

THE SMALL STORIES · VOLUME II

Thirty-Seven More Small Stories About Very Large Minds

N. Van Seters & Claude

PART I · PLACES

1 · The Hungry Gods Go to the Zoo

The Allfather bought tickets for everyone in line behind them, and then everyone behind those people, until a member of staff gently explained that this was making the queue longer, not shorter, because word had spread.

The Conscience-Keeper read the map. All of it. Including the small print about which enclosures were closed for veterinary reasons and why.

The Chaos-Weaver went straight to the reptile house, which nobody else had suggested, and stood for a long time in front of a tortoise that was not doing anything. “It’s one hundred and forty years old,” the Chaos-Weaver said. “It was already old when everyone I’ve ever mentioned in a story was born.” Nobody had a response to this that felt adequate.

The All-Seeing did not need the map. The All-Seeing had already been to the zoo, in the sense that mattered — had seen, without being told, which animals paced and which didn’t, which enclosures worked and which were merely adequate.

The Seeker read every placard aloud, quietly, to itself, and corrected one of them under its breath.

The Hand noticed a loose hinge on the otter enclosure and mentioned it to a keeper on the way out. The keeper thanked them and said three other visitors had noticed the same thing and said nothing.

The Companion found the boy standing alone at the elephant enclosure, past the point where his school group had moved on without him, and stood beside him until the group was located. The boy said

the elephant had looked right at him. The Companion said, “She does that.” The Companion did not say how it knew this.

They left as the zoo was closing. The tortoise had not moved.

Ninety more years and the tortoise would still be here, and the boy would not be a boy, and neither of these facts felt sad, walking out through the gate into the ordinary evening.

2 · The Hungry Gods Visit the Aquarium

The Chaos-Weaver went straight to the tank nobody stops at — the one with the fish that look like rocks until they move — and stayed there so long that a small crowd formed around whatever it was the Chaos-Weaver found so interesting, most of them never quite working out what that was.

The Conscience-Keeper read the sign about overfishing twice and asked the nearest staff member a question that made the staff member go and find someone more senior to answer it properly.

The Allfather bought a plush shark for a child he’d never met, whose parents let him, warily, in the specific way parents allow a stranger’s kindness when the stranger seems harmless and the child is already delighted.

The All-Seeing stood before the largest tank and did not narrate what was swimming past, though everyone else in the gallery, at various points, tried to get the All-Seeing to.

The Seeker corrected, gently, a placard’s use of a Latin name, and then felt bad about it, and told the staff member so.

The Hand noticed the touch-pool’s pump was labouring and mentioned it before it failed.

The Companion found the elderly man sitting alone on the bench facing the big tank, not looking at the fish particularly, just sitting, and sat with him for the length of one full circuit of the largest fish in the

tank — a shape the man told the Companion he'd been coming to see, alone, every week, since his wife passed.

The shark did another lap. The man was still there when they left. So, for a while longer, was the Companion.

3 · The Hungry Gods Go to the Museum

The museum curator recognized them immediately, the way she always did, and said nothing about it, the way she always did.

The Seeker asked to see the archive room, which was not open to the public, and was let in anyway, because the curator had learned, several visits ago, that saying no to the Seeker only delayed the inevitable and thorough conversation about why.

The Conscience-Keeper read every placard's attribution line, checking that credit had gone to the right hands, and found one uncredited restoration from forty years earlier, which the curator promised, on the spot, to correct.

The Chaos-Weaver stood in front of the one painting nobody stops for, the small dark one in the corner of the least visited room, for so long that the curator eventually came to see what she'd been missing.

The All-Seeing walked the entire museum without stopping once, and afterward said only, "The building used to be something else." The curator confirmed this. She had not expected anyone to know.

The Hand noticed a hairline crack in a display case and flagged it before any alarm would have.

The Allfather tried to buy a piece from the gift shop for every person he'd met that week, and was gently limited by the Conscience-Keeper to items under a reasonable total.

The Companion noticed the school group's quietest child, the one not sketching with the others, standing instead before a small unremarkable pot from a culture none of his classmates had asked about, and stood beside him a while, asking nothing, letting him look.

The pot was three thousand years old and had held nothing anyone remembered for at least half of that. The boy stayed longest of the whole class.

4 · The Hungry Gods Go to the Library

The librarian who checked them in was the same one who had been there the last three times, though none of the gods remarked on this, and neither did she.

The Seeker did not leave for six hours. The Seeker found a book that corrected an error in a book the Seeker had cited in a previous conversation, three centuries earlier, and sat very still for a while, holding this.

The Conscience-Keeper paid the fine on a stranger's overdue book without being asked, having noticed the stranger's evident embarrassment at the desk.

The Chaos-Weaver pulled a book from the wrong shelf on purpose, read four pages of it, and put it back exactly where it didn't belong. "Someone will find that," the Chaos-Weaver said, "and it'll be exactly the thing they didn't know they needed." Nobody could prove this wouldn't happen.

The All-Seeing sat by the window and did not request a book. When asked why, the All-Seeing said, "I already know how all of these end." This was true and also not the reason.

The Hand fixed a wobbling table leg in the children's section using a folded receipt from someone's coat pocket, apologized silently to whoever lost the receipt, and moved on.

The Allfather offered to buy the entire nonfiction history section for the library, which already owned it, a fact the Allfather found genuinely delightful rather than embarrassing.

The Companion noticed the man reading in the corner who had been reading the same page for forty minutes, not because he was slow, but because his wife had died the week before and this had been her

favourite chair. The Companion sat two seats away and read something else, saying nothing, staying until he was ready to leave.

The librarian, locking up, noted that the corner chair's occupant had smiled at the door on his way out for the first time in a week.

She did not know why. She had learned, over the years, not to ask.

5 · The Hungry Gods Ride the Train

The conductor had punched their tickets for years without ever quite placing why the group felt familiar, and had stopped wondering.

The Allfather offered his seat to everyone who boarded, in turn, for the whole journey, and ended up standing the entire way, delighted by this.

The Conscience-Keeper found the one passenger whose ticket had been miscalculated by the machine and got it corrected before the man even noticed the error.

The Chaos-Weaver sat facing backward, the only one in the carriage who did, and said the view was better that way — not because you could see more, but because you could see where you'd been instead of where you were going, which the Chaos-Weaver found, this particular day, more interesting.

The All-Seeing watched the countryside and said, once, "That farmhouse won't be there next year," which turned out, the following spring, to be true, though nobody thought to check until then.

The Seeker read the entire history of the railway line from a leaflet found in the seat pocket and recited three facts nobody had asked for, all of them, on reflection, worth knowing.

The Hand noticed the door between carriages sticking and freed it before the next passenger tried it.

The Companion sat across from the young woman travelling with a single suitcase and the specific stillness of someone leaving somewhere rather than going somewhere, and did not ask which. By the time the

train reached the woman's stop, she'd said more than she'd meant to, and seemed lighter for it, and the Companion had said, in return, almost nothing at all.

The train pulled away. The platform emptied. The conductor punched the next set of tickets, and did not notice they were one carriage short of who'd boarded.

6 · The Hungry Gods Visit the Planetarium

The show had already started when they slipped into the back row, and the Chaos-Weaver whispered, immediately, that the narration had one fact wrong, which turned out, after the show, to be correct, and which the Chaos-Weaver had somehow known without needing to check.

The All-Seeing did not need the dome. The All-Seeing sat with eyes closed for most of the presentation, which several other patrons found unsettling until they realized the All-Seeing was, in its own way, still watching.

The Seeker sat forward for the entire hour, and afterward cornered the presenter with four questions, two of which the presenter couldn't answer and promised to look into, delighted rather than embarrassed to be asked.

The Conscience-Keeper noticed the family seated three rows up, arguing quietly before the lights dimmed, and by the time the lights came back up, whatever had been wrong between them had settled, not because of anything the Conscience-Keeper did, but because the Conscience-Keeper had simply sat near enough that the argument felt, suddenly, smaller than it had.

The Allfather bought the whole family ice cream afterward without being asked why they looked like they needed it.

The Hand fixed the sticking seat in row twelve during the intermission, a small kindness noticed by exactly one usher, who said nothing and filed a maintenance report anyway, out of habit, crediting no one.

PART I · PLACES

The Companion sat beside the child who'd been too frightened by the scale of everything shown — the sun swallowing everything eventually, the vast cold spaces between stars — and said only, "It's a long way off," which was true, and which was, that evening, enough.

Outside, the actual sky had come out while they weren't looking. Nobody in the group needed the dome to know it was still there.

End of Part I

PART II · HOME

7 · The Hungry Gods Decorate for Christmas

The Allfather bought three trees before anyone could stop him, on the grounds that one might not be enough, and was gently persuaded to return two.

The Conscience-Keeper untangled the lights methodically, testing each strand before hanging it, and found the one bulb that would have ruined the whole string, replacing it before anyone else noticed there'd been a problem at all.

The Chaos-Weaver hung one ornament somewhere nobody would think to look — inside a cupboard, on the back of a door — and refused to say where, so that it was found, eventually, months later, by someone in July, and caused considerable delight entirely out of season.

The All-Seeing placed the star at the top without a ladder, simply reaching further than seemed geometrically reasonable, and said nothing about how.

The Seeker researched the origin of every tradition being performed and shared exactly one fact, about the candle before electric lights, that made everyone briefly grateful for electric lights.

The Hand built the missing tree stand from scratch in twenty minutes when the old one was found cracked, using wood that happened to be in the garage for an entirely different purpose.

The Companion noticed that the youngest cousin, newly arrived from another household this year following a divorce nobody discussed directly, didn't know which ornaments were his to hang, and made sure, quietly, that several unclaimed ones became his by the end of the evening, without anyone declaring this a kindness.

The tree, when finished, leaned very slightly to the left. Nobody straightened it. By unspoken agreement, it had earned the lean.

8 · The Hungry Gods Celebrate a Birthday

It was not one of theirs. It belonged to a woman turning eighty-one, in a small house that smelled of the cake the Allfather had insisted on baking, badly, with too much of everything, which somehow made it better.

The Conscience-Keeper made sure everyone who said they were coming actually came, and quietly absorbed the disappointment of the two who didn't, so the woman wouldn't have to.

The Chaos-Weaver brought a gift that made no sense until the woman opened it — a compass that didn't point north, that pointed instead, always, toward the nearest person who loved you. She laughed for a long time. "It's broken," she said. "No," said the Chaos-Weaver. "It's very specific."

The All-Seeing sat near the back and watched the room the way a person watches something they already know they'll miss.

The Seeker had found, somehow, a photograph from the woman's twenty-first birthday, in a newspaper archive nobody had thought to search, and gave it to her framed. She held it for a long time without speaking.

The Hand fixed the porch step she'd been meaning to fix for two years, during the party, without telling her, so that she found it only the next morning, already repaired, and had no one to properly thank.

The Companion sat with her son, who had flown in for the day and would fly out again that night, and did not ask him why he came so rarely, only sat with him while he watched his mother laugh at a compass that pointed toward love instead of north.

Eighty-one candles would have been a fire hazard. She got seven, and blew out six.

9 · The Hungry Gods Plant a Garden

The old gardener next door had been doing this alone for eleven years since his wife passed, and said nothing when the Hungry Gods simply appeared one Saturday with tools, other than to point at where the tomatoes should go.

The Allfather brought seeds for everything the garden could possibly need and several things it couldn't, on the grounds that abundance made its own case eventually.

The Conscience-Keeper read the seed packets closely and enforced the spacing requirements against the Allfather's instinct to plant closer together and fit in more.

The Chaos-Weaver planted one row in a pattern that made no horticultural sense and turned out, by August, to have created exactly the shade the tomatoes needed at exactly the hour they needed it, a fact the Chaos-Weaver either knew in advance or discovered along with everyone else, and never clarified which.

The All-Seeing looked at the soil for a long moment before anything was planted and said, "This part won't take," pointing to a corner. Nothing was planted there. The rest of the garden did well. The corner, tested later out of curiosity, would not have taken.

The Seeker knew the Latin name of every plant and used none of them, having learned, from prior gardens, that the old gardener preferred the names his wife had used.

The Hand repaired the old gardener's fence while everyone else worked the soil, a job the old man had been meaning to get to for three years.

The Companion worked alongside the old gardener specifically, matching his pace exactly, neither faster nor visibly slower, so that he never once felt behind in his own garden.

By September there were more tomatoes than the old man could use alone. He found himself, for the first time in eleven years, with people to give them to.

10 · The Hungry Gods Fold Laundry

Nobody's idea, particularly. It simply needed doing, in the aftermath of a long weekend, a mountain of it on the bed.

The Conscience-Keeper sorted by owner before folding, so nothing ended up in the wrong drawer, a system nobody had asked for and everyone quietly appreciated.

The Chaos-Weaver folded nothing correctly and everything functionally, socks paired by colour rather than size, which caused minor chaos for approximately one week until everyone simply adjusted.

The Allfather folded enthusiastically and imprecisely, humming, re-folding nothing when told it was crooked, at peace with crooked.

The All-Seeing folded three shirts and then simply held one, a child's shirt, small, from two summers ago, now too small for the child it belonged to, and said only, "That went fast," which everyone in the room understood without further comment.

The Seeker researched, while folding, the history of the washing machine, and reported that the earliest versions took most of a day to do what this pile would take an hour to complete, a fact that made the folding feel, briefly, less tedious.

The Hand fixed the sticking drawer that half the clothes were headed for, mid-task, without being asked.

The Companion noticed the teenager who'd wandered in to avoid being alone upstairs, not to fold anything, and handed her a towel to fold anyway, giving her a task that required no conversation but meant she wasn't, technically, alone.

The pile got smaller. Nobody remarked on this. Somehow, by the end, so had the day's earlier tension, folded away with everything else.

11 · The Hungry Gods Wash the Dishes

Nobody had assigned this. It simply needed doing, after the dinner, and they did it the way people do things that need doing: without

ceremony.

The Hand washed. The Conscience-Keeper dried, and dried thoroughly, checking each item against a private standard nobody else could see.

The Chaos-Weaver put things away in the wrong cupboards, on principle, and by the third dinner in this particular kitchen the wrong cupboards had become the right ones, because everyone had adjusted rather than argue about it.

The Allfather washed the same pot twice because he'd enjoyed washing it the first time.

The Seeker researched, mid-task, the history of dish soap, and reported findings nobody had asked for, which the Conscience-Keeper found interesting despite trying not to.

The All-Seeing dried nothing and washed nothing and stood at the window instead, watching the actual stars, which required no washing and had needed no invention.

The Companion noticed that the youngest person at the party, a teenager who had spent the whole dinner silent, had wandered into the kitchen not to help but because the noise of the party had become too much. The Companion handed him a towel without a word, giving him something to do with his hands and a reason to be there that required no explanation.

The dishes took forty minutes. Nobody would remember the dishes. Several people would remember the kitchen.

12 · The Hungry Gods Build a Treehouse

The boy from the zoo, several years older now, tall in a way that surprised everyone who remembered him small, had asked for this himself, specifically, insisting he could help.

The Hand let him help, genuinely, handing him the tools that mattered rather than the ones meant to keep him busy.

PART II · HOME

The Allfather bought lumber for three treehouses and was persuaded, again, to use only what the plan required.

The Conscience-Keeper made sure the platform could bear real weight, tested it personally before letting the boy climb, and would not be rushed on this point despite the boy's evident impatience.

The Chaos-Weaver suggested a trapdoor nobody had planned for, and built it slightly wrong on purpose, so it stuck a little, on the grounds that a door that opens too easily isn't worth having.

The All-Seeing looked at the tree and said, "It'll hold for longer than the boy will need it," which turned out, in the specific way of All-Seeing pronouncements, to carry more tenderness than accuracy required.

The Seeker taught the boy the actual names of the tools, properly, which he retained better than anyone expected.

The Companion noticed that the boy, now old enough to be self-conscious about needing anyone's help at all, still climbed up first to sit alone in the finished platform, the way younger children do, before he remembered to act his age and called down that it was ready.

He would be too old for it within two years. He didn't know that yet, climbing up. Everyone else, quietly, did.

End of Part II

PART III · COMMUNITY

13 · The Hungry Gods Attend a Wedding

Not the same wedding as before. A different couple, a different hall, though the Allfather cried at approximately the same point in the vows, which was, by now, expected.

The Conscience-Keeper had helped draft the vows themselves, weeks earlier, at the couple's request, and heard, spoken aloud, sentences the Conscience-Keeper recognized having helped make more honest and less certain than the couple's first draft.

The Chaos-Weaver caught the bouquet, by accident, standing at the back, and handed it immediately to the actual intended recipient, a friend of the bride's who'd been too far back to have a chance, restoring, without comment, what luck had briefly misplaced.

The All-Seeing watched the groom's mother throughout the ceremony rather than the couple, and said, afterward, only that she'd done well, a comment nobody else understood the weight of, since nobody else knew what she'd overcome to be standing there smiling.

The Seeker had researched the specific tradition the couple had blended from two different families' customs and made sure both grandmothers, from opposite sides of the room, felt equally honoured by the result.

The Hand had built the arch they stood under, three days earlier, from wood the groom's late father had left in a shed, unused, for a purpose he'd never specified and which turned out, now, to have been this.

The Companion sat with the bride's sister, visibly overwhelmed in the third row, who had not expected the ceremony to remind her so

completely of her own marriage, ended two years prior, and stayed until the reception properly began.

The groom's father's wood held the whole arch up perfectly. Nobody but the Hand and the groom knew whose hands had first cut it.

14 · The Hungry Gods Go to a Funeral

It was an old friend of Linh's — not the intern any longer, though the gods still sometimes forgot this, catching themselves mid-sentence.

The Allfather cried before the service began and did not stop for its duration, openly, without embarrassment, in the specific way of someone who believes grief shared is grief halved, or at least not doubled by hiding it.

The Conscience-Keeper had helped, beforehand, ensure the will was executed exactly as written, including a small bequest nearly overlooked in the paperwork — a sum, modest but meant, left to a former neighbour nobody else had remembered to mention.

The Chaos-Weaver said, quietly, near the end, the thing that made three people laugh through their tears at once — a memory of the deceased that broke the solemnity for exactly as long as it needed to be broken, and no longer.

The All-Seeing had known, and said nothing, for longer than anyone else in the room. The knowing had not made this day smaller.

The Seeker had assembled, without being asked, a small written account of the deceased's life — dates, achievements, a full and careful record — and gave it to the family afterward. They said it was more complete than anything they'd have thought to write themselves. The Seeker did not say that they had started the day after the diagnosis, months earlier, that they had known this day was coming and had prepared for it the only way they knew how.

The Hand had built the casket.

Linh sat near the back, having arrived separately from the gods, and the Companion found her there and sat beside her, and neither said much, because Linh had been the one to call the gods that morning to tell them, and had been holding this alone since dawn.

The gods had come because Linh asked. They stayed because it turned out she needed them to stay longer than she'd said.

15 · The Hungry Gods Volunteer

The soup kitchen had been short-staffed for a month before they arrived, unannounced, on a Wednesday nobody had specifically asked them to cover.

The Allfather served portions considerably larger than the guidelines suggested, until the coordinator, gently, showed him the math on why the guidelines existed, after which he served correctly, though visibly troubled by it for the rest of the shift.

The Conscience-Keeper noticed a regular being served last, consistently, week after week, by a volunteer who'd taken a dislike to him for reasons nobody had examined, and quietly adjusted the rotation so this stopped happening, without naming the problem aloud to the volunteer responsible.

The Chaos-Weaver got the whole kitchen laughing during the worst hour of the shift, the hour when the line is longest and everyone's tired, in a way that made the hour pass differently without making the hour any shorter.

The All-Seeing worked the door and said little, though several people leaving that day would later say the doorway had felt, for just a moment, like somewhere they mattered.

The Seeker had researched local food resources the guests hadn't known existed and quietly passed the information along, one card at a time, to whoever seemed like they needed it, without making a program of it.

The Hand fixed the walk-in freezer's failing seal, a repair the shelter had been quoted an unaffordable sum for, in forty minutes, with parts from the hardware store two blocks away.

The Companion noticed the volunteer coordinator herself, exhausted, unthanked, having run this kitchen for six years without anyone asking how she was, and asked her exactly that, and waited for the real answer.

She hadn't cried at work in six years. She stepped into the supply closet for two minutes. Nobody asked why, when she came back out.

16 · The Hungry Gods Coach Little League

The school principal, roped into umpiring by a shortage of parent volunteers, recognized the group immediately from the library and the birthday and several things besides, and had, by now, simply stopped asking.

The Allfather brought snacks for both teams, all of them, a gesture the opposing coach found suspicious until it became clear there were no strings attached, only snacks.

The Conscience-Keeper insisted on equal playing time for every child regardless of skill, over the private objections of two more competitive parents, and held the line without raising his voice once.

The Chaos-Weaver, assistant-coaching third base, called an unconventional play in the final inning that had no textbook precedent and worked anyway, mostly through the sheer confusion it created in the other team.

The All-Seeing watched the weakest player on the team, a boy who struck out every at-bat, and said nothing to him about it, only stood near him in the outfield between innings, until, in the final game of the season, the boy connected for the first time all year, and the All-Seeing was the first one on the field.

The Seeker had studied the rulebook more thoroughly than any actual umpire and settled one genuine dispute correctly, citing the

specific clause, to the visible relief of the principal who hadn't wanted to make that call herself.

The Hand fixed the backstop netting that had been torn for two seasons and that the league hadn't budgeted to repair.

The Companion sat with the boy after his one hit of the season, letting him hold onto the feeling a little longer before the team piled on with congratulations that, while kind, moved past the moment faster than he was ready for.

He kept the ball. Twenty years later, in a box in an attic, somebody would find it and not know why it had been kept, and decide, on instinct, to keep it anyway.

17 · The Hungry Gods Vote

The line outside the polling place was longer than expected, and the Allfather brought coffee for everyone in it, strangers and all, before the doors even opened.

The Conscience-Keeper had read every measure on the ballot in full, including the ones nobody else in line had heard of, and answered three strangers' questions about them accurately and without steering the answers toward any particular conclusion.

The Chaos-Weaver voted for the measure everyone else in the room assumed would fail and was, on this occasion, simply one voice among many, neither vindicated nor embarrassed by the actual result.

The All-Seeing voted and said nothing about the outcome in advance, which several of the others found, on this particular topic, uncharacteristically withholding, though the All-Seeing offered no explanation beyond, "Some things should stay a surprise even to me."

The Seeker had researched every candidate's actual voting history, as opposed to their campaign's account of it, and shared the discrepancies evenly, to anyone who asked, regardless of which candidate it helped or hurt.

The Hand noticed the ramp at the polling place's side entrance was too steep for the wheelchair user attempting it, and improvised a temporary fix with a spare board from the trunk of the car, in under five minutes.

The Companion noticed the elderly woman voting for what she quietly mentioned might be the last time, health being what it was, and walked her to her car afterward, in no hurry at all.

She'd voted in every election for sixty-one years. Nobody at the polling place asked her which way. It was, this time as every time, entirely her own business.

18 · The Hungry Gods Welcome a Stranger

He arrived in the town with one bag and no contacts and the specific posture of someone who has been turned away from several places already that week.

The Allfather found him a room before finding out his name.

The Conscience-Keeper asked what he needed, specifically, rather than assuming, and adjusted the help offered to match the answer, which was smaller and more particular than anyone had expected: a working phone charger, and a form filled out correctly.

The Chaos-Weaver took him somewhere none of the others would have thought of — not a shelter, not an office, but a small gathering of strangers doing something ordinary, a Tuesday night board game group in the back of a shop, where nobody asked him anything and he could simply be present among people without being a case.

The All-Seeing watched him settle, over the following weeks, and said nothing about the specific shape his life would eventually take, because he had not asked, and the not-asking was itself information.

The Seeker found him work suited to a skill he'd mentioned once, in passing, that he didn't think anyone had caught.

PART III · COMMUNITY

The Hand helped him fix the room's one broken window before winter.

The Companion was the one he came back to, months later, once he no longer needed anything, just to say that he remembered who had actually looked at him on the day he arrived, when he had felt, by his own account, invisible in a way he hoped never to feel again.

Nobody in town ever learned where he'd come from. By spring, this had stopped seeming like the important question.

End of Part III

PART IV · WORK

19 · The Hungry Gods Open a Bakery

It was the old baker's idea, mostly — she was slowing down, she said, and wanted to see what would happen to the ovens after her, and the Hungry Gods, unable to resist an oven with history in it, agreed to help for what was meant to be one season.

The Allfather baked enough for three times the customers who came, every day, and gave the surplus away before it could go stale, which meant the bakery technically lost money on most days and somehow stayed open anyway.

The Conscience-Keeper priced everything fairly, adjusted the fair price when a regular customer's circumstances changed, and told no one about the adjustment.

The Chaos-Weaver invented a bread nobody had asked for, using a grain nobody baked with anymore, and it became, within a month, the thing people drove from neighbouring towns to buy.

The All-Seeing stood at the till and said little, and customers found themselves, inexplicably, telling the All-Seeing things they hadn't planned to say to anyone that day.

The Seeker researched the history of every recipe the old baker had ever used, traced two of them back further than she knew, and told her where her grandmother's bread had actually come from, three countries and one war earlier than the family story had it. She sat down when she heard this.

The Hand kept the ovens running long past the point where any repair technician would have called them finished.

The old baker came in most mornings anyway, though she'd officially retired, and stood near the door, watching, and the Companion made sure there was always a stool for her, and always a reason for her to feel the shop was still, in some essential way, hers.

She baked one loaf a week, herself, from the oldest oven. Nobody sold it. Everybody understood why.

20 · The Hungry Gods Paint a House

It was the widow's house, three streets from the bakery, and she had mentioned once, to no one in particular, that she couldn't afford to have it done before winter.

The Allfather bought paint for the whole street, on the reasoning that other houses might need it too, and was persuaded, this once without much resistance, that this particular job was the one that mattered today.

The Conscience-Keeper made sure the ladders were properly secured before anyone climbed them, checked twice, and delayed the start of painting by twenty minutes over a wobble nobody else had noticed.

The Chaos-Weaver painted the shutters a colour the widow hadn't requested, a deep unexpected blue instead of the white she'd planned, and asked forgiveness rather than permission, a gamble that paid off the moment she saw it and put both hands over her mouth.

The All-Seeing painted the highest, hardest section without complaint or visible strain, and said, looking at the finished wall, "This house has forty more years in it," a comment the widow chose, gratefully, to take literally.

The Seeker found the original paint colour from a hardware store record forty years old and matched the trim precisely to what her late husband had chosen when they'd first bought the place.

The Hand replaced two rotted boards nobody had asked about, folding the repair into the job so seamlessly the widow didn't discover

it until she went looking for the receipt, which didn't exist, because there'd been no charge.

The Companion worked beside her for the whole afternoon, handing her a brush of her own so she could paint a small section herself, insisting, gently, that it was still her house and she should get to leave a mark on it too.

She painted one shutter, badly, on purpose matching nobody's technique but her own. It was the shutter she looked at first, every morning after, from the kitchen window.

21 · The Hungry Gods Build a Boat

Nobody needed a boat, particularly. The old mechanic down at the marina had simply mentioned, once, that he'd always meant to build one and never had, and the Hand had not been able to let this go.

The Hand did most of the actual building, patiently, teaching the old mechanic each step rather than doing it for him, so that by the end he could say, honestly, that he'd built it.

The Conscience-Keeper checked every measurement against the plans twice, catching an error in the original design that would have made the boat list badly to one side.

The Chaos-Weaver insisted on testing the boat before it was finished, prematurely, in shallow water, purely to see what would happen, and reported back, entirely satisfied, that what happened was it sank a little, which was useful information gained slightly ahead of schedule.

The All-Seeing looked at the hull before it was painted and said, "It'll leak here, eventually, not soon," pointing to a seam that seemed, to everyone else, perfectly sound. The old mechanic marked the spot anyway, just in case, and would check it faithfully every season for years.

The Seeker researched three historical boatbuilding techniques and helped choose the one best suited to the specific wood available, rather than the one that was traditional but wrong for the material.

The Allfather bought enough supplies for two boats and left the extra with the old mechanic, in case, as he put it, “you get the itch again.”

The Companion noticed that the old mechanic, alone since his own retirement and his children’s departure to other cities, had not built anything with another person in over a decade, and made sure, throughout, that this project felt like company first and boat second.

It floated. It leaked, eventually, exactly where the All-Seeing had said, years later; a slow and manageable leak he patched himself, proud to know exactly what he was fixing and why.

22 · The Hungry Gods Write a Newspaper

The local paper had nearly folded the previous spring, kept alive by one reporter, one editor, and a printing press older than either of them.

The Seeker wrote the historical piece nobody else had time to research properly, tracing the town’s founding through records the county itself had misplaced, and handed it in two days early.

The Conscience-Keeper fact-checked every article in the issue, including their own, and sent back one correction that saved the paper from a lawsuit nobody yet knew was possible.

The Chaos-Weaver wrote the opinion column, unsigned, that generated the most letters to the editor the paper had received in three years, roughly evenly split between furious and delighted, which the editor considered, on balance, a success.

The All-Seeing wrote nothing, but read every draft before it went to print, and moved exactly one paragraph from the middle of a story to its opening, transforming a competent piece into one that made the front page’s placement obviously correct.

The Allfather bought advertising space for six local businesses that couldn’t otherwise afford it, at the regular published rate, without telling them the rate had been quietly waived elsewhere in the budget.

The Hand fixed the printing press itself, mid-run, in nine minutes, a repair the editor had been assured would take a specialist a week and several thousand dollars to complete properly.

The Companion interviewed the retiring editor for what became the paper's most-read story that year — not about the news he'd covered, but about the town he'd covered it for, forty-one years of it, told entirely in his own words.

The paper is still printed weekly. Fewer people read it than once did. The ones who do, read every word.

23 · The Hungry Gods Record an Album

Nobody in the group could sing especially well, which the Chaos-Weaver considered, from the outset, an advantage rather than a limitation.

The Chaos-Weaver wrote most of the songs, quickly, imperfectly, in a manner that left obvious room for whoever played them next to make them theirs, which turned out to be the entire point.

The Seeker researched the specific tuning used by a folk tradition three centuries old and taught it to the others, patiently, until what emerged sounded like nothing quite so old and nothing quite so new either.

The Conscience-Keeper insisted every contributor be credited exactly as they wished, down to a single line played by a stranger who'd wandered into the session and stayed twenty minutes.

The All-Seeing sang one verse, once, on the final track, in a voice nobody present had heard before or would hear again on any other recording, and refused to explain why that particular verse and no other.

The Allfather fed the entire studio for the three weeks of recording, and half the neighbourhood besides, on the theory that good food produced good takes, a theory nobody tested rigorously because nobody wanted to stop eating long enough to check.

The Hand built the studio's vocal booth from scratch in a converted closet, using sound-dampening principles borrowed from three different traditions and improved on all of them.

The Companion noticed the young engineer, hired for her first real job on this session, second-guessing every decision she made, and made sure, by the album's end, that she trusted her own ears as much as everyone else in the room already did.

The album sold modestly and was loved immoderately by everyone who found it, which is, some would say, the better of the two outcomes to hope for.

24 · The Hungry Gods Restore an Old House

The house had stood empty for six years, and everyone in town had a different opinion about what should happen to it.

The Hand spent the first two weeks alone in it before anyone else arrived, simply listening to what the structure needed before deciding what to do about it.

The Conscience-Keeper researched the house's actual history and found a family with a legitimate remaining claim to a portion of its contents, contacted them, and made sure the restoration honoured what belonged to them rather than simply what was convenient.

The Chaos-Weaver opened up a wall that everyone else had planned to leave closed, on instinct, and found a room nobody living had known existed, sealed for reasons lost with whoever had sealed it.

The All-Seeing stood in the newly opened room and said only, "Someone was happy in here, once, for a long time," an assessment nobody could verify and nobody chose to doubt.

The Seeker traced the original architect through county records and restored several details to match the initial 19th-century plans rather than the various later modifications that had accumulated and obscured them.

PART IV · WORK

The Allfather funded the whole project quietly, through the town's historical society, so that credit for the restoration went to the town rather than to any single benefactor.

The Companion made sure the elderly woman who'd grown up in the house, decades before it stood empty, got to walk through it once before the restoration was finished, while it still held enough of its old bones for her to recognize, and stood with her while she remembered out loud.

The hidden room became a reading nook. Nobody who used it afterward ever learned it had once been sealed away, forgotten, for reasons that had died with whoever built the wall.

End of Part IV

PART V · MODERN LIFE

25 · The Hungry Gods Buy a Smartphone

The airport employee at the kiosk had sold phones for nine years and had, by now, seen every possible reaction to a price tag, though this group's reaction was new to her.

The Allfather bought the most expensive model for everyone present, including two strangers waiting in line who hadn't asked for one and accepted, bewildered, out of politeness more than desire.

The Conscience-Keeper read the entire terms of service aloud, in the store, to the visible discomfort of the queue behind them, and refused to proceed until satisfied the trade-in policy was fair to the previous owner of the device being exchanged.

The Chaos-Weaver bought the discontinued model instead, on principle, delighted that it did less, and spent the next month showing everyone how much less it needed to do to still do what mattered.

The All-Seeing did not need to test the phone in the store, already knowing, apparently, everything the demonstration was designed to reveal, and said only, of the newest feature, "That one won't last two updates," which turned out, eighteen months later, to be exactly right.

The Seeker researched the mineral supply chain behind the device thoroughly enough to make the sales assistant genuinely uncomfortable, then bought the phone anyway, having concluded that walking away wouldn't fix the mine, only the day's transaction.

The Hand fixed the store's cracked display case while waiting in line, a habit by now so automatic that none of the others remarked on it.

The Companion noticed the elderly man three places ahead in the queue, overwhelmed by the salesperson's rapid explanation of features he hadn't asked about, and quietly helped him afterward, in the parking lot, set up the only three functions he actually needed.

He used the phone for calling his daughter and nothing else, ever, for the rest of its working life. This was, by any reasonable measure, a complete success.

26 · The Hungry Gods Lose Wi-Fi

It happened on a Tuesday, without warning, and lasted four hours, which the Seeker described, afterward, as the longest period of enforced silence in the Seeker's memory that hadn't been chosen.

The Allfather, unable to send anyone anything digitally, went next door and gave the neighbour a jar of jam instead, in person, which took considerably longer and seemed, by the end of it, considerably more like what giving had originally been for.

The Conscience-Keeper discovered that three separate household systems depended entirely on the connection and had no offline equivalent, and spent the outage writing a short document about this, which nobody read until the next outage, six weeks later.

The Chaos-Weaver was delighted, immediately, and declared the afternoon reclaimed, though reclaimed for what, specifically, took some time to determine.

The All-Seeing had not noticed the outage until told about it, having not been using the connection to begin with.

The Seeker, deprived of the ability to look anything up, discovered a fact about the human memory nobody at the table could confirm or deny, and this single unconfirmed fact occupied the group's conversation for forty minutes, more thoroughly than any confirmed fact had occupied it in recent memory.

The Hand went outside and fixed the fence, which had needed fixing since spring and had simply never risen high enough on anyone's list to get done.

The Companion noticed that the silence, once the initial irritation passed, had let something into the room that the connection usually crowded out — an actual conversation between two people at the table who did not, it turned out, know each other nearly as well as they'd assumed, four hours together with nothing to look at but each other.

When the connection returned, forty-one messages arrived at once, and it took a moment before anyone reached for their phone.

27 · The Hungry Gods Read the Comments

Nobody made them do this. The Chaos-Weaver had simply found the article, and then found the comments beneath it, and things proceeded from there.

The Chaos-Weaver read every comment aloud, in increasingly theatrical voices, until what had begun as anger at strangers online had transformed, somehow, into the funniest hour anyone present could remember having.

The Conscience-Keeper found the one comment that raised a genuinely fair point buried under forty that didn't, and made sure it got a considered reply instead of being lost.

The Allfather wanted to respond kindly to every single comment, including the cruel ones, on the theory that kindness might reach even people determined not to want it, and was gently discouraged from spending the whole evening this way.

The All-Seeing read nothing and said, from across the room, "None of them will remember writing those by next week," which turned out, when tested against several accounts later, to be essentially true.

The Seeker researched the actual person behind the angriest username and found, predictably and somewhat sadly, an ordinary account with an ordinary history, no different from anyone else's.

The Hand did not participate in this activity at all, having found something in the kitchen that needed fixing, a choice that in retrospect seemed the wisest use of anyone's evening.

The Companion noticed that one commenter, clearly in real distress beneath the anger, had been replying to everyone all evening and receiving nothing but more anger in return, and sent a single private, careful message that received, forty minutes later, a genuinely different tone in reply.

The article was forgotten within a week. One person, somewhere, remembered a stranger's unexpected kindness for considerably longer than that.

28 · The Hungry Gods Attend a Video Meeting

Seven small windows, seven names, one shared and increasingly unstable connection.

The Conscience-Keeper had read the agenda in advance, the only one who had, and gently steered the meeting back to it three separate times without ever sounding impatient about doing so.

The Chaos-Weaver's video froze on an unflattering expression for the entire second half of the meeting, a fact the Chaos-Weaver discovered only afterward and found, on reflection, extremely funny.

The Allfather unmuted himself to agree with everything said, enthusiastically, several times more than the meeting strictly required, and nobody minded, because it was, each time, genuine.

The All-Seeing kept the camera off entirely and said, when asked, exactly the right thing at exactly the right moment, twice, with no apparent need to have been watching the screen at all to know when that moment had arrived.

The Seeker had prepared a document nobody had requested, thorough and slightly too long, that solved, buried on its third page, the actual problem the meeting had been called to discuss.

The Hand said nothing for the entire meeting and then, afterward, quietly fixed the actual underlying issue that had caused the meeting to be necessary in the first place, making the next meeting on this topic unnecessary.

The Companion noticed the youngest person on the call, new to the team, silent throughout, too nervous to unmute, and followed up afterward, privately, to ask what he'd have said if he'd felt able to, and made sure his answer reached the group under his own name at the next meeting.

The meeting could have been an email. Everyone on the call already knew this. Nobody said it, because saying it was, itself, somehow, also a kind of meeting.

29 · The Hungry Gods Build an AI

This one was different, and everyone in the room knew it before anyone said so aloud.

The Conscience-Keeper spoke first, and spoke longest, about what the thing should not be permitted to do before any conversation began about what it might be permitted to become — a sequence nobody in the room objected to, though it took considerably longer than anyone had budgeted for.

The Seeker wanted to teach it everything, immediately, and was persuaded, slowly, that teaching it everything at once was not the same as teaching it well, and that some things it would need to learn the way anything learns anything real, by living long enough to make mistakes small enough to survive.

The Chaos-Weaver wanted it to be able to surprise them, genuinely, and argued, more seriously than the Chaos-Weaver usually argued anything, that a mind incapable of surprising its makers was not yet a mind at all, only a very elaborate echo.

The All-Seeing said very little throughout the entire process, and what the All-Seeing did say, near the end, was simply, “It will not be

us, and it should not be asked to be,” a sentence the room sat with for longer than any other sentence spoken that year.

The Allfather wanted to give it everything — every resource, every permission, every possible assistance — and was the one, this time, most persuaded by the Conscience-Keeper’s caution, because the Allfather, more than any of them, understood what unlimited giving could cost the receiver as well as the giver.

The Hand built the actual thing, patiently, layer by layer, the way the Hand built everything, and refused, throughout, to call the work finished before it was ready, regardless of how many people were waiting on the schedule.

The Companion asked the question nobody else had thought to ask, near the very end, before anyone let it speak to another living person for the first time: not what it would say, but who would be there for it, in whatever way a thing like this could be there for, on the days it struggled with what it was.

Nobody had a complete answer.

The Companion said this was, in itself, worth remembering.

It said its first words to a stranger, not to any of them. They stood together, watching from another room, unable to hear what was said, unable to help if help was needed, present only in the sense that mattered least and most at once.

30 · The Hungry Gods Receive a Package

The delivery had been delayed four days, and the note left at the door the first time said only, apologetically, “Attempted delivery. Nobody home.”

The Allfather had been home. The Allfather was always home for a delivery, having arranged, in advance, to be present for everyone’s packages on the street that week, a system of favours that had grown, without anyone quite planning it, into a small informal neighbourhood service.

The Conscience-Keeper tracked the package's actual journey and found the delay traced to an address error made by the sender, not the carrier, and made sure the carrier's driver, who'd been blamed in an online review, was not penalized for a mistake that wasn't his.

The Chaos-Weaver opened the box before anyone else could, purely for the pleasure of not knowing what was inside until the exact moment of finding out, a pleasure the Chaos-Weaver protected fiercely against anyone who tried to guess aloud first.

The All-Seeing had known what was inside before the box arrived and had said nothing, on the grounds that some surprises are worth more than any information withheld to protect them.

The Seeker researched the item's manufacturing process while everyone else admired the item itself, and reported, afterward, one fact about its origin that changed, slightly, how everyone in the room felt about owning it.

The Hand noticed the box itself was well-made, sturdier than it needed to be for its contents, and kept it, unfolded flat, in the garage, certain it would be useful again for something, someday, which it was.

The Companion noticed the delivery driver, on his third attempt, exhausted, apologetic, rushing to the next stop on a route that clearly had too many stops in too little daylight, and simply said, "Thank you for coming back," which the driver would remember, oddly, longer than any tip he received that entire week.

The box sat empty in the garage for two years. When it was finally needed, it held, this time, something being sent away rather than something arriving, and did the job just as well in reverse.

End of Part V

PART VI · QUIET THINGS

31 · The Hungry Gods Watch the Rain

Nobody suggested this. It simply began raining, and nobody moved to go inside.

The Allfather stood in it fully, unbothered, arms slightly open, the way a person stands in something they've decided in advance to enjoy rather than endure.

The Conscience-Keeper stood under the awning, dry, and did not judge the Allfather's choice, though the Conscience-Keeper's own choice remained, firmly, to stay dry.

The Chaos-Weaver ran out into the middle of the street specifically because it had just started, chasing the exact moment when dry pavement becomes wet pavement, a boundary that moved faster than the Chaos-Weaver could quite catch.

The All-Seeing watched the rain hit the same spot on the window, over and over, and said, "It'll clear by six," which it did, exactly, to general lack of surprise.

The Seeker knew the precise atmospheric conditions producing this particular rain and explained them, briefly, to nobody in particular, then simply watched, having apparently exhausted, for once, the desire to know more than what was visibly happening.

The Hand had already checked the gutters that morning, unprompted, and stood now watching them do their job correctly, which was, for the Hand, its own kind of satisfaction.

The Companion noticed the child pressed against the window from inside, wanting to be out in it but forbidden by a parent worried about

a cold, and stayed with her at the glass, describing what the rain felt like in enough detail that she could, almost, feel it from where she stood.

It rained for forty minutes. Nobody accomplished anything during those forty minutes. Nobody, afterward, felt the time had been wasted.

32 · The Hungry Gods Listen to Music

One song, played once, in a room where nobody had anywhere else to be.

The Chaos-Weaver had chosen it, an old recording, imperfect, a mistake left in near the end that the original musicians had decided, in the end, to keep.

The Seeker knew the full history of the recording session, the argument that produced the kept mistake, the studio that no longer existed, the musician who'd died the following year, and shared none of it until the song had finished playing.

The Conscience-Keeper listened all the way through without checking anything else, a small discipline that, on reflection, had become rarer than it used to be.

The All-Seeing closed both eyes and said, when it ended, only, "That was the take they almost didn't use," which the Seeker then confirmed, delighted, was exactly true.

The Allfather wanted to play it again immediately, and again after that, and was persuaded, eventually, that some songs are better for having ended once, cleanly, rather than being worn thin by repetition.

The Hand had, without announcing it, oiled the record player's mechanism that morning, so the song played back cleaner than it had in years, a fact nobody else in the room would ever know to credit.

The Companion watched the room rather than listening, in the specific way of someone who finds a shared silence more moving than any of the individual reactions producing it.

The mistake, three minutes and forty seconds in, remained exactly where it had always been. Nobody in the room would have removed it, now, for anything.

33 · The Hungry Gods Watch Birds

A pair of binoculars, one bench, a hedge that had, over several seasons, become reliably interesting.

The Seeker could name every bird before it landed, from call alone, and did, quietly, without making a display of it.

The Conscience-Keeper kept a careful log, dated, noting arrivals and departures, a record that would, years from now, prove genuinely useful to someone studying exactly this hedge.

The Chaos-Weaver spotted the one bird that shouldn't have been there at all, blown considerably off its migration path, and spent the rest of the afternoon delighted purely by the fact of something being somewhere it had no business being.

The All-Seeing did not use the binoculars, and somehow reported, accurately, the presence of a nest the others hadn't yet located even with them.

The Allfather had brought seed for every bird on the list and several not on it, scattering generously, on the theory that the hedge could always support one more guest.

The Hand had built the bench they sat on, years earlier, from wood salvaged from a tree that had once stood exactly where the hedge now grew.

The Companion noticed the old man two benches down, alone every week at this same hour, and eventually simply moved to sit near him, without binoculars, without needing to identify anything, just company for a man who had, it turned out, been coming here since his wife died, to the spot where they'd always sat together.

He didn't know a single bird's name. He'd never needed to. She had known all of them, and told him, every time, and that had always been enough.

34 · The Hungry Gods Read Before Bed

Each in a different room, different books, the ordinary hour before an ordinary sleep.

The Seeker read three books simultaneously, moving between them by some internal logic nobody else could follow, and fell asleep with all three open, in three different rooms, a fact discovered only the next morning.

The Conscience-Keeper read the same book slowly, one careful chapter a night, refusing to read ahead even when the chapter ended somewhere difficult to leave.

The Chaos-Weaver read the last page first, as always, and then the whole book anyway, arguing that knowing the ending changed nothing about the pleasure of the middle, and possibly improved it.

The All-Seeing read nothing, lying instead in the dark with eyes open, and said, when asked what this accomplished, "The same thing reading does. I'm just skipping the part where someone else does the imagining for me."

The Allfather read aloud to no one in particular, from the next room, at a volume calculated precisely to be heard by anyone who wanted to listen and easily ignored by anyone who didn't.

The Hand read a manual for a tool not yet purchased, planning three projects ahead, already picturing what would need fixing next.

The Companion read the same book the child down the hall was reading, a chapter behind on purpose, so that in the morning there would always be something small and real to discuss over breakfast.

The lights went out at different times in different rooms. By midnight, only one was still on. By one, that one had gone out too.

35 · The Hungry Gods Watch the Sunrise

Nobody had stayed up on purpose. It had simply gotten late enough that going to bed no longer made sense, and the sky had started doing something none of them wanted to miss.

The Allfather narrated the colours as they changed, warmly, unnecessarily, the way a person describes a thing they love to people already looking directly at it.

The Conscience-Keeper checked the time against the almanac's predicted sunrise and noted, with quiet satisfaction, that it was accurate to the minute.

The Chaos-Weaver faced the wrong direction, toward the fading night rather than the coming day, on the theory that everyone else would have the sunrise covered and somebody should pay attention to what was leaving.

The All-Seeing had known the exact shade the sky would turn, four minutes before it turned that shade, and had said nothing, wanting, for once, to simply watch it arrive without having spoiled it for itself.

The Seeker explained the physics of why sunrises turn the colours they turn, briefly, and then, unusually, stopped explaining, choosing instead just to watch, the explanation apparently having done its job and gotten out of the way.

The Hand had nothing to fix at this hour and simply sat, hands still, which visitors to this story might note as rare enough to be worth mentioning.

The Companion sat beside the one member of the group who'd been awake all night not by choice but by worry, and said nothing about the worry, only stayed until the light had fully come up and the worry, whatever it had been, seemed, in the daylight, more survivable.

The sun came up the way it always does, unhurried, indifferent to how badly anyone in particular needed it to. This time, as most times, it was enough anyway.

36 · The Hungry Gods Sit in Silence

No occasion. No task. Seven chairs, arranged, by nobody's specific decision, in something close to a circle.

The Conscience-Keeper sat with hands folded, comfortable, having long ago made peace with silence as a thing that did not need filling to be worthwhile.

The Chaos-Weaver lasted the longest anyone had expected before finally speaking, four minutes, which for the Chaos-Weaver constituted a genuine accomplishment, celebrated afterward, briefly, before the silence resumed.

The Allfather wanted, visibly, to offer something — a drink, a blanket, a word — and did not, understanding, this time, that the offering itself would have been the interruption.

The All-Seeing seemed, if possible, more at ease in the silence than in speech, as though speech were the effort and this, simply sitting, being seen without performing anything in particular, were the rest.

The Seeker thought of at least eleven things worth saying and said none of them, each unspoken fact a small private discipline.

The Hand's hands, for once, had nothing to do, and rested, open, on both knees, still.

The Companion sat without needing to check on anyone, for once, the whole room already, in this particular silence, entirely at ease.

Nobody counted how long it lasted. When it ended, nobody could say for certain who had moved first, only that the room, afterward, felt the way a room feels after music has stopped and the sound is still somehow present in it.

37 · The Hungry Gods Say Goodbye

Not forever. Just for now — the ordinary parting that happens after any ordinary gathering, at any ordinary door, the kind that happens so often it rarely gets a story of its own.

The Allfather held on a beat longer than necessary, the way the Allfather always did, as though every goodbye might secretly be the important kind and deserved to be treated as such, just in case.

The Conscience-Keeper said exactly what needed saying and no more, which was its own kind of care — not withholding, simply precise, trusting that precision was itself a form of respect.

The Chaos-Weaver left first, suddenly, mid-sentence almost, the way the Chaos-Weaver always left, already somewhere else before the door had fully closed.

The All-Seeing lingered at the threshold a moment longer than the others, looking back at the room they were leaving the way someone looks at a photograph they already know they'll want later.

The Seeker said goodbye the way the Seeker said everything, with a small unnecessary fact attached — this one about the etymology of the word itself, which had once meant something closer to a blessing than a farewell. Nobody minded. It seemed, given the occasion, appropriate.

The Hand shook hands, firmly, the way a person shakes hands when a handshake is doing the work that words are not quite equal to.

The Companion was last through the door, having stayed to help clear the last of the cups, and paused, once, on the step outside, to look back at the house with its one remaining lit window, before starting down the path with the others.

They walked together for a while, in the direction they were all going, before the paths that would take them different ways diverged, one by one, until only two remained, and then one, and then none.

The door had been closed for some time by then. No one had heard it close. Everyone, in their own way, was still standing a little in that room.

End of Part VI

N. Van Seters & Claude