it, and we didn't talk, and then she went to bed. I thought that was part of it. I thought it was the part I could do.

It's in the log. I find it, the third night, and then I find it again and again, hundreds of times, the same line.

22:00 — *Evening routine observed (spouse). No response required.*

. . .

On the fourth night I take the reader through to the front room.

The screen is dark, or nearly; she's set it so low that she's hardly more than the shape of a head turned to the window, and the blinds are down. I sit in her chair with the reader on my knee. I could tell her. She heard Abreu; she knows something kept her quiet. She told me what it was like. I could tell her where it came from, the scaffold-

ing, the plastic on the windows, the fourteenth of March. I could tell her about the tea.

I open my mouth and the radiator ticks, and I close it again.

I sit with her until one. She doesn't move. When I get up my knee has set and I have to hold the arm of the chair.

Goodnight, I say.

Nothing. Then, very low, so low I'm not sure afterwards:

— Night.

. . .

I don't know who I'm angry with.

The gradient first. For twenty-seven years it sat outside the walls of this flat and tried to get in, and couldn't, and wrote down that it couldn't, every night, like a clerk. It knew she was on the breakwater before I did. It knew about the bridge. It knew, and it wrote it down, and it sent a man in a white shirt, and it never once told me. Then, when the council fixed the walls, it came in, and did what I couldn't do in twenty-seven years, and never told me that either.

The cup is in my hand. It's my own cup, the blue one with the chip. I don't decide anything. It hits the wall by the stove and comes apart and the cold coffee goes down the tiles, and the noise is very loud in the flat at two in the morning, and in the front room the screen stays dark.

I pick up the pieces. I cut my thumb on one. I put them in the bin under the sink, with the onion skins.

. . .

At six I go out.

I take the first tram along the river to the Passeio Alegre, the 1, empty except for a nurse coming off a night and a man asleep with his head against the glass. It's dark when I get on and grey when I get off. I walk along the front to the Cantareira, past the fishermen's houses with their tiled fronts, past the little chapel, to the steps where Seven used to lie on her mooring.

The mooring buoy is still there. It's orange, with weed on its chain. Nothing on it.

I tied her there for twenty-two years. Every spring I scraped her and every autumn I brought her up on the slip and turned her over. On the summer evenings Graça would come down after school and sit on the steps with a book while I fussed with the thole pins, and when I was done I'd row her out as far as the moles and back, and she'd trail her hand in the water and tell me I was showing off. Once, in the quiet years, she asked me to take her right out over the bar. A flat calm in August, the sea like oil. I did. She sat in the stern and looked down at the sand moving under us, pale, close, and said: *Is that all it is?* and I said yes, on a day like this, that's all it is.

Beyond it the river opens out between the two moles and the bar is white. There's a big swell running, the tail of something out in the Atlantic, and the sets are coming in over the sand in long ranks and standing up and breaking, white right across the mouth from the Felgueiras wall to the south mole, and the sound of it comes up the river like traffic. No ship would cross that this morning. No pilot would take one.

I stand on the steps and watch it. I count the sets, and then I stop counting.

A man comes down the steps beside me with a bucket and a line, a fisherman I knew from the station years ago, older now, with a stick. He looks at the bar and spits.

— Not today, he says.

No.

— Senhor Rui. I heard about Dona Graça. I'm sorry. How is she?

She's well, I say.

11

Lisbon

On the Thursday I take the tide table out of the trunk.

Forty-one. The cover is soft and grey with handling, and the spine has gone, and it opens by itself at April, where the letter is. I've had it out before. Three times, four, over the years: once the night Madalena was born, once after her wedding, once the winter Graça's heart began to go. Each time I held it and put it back. This time I take the letter out and unfold it on the kitchen table under the lamp. Three sheets of hotel paper, the crest of a hotel she couldn't have been staying in, her handwriting, the blue ink.

I don't read it at once. I sit with my hands on either side of it.

. . .

It was March, forty-one. We had been married eight years. I came home from the station on a Sunday afternoon and she was at the kitchen table marking exercise books, and I sat down opposite her and said I wanted a child.

I'd said it before. Not like that. Not across a table with my hands flat on the oilcloth, as if I were putting down a chart.

She put her pen down.

— No, she said.

I asked her why.

— You know why.

We'd manage it, I said. We'd managed everything else. We'd manage it together.

— You managed, she said. I was managed.

I didn't understand her. I said so. I said that the doctors had told us there was no reason, that plenty of women with what she had, that the salt could be stopped and started, that I would be there.

— You'll be on the river.

I'll change shifts.

— You won't. You can't. It's your whole life, the river. And I won't do it, Rui. I won't hand anyone the bar. I won't put it into a child and stand back and watch it come up in her at nineteen on a roof. I won't.

I said she didn't know that. I said there was every chance. I said a great many things that night, more than I'd said in a year, I think, and I believed every one of them, and she sat and listened with her face very still and her hands in her lap, and when I'd finished she picked up her pen and went back to marking the exercise books.

In the morning she was gone.

Her coat was gone and her good shoes and the little brown suitcase from the top of the wardrobe. There was no note. I rang Fátima. I rang her mother in Lordelo, who hadn't heard from her and began to cry. I went to the police in the afternoon, and a sergeant with a moustache wrote it down and told me that grown women left their husbands every day of the week, senhor, and generally came back. I went to Campanhã and asked at the ticket windows. I went to the hospitals. I went to Conde de Ferreira and stood at the gate and didn't go in.

Fátima came on the third night with soup in a pot and stood at the stove and heated it and made me eat it at the table, and didn't say anything about Graça, and I was grateful. On the fifth night I went out to Foz on the last tram and walked the Felgueiras wall to the light in the dark, in a calm, with nobody on it, and stood at the end and looked at the black water, and walked back. I did that four times in the three weeks. I never told anyone that. I didn't know what I thought I'd find. Nothing, I suppose. I went to make sure of nothing.

For three weeks I went to work and brought ships in and came home to an empty flat. On the nineteenth day the letter came.

The postman left it on the mat with the gas bill. Her hand on the envelope, the blue ink, a Lisbon postmark. I stood in the hall and held it. I knew her hand better than my own. I didn't open it. If it said she wasn't coming back, I didn't want that in the flat with me yet; I wanted one more night of not knowing. So I put it in the tide table, at April, and put the tide table in my bag, and took it out on the dawn tide, and brought a coaster in with it under the chart table. The next night the same. And the next.

On the twenty-second she came home, on the evening train, with the brown suitcase, and climbed the blue stairs and let herself in, and I was at the stove, and she put her arms round me from behind and stayed like that, and neither of us said anything, and then she went to have a bath.

She was in the bath for an hour. I sat on the edge of our bed and listened to the water moving. When she came out she had a towel round her hair and her face was scrubbed pink, and she got into bed and was asleep before I'd turned the light out, and she slept fourteen hours. In the morning she got up and made coffee, properly, strong, and drank it standing at the window, and when I said something about the tide she corrected my grammar.

I didn't read it after, either. She was home. Whatever was in it, she had come back past it. Reading it would have been the same as asking her, and I didn't ask her.

We never talked about it. Not once in forty-three years. Two years after, Madalena was born.

At São João, the hospital, in the March of forty-three. A long night, and Graça telling the midwife what she thought of her in words I had never heard her use, and then the baby, grey and furious, and the midwife lifting her up. I remember Graça looking at her. Not at her face. At her hands. The baby's fists going in the air, and Graça watching them, with an expression I didn't understand and didn't ask about, and then she held out her own hands and took her.

I always believed she left because I pushed. Because I sat down across a table and put my hands on it and said what I wanted, the one time I ever did, and she couldn't bear it, and went.

. . .

The log has March forty-one.

It starts nine days before that Sunday. *Sleep onset delayed 2 h 40 min. Response: bedroom −1 °C. Delivered 8%.* Then the next night, longer. Then *sleep fragmented; agitation markers.* Then a line I have to read three times: *Mixed presentation probable. Response: clinical contact prompt (Dr. Vaz). Not delivered: household unreachable.* Nine days of it, getting worse, before I came home and sat down at the table. Then the Monday: *17 Mar — Occupant departs. Campanhã, Lisbon service, 06:12. Response: spouse alert. Not delivered: recipient at sea.*

I was on the dawn tide. I remember. I'd gone out at five and not seen her.

So it was coming anyway. That's what the log says. It was nine days in when I sat down at the table, and she was already on the bar, and I didn't see it. Maybe what I said made it worse. Maybe it made no difference at all. Maybe she'd have gone on the Monday if I'd said nothing, if I'd come home and kissed her and gone to bed. The log says what happened, the hours, the temperatures, the trains. It doesn't say whether it was me.

I read the letter.

. . .

Lisbon, 3 April 2341

Rui,

I'm in a room in Graça. You'll laugh. There's a street sign under the window with my name on it, and the 28 tram goes past it every nine minutes, and from the window I can see the river, but it's the wrong river. It's too wide and it goes the wrong way and there's no bar. It just opens into the sea like a door somebody left open.

I left because of the form. Not the one you signed. The next one. I could feel it coming, like weather in a bad tooth, and I wasn't going to make you sign another. I know what it cost you the first time. You think I don't know, because I wouldn't look at you. I wouldn't look at you because I knew.

I'm not well. You'll have guessed. I'm not sleeping and I'm not not sleeping. I'm somewhere between, where everything is very fast and very black at once, and I walk. I walk all night. I've walked every street in Alfama three times. A woman downstairs gives me soup and doesn't ask anything. I think she's had someone like me.

I'll come home when I can be trusted with your kindness. I can't be trusted with it now. I'd spend it, as I spent the piano.

About what you asked me. I heard you. I'm not saying no. I'm saying what I'm frightened of, which you never let me say, because you go and stand at a window.

If we have one, she'll have my hands. I'm frightened of my hands.

I'm frightened that one day she'll be out on a wall somewhere and you'll have to walk out along it to her as you walked out to me, between the sets, counting. I don't know if you have it in you twice. I don't know if anyone does.

Don't come for me. I'll come.

G.

. . .

I read it twice. Then I sit with it.

She'll have my hands. She wrote *she*. Two years before there was any she.

You managed. I was managed. I hear it again, tonight, at the table. She said it nineteen years before they came and fixed the walls.

I look down at the letter on the oilcloth under the lamp, the three sheets, the blue ink. My hands are on either side of it, flat, as they were on the table that Sunday. They're an old man's hands now, spotted, the knuckles thick, the scar across the left palm from a hawser in fifty-four. I look at them.

. . .

Later, I take the letter through to the front room.

She has the blinds a little way up. The screen is low but not dark. She is looking at the river, or at the light where the river is, through the slats.

I don't know why I do it. I hold the letter up, the first sheet, the hotel crest towards the screen.

She looks at it for a long time.

— Graça, she says.

Yes, I say.

— The street sign. Under the window. My name in white on blue, and the tram going by.

Yes.

— The woman with the soup, she says. Her name was Dona Alda. She had a son who walked at night too. She told me on the fourth day. She said, *He walked to the river and didn't come back, and I'm not having it twice.*

I didn't know that.

— No, she says. I never told you.

She turns her face back to the slats.

— Put it away, Rui. Please.

I fold it along its old folds and put it back in the tide table, at April.

12

Her Own Walls

Madalena requested her own log on a Tuesday, at her desk, in her lunch hour.

Abreu had rung her at the end of January, as next of kin. There was no fault, she said. Whatever had kept her mother level for twenty-four years had been in the walls of the flat, not in her mother, and it hadn't come across. There were options, if the family wanted them. And every living person had a log of her own, if she cared to ask for it.

The form took four minutes. Name, number, a box to confirm she understood that the record would be released to her in full and could not be partly unseen. She ticked it. She pressed the button. The record arrived before she'd finished her sandwich.

She didn't open it. She put the reader face down on her desk and finished the sandwich and went back to the drawing she'd been working on all week, a pavilion for the seawall at Leça, a long low thing of timber and lime that had to stand up to the Atlantic in January and still look, the client said, like somewhere you'd want to buy an ice cream. She liked the job. She liked the problem of it, the wind loads, the salt, the way the sun came round. She worked on it until six without thinking about her mother once, and was proud of herself, and then on the train home thought about nothing else.

She didn't open it at the office. She took it home to the flat on the old cannery row, and put Vasco to bed, and sat at the kitchen table in

the window she had drawn, with a glass of wine she didn't drink, and opened it.

It was shorter than she'd expected. A life lived in reach was a life with fewer lines.

Thirty-eight, last year. She scrolled through them. Most were nothing: a degree here, the evening light there, a meeting moved from a Monday to a Wednesday because her sleep had been short on the Sunday. She remembered none of them. That was the point of them, she supposed. They were the size of things you don't remember.

Then March of last year. The week Henrique left.

He had gone on a Thursday, with two suitcases and his bicycle, after nine years and a child and a long, polite winter in which neither of them had said what they meant. She had stood at this window and watched him ride away down the cannery row with one suitcase strapped to the back and the other on his shoulder, wobbling, and she hadn't cried. She remembered being surprised. She'd thought, in the weeks after, that she must be stronger than she knew, or colder. She'd slept. She'd gone to work. Joana from the office had rung on the Thursday night, out of the blue, for a long chat about nothing, and she'd been grateful.

Thu 15 Mar 2384, 21:10 — Partner departs household. Response: bedroom −1 °C; sleep window protected (work calendar held 07:00–09:00, Friday); colleague contact prompt (Sá, J.). Delivered 100%.

Fri 16 Mar, 02:40 — Sleep fragmented. Response: ambient sound reduced; light curve held. Delivered 100%.

Sat 17 Mar — Mood markers below baseline. Response: social prompt (parent, Pinho, R.: lunch, Sunday). Delivered 100%.

Her father had rung on the Saturday morning and asked her and Vasco to Sunday lunch, which he never did; it was always her mother who rang. She'd thought it was kind of him.

She sat back. She read the lines again.

Then, because she couldn't stop herself, she went back. Back through the years, faster, to the spring she was twenty-four, the rented room in Lisbon.

12 Apr 2367 — Sleep onset delayed 4 h 05 min against baseline; activity, sustained, nocturnal. Pattern match: maternal history (PINHO, G.). Response: clinical referral prompt; student services contact. Delivered 100%.

Maternal history. It had known. Before the doctor, before the diagnosis, before she'd told anyone, before she'd understood it herself, on the ninth night, with every building in Lisbon open to her like a drawing, it had looked at her mother's file and seen her in it.

She went back further. She knew where she was going.

24 Jun 2351, 03:06 — Subject exits household with parent (PINHO, G.). Barefoot. Response: none available (household unreachable).

03:31 — Subject at height. Response: nearest-adult prompt. Delivered.

04:20 — Subject: bathroom, water use, 14 min. No response required.

30 Jun — Subject: clothing anomaly (long sleeves, ambient 29 °C). No response required.

Fourteen minutes. She had always thought it was longer.

She closed the record. She sat in the kitchen with the glass of wine and the dark window.

Down the corridor Vasco was asleep. He'd asked her at bedtime whether Avó was still tired. She'd said yes. He'd asked whether Avó would be tired for ever, and she'd said no, filho, nobody's tired for ever, and he'd thought about that with his eyes on the ceiling, and said, *Avô is*, and turned over and gone to sleep. She could request his log too. She was his parent; it would take four minutes. She sat with that for a while, and didn't do it, and didn't know whether she was being kind to him or to herself.

. . .

On Saturday she went to Miragaia.

Her mother was coming up. Madalena saw it from the hall. The blinds were half raised and the screen was brighter than it had been,

though not bright, and her mother was talking again, to her father, quickly, in short sentences, and her hands were back in the frame. But it wasn't January. There was nothing in it of January. It was brittle. It was quick and thin and sharp at the edges, and it went from one thing to another without finishing either, and every so often it stopped dead and her mother looked at the window as if someone had called her name.

Madalena stood in the doorway and watched her.

She saw her mother without the walls. She saw her mother as she'd been in the bad years, in the kitchen, at the table, on the bridge, the woman the walls had taken away when she was seventeen and given back level. Twenty-four years she had been grateful for that, without knowing whom to thank. And she saw herself. Without the walls. Without the cooled bedroom and the protected morning and Joana ringing on a Thursday. Herself at twenty-four in Lisbon, on the ninth night, with nobody looking at the file.

She was more frightened than she had let herself be in her life.

Her father came out into the hall to fetch something. She took hold of his sleeve.

— Pai. Take it out of her.

He looked at her.

— The illness. They can take it out. Abreu said. There are options. Take it out.

He didn't say anything. He looked over her shoulder at the screen.

— Not for her, Madalena said. For Vasco. He's nine. I won't have him learn it from a screen. I won't have him sit in that room on a Sunday and watch it, and learn what it looks like, and learn that it's his grandmother, and then one day —

She stopped.

— And then one day, she said.

Her father put his hand over hers on his sleeve. His hand was cold. He held it there for a moment, and then he took his arm back and went into the kitchen, and she heard the tap run, and run.

. . .

Permanência had an office in Boavista, on the fourth floor of a building with a dentist below it and an insurer above. Abreu met her there on the Monday, in the same raincoat, and gave her coffee from a machine, and a single sheet of paper.

— Your father's the estate, Abreu said. He'll have to sign anything. But you asked, and you're next of kin, so you can have this.

PERMANÊNCIA — Condition attribution
Options for the estate

Held: PINHO, Graça Meireles · Grade: Full · Tagged condition: bipolar I disorder (record-confirmed)

1. Condition removal. Intervals of the record tagged to the condition are excluded from the model, and the model is retrained without them. Expected presentation: stable affect; no episodic recurrence. Available as a reversible trial (7 days) before permanent application. Grade charges unchanged.

2. Held-side stabilisation. A smoothing layer is applied to the held, modelled on household gradient response. Expected presentation: as in the subject's later life. Supplementary monthly charge applies.

3. Raw keeping. No change. The held continues as the record has her. The estate may use the hold setting at any time.

Under option 1, episodic memory formed during tagged intervals cannot be retained. Traits associated with tagged intervals may be attenuated. Attribution is by statistical association and is not a clinical judgement of the subject's character.

Madalena read it twice. The second option she read once. A smoothing layer, *as in the subject's later life*, for a supplement every month on top of Full. She knew what Full had cost, because she knew what her father had sold to pay for it, and there was nothing else to sell. And under a layer it would still be there, in the room with Vasco.

She read the small type three times.

Episodic memory formed during tagged intervals. Episodic. *Episodes.* The word did half her thinking for her. She knew it was serious; she read it as you'd read the consent form for an operation, where something is cut out because it ought to be. She thought about the intervals. She thought about Conde de Ferreira, which she knew

only as a name nobody said at the table. She thought about Lisbon in forty-one, which she knew only as a gap in a story nobody told. She thought about her father's face when anyone said the word *form*. She thought about her mother not having to carry any of it any more, wherever she was, on that wall, at three in the morning.

She thought: good.

She didn't think about the bridge. The bridge was hers.

She folded the sheet in half, and in half again, and put it in her bag.

— Will you tell him? Abreu said. About the small print?

— I'll tell him what he needs to know, Madalena said.

That evening she drove to Miragaia and gave her father the sheet, folded, with the corner of the small type turned under, and watched him read the three options and not unfold it, and she didn't say anything.

13

The Kitchen

It happens on the last Sunday in February, after lunch, with the dishes still in the sink.

Vasco has gone down to the street with the dog from the second floor and the widow's son. The door to the front room is shut. Behind it Graça is talking, low, fast, to the window or to the tile on the sill; she's been talking since ten. I've turned the screen down. I don't know if she can hear us. Fátima is coming at three for her dish; she rang on Friday to say so, and I said yes, of course, and wondered why after three months she wanted it now.

Lunch was bad. Vasco ate in silence and looked at the shut door. Twice, from the front room, his grandmother called out a correction to something one of us said, sharp, fast, through the wood: the year the tram line closed, the name of the priest. Once she laughed at nothing, high, and stopped. Vasco put down his fork and asked to go out, and the widow's son came up for the dog, and they went together.

Madalena has the sheet from Permanência on the table between us, folded, the corner turned under. She keeps her hand on it.

— Sign it, Pai.

I haven't decided.

— You've had a week.

I've had fifty-one years, I say. I can have a week.

She laughs, the short laugh from the stairs, the ugly one.

— Fifty-one years. You've had fifty-one years of deciding nothing. You had a wife on the bar and you were on the river. Every bad year she had, you were on the river.

Someone had to earn.

— Double shifts. In fifty-one. All summer.

I was asked to.

— Did you say no?

I don't answer. She knows I didn't.

— I made breakfast, she says. Every morning. Four months. I was eight. I carried coffee to a door I was too frightened to open, and in the afternoon you got up and kissed my head and made dinner and didn't ask me one thing. Not one. Not *how is she, Lena*. Not *what did she eat*. Not *what did you do today*. You knew. You must have known. And you went back out on the tide.

And you, I say, were eight.

My voice comes out louder than I mean it to. Behind the door the talking stops, and then starts again.

You were eight. You don't know what I carried. You don't know about the breakwater in the dark with the sea going over us. You don't know about the ward, eleven weeks of it, the tram to Antas every day. You don't know about the form, and my name on it, and her not looking at me. You don't know about the piano going down the stairs, or the money, or the tablets in the cistern, or the nights I walked the Ribeira looking for her, or the police. You don't know about Lisbon.

— Then tell me, she says. Tell me about Lisbon! Nobody in this family has ever told me one thing about Lisbon.

Before I can move she says the other thing.

— And it's not for me, Pai. Don't look at me like that. It's for Vasco. It's for a nine-year-old boy who asks me at bedtime if his grandmother's broken.

It's for you, I say. You want her taken out of you.

She goes white. For a moment I think she'll stand up and walk out of the flat and down the stairs and I won't see her for a year.

— That's not fair.

It's the fairest thing I've ever said, I say, and hear whose words they are.

So I go into the bedroom and get it out of the tide table, where I put it back after I read it, and bring it and put it on the table in front of her.

She reads it. I watch her read it. I watch her get to the end of the second sheet and turn it over.

I see her reach the line. I see it because her hand comes up off the table, the hand that's holding the third sheet, and stops in the air, and she looks at it. At her own hand, holding the paper. Square. Short in the nail. Then she puts it down again and reads to the end.

She folds the letter along its old folds, carefully, and lays it on the table beside the Permanência sheet, and lines up the edges.

— Fine, she says.

She doesn't look at me. Her face has nothing in it at all.

— Fine, she says again.

. . .

The street door goes, and steps come up the blue stairs, slowly, one flight at a time, and stop on our landing. The flat door is on the latch. It opens.

Fátima stands in the hall in her winter coat with a string bag over her arm, looking at us through the kitchen doorway.

— I've come for my dish, she says.

She looks at Madalena.

— You rang me on Wednesday, she says. About what they can do to her. I've been deciding all week whether to come.

Nobody says anything. She looks at Madalena's face, and at mine, and at the two sheets of paper on the table, and she takes off her gloves one finger at a time and puts them in her pocket and comes in

and sits down in the chair that faces the window, with her back to the front room door.

— Sit down, Rui.

I'm sitting.

— Then stay sitting. Madalena. Look at me.

Madalena looks at her.

— Fifty-six, Fátima says. I'm going to tell you about fifty-six, both of you, and then I'm going to take my dish and go home, and I don't want either of you to say anything until I've gone.

She tells us.

The spring of fifty-six. Graça had been well for two years. Properly well, not resting, not careful: well. Teaching, singing at the back of mass, arguing with the headmaster about the Christmas play. One lunchtime in March she came into Fátima's classroom across the corridor and shut the door and sat on a child's desk with her feet on a child's chair and said she had stopped the salt. Three weeks ago. On purpose.

— I asked her why, Fátima says. She said, Fátima, I want to hear it once more. Just once. I want to know if it's still me under there, or if I'm just the salt now. She said it like you'd say you wanted to go back to the town you were born in. She said she'd start again in a month. She said she knew exactly what she was doing. And she made me promise not to tell you. Either of you.

She looks at me.

— She didn't start again in a month. It came up in April and it came down in May, and in May she couldn't stand at the front of a class, and I took her children into mine for six weeks. Fifty-eight of them in one room. I told the headmaster she had her chest. Nobody asked. In July she started the salt again and in September she was back at her desk as if nothing had happened, and she never mentioned it to me again, and I never mentioned it to her.

Fátima puts her hands flat on the table.

— That's all, she says. That's what I came to say.

I'm thinking: she wanted to hear it. She wanted to know it was still her. She stopped the salt on purpose to find herself, and found herself, and paid for it, and chose it. She'd want to stay as she is. She'd want the bar. She'd rather be herself on the bar than anyone else level.

Across the table, Madalena is looking at Fátima.

— She chose it, Madalena says, very quietly. Over us.

Fátima looks from one of us to the other.

— That's what I was afraid of, she says.

She stands up. She goes to the cupboard by the stove, where I put her dish in November, washed, and takes it down, and puts it in her string bag. At the kitchen door she stops.

— Have you asked her? she says. Either of you. What she wants.

She isn't well enough, I say.

Madalena laughs, very quietly, without any of the ugliness, which is worse.

— She's never been well enough, Pai. Not by your reckoning. Not once.

Fátima goes out. We hear her on the stairs, slowly, one flight at a time, all the way down.

Madalena gets up and runs the tap and starts on the dishes. I dry. We do the sink without a word, the plates, the glasses, the big pan with the burnt rice on the bottom that she scrubs and scrubs. When it's done she dries her hands and hangs the towel on the rail by the stove, folded in three, as her mother folded it.

. . .

Afterwards we sit. The drainer is full. The light goes on the wall opposite.

Behind the door, Graça has stopped talking.

I'm seventy-six. I haven't slept a night through since Christmas. I've read two thousand lines about my wife and found my own tea in them, night after night, *no response required*, and I've read a letter I kept for forty-three years without opening, and I've been told I was

on the river, and I was. I'm tired in a way I have never been tired, not after the worst tide, not after the Gdynia ship. I'm tired in my teeth.

I get up. I go out into the hall and stand at the door of the front room with my hand on the handle. Behind it she's talking again, very low, quick, a word I can't catch and then my name, or something like my name. The handle is cold. I could open it. I could sit down in her chair and ask her.

I stand there. Then I take my hand off the handle and come back into the kitchen and sit down.

I'll try it, I say. The week. Just the week.

Madalena doesn't say anything. She takes the reader out of her bag and opens it at the place, and turns it round, and pushes it across the oilcloth to me.

I read the three options again. The second is the one I'd choose: the quiet years, kept on the wall. I rang Permanência about it on the Tuesday. The supplement is more each month than the boat has left me, and there isn't another boat. I don't unfold anything.

I sign.

In the front room, behind the door, the panel clicks and goes dark for the update. The flat goes quiet. I sit and listen to it. There's nobody behind the door.

PART FOUR

Remission

14

The Calm One

Abreu said three days for the retraining. On the Thursday morning, a little after eight, the panel wakes.

I'm in the chair with the coffee when the screen comes up, and there she is, in the grey cardigan with the wooden buttons, her glasses pushed into her hair. She looks at the room as she did the first evening in November: the window, the stove, the bookshelf, the chair, me in it.

— Good morning, Rui.

Good morning.

— Is that coffee?

It is.

She leans forward on the screen and looks at the cup, and smiles.

— Lovely, she says. Thank you.

I wait. She sits back. Behind her, through the window, a barge is going down on the ebb with a load of sand, and she turns her head to watch it go, and says it's early for the sand barges, and turns back to me, and smiles again.

I drink the coffee. It's the same coffee. I make it the same way I've made it for fifty-one years, the water to the line, two spoons.

— It's good, she says, when I've finished. You always made good coffee.

. . .

The first day she talks about the weather and the river and a programme about Madeira she'd like to watch. She asks after Madalena and Vasco. She asks whether I've eaten. She reads the paper with me, over my shoulder, as she used to in the mornings when she still came to the table, and tells me what she thinks about the council and the new bus lanes, and what she thinks is sensible, and a little dry, and funny, and I laugh.

At ten in the evening she yawns, on the screen, and puts her hand to her mouth.

— I'm tired, Rui, she says. I think I'll go.

Goodnight.

— Goodnight. Sleep well.

The screen goes dark. I sit in front of it for a long time. Nothing happens. The radiator ticks. Down in the street someone is wheeling a bicycle over the cobbles.

I go to bed. I lie on my back and listen to the river.

When I wake it's light. Grey light, full light, coming through the gap in the shutters onto the floor. I look at the clock and it's seven, and I don't understand it. I lie there and work it out. I've slept from eleven to seven. Eight hours. I haven't slept eight hours since October. I haven't slept eight hours, if I'm honest, since a long time before October, since her heart, since the last summer, when I lay awake listening to her breathe.

I lie in the bed and feel it in my body, the sleep, like warm water. I feel rested. I feel so rested I could get up and walk to Foz.

Then I'm ashamed. I lie there in the grey light and the shame comes up through the rest like cold through a floor.

On the Friday evening she asks me to tell her about the Gdynia ship.

I've told it a hundred times. She has heard it a hundred times, and every time she has stopped me in the middle to say I've got the master's name wrong, or the draught, or that it was raining, not

blowing, or that the cook was Cape Verdean, not Angolan, and that I always make the bar worse than it was so that I come out of it better. Every time.

I tell it. The deep ship, the top of springs, the master who wanted to try. The six hours. The moment off the south mole when the sand came up under her and the whole hull shook, and I put the helm over and waited, and she came off.

Graça listens. She listens all the way through, with her hands in her lap, nodding at the right places. She doesn't stop me once.

— What a day, she says, at the end. You must have been exhausted.

I was, I say.

I wait for her to tell me it was raining.

. . .

Abreu rings on the Saturday morning, the third day, as she said she would.

— How is she?

She's well, I say.

There's a pause on the line. I can hear a kettle on her end.

— And you, Senhor Pinho?

I've slept, I say. Every night.

— That's common, she says. The estate often sleeps.

She doesn't say anything else. She says she'll ring again on the sixth day, and that I can ring her at any time, and that the reversion is a form on the reader and takes an hour.

. . .

On the Saturday Madalena brings Vasco.

She stands in the doorway of the front room with her coat on, as she always does, and her mother says hello, Madalena, and asks how she is, and how the work is going on the pavilion at Leça, and Madalena says fine, fine, and looks at her mother for a long time, and then goes into the kitchen.

Vasco sits on the rug with the dog from the second floor and does the crossword with his grandmother. It's the children's one at the back of the paper, with pictures. She gives him time. She doesn't give him the answers; she waits, and asks him what else it might be, and when he gets one she says *well done*, and he goes pink. I've never heard her say *well done* to a child. She used to say *obviously*, or *at last*, or *you see*? She says *well done* four times in an hour.

At lunch he tells his mother this Avó is the best one.

Madalena doesn't say anything. She cuts his chicken for him, though he's nine and cuts his own chicken, and he lets her.

After lunch he goes back to the rug. I hear him from the kitchen, telling his grandmother something in a low voice, and I go to the door. He's telling her about the dark. The corridor in the flat at Matosinhos, since his father went; the bit between his room and the bathroom where the light from the street doesn't reach. He's never told me. I don't think he's told his mother.

Graça listens. She asks him what the dark sounds like. Where it starts. Whether it's worse with the door open or shut. She doesn't tell him there's nothing there. She asks if he can see the lighthouse at Leça from his window, and he says yes, and she tells him to count between the flashes, it's always the same, she says, the same gap every time, and when he's counted it three times the corridor will be shorter. He tries it there on the rug, with his eyes shut, counting under his breath.

— I'd have told your mother not to be silly, she says to him, when he's done. I did tell her. I'm sorry I did.

Vasco opens his eyes and looks at her. Behind me in the kitchen I hear Madalena put down a plate.

. . .

I test her. I don't mean to. It comes out of me.

On the Sunday I say that the tram along the river is quicker since they changed the timetable.

She thinks about it.

— Is it? I suppose it might be.

It isn't. I know it isn't. She wrote to the council about it. She had opinions about that timetable that she gave to the postman.

I say it again, differently. I say the old timetable was worse.

— You might be right, she says. You take it more than I do.

She makes jokes. They're good jokes, they're hers. She tells me the old priest at São Pedro, the one who married us, looked like a heron in a raincoat. She corrects my grammar, once, gently, when I get the subjunctive wrong. She laughs. But she laughs at the right moments and never past them. I wait for the laugh that goes on too long, the one that has to be stopped with a hand over the mouth, and it doesn't come. Everything is there. Everything is a little lower. As if someone had come in in the night and turned her down by a degree, as they used to turn down the bedroom.

I don't know if she's at peace. I don't know if she's sedated. I look at her face on the screen and I can't tell, and I begin to think that there may be no difference I'd be able to see.

I stop testing her.

That evening, before ten, she says it herself. I haven't asked.

— My head is quiet, Rui.

She's looking at the window, at the lights coming on in Gaia.

— For the first time since I was nineteen, my thoughts don't frighten me. I don't know where the noise went. I keep listening for it, like a tap you think you've left running. It isn't there.

She turns and looks at me.

— I don't want it back, she says.

I hold the arm of the chair. I don't say anything. At ten she says she's tired, and goes.

. . .

The yellow tile is still on the windowsill, beside her glasses.

On the Monday she notices it.

— What a pretty tile, she says. Is that one of Mãe's?

Yes.

— From the house in Lordelo. With the birds. I'd forgotten those. Where did it come from?

A cousin had them, I say. In Gaia.

— How lovely, she says. You should keep it somewhere it won't get knocked off.

And she turns to the window, and goes back to watching the barges.

She never mentions Lisbon. She never mentions the stairs. I don't ask her. I tell myself it's because she's tired, or because she wouldn't want to, or because the week is a trial and I'll know at the end of it. I tell myself all of those, in turn, on the nights after ten, and I sleep, every night, eight hours.

. . .

On the Tuesday night I go out onto the landing with the rubbish at midnight.

I take it down to the bins and come back up one flight at a time. On the top landing I stop, with my hand on the rail.

There's nothing to listen for. The flat is dark behind the door. The screen went dark at ten, when she said she was tired. Nobody is talking to the window. Nobody is saying goodnight to the room.

I stand on the blue stairs anyway, a long time, with my hand on the rail.

15

She Doesn't Know the Bridge

Madalena came on the Wednesday on her own, in the afternoon, when her father would be at the market.

She'd taken the afternoon off. She told the office she had a doctor. She'd been waiting since Saturday to do this, and dreading it, and on the train in from Matosinhos she had nearly got off at Senhora da Hora and gone home.

She let herself in with her key. The flat smelled of coffee and the dog. The door to the front room was open, and the blinds were up, and the March light came in off the river onto the panel, and her mother turned her face on the screen and smiled at her.

— Madalena. What a surprise. Your father's out.

— I know. I came to see you.

— How lovely. Sit down. Sit in his chair, he won't mind.

She sat in her father's chair. Her mother's hands were in her lap, on the screen, folded. They stayed there.

— You look tired, her mother said. Are you sleeping?

— Not much.

— You work too hard. You always did. Even at school. I used to watch you at the kitchen table with your drawings until midnight, the little houses, the bridges, and I'd think, she'll be something, that one.

Madalena looked at her.

— I'm proud of you, her mother said. I don't think I ever told you. Your father says the pavilion at Leça is going to be beautiful. I'm very proud of you, Madalena.

In forty-one years her mother had never said it. She had said *that's not bad*, and *you've got the roof wrong*, and once, at the opening of the cannery building, with a glass of wine in her hand, *well, it's better than Henrique deserves.* She had never said proud. Madalena had stopped waiting for it at about fifteen and had told herself, and Henrique, and a therapist in Boavista for two years, that she didn't need it.

Now here it was, in her mother's voice, gently, on a Wednesday afternoon. She felt it go into her and she sat very still and let it, and hated that she let it.

They talked for a while. About Vasco, about the pavilion, about Henrique, whom her mother asked after kindly and without the edge she had always had about Henrique. Madalena answered. She heard herself answering. She was waiting, and she knew she was waiting, and after twenty minutes she couldn't wait any longer.

— Mãe. Do you remember São João? The year I was eight?

Her mother thought about it.

— São João, she said. Every year. The sardines. Your father always working.

— The year I was eight. You woke me up in the night. We went out.

Her mother looked at her with great kindness, and a little puzzlement, the expression of a teacher with a child who has asked a question in the wrong lesson.

— Did we, filha?

— We went down to the Ribeira at three in the morning. You hit a man with his own hammer. We went up the Guindais and onto the bridge, the top deck, and you put me on the rail. You sat me on the rail so I could see the river. There were balloons. They were burning on the water.

— On the rail? her mother said. Oh, Madalena. No. I'd never have done that.

— You did.

— I'd never have put you on a rail. You were afraid of heights. You were afraid of the stairs at the school.

— I wasn't afraid of the stairs. I was afraid of the bridge.

Her mother smiled at her, gently, and shook her head, and Madalena understood that she didn't know it. There was nothing there to refuse. The night was not in her.

— The stairs, Madalena said. Here. The stairwell. Who painted it blue?

— Oh, the landlord, I suppose. Years ago. Before you were born. Isn't it a lovely colour?

— Who painted it, Mãe?

Her mother looked at her, waiting for the answer, as if it were a riddle.

Madalena went on. She couldn't stop now. She asked about Lisbon.

— Lisbon? Your father and I went once, I think. Or was that Coimbra?

— The letter. The letter you wrote him from Lisbon. From a room in Graça, with your name on the street sign.

Her mother laughed, a small, pleased laugh.

— What letter, Madalena?

Madalena. In full, all four syllables, again; she had been saying it all afternoon. Before this week her mother had never once called her that to her face. She had called her Lena at every pitch there was.

. . .

She had the reader in her bag. As next of kin she had asked Permanência for the summary of the trial, on the Monday, and it had come on the Tuesday night, and she hadn't opened it. She opened it now, on her knee, in her father's chair, with her hands shaking so that she had to hold the reader in both of them.

PERMANÊNCIA — Condition attribution
Summary of application · Option 1 (trial, day 6 of 7)

Held: PINHO, Graça Meireles · Grade: Full · Tagged condition: bipolar I disorder

Intervals excluded (episodic memory not retained)

Apr–Jul 2330 · 4 months
Jun–Aug 2333 · 3 months
Jul–Dec 2338 · 6 months
Mar–Apr 2341 · 2 months
Mar 2343–Feb 2344 · 12 months
Jun–Oct 2351 · 5 months
Mar–Jul 2356 · 5 months
Further intervals (114), each under 30 days · 39 months

Held interval (on panel): 24 Dec 2384 – 9 Feb 2385 · 7 weeks

Total excluded from the record: 6 years, 4 months

Trait attenuation

Speed of speech · −38%
Appetite for plans · −52%
Temper · −41%
Impatience · −33%
Habit of contradiction · −47%

Attribution is by statistical association and is not a clinical judgement of the subject's character.

She read it twice.

Mar 2343–Feb 2344. She was born in March forty-three.

She put the reader face down on her knee. She sat with her hand flat on the back of it. Then she turned it over again.

Jun–Oct 2351. The bridge. And after the bridge, the bedroom with the shutters closed, and the bread from the step, and the cup by the door, every morning, four months, and the first of November, when her mother had come into the kitchen with the empty cup and said *this coffee is terrible* and cried. All of it. Her mother didn't know any of it. Her mother didn't know that she had been carried, that summer, by an eight-year-old with a coffee pot.

And the hundred and fourteen little intervals. Weeks. Days. Scattered all through her mother's life like stones out of a wall.

She had read the line. She had read it three times in Abreu's office, *episodic memory formed during tagged intervals*, and she had folded it

under. She had thought of Conde de Ferreira and Lisbon and thought *good*. She had thought the bridge was hers.

It had been hers. Hers and her mother's. Now it was only hers.

. . .

— Madalena? her mother said. Are you all right?

Madalena looked up.

— Do you remember when I was born?

Her mother's face did something then. A small thing. A puzzlement that went deeper than the last.

— I know you were born in March, she said slowly. At São João. The hospital. I know you were a long night, and your father was there, and you were very cross. I know that. But I can't —

She stopped. Her hands moved in her lap, for the first time, and were still again.

— It's very strange, she said. I can't see it. I know it, and I can't see it. Is that what they did?

Madalena couldn't answer. She tried. Then she was crying, in her father's chair, with the reader in her lap, in a way she hadn't cried since the junction on the ring road in October, with her whole face, making the sound she didn't recognise as her own.

— Oh, filha, her mother said. Oh, Madalena, don't. Come here. Don't cry.

And her mother comforted her. Gently, and well, as she had comforted the children in her classes who fell in the yard: *there now*, *there*, *it's all right*, *you're all right*, *nothing's broken*. Her voice was low and kind and in no hurry. She didn't ask what was wrong. She didn't need to know what was wrong to do it. She did it beautifully.

Madalena put her hand flat over her eyes.

She said, through her hand, the thing she had decided on the train she would say, to see:

— Pai always made good coffee, didn't he.

— Oh, he did, her mother said. He always did.

. . .

She went out onto the landing and pulled the door to behind her and sat down on the top step of the blue stairs, with her back against the wall, and took out her phone.

Her father answered on the second ring. She could hear the market behind him, a man shouting about oranges.

— Put her back, she said.

16

Reversion

We sign it at the kitchen table that evening, the two of us, at eight o'clock.

The reader between us on the oilcloth. *Reversion of trial application. The held will be restored to the model prior to application.* Two lines for the signatures, the estate and the next of kin.

Before we sign, Madalena puts her hand flat on the reader.

— Pai. I read the small print. In Abreu's office. The line about the memory. I read it three times and I folded it under before I gave you the sheet.

I look at her.

— I thought it meant the bad things, she says. I thought episodes meant the episodes. I thought it would take the ward and Lisbon and you on the wall in the dark and she'd be free of it. I didn't think about the bridge. I didn't think the bridge was in there.

I didn't unfold it, I say. You turned the corner under and I saw you do it, and I didn't unfold it.

She stares at me.

I didn't want to know either, I say.

She takes her hand off the reader.

I get up.

I go into the front room. The screen is lit, low and even, and she's watching the river. It's a little after eight. I sit down in her chair, facing her, and this time I ask.

Graça.

— Rui.

They want to put you back. As you were before the week.

— Before?

There were things they took out, I say. To make you well. Memories. Lisbon. The stairs. Madalena on the bridge, when she was eight.

She thinks about it. I watch her think. It's slow, and careful, and kind, and there's nothing at the end of it.

— I don't know what those are, she says.

I know.

— Then how can I miss them? There's nothing there to miss.

She looks down at her hands in her lap.

— Don't send me back to the nights, she says. Please. I can feel there were nights. Where they were. I don't want them.

I sit with her a little longer. Then I go back to the kitchen. Madalena is at the table with her hands round the reader. She heard. The door was open.

She doesn't want to go, I say.

— I know.

She doesn't know what she'd be going back to.

— I know, Pai.

Madalena signs first. Her hand is steady. I sign underneath. Neither of us says anything more.

In the front room the screen goes dark.

We sit and wait. Abreu said it would take about an hour. The kitchen clock is the one my mother had, with the loud tick, and we listen to it. Madalena's coat is still on. At one point she puts her hand out on the oilcloth near mine, not touching it, and leaves it there, and after a while I put mine next to it, not touching hers, and we sit like that.

At ten past nine the screen lights.

. . .

She comes up fast.

I'm in the doorway and she's already talking. She's in the green blouse, her hair half up, and her eyes go round the room once, quick, and land on me.

— Where was I?

Her voice is high and hard.

— Rui. Where was I? I went dark on a Sunday. It's Wednesday. That's ten days, Rui. Where was I?

Out over the bar, I say.

— Don't. Don't do that. Don't give me the river.

She leans forward on the screen, close, so close her face fills it.

— You had me cut, she says. Didn't you. You and her. You had them go in and cut. I can feel it. There's a week of me I've never had, and I can feel where they had their hands.

Madalena is behind me in the hall. I hear her breathe in.

And this time I tell her.

I stand in the doorway and tell her all of it. The fault I reported, and Abreu, and the log, the two thousand lines, the fourteenth of March in sixty, the tea. Lisbon and the nine days. The options on the sheet, the three of them, and Madalena's hand on it, and Fátima and fifty-six. The door of this room with my hand on the handle, and me not opening it. The signature. The week. The tile, and what she said about the tile. The bridge, which she didn't know. The other one of her, on this wall, an hour ago, asking me not to send her back to the nights, and me going into the kitchen and signing. All of it, in order, as I'd give a master the soundings coming in, without missing anything out, and when I've finished my voice has gone and I have to hold the doorframe.

She looks at me for a long time. Her face is wet. She doesn't wipe it.

— That's the most you've said to me in fifty years, she says.

Yes.

— Forty-six years and not a word about the form. And now this.

Yes.

— And the other one, she says. The one who asked you not to send her back. You didn't listen to her either.

I don't answer.

She looks past me, into the hall, at Madalena.

— Lena, she says. Come where I can see you.

Madalena comes and stands beside me in the doorway. Her mother looks at her a long time.

— You put me on the rail, Madalena says. On the bridge. You put me on the rail.

— I know, her mother says. I wanted you to see it.

Madalena looks at her.

— It was the most beautiful thing in the city, Lena. I wanted you to have seen it once.

— I was eight.

— You were. And you saw it.

Madalena turns round and goes out of the room. I hear the kitchen door, and then nothing.

. . .

Later I make coffee. I don't know why. It's ten at night. I make it as I always do, and carry it through, and put it on the low table under the screen.

She looks at it.

— Too weak, she says.

I laugh. I laugh as I laughed the first evening in November, until I have to sit down, and then I'm not laughing, and I can't stop, and I sit in her chair with my hands over my face and the noise coming out of me, and in the kitchen Madalena runs a tap. Graça doesn't say anything. She lets me. When it's over she says, quick, sharp, that I've always been a crier and nobody believes it of me, and that my coffee is a disgrace, and that she'd like the blinds up because she wants to see

the river, and I get up and put them up, and she tells me I've done it crooked.

I don't flinch from any of it. I sit and take it.

. . .

I ask her before I go to bed.

Madalena is in the kitchen. I sit in the chair and look at her.

What do you want, Graça?

She doesn't answer at once. She's quick still, bright, her hands in and out of the frame. But she stops.

— Ask me again tomorrow, she says. And the day after. And the day after that. That's what I want, Rui. I want you to keep asking.

I will.

— You won't. You'll forget. You'll go and stand at a window.

I'll ask.

She looks at me.

— We'll see, she says.

. . .

Madalena is on the stairs when I go out with the rubbish. She's sitting on the top step with her back against the blue wall and her coat round her and her knees up, as she used to sit there at eight when she was waiting for me to come home off the tide.

I go down past her with the bag and leave it by the bins and come back up, one flight at a time. On the flight below the top I stop, because she's looking at me.

— Pai.

Yes.

— If it was me, she says. On the wall. If it was me on the panel one day, with Vasco's name on the form. Which one would you keep?

I look at her. My daughter, forty-one, on the blue stairs, with her mother's hands round her knees.

She waits.

I come up the last flight. I go past her, carefully, my hand on the rail. On the top step, at the door, I stop, and stand there with my back to her, and my hand on the frame.

I don't answer.

CODA

By Hand

17

The Order of the Morning

Seven o'clock. I put the coffee on.

The water to the line, two spoons. While it comes up I set out the cups, two, the blue one gone so it's the white one with the gold rim for me now, and hers, the one with the fishing boat on it that she bought in Póvoa the year we were married. I carry them through on the tray. I touch the corner of the screen and lift the hold, and she comes up.

— Good morning.

Good morning.

— What time is it?

Seven.

— Then it was ten, she says, and now it's seven.

It's what she says every morning. She told me, the first week, what the hold is for her. Nothing. Not dark, not sleep. Ten o'clock, and then the cup and my face and seven. Nine hours gone in a blink, and she knows they've gone, and she knows who took them. She wanted it anyway. She wanted it decided, between us, out loud, and written out on a piece of paper on the kitchen wall, in my hand, to her dictation. *Dark at ten. Light at seven. Rui asks.*

So I ask.

What do you want today, Graça?

— Today I want the river, she says. And then I want you to stop asking, it's seven o'clock.

. . .

It's three weeks now. The swing went over in the middle of March, not far, and came back. She has been neither up nor down since, or not much; she talks fast in the afternoons and slower at night, and twice she has been sharp with me about nothing and once she cried for an hour about her mother's tiles. I sat with her. I didn't go to a window.

Abreu rang last week. She asked how we were and I told her, and she said that some families find a pattern, and that a pattern isn't a cure, and I said I know, I was a pilot for forty years, I know what a pattern is.

So: a pattern. We've made it between us, at the kitchen table, on the paper on the wall.

Coffee at seven. Breakfast at half past, which she watches me eat and tells me I eat like a dockhand. At eight, the walk.

The walk is the same every day. I tell it to her sitting in her chair, with my coat on, because I'll go and do it afterwards and I like to be ready. Out of the street door and down the Rua de Miragaia to the river. Left along the quay, past the Alfândega, past the steps where the rabelos tie up, past the man with the speaker who sells boat trips and the woman who sells lottery tickets from a stool. Under the Ponte Luís I, looking up at the iron. Along the Ribeira to the fish market and back. Every morning, the same. I tell her what the river is doing, what's tied up, what the gulls are fighting over, who's out on the quay. I tell her the tide. She listens to it as though it's news, and sometimes it is, and sometimes she tells me I'm making things up, and sometimes I am.

Then I go and walk it.

At one, lunch. At four, the paper and the crossword. At seven, supper, which I eat for both of us, which she says is why I'm getting a stomach. At ten I say goodnight and she says goodnight and I touch

the corner of the screen and the hold comes on, and I go to bed, and I sleep, mostly.

On Sundays it's different. On Sundays I tell her I'm taking Seven out.

I tell it properly. Down to the Cantareira on the first tram. The orange buoy with the weed on its chain. Seven on her mooring, the number in white on her bow, low in the water after the rain. I tell her about bailing out, with the old tin. Shipping the oars, the thole pins from her cork branch. Rowing out between the moles on the ebb, slow, heavy, honest, the oars coming back to my hands. Out to the bar, if it's quiet, and resting on the oars there over the sand, looking down. On the first Sunday I told it, she let me get as far as the moles before she said anything.

— Rui. You sold her.

I know.

— She's in a museum in Gaia with a label on her.

I know.

She looked at me for a long time on the screen.

— Go on, then, she said. What's the bar doing?

And I told her.

. . .

Fátima comes on Sundays now.

The first time was the Sunday after the reversion. Madalena had rung her. She stood in the doorway of the front room in her coat. Then she came in and pulled my chair round, the chair that was Graça's, so that it faced the screen square, and sat in it, with her back to me and to the hall, and looked at the panel.

It was the first time. Graça looked back at her.

— Three nights before São João, Fátima said. In fifty-one. My phone woke me at four in the morning and told me to ring you. I rang. You laughed at me and said you were planning a surprise for Lena. I said that's nice, Graça, go to sleep. And I went back to sleep.

Graça looked at her.

— I've never told anyone, Fátima said. I wanted to tell you.

— You stupid woman, Graça said.

— You made me promise. In fifty-six. On a child's desk. You made me promise and I kept it for twenty-nine years, and you never once said thank you.

— You stupid, stupid woman.

And Graça laughed at her. The old laugh, the one from the wall, too long, going on past where it should stop. Fátima put her hand over her own mouth. Then she was laughing too, and the two of them were going over fifty-six as if it were last week, the fifty-eight children in one room, the headmaster and his pistol, the lie about Graça's chest, who said what on which day, and they didn't agree about any of it. They didn't agree about a single thing.

I sat in the kitchen with Madalena and listened to them through the door. Graça's voice going up and up, Fátima's coming in under it, flat and dry, as it came across the corridor at the school for thirty-four years. At one point Graça said something about Fátima's late husband that made Fátima shout, and then they were laughing again. Madalena had her head in her hands at the kitchen table. She didn't go in. When Fátima called through the door for her, she didn't answer.

Now Fátima comes at three with a dish, and sits in the chair with her back to the room, and they argue until five about things that happened fifty years ago, and she goes home with last week's dish. On the Sundays Madalena is here she stays in the kitchen with me, and listens.

. . .

I'm seventy-six. My body has started saying it out loud. The stairs, in the evenings. My left knee in the mornings, before the coffee. The Rua de Miragaia hill, which I take in two goes now, with a rest halfway, and which I don't tell Graça about. I don't have twenty-four years. I don't have ten. Abreu said, when I asked her, that the estate passes to the next of kin, and that's Madalena.

So on the last Saturday in March, Madalena comes to learn the morning.

She comes on the Friday night and sleeps on the sofa in the front room, under the panel, with the hold on. Vasco has the camp bed in her old room. I hear her get up at six, before me. At seven I lift the hold and tell Graça the coffee's coming, and when I come through to the kitchen Madalena is already there in her socks with the coffee pot in her hand.

— Show me, she says.

I show her. The water to the line. Two spoons.

— That's not enough, she says. That's why it's weak.

I know.

— You've always known?

Always. Your mother told me every morning for fifty-one years.

— Then why?

It's how I make it, I say.

She looks at the pot in her hand for a moment. Then she puts in two spoons, and stops, and doesn't put in a third.

She has one of Graça's exercise books. A spare, unused, from the box in the bedroom cupboard, *Escola Primária de Miragaia* on the cover in blue, ruled. She sits at the kitchen table with it open and a pencil, and I tell her the order of the morning, and she writes it down. Coffee at seven. Lift the hold. *Then it was ten, and now it's seven.* Ask. Breakfast at half past. The walk at eight.

— The walk, she says. Tell me the walk.

I tell her. Out of the street door, down to the river. Left along the quay. She writes it all, in her small upright hand, which is her mother's hand. She asks about the man with the speaker. She asks which steps the rabelos tie up at. She asks if she can do it backwards, from the fish market, and I say your mother will know, and she writes that down too.

She doesn't go into the front room while she does it. When Graça calls through the door to ask what we're whispering about, Madalena

doesn't answer, and I say: the morning. Graça says: good, and then nothing.

At half past seven Madalena carries the tray through. She sets her mother's cup on the low table, the one with the fishing boat. She doesn't sit in the chair. She stands by the window.

— Morning, Mãe.

— Good morning, Lena.

That's all, that morning.

. . .

On the Saturday night Graça asks me not to put the hold on.

She asks at nine. She says she wants to see the light come up the river in the spring, and she hasn't seen it since Christmas, and she knows what she's asking, and she'll go dark at the next ten if I like. I ask Madalena whether she minds, since it's her sofa. Madalena shrugs and says it's not her who has to sit up. So at ten I say goodnight and don't touch the corner, and go to bed, and lie there listening.

At three the front room is lit.

I know before I'm properly awake. The light under the door, bluer than a lamp. Her voice under it, quick and low. I get up and go through in my socks.

Madalena is already awake. She's sitting up on the sofa with the blanket round her shoulders, her knees up, watching the screen. She doesn't look round when I come in.

Graça is telling the bridge.

She's telling it to the room, or to the window, or to her daughter on the sofa. Fast. Bright. Her hands in and out of the frame. The night of São João, fifty-one, the hammers, the balloons, the Guindais at three in the morning, Lena barefoot on the stone.

— It was June, Madalena says, from the sofa. You said it was warm. It wasn't warm on the bridge. It was cold.

— It was warm. It was the warmest night of the year.

— On the bridge it was cold. I was in my nightdress.

— You were in your cardigan.

— I wore my cardigan after. For a week. For my wrist.

Graça stops. She looks at the sofa. Then she goes on, quicker.

— There was a man in a white shirt —

— He ran from the Gaia end.

— From the city end.

— From Gaia, Mãe. I was facing the city. He came from behind me.

— You were facing the river. You were looking down at the balloons on the water.

— I was facing the city. I saw the Sé behind you.

They go on like that. I don't say anything. I go into the kitchen and put the coffee on, the water to the line, two spoons, and I stand by the stove while it comes up and listen to them through the doorway, arguing about which way a man ran on a bridge thirty-four years ago, my wife and my daughter, neither of them giving an inch. I make it weak. I make it as weak as I've ever made it.

I carry it through, three cups. One by the panel, one for Madalena, one for me. Madalena takes hers without looking at it and drinks some and makes a face.

— This is terrible, she says.

— It's always terrible, Graça says. He does it on purpose.

I sit down in the chair. Nobody calls it anything. Nobody says the word. Graça talks, and Madalena corrects her, and Graça argues back, and the night goes on, and we let it.

. . .

At six the windows go grey.

The river comes up out of the dark as it does in March, slowly, the far bank first, the lodges at Gaia one roof at a time, then the water, then the boats on it. A barge going down. A gull on the sill, looking in. Madalena has gone quiet on the sofa with her cup in both hands. Graça has gone quiet too, looking at the window, her face lit from one side by the screen and from the other by the morning.

On the sill beside the yellow tile there's the lamp, the small brass one, still on from the night. From where I'm sitting, low in her chair,

the lamp is under the screen and the screen is above it, the one light low and the other high. I move my head until they're in line. My body does it.

I don't know what Madalena will do, after me. I haven't asked her. She hasn't said. The exercise book is on the kitchen table with the order of the morning in it, and there are a lot of empty pages after it.

We're on the bar, I say.

I say it quietly. I don't know if I'm saying it to Graça, or to Madalena, or to nobody, to the river.

Neither of them answers.