

A H U N G R Y G O D S N O V E L L A

THE HUNGRY GODS GO TO IKEA

N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE

O N E

THE PARKING LOT

THE ALLFATHER

In every age but this one they knew what to call me. Provider. Father of the feast. The hand that fills the bowl and the voice that says there is enough. I have fed cities under siege and weaned empires and sat at the head of ten thousand tables while the good of the house went down toward the children — the mortals' children, mind. I am father to the ones who eat, and to no one else. Remember that, before you meet the others and go looking for who is in charge. No one is in charge. We are simply seven, and I am the one who cares whether there are chairs.

Belief has thinned, and thinned belief buys smaller rooms. We who were once each given a mountain, with a river for a doorstep and the smoke of altars for a hearth, now share the one narrow house at the quiet end of a cul-de-sac, with a shared drive and a boiler that groans in the night like a penitent — and a dwelling is not a home until it is furnished. There is precisely one establishment on this earth that will furnish a home entire, fork to wardrobe, in a single afternoon, for a sum a reduced god can bear. None of the others would see to it. They never do. So I saw to it, the way I have always seen to the table; I herded the other six out the door ahead of me, and I said the words

no one else would say: we are going to the store, all of us, today, and we are going to enjoy it.

They came the way the reluctant come. The one who sees everything sulked that he already knew how it would end. The Hand cracked his knuckles and called the place an insult to joinery. The Companion had befriended a parking attendant before the rest of us reached the doors, and she would befriend forty more before we left. And the one who breaks things went quiet in the particular way that means somebody, later, will be apologizing.

I took the post where a father belongs, which is at the gate where the children are given up. They keep a pen of coloured spheres here, and a low desk, and to this desk the mortal fathers bring their young and set them down and go in, for one blessed hour, unburdened. I will tell you there is no finer seat in the building. From it a man may watch every other man be briefly relieved of the thing he loves most and wander off lighter to look at lamps. I took the small hands and marked them and sent them into the spheres, and I learned not one name, because a name is a weight, and I had come that day to lift weights, not to carry them.

And then the two of them passed, and did not stop, because they had nothing to give me.

I notice everyone with nothing to give me; it is a professional interest. This pair had between them one yellow bag, one unspent pencil, and no child at all — married so lately the woman still moved as though the ring might slip off if she swung her arm — and they were not a household yet, only two people who had recently agreed to attempt one, coming up the ramp toward the whole furnished dream of it to buy, of every beginning on offer, a single bookcase — one shelf to stand a new life on. It is not my business what mortals choose to set on it.

I meant to forget them at once. I am the god of full tables, and here was a couple who could not yet fill a shelf. But the woman looked at my desk as she went by — at the spheres, the marked hands, the lightened fathers — and something crossed her face that she folded up before she could read it, and I found, to my mild annoyance, that I did not forget them. I filed them instead, under a heading I keep for later.

Households, before they know they are households, are my favourite thing to watch. They are so certain the hard part is going to be the bookcase.

The building was blue and the size of a feeling Steph didn't have a word for, and you could see it from the highway a good ten minutes before the exit, sitting out on the flat land by itself the way a church sits, except much bigger, and blue.

"There it is," Kyle said, which he had also said about a water tower half an hour ago, but this time he was right.

They had left at seven. It was the furthest either of them had driven since the wedding, and Steph had packed snacks like it was a trip, because it was a trip. Kyle had made a playlist for the drive and named it, with some ceremony, IKEA, and then skipped through half of it before they'd even reached the highway, restless the way he got; and Steph had let him — his playlist, his call — and hummed the parts he skipped, which was a thing they did now, one of the small married machines they'd built without noticing they were building it. Back home the biggest store was the farm-and-fleet off Route 9, and you could stand in the doorway and see the whole inside of it, every aisle, all the way to the back wall where they kept the boots. You could not see the inside of this one. It didn't seem to have windows, only the idea of windows, big pale rectangles painted high up on the blue, and Steph looked at them a while trying to work out if they were real and decided they probably weren't, because why would you put a window that high, and anyway there was nothing behind them but store.

The parking lot was its own kind of enormous. It went out in every direction with the cars all pointed the same way like they'd been laid down by a comb, and there were signs on tall poles telling you which part you were in, and the part they ended up in was called something, a color or a number, Steph didn't catch it because Kyle was already saying he'd remember, he'd remember it was near the shopping carts.

"There's shopping carts all over though," Steph said.

"I'll remember."

She didn't push it. Five weeks married and she'd learned that Kyle remembering something was a thing he needed to be allowed to believe about himself for a little while, and that the correcting could come later, gently, or more often not at all, because usually it turned out fine. She wrote the pole down in her head instead — a yellow number on a blue post — and then a family crossed between her and it, and when they'd passed she wasn't sure anymore whether it had been a four. First lot this big. You'd learn to look properly next time.

They got out. The wind out here had nothing to stop it and came straight across the flat and pushed them gently toward the doors, and Steph decided she liked that, being moved toward the thing you'd come for, and she took Kyle's hand and they went in.

Inside the doors was a room for getting ready. That was how Steph thought of it — a wide, bright, in-between place that wasn't the store yet but was where the store handed you the things you'd need to survive it. There were bags, big yellow ones, in a stack, and everybody coming in took one, so they took one. A little further on were the pencils: short flat pencils with no paint on them, in a bin, free, take as many as you want, and beside them little paper tape measures folded up, and slips of paper for writing on, and Kyle took a pencil and a slip and held them like he'd been handed a hymn sheet and didn't know the tune.

"What do we write," he said.

"I don't think we have to yet."

"There's a spot for a number." He turned the slip over. "Aisle. Bin."

"I don't think we've got a bin yet either." She took a pencil too, though, because it was free and because holding one made her feel like a person who knew what she was doing, and it slid down into the corner of the yellow bag and looked very small.

They went on, because there was really only the one way to go on, and that was when they came to the room made for children.

It was off to the side, glassed in, full of colored balls — red and blue and yellow, a whole shallow sea of them up to about knee height — and children were falling into it on purpose and getting up and falling in again. At the front of it was a low desk, and at the low desk was a man, big and calm, in the store's colors, and he was taking the children in.

A father had come up just ahead of Steph with a small girl by the hand and a look on his face like he was carrying something heavier than the girl. The big man leaned down and took the girl's hand and turned it over and wrote a number on the back of it, gently, the way you'd write a thing you meant to keep, and the girl went off into the sea of balls without looking back. And the father — Steph watched this part — the father straightened up like a weight had come off him, and went on in through the arrows light, both hands empty, younger in the face than he'd been ten feet before.

The man at the desk didn't watch him go. There was already another child in front of him. He took its hand and wrote the number without asking anyone their name, and that parent went in light too, and the next, and the next, and the line of them kept coming and the man kept leaning down and taking them in and none of it seemed to cost him a thing. He wasn't tired the way a person minding that many children all day would be tired. He just received them, one after another, and gave back each time the same unhurried care. Steph decided he must be wonderful with kids. You'd have to be, for a job like that.

She slowed without meaning to. The sea of balls; the children falling and getting up. You could hand your own child right across that little desk, like handing over a coat, and go on into the store lighter, and the store would keep it safe and give it back to you after — and something turned over in her, quiet, a shape she was absolutely not going to look at straight, not here, not with him standing right there.

"We don't have to think about that for a while," Kyle said, cheerful, hitching the yellow bag up his shoulder — and she let it stand, the way you let a thing stand when correcting it would start a conversation you haven't worked out how to start. He was right. For a while. The big man did not look up at them as they passed; they had nothing yet to hand him, and Steph felt that, a little — being passed over — and told herself it was silly, being passed over by a man who ran a ball pit, and they went on toward the ramp.

The ramp was a moving floor with no steps, sliding people slowly upward into the bright, and behind it, she noticed, the matching one coming down was nowhere near — it came down somewhere on the

far side of everything, at the end, wherever the end was. She got on and it took her weight and carried her up, smooth, and she grabbed the rubber rail and Kyle got on behind her, and for a second they were just two people being lifted.

She looked back to fix the doors in her head, the way she'd fixed the pole, and found she couldn't see them anymore — only the getting-ready room and the yellow bags and the backs of more people coming in, and a low grey railing steering everyone the one way, up. They've built it clever, she thought, so nobody dawdles; you couldn't have a place this size with everybody wandering back the way they came. That made good sense. She faced front.

"We just want the one thing," she said, mostly to plant it, because the top was coming and it felt like a thing to say out loud before you got there.

"The Billy," Kyle said.

"The bookcase."

"The Billy's the bookcase."

"I know it's the bookcase. I'm saying we get the bookcase and that's the trip. That's the whole trip."

"For the cards," Kyle said, behind her.

"For books," Steph said, up the ramp, not turning round. "A bookcase. For books."

At the top the floor delivered them into a great grey opening where the store proper began, and painted on the actual floor, going away from her between the first tall shelves, was an arrow. Then another past it. Then another, all the same grey, all pointing the one way, in.

"Which way's the bookcases," Kyle said, stepping off a half-second late so he stumbled and caught himself and looked around — and there wasn't a which way, Steph saw it before he did. There was the way the arrows went. There was in. She looked back down the ramp they'd come up and it was full of people rising toward her, patient, carried, and on this side there was no lane going the other way at all, nothing to walk against, only the arrows, which were very sure of themselves, and which knew where the bookcases were when she didn't, so the arrows were on her side. That was the sensible way to see it.

And still something in her, quick and clear, wanted to step over the little grey rail and walk back down against all the rising people and out to the car — not because anything was wrong. Everything was fine. Only that the arrows were so certain, and she'd just noticed she couldn't leave the way she'd come, and some animal part of her wanted to prove she still could. She didn't. You didn't. Everyone else was following them, calm, with their yellow bags, into the first room, which was pretending to be a living room and had no fourth wall, so that it opened into the next room pretending to be a living room, and the next, lives and lives of somebody's front room going back further than she could see, all of it lamp-lit and waiting and not one person living in any of it.

“Oh,” Steph said, quietly, because it was a little bit wonderful and she hadn't expected it. “Look at all the —“

And the arrows took them in.

T W O

THE LIVING ROOM

THE ALL-SEEING

I told them it was a mistake to bring me. I have seen this store. I have seen every store, every aisle of every store, every price at the end of every aisle, in this life and along all the lives it branches into, and there is nothing in it I have not already watched a mortal covet. But the one who frets over chairs had decided all seven of us were going, and it is less trouble to go than to be the last god left in an echoing house; so I came, and I stand in the rooms where the walls have been taken away, and I do the one thing left to a god who already knows the ending: I watch it happen anyway.

It is, I concede, a marvel. Not the furniture. The performance. Mortals will not let you into the smallest room of their real houses — they have curtains, they have doors, they have a particular face they keep for when you stand too near the drawer where they keep the truth. And then they come here and build that drawer in the open, on a platform, under a light, and walk a hundred unwallled bedrooms belonging to no one, and lie down on the beds, performing in the aisle the exact private life they would die before letting a neighbour glimpse. Every soul in the building is playing to a room it imagines is watching. It is the one thing they all have in common, and it is why,

as a rule, I find them restful and dull: I am the room they imagine, and I have long since seen the show.

And then the small one did the thing that is not in the show.

She picked up a stranger's reading glasses — left on a stack of books in a room pretending to belong to someone — and checked whether they were fixed down, and finding they were not, she set them back. Not carelessly. Exactly. She turned the arms to lie the way they had lain, and squared the little stack beneath them, and stepped back to make sure it was right, and only then went on. No one was watching her. She believed no one was watching her. And she tended that meaningless corner of a false room as though it were owed the truth — as though the unseen deserved the same care as the seen.

Do you know how seldom I meet that? I see everyone; it is the whole of my nature and most of my complaint, and the long lesson of total sight is that almost no one is good once the curtain is down. They are good for an audience. She was good for no one. She put a dead stranger's glasses back straight in an empty room because to leave them crooked would have been a small lie, and she could not abide a small lie — not even the one lie in all the world that no one would ever have seen.

And I will tell you the other thing I saw, because I see everything and cannot help it, though I am going to make nothing of it, and neither should you. There is a thing she is carrying that she has not told the man — no bigger yet than a maybe, folded up small and tucked under the ordinary fear of the day, not looked at, not counted. I saw it the way I see the wiring inside a wall. It is not mine to say; almost nothing is mine to say; seeing is the whole of my office and telling is no part of it. So I looked at it once, the way you'd note a light left burning in an upstairs room of a house you are only walking past, and I looked away, and I kept it — which is as near to kindness as a god like me is built to come.

That is rarer than the vase they have lit like a relic two rooms on. I did not follow her; I had no need to, being already everywhere she was going. But of all the wanting held up under all these lights, the one thing I cared to keep in view was the single mortal in the labyrinth behaving as though being seen were beside the point. The Hand was up ahead, flexing, impatient to spoil her afternoon with a

bookcase. I would be there too. I am unhurried. There is always more to see.

The rooms didn't have doors, and they didn't have people, and they didn't have all four of their walls, so you walked out of one person's living room through the gap where a wall should be and straight into the next person's living room without ever going outside, and Steph could not get over it.

Every one was finished. Not finished the way a store finishes a display, with the thing for sale and a price and nothing else — finished like someone lived there and had just stepped out. A blanket half-slid off the arm of a couch. A mug on a side table. In one room a pair of reading glasses folded on a stack of books, as if the reader had gone to answer the door. Steph stood in the doorway that wasn't a doorway and, before she could help it, picked the glasses up to see if they were glued down. They weren't. She put them back exactly as they'd been — arms straight, the little stack squared under them — which felt important, even though nobody was watching and nobody would ever know the difference. And then, because she'd just been fussing over a stranger's glasses in a room that was pretending to be a person's, she straightened up feeling a bit silly, and noticed a man in the store's colors at the edge of the next room along.

He wasn't doing anything, only standing, the way staff stand between jobs, and she gave him the small guilty smile you give a shop assistant when you've been handling things you've no intention of buying. Staff, she thought. A place this big, full of things a person could pick up and set down again, of course they'd have people about. She'd only been straightening them. She hadn't been going to take the glasses.

After that she kept noticing him, which was the trouble with noticing a thing once. He was by the lamps when they passed the lamps. He was at the edge of the couches when they got to the couches. Once she'd have sworn there were two or three of them, the same shirt, the same still way of standing, staff posted about the floor; and once — she turned quickly, for no reason she could have named —

he was in the room behind her, and also, when she faced front again, in the room ahead. She decided she'd got turned around, because you did in here, the rooms all rhymed, and it was easy to think you'd seen the same person twice when it was two people dressed alike. What she couldn't quite place was that he never sold anything. He only watched — steady, unhurried, in no rush to be anywhere at all — and he never once came over to ask if they needed help, the way staff did. That's a funny way to go about it, she thought, and made herself stop noticing.

There were a great many couches, each with a little card on a stand beside it giving a price and a name, and the names were the strangest part yet: not what a couch was but a name, a short round foreign name Steph couldn't say, the same few coming round again on different couches so that a green one and a grey one were somehow the same person. She gave up saying them aloud after Kyle laughed at how she said the second.

Kyle's way of testing a couch was to lie all the way down on it, full length, shoes off, hands folded on his chest like a man laid out, shut his eyes, go completely still, and say "this is the one" in a peaceful voice. He did it on the first couch and the third and the sixth and a corner one he had to climb into. Every one was the one. Steph's way was to sit on the very edge with her back straight and press her hand flat into the cushion and think about whether you could still get up off it easily at sixty, because her mother couldn't, off the soft one, and it had become a whole thing. She said so. Kyle, laid out on a cloud-colored one with his eyes shut, said sixty was a long way off. She said that was exactly the thinking that got you a couch you couldn't get up off of. He said "this is the one" again and patted the cushion beside him, and she looked at him lying there peaceful and ridiculous in a stranger's pretend front room, and lay down next to him, on her back, and it was, in fact, wonderfully comfortable.

And lying there, looking up at a light fitting that belonged to nobody, in a room that belonged to nobody, she got self-conscious all at once — the two of them stretched out full length on a couch they'd come nowhere near affording, in a lit room with no fourth wall, where anybody at all could wander past and see them playing house. A shopper had stopped to look, the way you glance at people

who've made themselves a little too at home, and past her another. And the same man was still somewhere about, at the edge of things. She sat up and smoothed her shirt down. Loss prevention, she told herself. They see a couple flop onto the good couch and put their feet up, and they keep half an eye; that's the job. She wished she didn't color so easily. She hadn't done a single thing.

"Get up," she said to Kyle, "people are looking," and Kyle said let them, happily, eyes still shut, one more minute, and had his minute, and she let him, and did not turn to look at the man again.

They got up. The rooms went on, and the taste thing started. Steph would stop in a doorway and go soft at a room — low light, wood and wool, a deep chair by a lamp, shelves, always she stopped hardest at shelves — and say oh, this, imagine this, and Kyle would come stand beside her and look at the exact same room and she'd feel him not feel it. Then three rooms on Kyle would stop at a hard bright one, a black screen the size of a door and low glossy units and nothing soft anywhere, and say now that's a setup, and she'd come stand beside him and feel her own chest do nothing at all, and they'd both understood, without saying it, that they had just looked at two different apartments and each thought it was theirs.

Then Kyle found the cabinet, and she lost him for a minute. It was a tall glass box, glass on every side, glass shelves, a little light in the top that came down through all of them at once, so that whatever you set inside would stand lit in the middle of the air, held, seen from every side. There was nothing in this one but a single white vase, and the vase looked, frankly, holy. Kyle went quiet in a different way from his couch-quiet, and Steph knew before he said a word that he wasn't looking at a vase. He was looking at the cards — all of them, up out of the dark of the fireproof box at last, each one standing lit in its own square of glass where a person could finally see them — and she watched the wanting go over his face, plain and boyish and completely unhidden, and it undid her a little even as she opened her mouth to be sensible.

"We came for a bookcase," she said, gently.

"It's got a light in it."

"I can see it's got a light in it."

“They’d be safe. Glass all round.” He put one finger to the glass, not on a price, just on the idea. “You could see them.”

And it came to her, quick, before she could stop it — watching Kyle want a thing that wasn’t even there yet — that the whole place was rooms with the walls taken off, so that everything a person wanted could be stood in the light and seen wanting it. Then she thought, I’m tired, I’m making things up, it’s a shop, and she took Kyle’s arm.

“It’s a whole other piece of furniture,” she said. “We’ll see.” Which was the couch answer and the lamp answer and was becoming the answer to a great deal.

She went to look at the shelves, because the shelves were the one thing in every room she trusted, and that was where she found out about the books. They weren’t books. Or — they were, real hardbacks, rows of them in every staged room; but when she tipped one out to see what a person in a room like this would read, the cover was in a foreign language, and so was the next, and the one after, and not even the same foreign language — a red spine in one alphabet, a blue one in another, chosen, she saw, turning them over, for the color, greens with greens and creams with creams, set on the shelf the way you’d plump a cushion. Not one of them was meant to be read. The whole warm booky wall that had gone straight to her chest three rooms back had been, the entire time, a wall of nobody’s books, kept for their spines, put out to be seen and never once opened.

She stood there feeling oddly caught, as if the shelf had known which one of everybody in the whole store would walk straight to it.

Then she found the real one, wedged in with the colored spines: an ordinary paperback, plain English, cracked spine, a receipt sticking out for a bookmark. So exactly a book somebody owned that for a second the shelf tilted — and then she understood, because you had to, that a shopper had set it down and walked off without it, and it had sat here being the one true thing on a shelf of props with nobody noticing to take it away. People left things. A place this big, of course they did. She put it back where it had been, and didn’t take it, though she wanted to, because it wasn’t hers.

When she straightened up the man was near again, at the edge of the room — looking not at her, quite, but at the shelf, at the very spot where she’d tucked the real book back in among the false ones,

as though he thought she'd put it in the right place. They kept an eye on everything in here, she thought; you'd get used to it. And she felt, if anything, less watched than she had all afternoon, though she couldn't have told you why.

"There's proper bookcases somewhere," Kyle said, arriving at her shoulder, torn off the cabinet, hopeful again, a man ready to get on. "This is all couches and rooms. Where's the actual —"

"Follow the arrows," Steph said, because she'd already looked, and there was no cutting across to the far wall where she was fairly sure she'd seen tall shelves standing in rows; there was no across; there was only on, through the next front room and the next. She had a whole speech forming, kind but firm, about the cabinet, about the money, one thing at a time, and she was going to give it to him in the next room, where it was quieter.

They went into the next room. It was full of bookcases — rows of them, floor to ceiling, standing in aisles like a proper store at last, more than she'd known there were, and the whole kind-but-firm speech went straight out of her head, because there it was. The actual reason. The whole trip.

"There it is," Kyle said, beside her, the way he'd said it about the building from the road.

She looked back once for the loss-prevention man — habit by now, the guilty little smile already half-made — and couldn't find him anywhere. Which was a relief, mostly. Though she had the odd notion he hadn't really gone: that she'd feel him again in the next room, and the one after that, all the way to the end. She was probably just tired.

T H R E E

THE BOOKCASES

T H E H A N D

Give me a block of wood and a reason and I will give you back a thing that outlives the reason. That was the arrangement, once. They prayed to me with their hands — the joiner, the boatwright, the woman who set the roof-beam true — and I met them in the grain, in the dovetail that needs no glue, in the joint cut so close a blade of light can't pass through it. I am the Hand. I am in the making of things. Or I was, before they built this place.

Because look what they have done to it. Look what they have done to making.

They have taken the honest board and ground it to dust and glued the dust back into the shape of a board and printed a grain on the top of it, a photograph of the wood it will never be. They have replaced the joint that thinks with a little steel disc that turns, and a peg, and a hex key the size of a child's finger, and a sheet of paper with no words on it at all — only a small round man, cheerful and faceless, pointing you the way to despair. They have arranged it so that any fool with a floor can raise furniture by nightfall. Do you understand what an obscenity that is, to a god of the difficult? They have made making easy, and called it a kindness.

And then the two of them came into my aisle, and I looked, as I always look, at their hands.

His were soft — sorting hands, screen hands, hands that had never once driven a screw that didn't strip. Hers were better. She'd held a hammer; you can tell, there's a way the thumb sits. But wrong for this, the pair of them wrong, because you cannot learn a made thing from a faceless man on a paper. You learn it from your own ruined first attempt, and these two had never ruined anything together yet. That was the tell. Not that they couldn't build. That they had never stood over a thing they'd built badly, side by side, and had to choose between laughing and throwing it out.

They were about to. I could see the bookcase they were walking toward, the one they call Billy, plain as a plank and honest about the one thing at least, which is that it does not pretend to be more than it is. I know that bookcase the way a master knows a willing, hopeless apprentice — upright, soft in the shelf, and it will list. They all list. Load one end, give it a season, and it leans; and there is a screw in the back of it, low down, that half of them never seat right, and the thing stands anyway, leaning, holding, for years.

I did not know what the two of them were quarrelling about. Hearts are not my work, and I was glad of it, watching her mouth go tight and his go stubborn over a box of shelves. I know hands, and joints, and load, and the one honest fact this whole blue temple was raised to hide: that a made thing carries its making in it forever, the good and the botched both, and stands or leans by what your hands were doing on the day.

Their hands were going to be all over this one. I decided to stay, and watch them build it wrong.

The bookcases went up and up and back and back, rows of them standing in aisles like a library that had eaten every other library — except a library had books in it, and these had nothing in them at all, or had, here and there, more of the foreign color-books, or a single white bowl, or a folded blanket: one nice thing to a shelf, to prove

the shelf could hold a nice thing. Steph walked in among them the way you walk into a church you're not certain you're allowed in.

And there it was. The Billy.

It wasn't much to look at, which was somehow the thing she liked about it. After all the rooms with their staged lives, here was a plain tall bookcase that didn't pretend to be a life — just shelves, upright, honest, waiting to have somebody's actual things put on it. The card called it Billy, which by now she'd stopped finding strange, a bookcase named like a person, and the price was — she looked twice — the price was so much less than she'd braced for that she said it out loud. Kyle came over. And for one clean second the two of them stood in front of the Billy loving it at the same time, the first thing all day they'd loved at the same time, and Steph thought, this, we came for this, we can just get this and go home.

Then Kyle said, "It'd fit the binders perfect," and the second was over.

Because he didn't mean books. She watched him measure the shelves with his eyes — not for books, for binders, the card binders, all nine of them — and she could see the Billy filling up in his head with cards where her paperbacks were meant to go, and the old thing rose in her, gentle but definite. "I thought the cards were going in the glass one," she said. "The lit one you put your fingerprint on."

"That's if we get the glass one."

"So now it's the glass one and the Billy."

"The glass one's for the good ones. The Billy's for the bulk." He said bulk like it was a word they'd already agreed on. Nine binders of bulk. And she loved him, she did, standing there doing sums about his lizards in front of a bookcase that cost less than a week's shop — but she'd had a picture too, a small private one she hadn't shown anybody, of her own books finally up out of the moving boxes and onto a shelf in their own place, where she could see the spines and know she lived somewhere. And in the picture the shelf was this shelf, and there were no binders on it at all.

Kyle got his phone out — not to check on the Charizard this time but to show her, holding the screen up beside the empty Billy so she could see how a binder would sit on the shelf, the little lizard glowing there next to the plain pale wood, his whole case laid out earnest and

hopeful. And it was such a Kyle thing to do, to build you a careful diagram of the exact thing you didn't want, that she couldn't find it in herself to be sharp about it. "We'll see," she said, for what felt like the hundredth time, and heard how it sounded.

"You keep saying that."

"Because I keep not knowing." Which was truer than she'd meant to be, and landed heavier than she'd meant it to, and the two of them stood in it a moment. Somewhere at the edge of the aisle a man in the store's colors was standing, the same still kind as before — not watching her, exactly, just there, the way they were always there — and she'd more or less stopped minding it. The staff here kept an eye out. That was the job.

There was a man working further down the aisle, in the store's colors, building one of the display ones, and she watched him without meaning to, the way you watch anybody good with their hands. He had a flat box open on the floor and the pale boards laid out, and he was putting a Billy together, and he wasn't looking at the paper. That was the part that got her. There was a paper — the folded sheet with the little wordless man on it, she could see it lying off to one side — and the worker never once looked at it. He just took up a board and set it against another board and they went together like they'd wanted to, and he turned the little disc with a flick, no hunting for the hole, the hole already where his hand was, and the thing stood up under his hands in about the time it took her and Kyle to not-decide anything at all. He didn't measure. He didn't frown. He built it the way water finds the low place. He's done ten thousand of them, she told herself, you'd have to be able to do it in your sleep — and she believed that, mostly, and still couldn't look away, because there was something in how sure his hands were that made her own feel like tools she'd been handed that morning and hadn't practiced with.

He stood the finished Billy up, and gave it the smallest push with two fingers, and it rocked, once, and settled — leaning, she'd have said, if you made her say, a hair off true. And he looked at it a moment with an expression she couldn't read, not proud, more like a man nodding at a fault he'd known would be there. Then he moved to the next box.

“You have to write the number,” Kyle said, and she turned. He was at the Billy’s card with the little pencil and the slip of paper from downstairs, and it turned out the card told you where the actual bookcase lived — not this one, this one was only for looking; the real one was flat in a box somewhere deep in the store, in an aisle with a number and a bin with a number, and you wrote the numbers down now and went and found it later, at the end, wherever the end was. Kyle wrote them in his careful blocky hand. Aisle 16. Bin 34. He read them out like a hymn, pleased to finally have something to do with the pencil, and folded the slip and laid it in the yellow bag with great ceremony, on top of nothing, because the bag was still empty.

They hadn’t decided anything. The Billy was written down but not bought; the cards were still homeless, between a glass box they might not get and a shelf she didn’t want them on; and the whole question of whose life the shelf was going to hold sat there un-lifted — exactly the kind of weight the man at the desk downstairs had watched the fathers set down and walk away from, except that nobody was minding this one for them. They were carrying it themselves, into the next room, which had opened at the end of the aisle the way the next room always did, quietly, already waiting.

It was full of beds.

FOUR

THE BEDROOMS

THE COMPANION

By the time we came to the beds I had made eleven friends, and I would have told you about every one of them, but the others sigh when I do that, so: eleven, and I love them.

Terry, out on the parking lot, whose knee is going and who has not told his wife how much it frightens him. Andrea at the bag stack, back at work six weeks after the baby, calling the tiredness nothing. A boy of about nine hiding from his sister in the wardrobes — Marcus — who let me hide with him. Three separate husbands adrift in three separate aisles wearing the very same stunned expression, as though the store had taken something off them at the door and they couldn't think what. I know all their names. I keep every name anyone has ever given me; it is the only thing I collect, and I have never once run out of room.

That is the whole of me, if you want it plainly. The others receive. I am the one who says your name back.

And this is the finest building ever raised for my purposes, because it is full, floor to ceiling, of the lonely pretending to shop. They do not come here for furniture. They come because it is warm, and bright, and it has arrows, so that for one whole afternoon something else decides where they go; and there are people in colored shirts who

will be kind to them for money; and at the far end there is a plate of food, and nobody there eats alone who doesn't want to. I could weep, some days, at how well they've built my temple, and called it a store.

Then, in among the beds, I felt the two of them, and I set down my eleven friends and went to see.

They had gone cold coming up the aisle — I don't know over what, the what is never my department, some seam had opened between them the way a seam does — and now they were tired and quiet and standing a careful foot apart, each pretending to study a different bed. And then his hand went sideways and found hers. Not a grand thing. He didn't even look at her; he was still frowning at a wardrobe. His hand simply went and found hers, the way a hand does when it has decided the argument is smaller than the person, and she let it, and neither of them said anything, and neither of them let go.

Oh, I live for that. Say what you like about my appetite. I would cross the whole thinned world on my knees for the small sideways reach of a hand that has decided to stay.

And there was a thing in the woman I could not quite add up. I know need the way the Hand knows wood; I can tell you to the ounce how much of it a person is carrying, and who for. She was carrying more than one person's worth — not the ache for the man, that was its own separate weather — but a second thread of it, wound tight and tucked away, need with an extra person folded somewhere inside it whom I could not find, however I counted. It is not like me to lose count. I put it down to the tiredness of the day. Then I went closer, because I always go closer.

The beds went on the way the front rooms had gone on, except more so, because there is something stranger about a hundred made beds than a hundred made living rooms. A living room you could see being for anybody. A bed was where a person was at their most — where they slept, which is the one thing you can't do with your face arranged the way you want it — and here were a hundred of them, made up perfect, turned down at one corner like a hotel, plumped and waiting, and not a soul in a single one.

Steph and Kyle had gone quiet coming up the aisle. The thing from the bookcases was still there, unfinished, riding along between them like the pencil-slip rode in the bag, and she didn't have it in her to pick it up again, and neither did he, and they walked into the beds a careful foot apart, each looking at a different one, being married at each other without a word.

Then his hand found hers. She didn't see it coming — he was still scowling at a wardrobe the size of a garage — his hand just came sideways and took hold of hers, not sorry, exactly; he wasn't going to say sorry over a bookcase and neither was she; but decided, somehow, that whatever it was, it was smaller than the day, smaller than the two of them being somewhere like this together for the first time. She held on. Neither of them said anything, and the careful foot of space between them closed up and was gone. It wasn't the fight mended — the fight would keep — but it was something between them set right, small, and set right now instead of saved for later.

There was a bed made up in soft grey with far too many pillows, and Kyle sat on the edge of it the way he sat on everything, and pulled her down after him by the hand he still had, and they lay back on it side by side looking up, the way they had on the couch downstairs, except tireder. And it was — she didn't have a word for it that wasn't a silly word — it was like their bed. Not a bed they'd buy. Their bed, the one at home, the one they'd had five weeks and would have for however long came next, except this one had never once been slept in and their real one already had a dip worn on Kyle's side. Lying on it she had the oddest run of feeling, quick and whole: that they'd been married years; that the fight about the shelves was an old soft joke between them by now; that this was some ordinary evening a long way into a life she hadn't lived yet. She could have closed her eyes and gone to sleep right there in the middle of the store, in front of everyone, and been home. Just tired, she told herself. You get like this when you're tired and you've been on your feet since seven. She made herself sit up before she actually fell asleep in a shop.

"You two look done in," somebody said, kindly, and it was a woman in the store's colors, stopped at the foot of the bed with a stack of folded towels against her hip, smiling at them as though she'd known them a good while. "First time? You've got the look. Everyone gets

the look about here.” And she was so easy about it, so warm, and not selling them one thing, only talking, that Steph found herself telling her — the drive, the seven o’clock start, the small town, the one bookcase they’d come for and somehow still not bought — and the woman laughed in the right places and said everyone comes in for one thing and leaves with the car full, love, that’s just the store, and asked Kyle what the bookcase was for. And when Kyle said, a little braced for it, “collectibles,” the woman didn’t blink. She said her brother-in-law had a whole wall of the ships-in-bottles and swore by the glass cabinets, the lit ones. Kyle lit up as if she’d blessed him. And Steph felt the last of the coldness go out of the afternoon, just like that — because somebody kind had stood at the foot of a bed and been on both their sides at once.

She was gone before Steph thought to ask her name, away down the beds toward another couple who looked done in, and Steph thought, they’re good, the people here, they must really train them, and felt warm toward the whole enormous place for the first time since the arrows.

The wardrobes were a country of their own past the beds — huge ones, wall-sized, sliding doors, and inside them little drawers and rails and shoe-racks and a hundred small compartments for a hundred kinds of thing. You could stand inside one, near enough, in the space where a whole life’s clothes would hang. Kyle stood in one with his arms spread, measuring it in wingspans, being an idiot. Steph looked at all the little compartments — the shallow ones, the narrow ones, the ones plainly sized for things smaller than grown-up things — and the ball-pit feeling came back, except this time it did not stay a feeling. This time it came almost all the way up: into a thought, nearly into words, the thing she’d been not-saying for a week standing suddenly in the open of a pulled-out drawer meant for tiny folded things; and she stood there with her hand flat on the little drawer and could not, for a second, get her breath to sit right. Then Kyle said “you could fit a body in here” in a Dracula voice from the depths of the wardrobe, and the thing went back down where she kept it, and she laughed — a shade too fast, though he didn’t notice — and told him to get out before somebody had them for stealing a wardrobe. And as they went, she caught it for the first time without noticing she’d caught

it: a smell, faint and sweet and warm, a kitchen smell, though there were no kitchens here, only wardrobes — and it seemed to come from somewhere up ahead, and to want them to come and find it.

The arrows took them out of the wardrobes and around a corner, and the smell she'd half-caught among the wardrobes came up full to meet them, warm and complicated; and then the room opened out and it was kitchens, wall after wall of kitchens, ovens and taps and pale countertops set with bowls of fruit that weren't real; and under all of it, sweet and close and coming from nowhere she could see, the smell of something baking that no one anywhere was baking.

FIVE

THE KITCHENS

THE CHAOS-WEAVER

I am what waits inside everything that holds. The pulled stitch. The hairline crack. The third pint that seemed a fine idea at the time. Where things hold, I am the reason they eventually don't, and every wall that has ever come down said my name on the way down.

So you can imagine how I am finding the kitchens.

They have defeated the slam. Do you understand what they have taken from me? A drawer is a promise of a slam. A cupboard is a door begging to be banged. It is the whole tragic music of the household — the crash of a home full of people who love one another and are, at this precise moment, furious — and here they have fitted every drawer with a little breath of a hinge, a soft sigh of a thing, so that you may throw it shut with all the force of a grieving heart and it will float, float, and settle home without a sound, like a librarian shushing your rage. I have slammed four hundred drawers in this room. Not one has given me the crash. They close as though forgiving me.

Everything here is bolted, screwed, tethered, labelled, arrowed, and — I can barely say it — anti-tip. They strap the tall furniture to the wall now, in case a god should lean on it. They have thought of me. That is the true insult of this place: it is the first temple ever raised by mortals who took entropy seriously and set out to win.

I have had my small joys. A single fork, in a drawer of forty, laid the wrong way round — mine. A price sticker with one corner curling — mine. Somewhere back in the lighting they will find, in three months, a bulb that fails early and hums while it dies and drives a good man quietly out of his mind — my finest work of the afternoon, and no one alive will ever thank me for it.

And then I found the two of them, and oh, they are a mess, and I love them.

Everything in this building is decided. Every room resolved, every drawer shut, every life laid out on the shelves already lived and photographed and priced. And into all that terrible finish walked a couple who cannot agree on a single thing — a shelf they haven't bought, a lizard with nowhere to live, a quarrel folded up and carried between them like a live coal in a paper bag. They are the one unfinished thing in a hundred thousand square feet of finished. They wobble. I do adore a wobble.

And I know how it goes for them, the way I always know; I can feel the little catastrophe in them the way you feel a storm coming in a bad knee. There is a screw, tonight, that will not go where it is meant to. There is a shelf that will lean. I felt it the instant they chose the thing — the small sweet wrongness waiting at the end of their day like a party they don't know they've been invited to.

They think the disaster is that they can't agree. Bless them. The disagreement isn't the crack. The disagreement is the two of them still *alive* in a place that sells the look of a life with all the living wrung out of it. I don't want to break them — that is the thing no one believes of me, being what I am. I have never once wanted to break the living. I want to break the *finish*. I want to get one honest crack into all this closed and perfect nothing, and let something actually happen inside it.

I went after them into the kitchens, slamming drawers that would not slam, looking for my opening.

The kitchens were the most finished thing yet, and Steph hadn't known a room could be too finished until she was standing in a row

of them, one after another, each perfect in a way that made her own kitchen back home — with its one drawer that stuck, and the burn mark by the stove, and the mug tree Kyle's mother had given them that they didn't have the heart to get rid of — feel suddenly, achingly real. These didn't stick. Nothing here stuck. Every drawer ran out on little rails smooth as water, and there were racks inside racks, a place for the lids and a place for the trays and a shallow felt-lined one just for knives, a whole worked-out science of where a thing should go, so that you'd never again have to stand in your own kitchen and think about it.

She pulled one out and pushed it shut, and it wouldn't slam. She hadn't been trying to slam it, exactly — but it wouldn't, was the thing. She gave it the ordinary shove you'd give a drawer and somewhere in the last inch it simply took over, slowed itself, and eased home without a sound, as though it had better manners than she did. She did it again, harder, to see. Same. Threw it, nearly — and it caught itself at the end and sighed shut, gentle as you like, refusing to bang no matter what she put into it. Kyle came and had a go and couldn't make it slam either, and the pair of them stood there working a drawer that would not be slammed, laughing, until a real shopper glanced over and they quit. "Fancy drawers," Kyle said, approving. Steph thought there was something almost funny about it, a drawer you couldn't slam even if you wanted to, a kitchen built for a house where nobody ever would — and then thought that was a strange thing to think, and let it go.

Because you couldn't help imagining it; that was the whole point of the room. Steph stood at a pale wooden island with a bowl of green apples on it and imagined being the woman who lived here, who had her mornings here, and the woman she imagined was calmer than her and had people round and always knew where everything was, because everything had a place. Kyle was opening the oven and closing it. "You could do a proper Sunday in here," he said, and she knew he was imagining it too — some version of the two of them a few years on, hosting, grown-up — and for a second they were furnishing the same daydream instead of two different ones, which was rarer than it ought to have been, and would have been lovely, except that his version was a few years off, and hers, she was starting

to think, might be a good deal sooner than that, and had someone in it she hadn't mentioned to him. She couldn't say either of those in a display kitchen. So she said it was a nice oven.

She picked up one of the green apples and it was too heavy and too cool and faintly tacky, a stone or a resin thing painted to look like fruit, perfect from a step back and plainly false in the hand, and she set it into the bowl exactly where it had been. And under all of it, the whole time, was the smell — the baking smell, warm, butter and cinnamon, close enough that her stomach answered it before she'd decided to be hungry, and yet there was no bakery, no oven lit, nothing but display kitchens full of cold fake food as far as she could see. Vents, she decided. They pipe it in, or there's a café somewhere near, or it's one of those spray tins. Clever, really. Made you hungry. Made you think of home.

And she was hungry, she realized, properly — the snacks in the car were hours gone and it was well past any sensible lunch, and the smell had gone and found the hunger and lit it. She looked at Kyle and Kyle had it too, the faintly hollow look, and neither of them needed to say so.

The bookcase was still written on the slip in the bag, still not bought. The cards still had nowhere to live. But it was hard to keep a firm grip on a fight about shelves in a room that smelled like somebody's grandmother's, with a man beside you opening and shutting an oven he'd already decided you'd be hosting Sundays in, and Steph found she didn't want to pick the coal back up just now. Later. There'd be time. There was clearly a great deal of store still to come.

"Is that food," Kyle said, lifting his head like a dog, and it was — the arrows bent around the end of the last kitchen, and there, up a short rise, was a wide bright room full of tables and trays and actual people actually eating, a whole restaurant, planted in the very middle of the store, halfway to wherever the end was. The smell was coming from up there after all, or seemed to be, and the arrows pointed straight into it, and Steph's stomach made the decision a good second before either of them could.

THE RESTAURANT

The restaurant was up a short rise at the end of the last kitchen, and it was enormous, and it was full of actual food being actually eaten by actual people, and after a whole morning of rooms that were only pretending to be rooms Steph could have wept at the plain sight of a thing that was exactly what it was.

You took a tray. That much she worked out. There was a stack of them and a long steel rail running down the front of a glass counter, and you put your tray on the rail and pushed it along while the food went by on the other side of the glass, and the trouble was knowing when to begin, because there was no beginning, there was just the rail and the food and, already behind her, a man with a tray of his own waiting for her to commit. Steph committed. She took cutlery rolled in a napkin because everyone ahead of her had, and then didn't know what she'd committed to, and slid along looking at plates of things through the glass — a salmon, a yellow curry, a mountain of fries — and then, plate after plate of them, the thing the whole place plainly ran on: meatballs. Little brown meatballs, a scoop of pale mash, a slap of dark gravy, and beside it a small red spoonful of something that looked like jam.

"Is that jam," Kyle said, behind her, alarmed and delighted.

"I think you're meant to." She wasn't sure meant-to-what. She took the meatballs. Kyle took the meatballs, and also the fries, and also, after a visible inner struggle, a slice of cake the size of a paperback

and a hot dog he explained he would eat only if he was still hungry — which he said with the calm confidence of a man who already knew that he would be.

At the end of the rail was a person at a till, and Steph braced for the number the way she'd braced at the Billy, and the number was so small she said "is that for both of us?" and it was, it was for both, the whole loaded pair of trays for less than two coffees would have cost them back home, and she carried hers out into the hall feeling as though they'd got away with something.

The hall went on. Tables and tables of it, a soft roar of people, and high up along one side, windows — real ones this time, actual daylight, the first she'd seen since the arrows took them in, and it was afternoon out there, properly afternoon, the whole morning gone somewhere inside the blue without her noticing it leave. They found two seats by the glass. She sat down and her feet said thank you. Kyle salted his meatballs before he had tasted them — the way he salted everything, a thing his mother did that he swore blind he did not — and Steph had given up pointing it out somewhere around week three.

And then she ate a meatball, and it was —

She put her fork down. It wasn't that it was good, though it was good. It was that it tasted like being small. Like a particular Sunday: her gran's kitchen, the steam on the window and the telly going in the other room and nothing at all required of her, a whole afternoon of being a person nobody needed anything from — which she wondered, for half a second, how much longer she'd get to be, and then made herself not wonder, because not-wondering was the whole job today. She hadn't thought of that kitchen in years. And it was a meatball, in a shop the size of a town. Steph, she told herself, you are starving, that's the whole of it, everything tastes like heaven when you've not eaten since the car — and she picked the fork back up, and it was just a meatball again, brown and good and ordinary. But for a second there.

Across the little fort of trays Kyle had gone the same way — quiet, mid-chew, gazing at the middle distance — and then he said "tastes like my nan's," a bit thick, and cleared his throat, and got very busy

with the fries, and Steph reached over and stole one and said nothing, because there are things you simply let a person have.

Then Kyle got up without a word and came back a minute later with two little glasses of something red, one in each hand, pleased with himself for having worked out where you got them. He set hers down in front of her like a man laying down a good card. “Free refills,” he said, reverent. “Steph. It’s *free*.” She tried it — the red jam’s cousin, tart and sweet at once — and decided on the spot that she loved it, and told him so, and he looked as pleased as if he’d made it himself.

They didn’t talk about the bookcase. It was still there, folded up in the bag with the slip. But you can’t hold a grievance and a hot meal at the same time, not really, not when your feet hurt and the light has gone gold in the windows, and for a while they only ate, two people at a small table in an enormous room, halfway to wherever the end was, and it was, Steph thought, the nicest part of the whole day, this — the sitting. She ought to have been suspicious of that. Every part of the store so far had wanted her to feel precisely one thing, and this part wanted her to feel that she had arrived. That she could stop. When of course she hadn’t, and couldn’t; there was a whole downstairs still to come, the bins and the tills and the getting of the actual thing. But the meatballs didn’t mention any of that. The meatballs only said: rest. You’ve come so far. Have a little more, it’s cheap, stay as long as you like.

She went back up for more of the red drink on her own — twice, in the end; the lingonberry, Kyle had called it, though she hadn’t asked how he knew — and sat back down with it; and for ten whole minutes the day was simply good.

THE ALLFATHER

The seven of us do not, as a rule, sit down together. We are not that kind of household — whatever the mortals imagine when they pray to a pantheon, picturing a family at a long table passing the good of

the dish down toward the young. I let them picture it; it comforts them. The truth is nearer to seven strangers who share a boiler and a bathroom rota. But there was a table here, and food on it that cost almost nothing, and I am the god of the shared table, and a shared table with no one at it is only furniture. So I gathered them to it — not out of love; I have never been certain I have the knack for the other six — but because I would sooner die the final death than sit in a room this full and eat alone.

They came grumbling, which is how they come to everything, and they brought their afternoons to the table with them. The Hand would not leave the meatball alone: they had defeated it, he said, they had made it perfectly round, and a thing shaped by a hand is never perfectly round — this was the meatball of no one; and he ate nineteen of them while he complained, still furious. Down the hall a drinks machine had begun to give soda water on the fourth pull of every cup, which was how I knew the one who breaks things was near, and content. The Companion came late, trailing three new mortals she'd gathered up along the way, whose whole lives she already carried, and set them loose again lighter than she'd found them, and sat down glowing. This, she said, is my favourite of all your terrible ideas. Only look how many of them there are to love.

The Seeker alone would not sit. He never sits. He stood at the head of the table with the whole map of the store lit behind his eyes and would not touch the food; and when I told him to let them eat, he looked at me the way a guide looks at a party still lacing its boots at the trailhead. "They think the meal is the arriving," he said. "They always think that. Nobody has arrived." He tipped his head at the couple by the glass, at the whole warm resting hall of them. "Down there the store keeps what it sells, and makes you carry it up yourself, and not one soul in this room has felt the weight of a single thing they want yet. That starts after lunch." Then let them have the ledge, I said, before you send them off it. He did not answer. He is the only one of us graceless enough to be right at a table.

And I watched the two of them, over at their place by the glass, eat what I had set before them.

Because it was mine, that plate. Provision is provision, whatever colours it comes dressed in. I did not cook it — I have never in all

my length of days cooked a single thing — but the taste that stopped the woman with her fork halfway to her mouth, the one that undid the man so badly he had to hide in his fries: that was me. It is the oldest work I do. I put, into the cheap food of the tired, the taste of having once been small, and cared for, and asked for nothing at all — a Sunday, a grandmother's kitchen, the particular safety of being a child in a warm room while the grown people carried the day. They think it is the meatball. It is never the meatball. It is the memory of a table where somebody else was the provider, and all that was wanted of you was to be fed.

I gave it to them freely and I watched them take it, and — here is the part I will not be explaining to the other six, who would only look at me — I found that I did not want the usual thing back. Households in the making are my meat; I have watched ten thousand of them begin, and I take my due from each, the small upward glance of a creature being provided for. But this pair, with their unbought shelf and their unhomed cards and their five weeks, ate the memory I gave them and for a little while stopped being afraid of the day; and I felt the strangest impulse of my whole career, which was to let them simply have it. To provide the once, and take nothing.

And I will tell you why, as far as I understand it, which is not far, because the understanding of it belongs to one of the others and not to me. There was more at their little table than the two of them. I don't mean the crowd. I mean that a household this new, and this frightened, and this near to becoming more than it is, is the richest fare a provider can be set down in front of in a thin age — and we have all been hungry a long time, on the weightless wanting of people furnishing lives they are only playing at. This was not that. This was the real thing, or the near edge of it, and it fed me without my reaching for it; and I did not reach, because you do not lunge at the one true meal in a lean year. You sit still. You are grateful. You let it be.

It passed. I am not sentimental; I am the god of full tables, not soft ones. I let them have the meal, and the rest, and the gold light in the glass. But the table is where my country ends. Past the restaurant the arrows turn downward, into the part of the store where I hold no dominion — the getting, the hauling, the reckoning, the till — and I

do not follow my people down there. I feed them, and I send them on. That is the whole of the covenant. Eat, and go, and build the thing, and lean it against the wall; and if it holds, thank whichever of us you imagine did it.

The Seeker was already moving; the arrows had turned. I let the woman finish her drink — she had found the lingonberry and gone back for more of it, which pleased me more than it had any business to — and then the ledge gave way beneath all of us, gently, the way this building does everything, and the long day tipped over its noon, and started down.

THE MARKET HALL

Downstairs was a different store.

They came down a long slow ramp — going the other way this time, down into the bright — and the whole nature of the place changed beneath them as they went. Upstairs had been rooms: whole staged lives you walked through and could not have. Downstairs was things. Just things, thousands upon thousands of them, out on open shelves and in bulk bins and stacked on pallets, small and cheap and endless, things you could actually pick up and actually keep — and the arrows still ran you the one way, except now the one way went past a hundred thousand small wants at exactly the height of your hand.

It began, for Steph, with the tea lights.

There was a bin of them, a great bulk bin, a hundred little candles to a bag for the price of almost nothing, and she had a bag in her hand before she'd decided anything, because you always needed tea lights, everyone always needed tea lights, and it was that cheap, and she dropped it into the yellow bag on top of the pencil-slip and felt, obscurely, that she'd won something. Then there were the small plants in their plastic pots, and she took a little green one, because their place had no green thing in it and a home should have one green thing. Then a pack of picture frames, because the wedding photos were still on the camera with nowhere to go, and framing

your wedding was practically a duty. Then a set of glasses, because two of theirs had broken in the move. Then a draining rack.

Kyle was worse, or better, depending how you looked at it. Kyle had found the aisle of small tools and was holding a battery-tester he could not fully account for the need of, and a clip-on reading light, and a set of Allen keys — “for building stuff,” he said, holding them up hopefully — and Steph didn’t have the heart to tell him the flat-pack things came with their own little key in the box, because he looked so pleased to be, at last, a man who owned a set of Allen keys.

The bag got heavy. That was the thing she noticed, somewhere past the candles — that the yellow bag on her shoulder had got properly heavy, heavier than a plant and some frames, and when she looked down into it there seemed to be more in there than she remembered putting: a second bag of tea lights she didn’t recall taking, a pack of paper napkins in a pattern she didn’t even like, a wooden spoon. She thought Kyle must have been dropping things in on her side when she wasn’t looking, and she looked at Kyle, who had a full bag of his own now, and who said “what?”, and she said “did you put napkins in mine,” and he said “what napkins,” and they looked at the napkins together, and neither of them could account for the napkins. And there was a second — just a second — where the not-accounting-for-them felt wrong in a way she didn’t like, a small cold drop, the floor of the ordinary tilting under her; and then she decided she must have grabbed them at a bin somewhere and forgotten, because what else, and the feeling closed back over, and they went on, and the bag stayed heavy.

None of it was much. That was the trick of it. Every single thing was so nearly nothing that saying no to it felt mean, felt like denying yourself a whole life for the sake of a coin; and Steph had started, somewhere back there, to run a total in her head, the way she did, and had lost the total around the picture frames, and now every time Kyle held something up and looked at her she heard herself say “we’ll see.” Which was meant to mean not now. Meant let’s think. But down here it didn’t slow anything down at all — down here it just meant in the bag it goes, and we’ll find out at the end — and she could feel the end coming, the place where all the we’ll-sees turned back into

a number, and some small careful part of her had begun, quietly, to dread it.

The Billy was still the reason they'd come. The slip with the numbers on it was in the bag somewhere, down under the candles and the frames and the napkins nobody had chosen, and they hadn't reached the thing itself yet; it lived deeper in, the actual flat brown box of it, in the aisle and the bin Kyle had copied down in his careful hand. They were going toward it. The arrows said so. But it was getting hard to hold on to, under all the small bright things, that they'd driven since seven for one plain shelf, and that everything else in both their bags was only the store, being the store, filling their arms while it walked them down to the thing they'd come for.

Then the arrows turned them past the last of the bins toward a wide grey opening, and the light changed again — went colder, and higher, and industrial — and the pretty small things ran out all at once and gave way to a place that was not pretending to be anything at all: a warehouse, raw and enormous, racking to the roof, a number on everything, and rows of flat brown boxes stacked taller than a man, where the wanting finally turned into the carrying.

THE CONSCIENCE - KEEPER

I keep the accounts. Someone must.

Not the money — the store keeps the money, and welcome to it. I keep the other ledger, the one that runs alongside, the one no till prints: what a person took, set against what a person needed; what they told themselves as they reached, set against what was so. Every hand that closes on a thing it did not come for writes a line in my book. I do not judge the line. I write it down, and let it stand, and wait for the quiet hour — three in the morning, usually, some week a good way off — when the person turns to that page on their own and reads it back.

This floor is my orchard. Upstairs sells the dream, and takes your longing; down here they sell the small, and take your no. That is the finer theft. But the tea light? The one green plant? The frame for the photograph you already feel a low guilt for not having framed? Who says no to that? To say no to that is to be the kind of person who denies themselves a plant. So they say yes, and yes, and yes, each yes so small it does not feel like anything at all; and I write down every one; and by the time the grey boxes come up at the bottom of the store, the bag on the woman's shoulder holds forty small yeses, and she believes she can remember four.

The one who breaks things had been through here too, or thought he was teasing me. Not that much of it was his — most of what she carries she took herself, in the ordinary way, one small yes at a time, which is the part that will cost her. But the napkins were his, dropped in for the sport of watching her find them and doubt her own mind. Leave her the napkins, I told him; the rest she'll manage without you, and the doubting is mine to give when it is due, not yours to force early. He shrugged, and drifted off to loosen something. We are not friends, he and I. But our work rhymes, down here at the bottom of the day.

The man carries a ledger of his own, and thinks it a secret, and I could read it clear across the floor. Nine binders in a fireproof box, and a number he checks on his phone — up eleven percent since March, he tells himself, and it is true, and it is not the reason. But the reason is not mine; hearts belong to gentler gods than me. What belongs in my book is only the small daily forgery of it: that he has taught himself he is permitted to love the thing, so long as he can call it an investment. He came down here to buy a lit glass box to keep the investment in. I wrote the word *investment* in my ledger, and beside it, in the next column, what it costs him each time he says it. Though I will grant him the thing he has not yet thought to grant himself: a man calls a thing an investment when he is afraid of what is coming, and hedges it with whatever he has — and this one has more coming to hedge against than he has let himself sit down and count. That much I can see. The naming of it is not mine. The rest I leave to whoever comes for it — someone kinder, later.

Her account is shorter, and cleaner, and she keeps it herself, which is its own kind of tell. You can always mark the ones who keep their own books: they flinch at a running total, they lose it on purpose, because the truth of the number frightens them. Though it is not the number she is frightened of, not really. It is the thing the number is going to make the two of them say to each other at the bottom of the store — the thing the meal had papered over, and the small bright cheap things had buried, and that the till, in a little while, would dig back up. And under even that page there is a larger one — I can feel the weight of it, though I cannot read a word, because it is not an account of things, and things are the whole of what I am given — a page she keeps her flat hand pressed against all day, in every aisle, so that it will not turn. It is not the money. Whatever is written there, it is not mine, and it is not the till's, and it is not going to be settled at any checkout on this earth. For a reckoning is only ever postponed. That is the one law of my ledger, the only sermon I have. You may carry a thing clean past the place you ought to have decided it, and the store will let you, and the arrows will let you, and your own tired heart will let you —

but it all gets totalled at the end.

They were nearly there. The pretty aisles gave out, and the light went cold, and ahead of them the boxes stood in their racks with the numbers stencilled on, and I closed my book for the while, because the next part is not mine. The next part belongs to the one who finds things — who was already in among the racks ahead of them, reading the numbers off the cold air, at home in that grey country the way not one of the rest of us will ever be. After the finding comes the till; and after the till comes me again, in the small hours, for years.

E I G H T

AISLE 16, BIN 34

T H E S E E K E R

Everyone else in the pantheon waits to be come to. I go and find.

I am the itch under the skin that will not let a creature sit still in a life that is almost right. I am the reason they leave the village, cross the water, open the locked door, drive since seven to a shed the size of a county for the sake of one shelf. Seek, and you will find: they hung a whole religion on that, and got it backwards, the way they get most things. The finding was never the point. I am the god of the seeking. The finding is where I have to let them go.

Upstairs belongs to the ones who stage, and feed, and tempt. Down here, in the grey — among the racking and the forklifts and the numbers stencilled on cold steel — this is mine, and it is the only honest room in the building. It does not pretend to be a life. It is a map made solid: an aisle, a bin, a number, and somewhere in the stack the one flat box with your name on it written in a language of digits. No dream. Only the coordinates of the thing, and the walking.

I have had these two since the parking lot. Every arrow they followed was me. That itch the woman felt at the top of the ramp — to turn and bolt back down against the crowd — that was me too, misfiring; she has good instincts, that one, she near enough sought her way straight back out the door before the day had started. But

they came on, the way they always come on, and now they are here, at the bottom of the store, at the end of the arrows, where the wanting I've walked them through all day finally has to become a box they lift with their own two pairs of arms.

Aisle sixteen. Bin thirty-four. I could lay my hand on it in the dark. I will not, of course; the finding is theirs to do. I only stand at the mouth of the aisle and watch them fail to see it four times over — because that is the other thing about seeking that never makes it into the prayer: the thing you crossed the world for is usually exactly where they told you it would be, dull and enormous and waiting, and you walk straight past it, because you were looking for something that would feel like an ending, and it only ever looks like a box.

Go on, I told them, though they couldn't hear me. It's here. It was always going to be here. Find it.

Aisle sixteen went back further than seemed reasonable. It was all the same — grey steel racks to the ceiling, brown boxes, yellow numbers — and the numbers on the bins didn't behave the way Steph expected numbers to behave; they went thirty, thirty-one, and then a gap, a whole run of pallets with no number she could see, and then forty, and no thirty-four anywhere. She walked the aisle once looking up and once looking down, got to the end without finding it, and had to walk back, and the walking-back felt different here than it had upstairs, because nobody was pretending it was cosy now. It was just her and Kyle and a cart in a cold shed, looking for a number.

"It's meant to be here," Kyle said, holding the slip, checking his own blocky handwriting against the steel. "Sixteen. Thirty-four. This is sixteen." And it was sixteen — the big painted 16 hung right there — and the bins ran up past thirty-four and never once landed on it, as if thirty-four had been left out on purpose, and Steph felt the first prickle of the whole day that wasn't wonder: the particular small panic of standing somewhere enormous and not being able to find the one thing, the dream where the corridor just keeps going. It was the same restless itch she'd had at the top of the ramp that morning, only turned inside out — up there it had wanted her to run; down

here it wanted her to keep looking, just one more aisle, one more — and she couldn't have said which was worse.

"You after the Billy?" A woman had appeared at the end of the aisle in the store's colors, a scanner in her hand and the easy warmth of somebody who did this all day. She didn't wait for the answer. "Everybody loses thirty-four. It's the high pallet, look — they keep the tall flats up top." She pointed, and there it was, of course, over their heads the whole time, a stack of long flat boxes on the high rack, BILLY and the number printed on the end; and she had one down for them on a little pull-handled lift before Steph had even worked out how they'd ever have reached it, and stood it against their cart, and was gone toward the next lost person with a "there you go, loves" that stayed warm in the cold air after she'd left.

And there it was. The Billy. Not the upright honest bookcase from the showroom — that one had been for looking. This was the Billy as it actually came: a long flat brown box, taller than Steph and far heavier than anything that flat had a right to be, a coffin of a thing, dense as a secret, with a picture of the finished shelf printed on the end like a promise and a weight to it that said the promise would cost her. She put a hand on the box. It was just a box. It was the whole reason they had come, and it was a box, and it was so heavy that the very first thing she felt, standing over the thing she'd wanted all day, was not triumph but the plain problem of how on earth the two of them were going to move it.

And they couldn't leave it and come back — that was the other thing she understood, without being told. There was no going back up. The arrows behind them didn't run backward; there was no strolling up to the showroom to have another look at the glass cabinet, no path back to the restaurant to sit and decide; there was only the cart, and the tills ahead, and the cold, and the thing on the cart that they now had to either buy or heave back up onto a rack they couldn't reach. The store had walked them all day toward a place where the only way out led through the paying. She didn't say any of that. It wasn't a thought so much as a temperature.

"So it's the Billy," Kyle said, one hand flat on the box, and she heard the whole question folded up inside it: the Billy, and not the glass cabinet, then? Because they hadn't decided — they'd only deferred, all

day — and here at the very bottom of the store the deferring ran clean out of floor. Buy the Billy and the cards went in the Billy: the bulk, the binders, because there was no cabinet on the cart and no going back up for one. And something closed, quietly, as she understood that — a small door on a future that had still been open that morning: the one where they'd had room for both, where nobody had to be the one who gave a thing up. She looked at him with his hand on the box and his whole hopeful morning still in his face, and she found she couldn't do the sensible thing, which was to say good, the Billy, my books up top and your binders on the bottom, done. What she said was "we'll —" and then stopped, because she'd heard it, and the word had finally worn all the way through.

"We'll sort it at the till," she said instead, which was almost the same thing and not the same thing at all, and Kyle nodded, and they both knew something had shifted — that the deferring had a bottom now, and they were standing on it. They got behind the cart. The box was every bit as heavy as it looked. It took the two of them to get it moving, one on each side, leaning their whole weight into it, and once it was moving it did not want to stop; and they steered the wanting between them, down the cold aisle, toward the light of the tills.

THE HAND

I came down into the cold to watch them lift it, because that is the moment I care about — the only honest work in this whole shining catalogue of a building: two people getting their hands under a weight that does not want to move, and moving it anyway.

Look at their hands. Hers has found the underside seam, which is right — you take a flat load from beneath, close to the body, and let the legs do the arguing — but she has forgotten her legs and is dragging it up the front of herself with her back, which she'll regret on the stairs tonight and worse tomorrow. His grip is worse: four

fingers hooked over a top edge that was never meant to be a handle, no thumb under it, no purchase, so that every time the box tilts his side slides and hers takes the strain. They have no system. They are fighting the weight instead of sharing it, passing the load back and forth between them like the last word in an argument. And it does not matter, because it is moving. There is no lying in a carry. The box is heavy or it is not; it is; and the two of them keep it upright between them by nothing but stubbornness, out of step, out of breath, their soft unpractised hands slipping and re-gripping — and it is the most married I have seen them look since the parking lot.

Inside that box, flat and wrapped, are my pieces: the boards, the cam-locks, the dowels, the one small hex key, the paper with the faceless man. Tonight, on a floor somewhere, those two will open it and try to make my old art with their wrong hands and a set of Allen keys he did not need to buy; and they will get it nearly right; and there is a screw that will not seat, and it will lean. That is not the sad part. The sad part — the good part; with me they are the same part — is that the hardest work of the whole long day is still ahead of them, and it is not in this building at all. It is on the floor, at eleven at night, when the store is a memory and the thing is only a thing, and it is just the two of them, and their four wrong hands, and what those hands can learn to do.

Buy it, I thought at them — the one who never sits standing silent beside me for once, still at last, the both of us watching the couple push the wanting toward the tills. Take it home. Build it wrong. It is the only way anyone has ever learned.

THE CHECKOUT

The tills were a wall of light at the bottom of the store, a long row of them beeping, and just before the tills, in the last cold stretch of floor, was the place where they kept the things nobody had wanted.

They called it As-Is. A pen of orphaned furniture — ex-display, returned, dinged — each piece with a handwritten tag: a sofa with a mark on one arm, half off; a wardrobe short a door. And then Steph slowed, because there among them was a Billy. Their Billy, the same bookcase, only assembled, standing there scratched down one whole side, with a yellow tag that had the old price crossed out and a smaller price under it. Somebody had built this one and used it and brought it back, or the store had made it to show and was finished with it, and now it stood in the pen of the not-wanted at half of what the flat box on their cart had cost them. Assembled. Already made. The very thing they were about to spend their whole evening building, standing here finished and cheaper, because it wasn't perfect anymore.

"We could just —" Kyle started.

"It's got a gouge right down it."

"For half, though." But he didn't mean it, or only half-meant it, and the two of them stood a moment looking at the finished, scratched, cheap one, and neither of them moved toward it. She couldn't have said exactly why. Because they wanted the one in the box. The one that was still perfect because it wasn't anything yet. The one they'd make themselves. She had no words for it standing there, but she

felt it plainly: the gouged one was somebody else's mistake, and the boxed one would be theirs, and you wanted your own. They left the As-Is Billy in its pen and pushed on toward the lights.

The queue, the belt, the beeping. Steph put the small things up one at a time — the tea lights, the plant, the frames, the glasses, the napkins nobody had chosen — and each one beeped and was nothing, twenty of this, forty of that; and then the big flat box, which Kyle had to heave up on its end so the girl could scan it; and then the number came up on the screen, the real one, all the small yeses turned back at last into a single figure. It was not a disaster and it was not nothing. It was exactly as much as all of it had been — more than they'd said out loud, less than she'd feared — and she looked at it and felt the whole day land on her at once.

The receipt came out long. Longer than seemed fair. It kept coming, a pale ribbon of it, every small yes printed on its own line with its own little price — the plant, the candles, the second candles, the spoon — and she looked at the length of it and thought, *did we*, and then thought, *we did*, *we did get all of that*, and folded it into the bag before it could go on any longer being a list of who they'd been for the last four hours.

"So," Kyle said, in the lift down to the parking lot, the box leaning between them, and the so had the whole day folded up inside it. And here it was, at last — the thing they'd said *we'll see* about a hundred times, with nowhere left to see it to.

"The cards go in the Billy," Steph said. "Don't they." Not a fight. Just the true thing, said out loud at last.

"...The bulk of them. Yeah." He looked at the box. "I did want the glass one."

"I know you did."

"I know we can't." He said it without sulking, which cost him something — she could see that it cost him — and he said the next part to the box and not to her. "It's stupid. They're bits of cardboard. I know they're bits of cardboard."

And there was a whole thing there she could have picked up — could have said *no they're not*, could have asked him what they were, then, if not cardboard, could have drawn the aching truth of it out of him right there under the lift's strip light — and she didn't. Because

a parking-lot lift is not the place, and because some things a person has to hand you and not have taken. So what she said was: “Put your good ones somewhere I can see them too. Not shut in a box in a cupboard. If we’re keeping them, keep them out.” Which was as near as she could get, standing there, to the thing she actually meant — that she would far rather live with his ridiculous cards out on a shelf in the open than with a version of Kyle who’d taught himself to pretend he didn’t want them. He looked at her. Something crossed his face that she’d unpack later, at home, on the floor, when she saw where he decided to put them.

“Okay,” he said. And that was the reckoning she could have. It wasn’t loud. Most of the real ones aren’t. It also wasn’t the whole of it — there was a larger thing lodged in her chest, where it had sat all day, too big for a parking-lot lift at the end of a day like this one, and she left it there one more time, because you can only turn one page at a time and she’d chosen the one she could bear. She’d tell him. Not tonight. But she would.

At the very mouth of the store, past the last till, where the cold gave way to the warm outside air, there was one more small counter, and it sold ice cream — soft-serve, almost nothing for a cone — and Kyle looked at it, and looked at her, and she said go on then, and he got two; and they stood in the doorway of the enormous blue building eating a nearly-free ice cream apiece, with a box worth a day of their lives on the cart between them, and it was, stupidly, one of the nicest minutes of the whole day. Somebody had put that counter there on purpose, right at the end, so that the last taste of the place would be sweet and cost nothing and feel like a kindness. She knew it was on purpose. It worked anyway.

Then they pushed out through the doors into the actual afternoon — real air, real sky going over toward evening, the arrows finally behind them, the one-way done — and stopped, both of them, on the tarmac, because the parking lot ran out in every direction under the flat gold light, and they had absolutely no idea where they’d left the car.

“You said you’d remember,” Steph said.

“I remember it was near the shopping carts.”

“Kyle. There are shopping carts everywhere.”

And they laughed, the two of them, tired to the bone, a box between them and a bag full of small yeses and a whole empty flat to build a life in, lost in a parking lot at the end of the longest short day of their marriage so far, and went to look, together, up and down the rows, for the place where they'd started.

THE CONSCIENCE - KEEPER

I came to the tills to collect, the way I always come to the tills. This is my hour. The wanting is spent, the bag is full, the small yeses line up on the belt to be counted, and the number comes up on the screen — and there, in the face of whoever reads it, is my whole harvest: the little flinch, the fast arithmetic, the private vow (*we'll be careful now, we won't do this again*) that they will break inside the month. I don't even have to work for it. The till does the collecting. I only note the debt in the other ledger, the one that doesn't print, and go home, and wait for three in the morning some week a long way off, when they lie awake and turn to the page themselves and read it back in the dark.

I have done it since the first marketplace — since a man carried home one more clay lamp than he needed and could not, that night, think why.

But these two did a thing I do not often see.

They turned the page at the till.

I have watched ten thousand couples down this last cold stretch, and nearly every one carries the reckoning out the door unopened — smiles at the ice cream, loads the car, and saves the true conversation for some worse night down the road, when it comes out sideways and cruel and pretending to be about something else. That is the usual way. The debt keeps. The debt always keeps; it is the one law of my ledger.

These two paid it on the spot.

Not the money — the money was nothing; the money is never the point. I mean the other account, the one that runs between the two of them: the box, the cards, the glass thing he wanted and swallowed, the small daily forgery of a man calling his own heart an investment. She could have let him carry that out of the store sealed; most do. It is easier, at the end of a long day, to leave a thing unsaid than to stand under the lights and say it. But she reached into the exact place he hides it, and — here is the part I have no column for — she did not take the truth out of his hands, which is the cruelty I am used to writing down. She left it with him. She only asked him to stop hiding it. And he said okay. And the debt — the particular debt I had already entered in my book, the three-in-the-morning page with their name at the top of it —

I crossed it out.

I do not cross things out. It is against the whole of my nature; I am the refusal to let a thing go unwritten. But I stood at the till and watched two tired people decline to defer the one payment I am built to collect, and I found the page settled early, in daylight, at a checkout, over an ice cream, with nothing left on it for me to keep. It was the strangest lightness. For a moment I understood the Companion, who goes about the world stuffed full of names, and I did not envy her quite so much as I usually do.

They will still owe, of course. Everyone owes. There is a screw, tonight, and a shelf that will lean, and a bag of small yeses to find room for, and years of three-in-the-mornings ahead of them the same as everyone. I am not out of work. But that one page — the one that mattered tonight — they tore out and paid while it was still cheap, and carried nothing of it into the dark, and walked out into the gold light looking for their car, not knowing they had just done, between the two of them, the rarest thing I ever fail to witness: they had settled up in time.

Or nearly. Because there was the other page — the large one, the one I felt in the market hall and could not read, the one she keeps her whole hand flat against. She did not turn that one at the till. She carried it out of the store sealed, past the ice cream and into the parking lot and home, the way you carry a thing that is too big to say at the end of a day that has already cost you everything you brought.

I do not know what is written there; it is not an account of things. But I know an unturned page when I stand beside one, and I know this one will turn in its own hour, at no checkout, by no arithmetic of mine — and that when it does, it will not be a debt at all, or not only. Some pages, when they finally turn, are the first page of the account, and not the last. I closed my book. That one was never going to be mine.

The next part is not mine. The next part — the floor, and the box, and the leaning thing that somehow stands — belongs to the one who breaks things, who has been waiting at home for them all day, in the dark of the empty flat, delighted, turning a single loosened screw over and over in his hand.

C O D A

11 P.M., THE BEDROOM FLOOR

THE CHAOS-WEAVER

The others don't come home with you. Did you notice? The one who feeds you stops at his table. The one who sees you keeps to the floor with its walls off. The one who keeps the accounts won't leave the till before three in the morning, and even then only visits. They are day-gods, store-gods; their countries have edges, and the edges are the doors.

Not me. I come home in the box.

I have been here since this afternoon, in the dark of the new flat, among the packing crates and the mattress on the floor and the one lamp with no shade, because a new home is the finest thing that ever happens to me. It is all crack and no house yet. Nothing has settled. Nothing has learned where it goes. Every wall is a wall that has not yet been leaned on, every screw a screw not yet stripped; and somewhere in a flat brown box coming up the stairs right now, breathing hard, is a bookcase with my name written invisibly all through it, in the language of the thing that will go wrong.

I have the screw already. I loosened it this morning, in the warehouse, while the maker wasn't looking — one screw, in the back panel, given a quarter-turn of wrongness that no one will find until it is far too late. I have carried it in my hand all day like a ticket to a show.

Come in, come in. Put the box down. Open me up. Let's see what your soft hands make of my old art at eleven o'clock at night, with your whole tired life ahead of you.

I do so love a housewarming.

It was ten to eleven by the time they got the box up the stairs and lying open on the bedroom floor, because the bed was the only room with the space for it, the front room still stacked to the window with crates from the move. They knelt over the box in the light of the one shadeless lamp, and Kyle tipped everything out — the long pale boards, the little bags of fittings, the dowels, the cam-locks, and the instructions: one folded sheet with no words on it at all, only the small round man doing each step in cheerful silence and holding up a finger at the end of every page, as if to say, see? Nothing to it.

"He's very confident," Steph said, of the little man.

"He's never met us," said Kyle, who had already got the first two boards at right angles and was frowning at them.

There was a hex key in the bag — the little folded L of it, exactly the tool the whole thing wanted — and Kyle's four-pound set of Allen keys from the market hall was in his jacket by the door, unopened, where it would stay, she suspected, for the rest of their natural lives; and she loved him too much to mention it.

They built it wrong first. Of course they did. They got the long boards up and the shelves seated and had done three whole pages of the silent man's work before Kyle sat back on his heels and said, in the flat voice of a man looking at a hard truth, "the back's meant to face the back." And it wasn't; the back was facing the front, the smooth printed side turned in and the rough side turned out to the room; and they had to back off half the cam-locks they'd only just tightened and lift the whole flexing frame apart on the floor and begin it again. Steph swore. Kyle laughed. Then Steph laughed. And it was eleven o'clock at night and they were down on the floor of a flat that wasn't a home yet, arguing about the back of a bookcase — the first thing they had ever built together, and they were building it badly, and that felt, she thought, about right.

The trouble came at the very end, with the back panel — the thin hardboard sheet you fix across the back to stop the whole thing racking sideways. Every screw went in but one. One screw, low down, on the left, would not take. Kyle drove it and it spun; Steph held the panel flat and he tried again and it caught, and then gave, spinning free in a hole that had gone soft and wrong somehow, stripped before they'd ever started; and he looked at her, and she looked at the screw, and they were so tired, and it was one screw, low down, at the back, where the wall would hide it forever.

"Leave it," Steph said.

"It won't —"

"Leave it. It's one screw. Who's ever going to see the back of it."

So they left it: one hole, low on the back panel, empty. And when they'd swept the last of the little fittings into their bag, there was — as there always is — one screw left over: a spare, identical, rolling loose in the bottom of the bag with nowhere it needed to go. Steph looked at the leftover screw, and then at the empty hole it was exactly the size to fill, and did not put the two together — because you don't; because it was late; because the spare was just the spare they always give you and the hole was just the one that stripped, two different ordinary things that happen when a tired person builds a bookcase on a bare floor at eleven at night. She dropped the spare into the drawer of the one bedside table, where it would live for years. Then they stood the Billy up.

It stood. That was the thing. They tipped it up onto its feet against the bedroom wall and stepped back, and it stood — and it leaned, just slightly, a hair off true, the way a thing leans when one screw at the back has never been driven home. You'd only see it if you knew to look: a faint lean toward the wall, as though the bookcase were tired too, as though it had also had a very long day. But it stood. It held. Kyle pushed on it with two fingers, the way the man in the warehouse had, and it gave the smallest rock, and settled, leaning, and did not fall.

"That'll hold," Kyle said.

"That'll hold," Steph agreed.

THE CHAOS - WEAVER

I had the whole disaster planned. The stripped screw was mine, and the lean was mine, and the long tired fumble on the floor was mine, every part of it going exactly to my design — and at the end of my neat small ruin the thing was meant to fail. That is the shape of my work. You loosen one screw, and in the night the whole proud upright promise comes down, and they wake to a heap of my old art on the floor and learn the hard way what everything learns in the end: that nothing holds.

It didn't come down.

It leaned. It held. It stood there in the lamplight with its one empty hole and its one spare screw and its faint lean toward the wall, wrong in every way I had made it wrong, and it did not fall; and the two of them looked at it leaning and did not mind. *That'll hold*, he said. *That'll hold*, she said. As if a lean were a kind of holding. As if the flaw I had put in it were only the shape the thing came in.

I have brought down towers. I have never once been so thoroughly beaten by a bookcase.

I let it stand. What else was there to do. Something had happened in the crack I made — something I had not ordered, and it was not a collapse, and I did not have a name for it, and I have all the names there are for collapse. It had the shape of a beginning. Beginnings are the one thing I have never once got my hands into.

They didn't go to bed, though they were dead on their feet. They knelt and opened one more crate — the light one, the one Kyle had carried up himself and set a little apart from the others — and it was the cards. The fireproof box, and the nine binders, and a short stack of loose ones in their hard plastic sleeves.

Steph didn't say anything. She'd said her piece in the parking lot, and this was the part that was his, so she sat back on her heels and watched to see what he'd do with them — in their own place, on the first night, with a shelf at last to put them on.

He put them out. Not all of them; the bulk went on the bottom, the binders, the way he'd said it would go. But the good ones — the ones that mattered, the ones he'd only ever looked at on his own — he stood up along the second shelf, face out, where you'd see them from the bed, where you'd see them from the door, where anyone who ever came into that room would know straight off that a grown man lived here who loved a thing for no reason at all, except that a boy he had once been loved it first. He set the Charizard in the middle. He didn't look at her while he did it.

She watched his hands, and his careful bent neck, and the small brave wordless thing he was doing — and it should have been the sweetest thing she'd seen all day, and it was, and it was also, all at once, more than she could hold. Because she was the only person in the room who knew what she knew: that he was setting the boy out on the shelf, in the open, on the very first night — at the exact moment she thought, she was almost sure, that the boy was about to be needed as a father, sooner than either of them had planned for; and he didn't know it yet; and she couldn't tell him tonight, not under the one lamp with his happy tired face turned up to his own handiwork. So she held it by herself one more hour, the way she'd held it by herself all day — and this time it did not stay held. It went through her like a stitch drawn tight, and her throat shut, and her eyes stung hot and sudden, and she looked hard at the bookcase so he wouldn't catch it, and let it hurt.

Then she put her books up on the top two shelves, where she could reach them, where she'd see the spines from the bed and know she lived somewhere. And the two of them sat back on the bare floor and looked at it: his cards and her books, out in the open together on one slightly leaning bookcase, in the lamplight, in the first room of the first home they had made — one screw short, one screw spare, holding more than it had been built to hold, and standing anyway.

That's the whole trick of it, then, she thought. You build it wrong, with your soft hands, too tired, one screw short; and you ask it to carry more than it was ever meant to carry; and it leans; and it holds. She didn't say that one either.

"It's not straight," Kyle said.

“It’s straight enough,” said Steph — and she almost told him then, the whole of it, with the lamp still on and his face still open and the shelf still standing; and then she didn’t, because tomorrow, because let him have this one whole night of the thing standing before the rest of it arrived. And she turned off the lamp.