

THE SITTING

a novel of the Hungry Gods Universe

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PART ONE

THE HOUSE

One

The gate opened for the shift at six. The man her father had asked would be inside it from half five, because he was that kind of man, and that was most of the reason her father had had to ask him.

Kalina was at the stop on Morska by twenty past, in the dark, in the coat that was not warm enough and that she had taken anyway.

It was the first week of the year when it was properly dark at six. The wind was coming down off the bay as it does from the middle of September on, not hard, just constant and from the north-east, carrying the smell of the water and under that the smell of the port, which is diesel and wet rope and something sweetish off the grain terminal that everybody in the district can identify and nobody can name. The road was black and shining and had not been rained on. It was only wet, as everything on that coast is wet from October, out of the air.

Three others waited with her, all men, all in the high-visibility with the reflective going grey at the shoulders. Nobody looked at anybody. One of them was eating something out of foil.

The trolleybus came and she got on and it went the way it goes, down past the market with the shutters still down, along the road that runs toward the port, and at the stop before the yard she stayed where she was sitting.

She looked for the moment afterwards, riding on past the cranes and the long grey flank of the fitting-out quay, and there was no moment to find. There had been a stop. The doors had opened and stood open and closed again. She had been sitting down through all of it, and had gone on sitting down, and the vehicle had gone on.

She rode to the terminus at Chylonia and got off because everyone got off, and walked back up the hill for a while, and then sat in a shelter near the church.

It was the sort of shelter that is three sides and a roof and a bench with a divider in the middle of it so that nobody can lie down. There was a timetable behind scratched plastic and somebody had gone over the numbers with a marker at some point in the last few years, correcting them, or altering them, and the corrections were now themselves out of date. The back panel had been kicked in at one corner and replaced with a sheet of ply that had been there long enough to warp.

She sat at the end nearest the road with her hands up inside her sleeves and her bag on her knees. It was three degrees and it went through the coat in about four minutes and then stopped getting worse, which is the thing about three degrees.

Behind the shelter the church stood up out of the wet — one of the brick ones from the twenties, with the square tower and the copper gone green, the sort they put up all along this coast when the city was new and there was money and a great deal of confidence. Somebody had left the outside light on over the side door. Under it the chestnuts had come down in the wind and the pavement was a slick of leaf and split casings, gone black at the edges, walked into a paste by everybody going down to the six.

The traffic went down. That was the direction, at that hour: everything going down the hill, and almost nothing coming up. Vans, mostly, and then the buses one after another with the condensation on them, and then, at about ten past seven, a run of about nine minutes when the road was busy in a way that she understood without having to be told, because a great many people in the district were arriving at the same set of places at the same time. She watched a man in a grey jacket run for the 21 and not get it and stand for a moment with his hands on his head, and then go on standing at the stop across the road, thirty metres away, for as long as she was there.

Nobody asked her anything. A woman with two bags sat at the other end of the bench for eleven minutes and got up when her bus came, and glanced at her once, at the beginning, in the manner of somebody establishing that a person is not in trouble.

At about ten to seven she asked what time it got light.

She did it without thinking about doing it, the way you scratch something. The answer came back before she had finished wanting it: a time, to the minute, for this date at this latitude, with the cloud accounted for. It offered to tell her when. She said no to that.

So she sat and watched for it, and it came at the minute she had been given, and by twenty past seven the sky over the roofs had gone from nothing to a low flat grey and the shelter had stopped being a lit box with a girl in it and was only a shelter.

There had been no moment in that either. She had been told and then it had happened.

At about half eight she got cold enough to think seriously about the church, open and warm and not entered since a funeral. She got as far as standing up.

At about nine she thought about going down after all — arriving late, which was worse than not arriving, and knowing it was worse, and going anyway. She turned it over for some minutes. It had the shape of a decision and none of the weight, and it came apart while she was holding it, and she stayed on the bench.

She got home at eleven.

Her mother was in the kitchen with the radio on low, in her uniform already though her shift did not start until two, and she looked up and said, “You’ll be frozen. Put the kettle on, I’ve had three.”

That was how Kalina learned that she knew.

There was no version of the morning in which she would not have known. The gate would have logged nobody arriving against her name at six. Wieczorek would have stood inside it until quarter past and then gone

in to his work and said something at the first break, or before it, to her father, who was two bays over on a cable run he had been on since August. Her mother had a summary she read on Tuesdays and Fridays and sometimes did not wait for. Any one of those was enough. All three had happened, probably, and the redundancy was the ordinary condition of the world, and Kalina had stopped some years ago trying to work out which channel a thing had come through, because the answer was always all of them.

She put the kettle on. Her mother said something about the roads and something about a girl at work whose son had done well at his placement, and did not connect the two, and did not need to.

“Are you eating?” her mother said. “There’s the rest of the soup.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Eat it anyway, you look grey.”

She ate it. It was good. Her mother watched a bit of the radio programme and then went to change her shoes, and at the door said, “He’ll be back at half six,” which was true every day and did not need saying, and was the only thing she said about it.

Kalina went up to her room and lay on the bed with her boots on and did not put anything on. That was a thing she did sometimes, and had noticed she did, and had never been able to say whether it counted. The room was cold. Below the window the hill went down in stages toward the water, the blocks and then the older streets and then the roofs of the works, and past all of that the cranes stood over the basin, four of them, still in the flat light.

She had wanted to go. That was the part she could not get anyone to hold, including herself. Sitting on the bench with her hands in her sleeves she had wanted to be inside the gate, in the noise, with a task and a man showing her the task, more than she wanted anything else that was available to want. It had been true at twenty past six on the Morska stop and it had gone on being true through every stop after the one where she did not stand up.

Her father came in at twenty-five past six. She heard the door and the boots and the tap running a long time, which was him getting the day off his hands, and the chair.

She went down because going down was better than being fetched.

He was at the table with his sleeves rolled and his forearms on the wood and he looked at her when she came in, which he did not always do.

“You’ve eaten,” he said.

“Mum made me.”

He nodded. He had a way of taking a piece of information and setting it down somewhere and going on to the next thing that made it very hard to argue with him, because there was never a place in the conversation where the argument could get a hand in.

Her mother put the plates down. They ate. Szymon was not there; Szymon was on lates that week and would come in at ten and eat standing up. The radio was still on low and nobody turned it off.

It was a good meal, because they always were. Her mother worked a full shift at the hospital and came home and made something out of what was in the house, and had done it for twenty-odd years, and did not regard it as an achievement and would have been embarrassed to be told it was one.

Her father ate the way he did everything, without hurry and without any part of his attention anywhere else. He had a mark on the back of his left hand, fresh, where something had caught him. He had them constantly. She had never once in her life heard him mention getting one.

Her mother talked. She talked about the ward and about a supervisor who had made a decision that was going to cost everybody a Saturday, and about the coat of Szymon’s that had gone off the line, and about whether the boiler man was going to come on the day he had said or on the day after it, and none of it required anything from either of them beyond being in the room. This was the arrangement. Her mother talked and her father was there, and if you had asked either of them they would have said that it worked, and it did work, and Kalina had grown up inside it and had never

had to learn how to sit at a table in a house where the silence had to be filled by whoever was losing.

Underneath it there was the yard.

It was always there in the evenings in some form. Somebody in the block worked it, or had, or their father had. Half the men her father spoke to on the street were men he had stood next to for twenty years. When the wind came off the water you could hear it faintly at the top of the hill, a sort of intermittent knocking, and you stopped hearing it at about eight years old and only heard it again if you went away and came back. It was the largest fact about the district and nobody in the district discussed it, in the way that people do not discuss the ground.

Near the end of it her father said, "I'll go and see Wieczorek tomorrow."

That was all. He did not say what he would tell him. He did not say what it had cost him to ask in the first place, which she knew about only because her mother had mentioned once, months ago, in a different context, that the two of them had not spoken for eleven years and that there had been a reason.

"You don't have to," Kalina said.

"No," he agreed, and finished his food.

He went to see Wieczorek the next day. She never learned what was said. It did not appear anywhere she could look.

Two

The house was two rooms up and two down in a block above the yards, and the thing about it that a visitor would have noticed first was how little of it was doing anything.

The block was one of six, put up in the sixties on the slope where the older streets stopped, and it had been painted a colour in about her ninth year that had been described at the time as sand. The stairwell had the smell every stairwell on the hill has – old cooking oil, cold concrete, and the disinfectant the caretaker put on the landings on Mondays – and it held the cold like a cellar through to May. The mailboxes inside the door were the original ones and about a third of the name-slots still had names in them that belonged to nobody living.

Inside, it was warm and it was small. The radiators came on in the middle of October by decision of somebody who was not in the building and went off at ten at night, and by half past ten in November you could see your breath in the back bedroom.

The front room had the sofa and the sideboard and the table they ate at, and a rug her mother had bought in a sale and did not like. The window at the end faced south-east down the slope, which meant the yards, and which meant that from the age of about four Kalina had known exactly what the weather was doing over the bay before she was fully awake.

Her mother was fifty-three and had got heavier in the last four years and moved faster than anybody else in the flat. She had thick, very straight hair that she dyed a dark red every five or six weeks and let go too long between times, so that there was usually a centimetre of grey at the parting that she was aware of and mentioned. Her hands were wrecked – cracked across the knuckles from twenty-two years of alcohol gel and hot water –

and she kept a tub of something on the windowsill above the sink and used it about a tenth as often as she should have.

Her mother's things worked. Her mother had a Companion the way she had a hospital badge and a bus pass, and she used it in that spirit — a set of arrangements that meant Tuesdays and Fridays were easier than they would otherwise have been, and that the pharmacy did not need chasing, and that the boiler man came. She read her summaries. She acted on them, briskly, without discussing them, in the manner of a woman going down a list.

Her father did not.

He was fifty-eight and not a big man, which surprised people who had heard about him before meeting him. He was narrow through the shoulders and had gone almost entirely grey by fifty and kept it very short because of the work. There were deep creases at the outside of both eyes from thirty years of getting close to things in bad light, and in the last two years there had been reading glasses. They lived in his breast pocket. He put them on and took them off about forty times an evening and had never once been seen to clean them.

His forearms were the give-away and always had been. They were out of proportion to the rest of him, from a lifetime of pulling cable through conduit, and they were mapped over with the small white marks that a man collects in that trade and does not mention.

It was not a position. He had one, because everyone had one, and it ran on his device in his coat pocket on the back of the door and it did whatever it did. He answered it when it was easier to answer it. He did not ask it about people.

That was the difference and it took Kalina until about fourteen to see the size of it. Her mother knew things about her that had come from somewhere. When her mother was worried, the worry arrived already furnished: dates, comparisons, a sense of where in a range a thing sat. There was a way of getting round it, which was that it could be argued with. You could go at the furniture. You could say the range was wrong or the

comparison was stupid or that it was two months out of date, and sometimes it was, and then the worry had to be rebuilt and rebuilding took time.

Her father's opinion of her had been assembled by hand over sixteen years out of things he had seen with his own eyes, and there was no way in at all.

Kalina had one too, of course. She had had it since she was five and it had been through four generations of itself in that time and she could not have described the differences between them, in the way that nobody can describe the difference between the light in a room in March and the light in the same room in April.

She used it constantly and could not have produced an inventory of the uses. It was in the getting up and the getting to places and the knowing what was going to be asked of her that week. In eleven years it had never once been surprised by her.

On the sideboard in the front room there was a meter he had had since before Szymon was born. It was a heavy grey thing with a dial and two leads coiled round it and a case that had been dropped enough times to go the colour of a coin. He had newer ones at work. He used this one at home for the socket in the bathroom that had never been right, and for the neighbour below when her lights went, and once, memorably, for a man three streets over who had wanted to know whether the fault was his or the block's, which was a question about money.

Kalina liked the meter. She had liked it since she was small enough to have to be lifted to see the dial.

In February the lights had gone in the flat below and Pani Sadowska had come up at nine at night in her housecoat, and her father had gone down with the meter under his arm and Kalina had gone down after him because it was February and there was nothing on.

Pani Sadowska was eighty-one and had a Companion that her son in Bydgoszcz had set up for her and that she used for exactly two things, one of them the radio. It had told her, before she came up, that the fault was

probably in the flat and probably the consumer unit, and that she should not attempt anything herself and should contact a qualified person. All of that was correct.

Her father did not say anything about that. He put the meter down on the arm of the chair and took the front off the unit and stood there for a while with a torch in his teeth, and Kalina held the torch after a bit because it was ridiculous, and he went along the thing touching the leads to it, one after another, and looking.

“There,” he said, eventually.

“What is it?”

“Look at it,” he said, and moved so she could, and put the leads back on. The needle went where it had gone before. He waited. He did not say what it meant, and she stood there in a cold front room in February for what felt like a long time and worked out, more or less, that the number was the same on this side of the thing as on that side of it, and that this was wrong, and roughly why it was wrong.

“Is it the switch?”

“It’s the switch,” he said, and that was as near to praise as she had had off him in about a year, and she thought about it on and off for two days.

He fixed it in twenty minutes. Pani Sadowska tried to give him money at the door and he said the thing he always said — that it was nothing — and it had been nothing, and he had also missed most of the second half.

What Kalina liked about the meter, and had never said out loud because she could not have made it sound like anything, was that it stopped. It put a number in front of you and stopped. She had been wrong about what the number meant twice before she got the switch.

Her mother’s things were not like that.

In the spring there had been a fortnight over a girl called Dominika, who was in Kalina’s year and who Kalina had spent some time with in the way you do at that age, in a group, at the end of a road, at hours that were later than the ones her mother had in mind. Her mother had come to her about

it at the end of the second week, and the worry had arrived furnished.

She had it that the group was a particular group. She had it that two of them had been through something the previous year. She had a fortnight's pattern of hours, and a comparison against a range of some kind, out of which Kalina's hours came up high. And she had it that a pattern like that was associated, in general, at that age, with things.

Kalina had gone at the furniture, because the furniture was where you went.

The group was not that group. The two of them were three of them and one had left. The thing the previous year had been the brother, not the boy. All of it true. None of it touched the hours, and the hours were the actual point.

Her mother went away and rebuilt it and came back four days later with a better version.

The rebuilding took four days. Four days was what she had won, and she had known at the time that four days was what she was playing for, and had played for it anyway.

There was one thing she had finished.

At thirteen she had taught herself to write with her left hand. Not badly and not as a party trick — properly, to the point where it was her handwriting and not a version of it, and where a person looking at a page could not tell which hand had made it.

It had taken about eleven months. She had done it in the evenings, forty minutes or an hour, mostly copying, and there had been a period of some weeks in the middle where it went backwards and she had gone on through that too. She had not missed many days. She had kept it up past the point where it was interesting to do and out the other side of that, into the part where it was only work, and then she had finished it, and stopped.

Nobody knew. Not her mother, who knew a great deal; not Szymon; not the school. There had been nothing to tell and no occasion on which to tell it, because it was of no use whatever. She had never once needed to write

with her left hand and did not expect to. She had wanted to be able to do it, and now she could, and that was the entire content of the achievement.

She thought about it sometimes and could not make anything out of it. It sat in her as a fact that did not connect to any other fact.

Szymon came in at ten past ten with the cold on his jacket and ate standing at the counter out of the pan, which their mother had given up objecting to in the spring.

He was their mother's build and had four inches on their father and had come in from the wind with his face and ears gone a hard red that took twenty minutes to go down. His hands were already going the way his father's had gone; you could see it starting at twenty-two, in the thickening across the back and the state of the nails, and he was pleased about it in a way he would not have admitted to.

"Alright," he said to Kalina, meaning it as a greeting.

"Alright."

He was twenty-two and in his third year and there was nothing wrong with him. She had tried to resent him at twelve. It had not been possible.

He had gone into the yard because it was there and because their father was in it. It suited him. He had never, as far as she could tell, had one thought about whether it suited him. He got up, he went, he came back. He was well liked on the strength of turning up and not being difficult.

He also could not walk past a loose thing. Handles, hinges, the towel rail, the third stair. He would stop mid-sentence and put his weight on it and then go on with what he was saying, and he had done it since he was about fifteen, and nobody in the house had ever remarked on it. It was the only part of their father in him and it had come without any of the rest.

He put the pan down and went in to the football, and their father was already in there, and Kalina heard all of it through the wall.

"He's off."

"He's been off since August."

A pause of about two minutes.

“That’s a foul.”

“That’s not a foul.”

Nothing more for the rest of the half. She had counted them once, at fourteen, out of irritation, and it had come to eleven words in forty minutes, and both of them had come out of it better than they went in.

He finished the pan and put it in the sink and ran water into it and said, “Heard about this morning.”

“Right.”

“He’ll get over it.”

“I know.”

“He will,” Szymon said, and yawned, and went up, and that was the extent of the conversation, and he had not meant anything by it except that he thought it was true.

She sat downstairs after everyone was up. The block was quiet. Somewhere below, a door.

The worst part had not been any of it. The worst part had been the soup. Her mother had put the soup in front of her at eleven in the morning because she was grey and had said eat it anyway, and had not asked one question about the four and a half hours between the Morska stop and the front door, and the reason she had not asked was not tact.

There was nothing to ask. There was no account of the morning that Kalina held and nobody else did. She could have gone up to the table and described the shelter and the woman with the two bags and the hour and a half and the decision that had come apart in her hands at nine o’clock, and it would have been new information — the shelter would have been new — but it would have gone into a shape that already existed and fitted it, and her mother would have nodded and said something kind, and the shape would have closed over it without moving.

She turned the lamp off and sat in the dark for a while with the cranes lit up down the hill, and then went up, and slept badly, and in the morning it was Thursday and there was school.

Three

The school was on the flat at the bottom of the hill: three storeys of pale brick from the seventies with the windows replaced in about her second year and the frames a blue that had looked temporary and had turned out not to be.

Nothing in a lesson had come at her sideways since she was about thirteen. Whatever was going to be covered had been laid out for her the night before in the amount she needed, and she went into rooms already holding the shape of what was in them. She was not unusual in this; every person in the building did it, and the teaching had adjusted to it years ago, and the effect was that the day had a great deal of content in it and almost no news.

There was a group at the edge of her year that she had been near for about a month.

They were not the centre of anything. That was what made them possible. The centre of the year was five girls who had been the centre since primary and whose arrangement was not open to entry, and Kalina had understood that since she was nine and had never wasted anything on it. The edge group was four or five depending on the day, and it had come together late, in the last year, out of people who had not been placed anywhere else, and it had a manner.

The manner was dryness. They were funny about things. Nobody in it was warm and nobody in it was cruel, and the way you got on in it was to say a thing about the world that was slightly harder than the thing anyone else was going to say, and to say it without appearing to have prepared it.

Kalina could do that. She had worked out that she could do it in about the second week, sitting on the wall by the science block listening to Bruno being funny about a teacher, and she had thought of a better line than the one he used and had not said it, and had gone home and thought about not having said it for most of an evening.

On the Thursday she said it.

The wall by the science block was the good place, because it was out of the wind and the extractors came out on that side and put warm air across it all through the middle of the day, and it smelled faintly of whatever the second-years had been heating.

They were on it at half eleven, four of them, and Bruno was doing the placement assembly.

Bruno was small and quick and had a way of holding his chin up when he was about to start. Marta was the tall one and did most of it sitting on her hands. Zosia had a very good coat that her aunt had sent and that she wore in all weathers, and she was the one who said the fair thing, and nobody minded her for it, and nobody stopped either.

Everyone was doing the placement assembly that week. It had been on the Tuesday and the man who gave it had used the word *journey* five times and had a lanyard he touched every forty seconds, and by Thursday there were about nine separate performances of him going round the school, most of them built on the lanyard, because the lanyard was the easy part.

“— and he’s got the slide up,” Bruno was saying, “the one with the arrows, and he says, *your placement is not a destination* —”

“He did not say that.”

“He said that. He said, *your placement is not a destination, it’s a—*”

“Don’t.”

“— *it’s a doorway*,” Bruno said, and put his hand flat on his chest, and Marta made a noise of genuine pain.

“That’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

“That’s not even the worst one. The worst one’s the bit at the end about how they’ll be with us every step of the—”

“He’s fine,” said Zosia, who did this, and who nobody minded. “He’s just doing his job.”

And Kalina said: “That’s the trouble with him. He’s not doing a job. If he was doing a job he’d have said what the bands are.”

It came out flat and unhurried and she had not prepared it, which was the whole condition, and there was about a half-second in which nothing happened.

Then Bruno laughed properly — the short one, out of the chest, not the social one he used at anything that was going.

“He didn’t, though,” Marta said, sitting up. “Did he? He didn’t say the bands once. He did the whole forty minutes and he never said what the bands *were*.”

“He said them at the start.”

“He said there *are* bands. He didn’t say what they are. He never said one number the entire time —”

“He said fifty.”

“Fifty’s not a band, fifty’s how many are in a room —”

It went from there, and it went well, and it went on for forty minutes.

She said four more things in those forty minutes. Three of them worked. She noticed that they worked at the moment of working, from inside, which she had not known was possible and which she found she could do nothing else while doing. She was also standing differently, with her weight further back on the wall and one boot up on the brickwork, and she was aware of standing differently and could not have stopped.

Once, in the middle of it, she said something and Marta turned to hear it properly. That was the part she took home.

She could have told you the length of it afterwards to within about five minutes, because she had been keeping a kind of count without meaning to.

Ola came round the corner of the science block at about twenty past twelve with her bag on one shoulder. She was broad and cheerful and walked fast and talked faster, and she had been exactly the same at seven, and there was something in the fact that she had not had to become anything.

Ola had known her since they were seven. They had been in the same class every year but two. They were not close any more in any way that either of them would have defended, and there had been no falling-out; it had thinned the way those things thin, and they still spoke, and there was nothing in it.

"There you are," Ola said. "Did you get the thing about the trip? Because they've moved the deadline and it's not on the board yet, it's only gone out on the—"

"I got it."

"Right, only you didn't last time," Ola said, and laughed, and it was affectionate, and it was completely accurate. "Do you remember, in Year Six, with the— when we all went and you were standing in the—"

And she told it.

It took perhaps ninety seconds. It was the story about the coach at the harbour when they were eleven, and Kalina standing at the wrong bay for twenty minutes after everyone had loaded, because she had not read the sheet, and the teacher walking back down the line for her, and Kalina crying, which was the part that was actually in it, and which Ola did not say and did not have to say because it was in the shape of the story and everybody who had been there had it.

Bruno had not been there. Neither had Marta. They had not been at that school. They heard it as an anecdote about a girl who did not read sheets, told with affection, by someone who had the standing to tell it.

"Oh, that's very good," Marta said, pleasantly. "That's very good."

And that was it. Nobody was unkind. Ola stayed another minute, said something else about the deadline, went off toward the hall. Bruno picked

the conversation up roughly where it had been. There was no exclusion. Nothing had been taken away from Kalina in any way she could have pointed to.

She could not do it after that. She tried, twice, in the next ten minutes, and both times the sentence went out of her before she got to the end of it, and she heard herself sounding like somebody doing an impression.

Forty minutes had been enough. That was what she worked out later. Forty minutes of nobody in a three-metre radius holding an earlier draft, and then Ola round the corner with one in her hand, laying it down between them, gently, meaning nothing by it.

She said two more things that afternoon.

The first was in the corridor outside the geography rooms, and it was about the trip, and it was reasonable. She had it worked out about eleven seconds before she said it, and she said it into a gap that she had watched coming and had timed for, and Bruno said “Yeah” and went on with what he had been saying, which was the correct response and cost her nothing.

The second was at the gates at ten past three and it was better, and she got it out and it sat there, and Marta smiled at her the way you smile at somebody who has made an effort. That one she felt in the back of her neck for about an hour.

There was nothing wrong with either of them. She took them apart on the walk and they were both fine, and the difference between them and the thing she had said at half eleven was not in the words at all, and she could not get at what it was in.

Walking down afterwards she did the thing she always did and ran it again with the correction in — Ola not coming round the corner, or coming round and saying something else, or Kalina having been at a school where nobody had been at her other school. She got about four minutes into the improved version before she noticed what she was doing.

There were, she worked out on the hill, about two hundred people in the city who had a story about her from before she was twelve. Every one of

them had come by it honestly, by being in a room where a thing had happened. Not one of them held it against her. Several of them were fond of her because of it.

She tried the sentence a few different ways going down the hill and every one of them came out sounding like complaining about being known, which is a thing you cannot say aloud at sixteen in a house where your father has worked in the same yard for twenty-nine years.

Four

Her mother said it on the Sunday, over the ironing, in the middle of something else.

“You’ll come good,” she said. “You will. You’re just a late one.”

She said it as a thing already decided, and she went on to the next item, a coat of Szymon’s that had gone missing off the line and had probably not gone missing at all. Kalina said something about the coat. The iron went on making its noise.

And somewhere under that, without any door opening, there was the story.

She could not have said what brought it. There was nothing in the kitchen to bring it. But it came up as things come up that you have not thought about in nine years and that have gone on being where they were left, and what came up first was her own body — small, and lying on her side, facing the wall, with the covers up to her jaw and her knees drawn, and the room dark except for the line under the door.

The line under the door was the whole of the room. She had that entire: the strip of light on the floorboards with the shadow going across it when somebody moved in the hall, and the noise of the television two rooms off, and the cold coming off the wall six inches from her face, in a flat where the heating went off at ten.

She had been six. It had been a period of some months, that winter or the next, in which there had been a story every night, and she had asked for them, and had asked for particular ones again, and had at some point stopped asking and it had stopped.

Then the pieces.

There was a boy who would not learn. That was the beginning and she was sure of it. His father wanted him to take a trade and he would not take it, and he went about all day doing nothing with the other boys who did nothing, and it broke his father's heart. She was sure about the heart. It had been said in those words and she had understood it at six as a thing that happened inside a person's chest, physically, the way a plate breaks, and she had been frightened of it.

She had asked about that. She was suddenly certain of this, lying on the bed at sixteen with the iron going downstairs: she had asked, at six, in the dark, whether the father died.

And she had been told that he did not.

She could not recover the answer. No sentence, no voice, nothing she could put in quotation marks. There was the fact of having asked and the fact of having been settled, and the settledness was still holding nine years on. The father did not die. She had gone to sleep on it.

Then a man came who said he was the boy's uncle.

After that it went to pieces. There was a cave, and there was something in the cave the boy was sent to get, and the man wanted it and the boy would not give it to him, and the man shut him in. That much held together. What came after the cave came in fragments in no order: something about a ring, something about a princess, a palace that arrived in a night, and a second brother who was worse than the first and who tried the same thing again with something about lamps.

And the boy became a king.

That was the end and it had never been in any doubt. The boy who would not learn a trade became a king, and was good at it, and everyone who had said he would come to nothing was there to see it.

And his father lived.

Kalina held that one for a moment with the iron going. His father lived. He had had his heart broken at the start and he was there at the end, at the wedding or the palace or whichever it was, and someone had said a thing

about him being proud, and the boy had brought him up out of wherever he had been and given him something, a room or a title. That was in it. She was sure it was in it because the pleasure of it was still there, intact, nine years on, a little warm patch in the middle of a story she otherwise could not assemble.

“You never,” her mother said, “did settle to anything. Even at that age. Your brother had his thing and you never had a thing, and I used to say to your father, she’ll find it. And he’d say nothing, because he says nothing, and I’d say it again the next week.”

“You still say it.”

“Well, and I’ll go on saying it,” her mother said, “because I’m right,” and shook out a shirt.

She did the collar and the yoke and then said, “Do you know what he did, when you were about four? He took you down the yard. On a Saturday, when there was nobody there, and he’d cleared it with somebody, and he had you round the whole of it for about two hours. He’d got it into his head.” She laughed. “You were asleep in the van coming back. He’d never say a word about it after.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“You wouldn’t. You were four.” Her mother put the shirt over the back of the chair. “He’d got it into his head you’d like it. And you might have done. He didn’t do it again, though, so I suppose you didn’t.”

Kalina went upstairs and lay down and tried for a while to get the middle of the story back and could not. She got the cave and she got the end and there was a wide dark space between them with a few things floating in it. She turned over on her side, facing the wall, which she noticed she had done and did not do anything about.

She thought about asking. It would have taken about four seconds and she would have had it entire, with the versions, and where it came from, and how old it was — and probably what she herself had been told, on which nights, and in what order, and which ones she had asked for twice.

She did not ask.

She lay there for a while afterwards with the shape of not having asked still in the room, and after a bit she went down because the football was on.

Five

The placement forms opened on the last Monday of September.

She had had it all a week before the assembly, laid out to the depth she asked for and stopping where she stopped asking: the tracks, what each one led to, what the intake had been in the district for the last six years, where somebody with her attainment typically went. It was accurate. She checked one part of it against her mother afterwards and her mother was the one who was wrong.

So she went into the hall already holding it, along with about two hundred other people who had done the same thing, and the woman at the front knew that and gave the talk anyway, because the talk was not for information.

There was an assembly and then there was a fortnight of it being the only thing anyone talked about, in the corridors and at the bus stops and at every table in every kitchen in the district, because the yards took what they took and the rest of it went where it went and everybody's parents had been through some version of it and had an opinion about the version their child was going through.

The tracks were the tracks. What was new, in the sense of being about ten years old, was the sitting.

They gave it a whole session in the hall. A woman from the placement office who was better at it than the man with the lanyard stood at the front and did not use the word journey once, and put the thing up plainly, which Kalina found she was grateful for in a way that annoyed her.

Eleven days. Residential, at the old maritime training college up at Oksywie, which had not trained anybody for the sea since before any of

them were born and was used now for this and for two other things. Fifty candidates a sitting, four sittings a year. Intake on the first day, nine days of assessment, egress on the eleventh.

Nothing came in and nothing went out. That was the part she said twice. Devices went into sleeves at intake, numbered, receipted on paper, returned by hand on the last morning. No interfaces on the site. Staff kept theirs and were barred from any query touching a candidate, and the bar was not a guideline.

And the assessments did not test what you knew.

The woman was good on this and took her time over it. Everything you know, she said, everything any of you knows, is held better elsewhere and can be had in a second, and there is no purpose in an institution paying to find out whether you have also got a copy. What the sitting looks at is what you do when it is off. Whether you can reason without it. Whether you can decide with less than you want. Whether you can sit in front of a thing you do not know the answer to, for an hour, without going to pieces.

A boy at the back said something about how nobody could do that, and there was a laugh, and the woman said, "Some can," pleasantly, and went on.

She took questions at the end and got the four she was obviously always going to get.

Somebody asked what happened if you failed. She said nobody failed. There was no failing. There was a band, the band was where you came out, and every band went somewhere.

Somebody asked whether you could bring anything. She went through it: clothes, whatever you needed for eleven days, books if you wanted them, though there were books there anyway. Nothing with an interface in it. If you brought something with an interface in it by accident you handed it in at intake and nothing happened to you. It occurred at every sitting and was not a matter for anybody.

Somebody asked whether the staff could look you up.

“No,” the woman said. “Not can’t in the sense of shouldn’t. There’s an audit and it runs on the staff and not on you, and a member of staff who queries a candidate during a sitting is out of that job by the end of the week and out of the profession by the end of the month. It has happened twice in eleven years and both of them were the same sort of thing, which was somebody worried about a candidate and going about it the wrong way. They were both good people and they are both selling insurance.”

And a girl two rows in front of Kalina asked what it was like.

The woman took a moment over that one.

“I sat one,” she said. “Not this one — the second year they ran them, at Lębork, when they were still working out what they were doing. And what I’d say is that it was the longest eleven days of my life and I have never since had eleven days that were that long, and I have had years I couldn’t tell you anything about.” She put her hands in her pockets. “I don’t know that it’s a pleasant experience. I wouldn’t sell it to you as one. What people say afterwards, when you get them on their own, is that it was the loudest their own head has ever been. That’s the phrase you’ll hear back. I’d not put it in the brochure.”

There was a silence of a particular quality after that, and she let it go on for a second, and then said, “Right. There’s a form,” and the hall broke up.

The bands mapped to the tracks. The yard track was one of them and not the top one, and that was public and everybody knew it, and it did not stop three quarters of the hall wanting it.

The fortnight after was the fortnight it always was. There was a great deal of information circulating in the district about the sitting, and about a third of it was true.

It was said that the fourth day was the worst and it was said that the seventh day was the worst, and both were said with confidence by people whose brothers had gone. It was said that they put something in the schedule on the fifth day to see what you did. It was said that a girl from Chylonia two sittings ago had walked out on the sixth morning and got as far as the main road before anybody noticed, which turned out to be true,

and that she had been made to finish anyway, which turned out not to be. It was said that everybody cried, and that nobody cried, and that the ones who came out best were the ones who had not wanted to go.

Kalina's mother heard all of it and repeated most of it and believed about half, and the half she believed was consistent.

She did not believe the girl from Chylonia. She said flatly that somebody would have noticed, and she was right about that and wrong about the rest of it. She did believe the thing about the fifth day, and brought it up three times, and by the third time it had acquired a detail about a member of staff that had not been in it before. She believed the food was bad, on no evidence, because the food is bad at everything. And she believed the one about the ones who had not wanted to go doing best, which she repeated to Kalina twice with a particular look, and which was the only one in circulation that was of any use to her.

Her father heard it too, at the yard, from men whose children had sat. He repeated none of it.

Her father raised it that night, which was fast, and meant he had known about it before she did.

"The sitting," he said.

"I know about the sitting."

"You'd do it well."

He was eating and he said it looking at his plate, and it was, as far as she could reconstruct afterwards, the first time in her life he had told her she would be good at a thing before she had done it.

"I'm not doing it," she said.

Her mother's head came up. Her father went on eating for a moment, which she had learned to read, and then he said, "Why not."

There was no answer she could put on the table. The answer was that he had said it and that his having said it had made it his, and that the whole apparatus — the forms and the hall and the woman who was good at her job and the eleven days and the bands and the yard at the bottom of the hill

with the four cranes over the basin — had arranged itself into a corridor with him standing at the end of it holding out a thing she would then have to have taken from him. She could not have said any of that at the table. She could not have said it anywhere. There was not a version of it that did not sound like something a person should be ashamed of.

“I’d not get it,” she said.

“You’d get it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No,” he said, and set it down somewhere, and went on to the next thing, and did not mention it again that week or the next.

Her mother mentioned it eleven times.

Six

He asked her on the Thursday, at the table, in a voice that had been carried into the room.

“Are you doing anything Saturday.”

“No.”

“There’s a job at Witomino. Woman’s got a fault on a ring and it’s been done badly twice.” He was eating. “You could come.”

“Right.”

“Only if you’re not doing anything.”

“I said I’m not.”

“Right,” he said, and that was the end of it, and her mother did not look up from anything and did not say a word, which meant she had known it was coming.

He had been up before her on the Saturday, which was the first in October. When Kalina came down at half eight he had the bag out on the front room floor and was going through it, which he did not do — he threw the bag in the van and went — and there were two pairs of gloves on the arm of the chair.

One pair was his. The other pair were new, and were not his size, and had been bought.

She did not say anything about the gloves and neither did he, and she picked them up on the way out and they fitted.

Witomino is up on the ridge, higher than everything, and you get to it by a road that climbs the whole way and turns twice, and from the top the woods start about two streets behind the last block and go on north for

twenty kilometres. It was a bad morning: the cloud was down on the ridge and the wipers were on the whole way up and the woods above the estate had gone the colour they go in the third week of October, which is not gold and is closer to iron.

The woman was called Pani Grabowska. She was in her sixties, in a cardigan over a housecoat, with her glasses on a cord, and she had had two men in already and was angry about it in the settled way of somebody who has told the story a number of times. Her father listened to the whole thing at the door for about six minutes without interrupting, which was a courtesy and was also him getting the history.

Then they went in and did the job.

He talked. That was the thing Kalina noticed inside the first quarter of an hour, and could not stop noticing. He explained what he was doing while he did it. He explained why the second man's fix had been a fix and not a repair, and what happens to a ring when somebody puts a spur off it in the wrong place, and why the fault came and went, and why coming-and-going was most of the diagnosis on its own. He was not bad at explaining. He had clearly not done much of it and he went too slowly and doubled back, and none of that mattered.

What mattered was that he had prepared it, and she could hear that he had prepared it, and there was no way to tell him she could hear it.

At about half eleven he gave her the meter.

"Go on," he said. "Same as the switch."

It was not the same as the switch.

The back bedroom was cold and had not been slept in for years and had that smell — a made bed nobody gets into, and cardboard, and something faintly chemical off the skirting where the fault had been cooking away quietly for eighteen months. The socket sat at ankle height behind a chest of drawers they had had to walk out into the middle of the floor. There was a crocheted thing on the bed and a wardrobe with a mirrored door that had been repaired with a strip of tape along the bottom, and rain coming across

the window in bursts.

She knelt on the boards with the front off the socket and the leads in her hands and had a bad minute. He did not help her, and that was the only unrehearsed thing that happened all morning.

Then she got it. The number was where it should not have been and she knew what it meant before she had finished reading it, and she said so, and she was right.

Her father took the meter back and looked at it and said, "That's it."

And there it was, in a cold back bedroom in Witomino with a woman making tea two rooms off. The thing he had got up early for. It had come off, and he had it in his hands, and he stood there holding it for about a second and a half.

Then he said, "You could do this."

Kalina stood there with the leads coiled in her fist.

She had his hands. That was a thing nobody had ever said, because nobody looks at hands — her mother had spent sixteen years telling people that Kalina had none of her father in her, and had been going off the face. But the hands were his. Square across the palm, short in the finger, with the same flat wide thumb, and they were doing what his did when they were waiting, which was nothing at all and doing it very still.

There was no answer available. Every sentence she could reach for was a sentence about him — about what he wanted and how long he had wanted it and what it had cost him to say four words in a stranger's bedroom on a Saturday morning — and none of it could be said in that room, or in the van, or in any room the two of them had ever been in together. The true answer was that she had liked the last ninety minutes more than she had liked anything in about a year, and that this was not the same as the thing he was asking, and she could not have made the difference audible.

"Maybe," she said.

He finished the job. It took another forty minutes and he did all of it and did not hand her anything else, and he was not cold about it and did not go

quiet; he asked her to hold the torch twice and thanked her for it both times.

Pani Grabowska gave them tea and offered money and he took it, because it was a job and not a neighbour.

The drive back was twenty-five minutes.

The two of them had never needed to talk in a vehicle. It was the one place where the not-talking had always been all right, and had been all right since she was small, and it was not all right on the way down from Witomino. She sat with it and could feel him sitting with it, and about halfway down he turned the radio on, which he never did, and it stayed on until Grabówek.

At the door he said, "Thanks for coming."

"That's alright."

He put the bag in the hall and went to wash his hands, and the gloves went on the shelf by the door and stayed there.

Seven

She met him on the trolleybus on the eighth of October, on the 21, going up the hill at about half four in the afternoon with the light already thinking about going.

It was the bad hour on that route. Everybody who had finished at three and everybody who had finished at four were on it together, and there were pushchairs in the middle section and a man with a length of pipe across his knees, and the windows had gone opaque at the bottom third. When the vehicle took the long left at the bottom of the hill the whole standing half of it leaned and came back, all together, the way they do, without anybody putting a hand out.

She had a seat because she had got on at the terminus. She was against the window with her bag on her lap, and had the sleeve of her coat pushed up against the glass to keep the wet off her arm.

A man took the one beside her at Węzeł Franciszki Cegielskiej.

He was in his fifties and not tall and very neat. Grey overcoat, buttoned, of a quality that was noticeable on that route at that hour. Shoes that had been cleaned, actually cleaned, which almost nobody does. A soft old leather bag on his knees with the corners gone pale.

Thin sandy-grey hair combed straight back off a high forehead. A small, quiet, unremarkable face that did not do very much. His hands were clean and soft and had never done anything.

He was reading a paperback with a library sticker on the spine, and he had it folded back on itself in the manner of a man who does not care what happens to a book, and when he put it away he put it in the bag face down and open, which ruins them.

He sat with his elbows in, which she noticed, because most of them did not.

They went two stops. He looked out of the window past her once and then went back to looking straight ahead. Then he said, without turning round much, "You'll be Iwona's girl."

Kalina said nothing, in the way you say nothing on a trolleybus.

"Biang," he said. "Before she married. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. You've got the whole of that side in your face, you've none of your father in you at all."

That was the second person in a fortnight to say it and the second to be going off the face, and Kalina put her hands under her bag without deciding to.

He said it as an observation about a matter of fact and not as a compliment, and then he looked out of the window at the road for long enough that she thought it might be finished. Then he said, "You wouldn't go in the water at Hel."

She turned and looked at him.

"Not past your knees," he said. "The whole week. Everybody in and you standing at the edge of it with your arms folded up like this." He did it, briefly, with his bag on his lap — the folded arms, high, the shoulders up — and it was exactly right, and it was a thing she had not thought about in seven years and had never been shown from the outside.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I was there," he said, "on the Thursday and the Friday, with your grandmother's people. You'd have been nine. There's no reason on earth you'd remember me, I was in a bad way that summer and I kept out of it mostly."

He gave her a name — Amsel, Ryszard — and did not offer to shake hands, which on a full trolleybus would have been an odd thing to do, and she was aware of being glad he had not done it.

“Your mother was the one who could sing,” he said. “Is that right, or am I putting that on the wrong one? There were three of them and one of them could sing.”

“That’s my aunt Grażyna.”

“Grażyna. There you are, then. Thirty years and I’ve had it round the wrong way the whole time.” He seemed pleased about it rather than embarrassed, and he shook his head at himself, and he did not ask her anything.

That was the thing she came back to afterwards. He did not ask her one question.

He talked for another two stops about the road. They had done something to the junction at the top four years ago, and he was against it, and he laid out what it had been like before — where the turn had been, and what you used to be able to do coming down from Witomino that you now could not do, and how much of the delay was the lights and how much was the geometry. It was a subject of no interest to anybody and he was funny about it in a low flat way that did not require her to laugh, and did not check whether she was listening, and did not stop when she did not respond.

At Kielecka he stood up.

“Give her my regards. Ryszard. She’ll not know it, but her mother would have.”

And he got off, and the doors closed, and the vehicle went on up the hill with Kalina still in it for four more stops.

She looked him up before it reached the next one.

There was nothing wrong with what came back. A man of that name, of about that age, born in Elbląg, with a work history that was institutional almost all the way along — a placement office in the south, then a research body, then a gap of some years, then another research body, which was the current one and which she did not recognise. A listed address in Gdańsk. No flags of any kind on anything.

It was, as a set of facts about a person, unusually flat. She would think about that later and be unable to decide whether it had been flat or whether she had simply looked at it for eleven seconds on a trolleybus.

What she did notice, and did not do anything with, was that there was nothing to place him anywhere near Hel in any summer. Not that summer. Not any of them.

She did not think about that for very long. People went places without it being written down. That was still true then, more or less, for a man of fifty — the record of a man that age had holes in it that were only holes, and everybody knew it and made allowances, and it was the sort of thing her mother said about her own generation with a kind of pride.

The vehicle got to her stop and she put it away and got off.

Eight

He came to the house on the Sunday, ten days after the trolleybus, and it was not his idea.

Kalina had given the regards, because there had been no reason not to, and her mother had stood with a plate in her hand and said “Ryszard,” twice, in two different tones, and then, “Amsel. Amsel. That’d be through the Biangas, that’d be my mother’s side. There was an Amsel.”

“He said he was at Hel. When I was nine.”

“Was he?” her mother said, and then, more slowly, “There was somebody that week. There was a whole crowd of them that week, it was the year your grandmother was ill and everybody came, and I couldn’t tell you now who was there and who I’ve put there since.” She put the plate down. “Amsel. There was an Amsel married one of the Bianga girls, but that was my mother’s cousin’s lot and they went to Elbląg and we never— was he tall?”

“Not really.”

“No,” her mother said. “No, well.” And then, being who she was, she invited him.

He came at four, which in the third week of October on that coast is already the end of the afternoon, and stayed until twenty past six, and he was very good.

The flat did what it did when there was a visitor: the good cloth on the table, the ceiling light on in the front room instead of the lamp, her mother having cleaned the bathroom on a Sunday morning for a man she had met once. The radiators had been on since Thursday and the windows had gone opaque by half four, and outside them the hill went down into nothing and

the yard lights came up over the basin one bank at a time.

He brought a cake from the place on Świętojańska, which was the right thing to bring and slightly the wrong shop, being the shop of somebody who did not live in the district. He said the flat was warm and meant it. He took his shoes off in the hall without being asked and without making anything of it, and he had the sort of socks a man's wife buys him, and Kalina noticed that and then noticed that there was no wife mentioned anywhere at any point in two hours and twenty minutes.

Then he sat down at the table and did nothing for an hour except get the Biangas wrong.

"Now there were four of them," he said.

"Three," said her mother.

"Three. Three girls."

"Three girls and Bolek, but Bolek was much older and he was really — he was almost like an uncle to us, he wasn't in with the girls at all."

"Bolek," Amsel said, and sat back. "Bolek with the leg."

"With the *leg*," her mother said, and put her hand flat on the table, and she was away.

It went on for the better part of an hour and Kalina sat at the end of the table with a piece of cake she did not particularly want and watched it happen.

He got things wrong. He got a lot of things wrong, steadily, and every time he got a thing wrong her mother corrected him, at length, with pleasure, and he was delighted to be corrected. He put Grażyna's wedding in the wrong town and her mother gave him the right town and then gave him the whole of the wedding. He thought the house at Reda had been sold before the grandmother died and it had been sold two years after, and her mother explained why, which took eleven minutes and involved the son-in-law.

He wrote nothing down. He did not once refer to anything. He sat with his hands round a cup and let a woman of fifty-three assemble, out of her

own material, in her own voice, over an hour, a version of the past in which he had been present throughout.

By five o'clock the connection existed and her mother was the one holding it up.

Kalina watched this happen from the end of the table and could not have said, then or later, that anything untrue had been said. She went back over it afterwards. He had made perhaps four positive claims in the whole hour and every one of them had been corrected by her mother and abandoned by him at once. The rest of it was her mother's. The Biangas, at the end of the afternoon, were entirely her mother's Biangas, and he had simply been in the room where they were built.

Her father came in at half four from the allotment with his hands still cold, and her mother said, "Tadeusz — this is Ryszard. Bianga side. My mother's people," and he shook the man's hand and sat down and had a piece of the cake.

He was polite. He was polite for an hour and fifty minutes, which for him was a considerable expenditure.

Amsel was good with him too, and differently, and Kalina watched that for the second half of the afternoon. With her mother he was a man being corrected. With her father he was a man who did not talk very much either, and the two of them sat at the same table in the same room and the conversation dropped by about two thirds in volume and did not become awkward, and Amsel let a silence run for nearly a minute at one point and let her father be the one to end it.

He asked about the allotment. Her father told him about the allotment, which took some time, because the allotment was one of the four things her father would talk about. He asked about the cable run in August. Her father told him about that too, or told him the part that could be told across a table, and Amsel asked one question in the middle of it that was a real question, of the kind you can only ask if you have been listening, and her father answered it more fully than he had answered anything.

Her father asked him one thing back. Where he was working now.

“A group under the placement standards side,” Amsel said. “Assessment quality, mostly. We look at whether the things that predict how people will do actually predict how people do.” He turned his cup round. “It’s dull and it’s mostly arithmetic and about a third of it gets read.”

Her father nodded, and let it go, and had another piece of cake.

At the door, afterwards, her mother said, “Well, that was nice,” in the general direction of the room, and her father said nothing at all.

Kalina was drying up. She said, “You didn’t like him.”

“He was alright,” her father said.

“You didn’t, though.”

Her father took a while over it. He had the tap running and he shut it off and stood with his hands on the edge of the sink.

“He’s not done anything,” he said.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I know what you asked.” He dried his hands. “I’ve nothing on him. He came, he was decent, he brought a cake.” He hung the towel up, squarely, the way he did everything. “I’d not have him back.”

“Why?”

And her father, who had been thirty years in a trade where you say what the fault is or you keep quiet, thought about it for a good ten seconds and then said, “I don’t know,” and went in to the football, and that was the end of it.

Szymon had a view, which he delivered on the Tuesday with his back to the room and a fork in the pan.

“He’s after Mum.”

“He is not.”

“He’s after Mum. Sixty-year-old bloke turns up out of nowhere, brings a cake —”

“He’s fifty.”

“Brings a cake,” Szymon said, “sits in the kitchen for two hours going ooh, *tell me about the Biangas* — I’ve seen it. Kowalczyk’s father did exactly that and there’d been nothing between them for thirty years.” He was enjoying himself. “Watch. He’ll be back.”

“He’s not after Mum.”

“We’ll see.”

He was completely wrong and he was cheerful about being wrong for the next three weeks, and every time he said it the thing got a little smaller, and by the end of the month Amsel was a joke in the house and jokes in a house are not looked at.

Her mother had him back twice before the month was out.

Nine

The school assessment came through on the Wednesday, addressed to her parents and copied to her, which was the standard arrangement and had been since she was eleven.

PLACEMENT SUPPORT ASSESSMENT — CANDIDATE-FACING COPY

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Prepared under BECS assessment standards. Reviewed by: Placement Office, District 9.

This assessment is a support document. It is not a decision and does not constitute a placement recommendation. It is provided to you so that you can see what the placement office will see.

Summary

Kalina is a candidate whose measured aptitude sits materially above her attainment record, and the gap has been stable for four years rather than widening or closing. This pattern is common and is not in itself a concern.

The distinctive feature of her record is the shape of the gap rather than its width. Across a large number of observed instances, Kalina initiates engagement with demanding tasks at a rate consistent with her aptitude and discontinues them at a rate well above her cohort.

Discontinuation occurs early and characteristically occurs before any point at which performance could be evaluated. This is not avoidance of difficulty; her persistence on tasks she has begun and been seen to begin is unremarkable and at times good. It is more precisely a difficulty in arriving.

Attainment

Attainment is at band four across most areas and band five in two. There is no area in which attainment is at or above measured aptitude. The distribution is unusually even; candidates with a gap of this size normally show it concentrated in particular areas, and Kalina's is spread across all of them at roughly the same width. We mention this because it argues against explanations

that would locate the gap in a subject, a teacher, or a period.

Setting effects

The most useful finding in this record concerns setting. Where Kalina is assessed by unfamiliar assessors, in settings with no prior contact, and where her earlier record is not available to those present, her performance rises — in the four instances available, by between one and two bands, which is a large effect and larger than we would ordinarily report on four instances.

We note this with appropriate caution. Four instances is not a basis for confident inference and the effect may be an artefact of the settings themselves; each of the four was short, novel, and had no consequence attached, and any of those three could carry the result on its own. It is, however, the single largest differential in her record, and it is in the same direction each time.

Suggested consideration

Families may wish to consider whether Kalina is a suitable candidate for the Unassisted Placement Sitting. The sitting's conditions correspond closely to the settings in which her performance has been strongest, and it offers an assessment of aptitude that is not weighted by attainment history. Candidates in her profile place, on average, above their predicted band.

This is a suggestion for the family's consideration and not a recommendation.

She read it in her room with her boots on.

She read it twice, and the second time she read it slowly, and what she kept going back to was not the paragraph about arriving, although the paragraph about arriving was accurate to a degree that made her put the thing down for a minute and look at the ceiling.

It was *where her earlier record is not available to those present*.

She read that clause about nine times. She got up and walked to the window and came back and read it again.

It was set out in the flat considerate voice the whole document was written in, sandwiched between a caution and a caveat, hedged twice, reported as a finding of low confidence. Then it went on to the next heading.

The four instances would be the aptitude panel at Wejherowo, and the two days at the regional thing in the spring, which was two, and one other.

She went at the fourth one for most of an evening. She had a list by half nine of everything that could possibly have counted since she was twelve, and she went down it, and three of them she could rule out on the grounds that the people in the room had known her, and the rest were not assessments in any sense that would produce a band. She got to the bottom and started again at the top.

Four seconds. She had asked it what time it got light. Four seconds was all this would have taken; the document had come to her and the material behind it would come to her too if she asked for it, and she would have had the date and the place and the assessors and the two bands.

She did not ask, and could not have explained it, and at about eleven she put the list down the side of the bed and left it there.

Her mother mentioned it on the Thursday. Her mother had read it twice and had gone straight to the last section, and what she took out of the whole document was that the placement office thought Kalina might do well at the sitting, which was, to be fair to her, what it said.

"It says you'd place above your predicted band," her mother said. "It says that. Above."

"On average. It says candidates in my profile do, on average."

"Well, that's you."

Her father did not mention it. He had it — it had gone to both of them — and he never once, then or later, referred to a word of it in her hearing.

But it was here. That was the thing she got to on the Thursday night and had not got to on the Wednesday. Underneath everything else, in the paragraph before the sign-off, the document suggested the sitting, and it had suggested it to her parents on the Wednesday morning.

Her father had known about the sitting before she did. She had assumed that meant the yard, or the office, or Wieczorek, or one of the eleven other channels by which a thing reached her father before it reached her.

He had got it here. He had got it out of this, in the flat considerate voice, with the sentence about arriving in it, and it had come to him with a suggestion attached and he had taken the suggestion, because it was a good one, because it was correct, and because a man does not turn down a thing that would be good for his daughter on the grounds of where it came from.

She sat on the end of the bed for some time.

The thing she could not get past — and she went on not getting past it, on and off, for a fortnight — was that it was kind. Every line of it was kind. Nobody had been unfair to her anywhere in it. Twice it had gone out of its way to say that four was not enough instances, and it was right about that. It had refused to make a recommendation, and that was correct. And it had put the largest finding in her record in front of her plainly, so that she could see what the placement office would see.

She could not find the injury. She went through it twice more that week looking for the place where somebody had done something to her, and there was no such place, and she did not feel better.

Ten

He made the offer on a Tuesday at the end of October, walking down to the stop, because her mother had said “Walk down with him, Lina, it’s black out there,” and neither of them had objected.

They went down past the shuttered end of the parade and he asked her nothing for the first three minutes, which by then she had come to expect and to find restful.

Then he said, “Can I tell you what I actually do? Because I’ve been in your mother’s kitchen three times and I’ve been vague about it three times, and it’s starting to be a thing I’m doing rather than a thing I’ve forgotten to do.”

“Alright.”

She had looked him up again after the second visit and had got the same flat institutional thing back, and she had also, without deciding to, been told the walking time down to the stop, which was four minutes, and which she had not asked for.

“I work for a group that looks at where the developmental models go wrong.” He had his hands in his pockets. “Not the big argument. Not whether they should exist. Where they’re wrong, in what direction, and by how much — the boring version. Do you know what a developmental model is?”

“It’s the thing that says what I’ll be like.”

“It’s the thing that says what you’ll be like,” he agreed. “And it’s right about most people most of the time, which is why anybody uses it, and I’d rather have it than not have it, and I want to say that at the start because everything after it sounds like an attack and it isn’t one.”

They crossed. There was nothing coming.

"It's wrong between fifteen and seventeen," he said. "Substantially wrong. Not a bit wrong, the way it's a bit wrong at forty. It's wrong at fifteen to seventeen the way a bad instrument is wrong, and then it comes right again at eighteen and everybody stops noticing, because what people notice is where a thing is wrong for a long time and not where it's wrong for two years."

"Why?"

"Because of your sitting." He said it flatly. "This is the only country in the world that does eleven unobserved days at that age, and it's the only piece of anybody's adolescence that isn't in the record anywhere, and it's not in the record by law and I'd defend the law. Your grandparents' lot fought for that. They fought for it hard, over about nine years, and they won it, and they were right."

"So."

"So the models have never seen the inside of it," he said. "There is a period in every one of your lives that is the most concentrated fortnight you will have had by that point, and it is the one fortnight the thing that predicts you has no material on. And then it predicts you anyway."

She thought about that for most of a block.

"Does it matter?" she said. "If it's two years."

"I'll tell you the one I carry about," he said. "There was a boy in Elblag two years ago. Sixteen. His model had him stable, and it was not being careless, it was reasoning correctly from what it had, and his family were reasoning correctly from what it told them, and everybody involved behaved well." He walked a few more steps. "He was not stable. And the reason it had him wrong is a reason we can name now, which is that the shape it was matching him to was built without any of this in it, and this is the age where it matters most and it's the age where we've got least."

"What happened to him?"

“He’s alive,” Amsel said. “That’s not the point I’m making and I’m not going to make it into one.”

“I’ll tell you what it’ll be like, since nobody else will.” He had his hands back in his pockets. “The first two days are the worst. Everybody says that and everybody’s right — you’ll be reaching for it about forty times a day and you’ll feel stupid every time. Then it settles. By about the fourth day you’ll have stopped noticing and the rest of it is boredom. Nine days of tests and bad food and nothing to do in the evenings. That’s the honest version.”

Kalina said, “Right.”

She had nothing to set against it. She had never been in one. He had read, presumably, a great many accounts of them and had talked to people who had come out, and there was no reason on earth to think he was wrong.

He was wrong about all of it. He was wrong about the two days and he was wrong about the fourth and he was wrong about the boredom, and she would think about that walk more than once in the following year and never be able to work out whether he had been repeating something or guessing.

They were nearly at the stop. There was one other person there, further along, not near.

“What we can get,” he said, “is nothing. Staff observe on site and the observation is destroyed at egress, and that is also correct and I’d defend that too, and it means the whole thing sits behind a wall we built on purpose and I’m not going to be the man who argues for taking it down.”

“Then how do you do it?”

“Badly,” he said. “We do it from the outside. Before and after, and inference in the middle, and it’s the softest work I’ve ever put my name to.” He stopped walking, which he had not done before, and turned so he was not talking to the side of her head. “There’s one thing that’s not behind the wall, and it took me a long time to see it, and I’ve been in two minds about it since. The statute stops systems. It stops retention. It stops staff querying you. It doesn’t stop a person going in there and paying attention and

coming out and telling me what it was like.”

Kalina did not say anything.

“That’s the ask,” he said. “You go, because you’re going to go or you’re not, and that’s nothing to do with me. And while you’re in there you notice. Not anybody in particular — I don’t want a list of people and I couldn’t use one. What it’s like. What fifty of you do with each other when there’s nothing looking. What happens to a room on the fourth night. Whether it’s better or worse than you thought and in what direction.” He shrugged slightly. “And then you come out, and I buy you something to eat, and you talk for four hours, and I write it down after you’ve gone.”

“That’s it.”

“That’s it.” Then: “And I’ll tell you the part I’d be in trouble for. I shouldn’t be having this conversation with an enrolled candidate. Not illegal, not against the statute, nothing to do with the statute — it’s against how we’re supposed to work, which is that you approach people afterwards and you take what you get. I’m doing it now because what you get afterwards is people who weren’t paying attention, and I’ve had two of those, and it was worth nothing.”

“Why me?” Kalina said.

“Because you’ll notice,” Amsel said. “That’s not flattery and I’d rather you didn’t take it as any. You’ve a habit of standing at the edge of a thing and watching it, and I’ve seen you do it twice in your mother’s kitchen, and it’s a nuisance to have at sixteen and it’s the only qualification this needs.”

“You’ve talked to other people.”

“Two.”

“What happened?”

“One said no, at the stop, more or less where you’re standing.” He put his bag down again. “The other said yes and went in and came out and had nothing. And I don’t blame him for it. He’d had eleven days of his own life happening to him and he’d been in it up to his neck, which is what you’re supposed to do in there, and I asked him what the fourth night was like and

he said it was fine.” He shrugged. “Which it may have been.”

“So you want somebody who won’t be in it.”

Amsel looked at her for a second.

“Yes,” he said.

She had a fair idea by then that she was being handled and she could not find the place where it was happening.

The bus came up the road, a long way down, and stopped, and came on.

“There’s one other thing and I’d rather say it out loud than have you work it out,” Amsel said. “I know people at the placement office. I’ve known them for years, and I’d be talking to them about you anyway if we did this, because I’d have to. A word from me carries with them. Not far. It carries.” He picked up his bag. “It’s not much. I’d not want you doing this on the strength of it.”

“Right,” Kalina said.

“You’ve time. It’s three weeks.” He put his hand up as the bus slowed, and got on, and did not look back through the glass, and she stood at the stop for a while after it had gone.

She had noticed the last part. She had noticed it clearly, and had understood exactly what it was, and it had gone in anyway and settled somewhere and stayed warm, and she was still turning it over on the hill going up.

Eleven

She enrolled on the fourth of November, in the ninth minute of a free period, at a terminal in the empty half of the library, on a form that took four fields and a confirmation.

The four fields were her candidate reference, which was filled in already; her school, which was filled in already; the sitting she was applying for, which offered a list of one, being the November sitting at Oksywie, District 9; and a box headed *anything the placement office should know*, which was optional and which she left empty after looking at it for a while.

Then there was a page of conditions with a tick at the bottom. She read them, because she read things. Attendance for the full eleven days. Surrender of devices at intake and no interfaces on site. Withdrawal permitted at any point, without penalty to the candidate, resulting in no band. Acknowledgement that no record of the interval would be retained by any party and that no result other than the band would be issued. Acknowledgement that the candidate's own account of the sitting remained the candidate's own.

She ticked it. It said *Thank you. Your place is confirmed.* and gave her a reference beginning with GD and a date and a time to be at the station.

The whole thing took about ninety seconds and she sat in front of it for another four minutes afterwards.

She did not tell anyone.

That was not a plan. She came out of the room and went to the next thing and it did not occur to her to say it, and then in the afternoon it occurred to her and she found that she was not going to, and she went round the back of that for a while and did not get anywhere useful.

Her mother knew by six.

There was nothing sinister in it. The school issued a placement update on enrolment because that is what a school does, and it went where it went, and her mother had it before Kalina got in the door. There was no wrongdoing anywhere in the sequence. Every part of the machinery had behaved decently and in good time.

“Lina,” her mother said, from the kitchen, and there was a whole delivery in it. “Lina.”

“I know.”

“When?”

“Today.”

“Why didn’t you say?”

“I only did it today.”

“You’ve been in the house forty minutes,” her mother said, laughing, and hugged her at the doorway with a tea towel still in one hand, and said “Oh, he’ll be pleased,” which was the sentence Kalina had been walking toward all the way up the hill and had not been able to see over.

Her father came in at twenty-five past six and washed his hands for a long time.

Then he came in and sat down and said, “Right, then.” That was all of it. It was said in a completely different voice from any voice he had used about it before, and she heard the difference, and it did not do anything to her.

He had not heard it from her. That was the shape of it. In September the gate had not logged her and Wieczorek had told him and her mother’s summary had confirmed it and the whole redundant apparatus of the district had carried the news up the hill to her father before she got home, and in November the same apparatus had carried the opposite news up the same hill at the same speed, and both times she had come in through the door into a room where it had already arrived.

She had eleven days coming where that would not be possible. She had worked that out on the third of November, lying on her bed with her boots

on, and had not said it in words even to herself, because there was a shame in it she could not locate the source of.

Nobody asked why she did it. There was nothing in it that needed asking: a girl had enrolled for a sitting that her school had suggested, her father wanted, and her mother had mentioned eleven times.

If anybody had, it would have come out as the thing about Amsel, and the word at the placement office, and it not being a bad idea, and it being eleven days out of the house. All of that was true and she would have said it with the shrug that goes with it.

All of that was in there. She could have produced any of it under questioning and none of it would have been a lie.

Twelve

She met Sylwia Kruk on the stairs on the Saturday, three days after she enrolled, coming up with three bags.

The Kruks had had the flat on the fourth floor until about six years ago and had gone to Gdańsk when the father's work went, and Sylwia was twenty-two now and back for somebody's christening.

She had got thin in a way that had probably been deliberate and had a coat on that had not come from anywhere in Gdynia, and she was carrying three bags up a stairwell in it. She had the Kruk face, all cheekbone and nothing else, and she had done something to her hair. She had also, in six years, entirely lost the vowels; she had Gdańsk now, or she had what people who move to Gdańsk from here acquire in the first year and never quite lose again.

Kalina took a bag off her at the second landing without being asked, because it was that or stand against the wall. The bulb on that landing had been out since August and the two of them did most of it in the light coming up from the floor below.

"You're the little one," Sylwia said. "Dorosz. You were about —" She stopped, and reconsidered, and laughed at herself. "Sorry. That's not — you were nine when we went."

"Ten."

"Ten." They went up another flight. "Are you at Morska still or have they moved you?"

"Still."

"They were going to move everybody. They've been going to move everybody since I was there." She shifted the bags. "What are you doing

now, then? You'd be doing placement."

"I'm doing the sitting."

Sylwia stopped on the landing.

It was not a dramatic stop. She had one bag under her arm and she put it down to change hands, and it took a moment, and Kalina would not have registered it at all except that there had been nothing to change hands for.

"Right," Sylwia said. "I did that."

"What's it like?"

"Fine." She picked the bag up again. "It's fine. It's nine days of tests and they feed you badly and there's a boy who cries on the second night, there's always a boy who cries on the second night. The seventh day's nothing like they say."

"Everyone says the seventh's the worst."

"Everyone says a lot of things about it and none of them have been." They got to the fourth floor and Sylwia set the bags down by the door and got her keys out and then did not put them in the door. "Do you know what the actual thing was?"

"What?"

"For about a year afterwards I kept not asking." She was looking at the keys. "Not on purpose. I'd want to know something and I'd just — not. I'd sit there. And then about four seconds later I'd remember I could, and I'd feel completely stupid, and I'd ask, and it'd tell me, and that was that." She turned the keys over. "It happened for about a year. Then it stopped."

Kalina stood on the landing with her hand still out from the bag.

"Was that good?" she said. "Or bad?"

Sylwia thought about it. She thought about it long enough that it stopped being a conversational pause and became a woman on a landing working something out, and Kalina watched her do it.

"I don't know," she said.

Then she put the keys in the door and said thanks for the bag, and went in.

Thirteen

The coach went from the station at ten past six on the morning of the tenth of November and her father drove her down at half five.

The van smelled of the van. He had cleared the seat, which meant there was a bag of something in the footwell behind instead, and he drove as he always drove, slowly and in the middle of the lane.

There was nothing in the streets at all. Down through Grabówek every window was dark except the ones on the stairwells, which are never off, and the road had gone white at the edges with the first of it – not snow, the salt-frost you get on that coast when the wind drops for a night, which lies for an hour and goes.

He did not say anything for the first ten minutes and neither did she, and it was not uncomfortable.

The two of them had generally been good at that, and it had gone wrong once, in October, on the road down from Witomino. It had come back. She noticed that it had come back and did not know what to do with the noticing, and sat with her bag on her knees while they went through the empty streets.

At the lights by the station he said, "You've got the paper for the sleeve."

"It's in the front."

"Right."

Her father did not come in.

He pulled up on the rank and put the brake on and left the engine going, and she got her bag off the back seat, and he got out and came round, which he did not have to do.

He stood there for a second with his hands at his sides.

“Right,” he said.

“Right.”

And then he said, “Find a trade that wants you back.”

He said it as though he were handing her something. It came out slightly rehearsed, which meant he had brought it with him in the van, which meant he had had it since the previous evening or longer, and it was not his sentence. She had heard it before somewhere — from him, years ago, about somebody else — and she knew without being told that it had been said to him first, in a yard or a kitchen, by a man who was probably dead.

“Okay,” she said.

He nodded, and got back in, and waited, because he was not going to pull off while she was still standing on the pavement.

She went in. The concourse was cold and very bright after the dark, and when she looked back through the glass the van had gone.

There were about thirty of them already, with their bags at their feet, and parents standing slightly apart from them in a loose outer ring. The rest came in over the next quarter of an hour and all came in the same way: through the doors with a bag, into the light, then a stop of two or three seconds while they worked out where the thing was. A woman from the placement office stood by the far doors with a list on paper and ticked people off it and said the same four sentences fifty times.

Kalina knew two of them by sight and neither to speak to. There was a boy from the technical school in a good coat who was talking to three people at once and had clearly decided how this was going to go. There was a girl sitting on her bag against the pillar with her hood up, entirely still. There was somebody being cried over near the ticket machines, quietly, by a woman who was apologising for it while doing it.

And in the last four or five minutes before they loaded, the concourse went quiet and then filled up with a different sound: fifty people all finishing at once.

They were on them. All of them, everywhere, standing about the concourse with their heads down and their thumbs going, or holding them up at arm's length and talking to them, or standing off in the corners with them against their ears. There was a girl by the vending machine having what was clearly the same conversation for the fourth time. There was the boy in the good coat, who had stopped performing entirely and had gone off toward the newsagent's shutter on his own to do whatever he was doing.

It went on for perhaps six minutes. It was not panic and nobody was frantic. It had the quality of a room being tidied.

Kalina had nothing to finish.

She went through it properly, standing there, because it seemed impossible: there was nobody expecting to hear from her before six, and nothing outstanding, and no arrangement that needed the last word putting on it. Everything she used it for was the sort of thing that stops when you stop. She had been carrying it for eleven years and it turned out there was no goodbye in it.

She stood by the pillar with her bag between her feet and watched them, and put hers away in the side pocket where the paper for the sleeve was, and stood there with her hands out of her sleeves for once, and could not think of one person to say anything to.

They loaded at six. She got a seat on the left and put her bag between her feet, and the coach went out past the goods yard and north, and about four minutes on it went along the road at the bottom, past the long fence and the gate, which was open, and lit, and taking the shift.

PART TWO

ELEVEN DAYS

Fourteen

DAY ONE

The college at Oksywie stands on the headland with the water on two sides of it and the naval ground behind, and it was built in the same decade as everything else on that coast, by the same people, in the same conviction. Four storeys of white render gone grey. Long windows. A curved front to the sea that had been the point of it.

It had trained nobody for the sea in fifty years.

It was forty minutes from the station and nobody said much. They went out past the goods yard and the container ground and the long backs of the sheds, and then north on the road that runs above the port, so that for about four minutes the whole basin was down on the right in the dark with the gantries lit and a ship in at the coal quay taking on under floodlight. Then the road turned inland and it was housing, and then it was the naval ground with a fence that went on for a kilometre and a half and had a soldier at the gate of it who did not look up.

Somebody at the back was talking the entire way. Nobody answered him and he did not appear to require it.

The coach came up through the college gate at ten to seven and stopped on gravel and they got out into a wind that was doing about thirty and had two thousand kilometres of open water behind it. There was no shelter between the coach and the door. Everybody arrived at the door with their eyes streaming and nobody talked for the first four minutes.

Inside was a hall with a terrazzo floor and a staircase that went up in one flight and split, and the ceiling was five metres up, and it was cold in the

way a big building is cold in November when the heating has been on for a fortnight and has not caught up. There were fifty of them in a space built for four hundred. You could hear where the walls were.

Nothing happened for twenty-five minutes.

The tables were not open. Whatever was supposed to have been done before eight had not been done, and fifty people stood about in a hall with a five-metre ceiling in wet coats with their bags at their feet, and a man in a fleece went past twice carrying a crate and did not look at anybody. There was a radiator along the north wall that was cold. Somebody tried the door of a room off the hall and it was locked.

Then a woman came out with a clipboard and said, "Right, sorry, we're going to start at the far end," and everybody moved at once and became a queue.

They queued along the left-hand side under a row of glass cases.

The cases held ship models. Eleven of them, a metre or so each, rigged and painted and fitted out to a level of detail that nobody had asked for in fifty years — hatch covers, deck winches, a ladder on the funnel of one of them about as long as a fingernail. Under each was a brass plate with a name on it and a year. The glass had not been opened in a long time and the dust inside had settled on the decks in a grey film, evenly, the way it does at sea.

Fifty people filed past them at seven in the morning in the dark and about four looked.

The surrender was done at three tables at the far end, by hand.

There was a box of sleeves — grey fabric, numbered in white on the corner, sixty of them in a crate — and a woman at each table with a pad of triplicate forms and a pen. You came up. You gave your name. She wrote it. You put the thing in the sleeve and she took the sleeve and turned the top over twice and put a seal along the fold and wrote the number on all three copies of the form and gave you one and put one in a folder and one in a second folder.

Kalina got number 31.

The girl in front of her had two — a second one, older, that she said was her mother's and that she carried and did not use — and there was a small delay while the woman found another sleeve and wrote a second number and did the whole procedure again. Nobody minded. It was clearly not the first time it had happened that morning.

"Anything else with an interface in it?" the woman said.

"No."

"Watch?"

"No."

"Right." She turned the fold over twice and ran the seal along it. Her hands were quick and bored and had done it several thousand times. "That's yours. Don't lose it, and if you do lose it we'll still find your bag, it's just slower. You're in the west wing, second floor, they'll take you up."

And that was it.

Kalina stood on the terrazzo with a slip of paper in her hand and looked at the crate. There were about thirty sleeves in it already, all the same, all numbered. There was no difference between hers and anybody's.

She had expected something. She could not have said what. Some register of the moment, some acknowledgement in the building of what the building was for.

There was a queue and a woman with a pad, and behind her somebody said "Anything else with an interface in it?" to the next one, in exactly the same voice.

The briefing was at half past eight in the big room on the ground floor, fifty chairs in rows and four adults standing at the front, and it took eleven minutes.

The woman who gave it was in her forties in a cardigan and did not introduce the others until the end. She had a single sheet of paper and did not look at it.

“Pani Roszak. West wing. Eleven days. I’ll do this once because it’s mostly obvious.

“Meals are half seven, twelve, half six. The refectory shuts at nine. Laundry’s in the west wing and there’s a rota on the door that nobody keeps to and it works out.

“You can go anywhere on the site. You can walk to the fence. You don’t go past the fence, and the reason isn’t us, it’s that there’s a naval establishment on the other side of it and they are not interested in your placement.

“You can withdraw at any point in the eleven days. If you withdraw you get no band and there’s no penalty of any other kind. Nobody will try to talk you out of it and nobody will ask you why, and I’d like you to hear that properly, because about one of you will need it and won’t remember I said it.

“If you’re unwell, tell one of us. If somebody else is unwell, tell one of us.”

She put the sheet down on the chair beside her.

“There are no clocks. There’s one in each assessment room and there’s the one over the hatch in the refectory and there are none anywhere else, and that’s deliberate, and I’m not going to explain it.”

A boy near the front said, “Why not?”

“Because the explanation’s worse than the thing,” Roszak said, and about four people laughed, and she waited for them to finish and did not smile.

“Last one. Nothing that happens here is recorded. Not by anything you brought and not by us. We watch you and we write things down and every word of it is destroyed on the last morning in front of a witness, and if any of you wants to see that done you can, and one or two of you every year do.

“Some of you will find that harder than you expect. Some of you won’t notice it at all. I’ve been doing this eleven years and I still can’t tell in advance which of you is which.”

Then she introduced the other three, and it was quarter to nine, and they were sent to find their rooms.

Fifteen

Registration was at a fourth table, and it was a different woman with a different pad, and the pad had columns on it.

“Name.”

“Kalina Dorosz.”

The woman found her on the list and made a mark. Then she said, “And what do you want putting on the card?”

Kalina did not follow.

“Your card.” The woman held one up: a rectangle of stiff paper in a plastic sleeve on a cord, blank except for a printed 31 in the corner. “You wear it for eleven days. Whatever you want on it. Most people put their name.”

“Do you write it?”

“You write it.” She pushed a marker across the table. “Anything you’d answer to.”

There were fifty of them in the building and none of them knew her.

She had not planned it. She would have said afterwards, if anybody had asked her afterwards and nobody did, that there had been no interval between the marker being pushed across the table and her hand going out for it, and that this was the truth as far as she could get at it.

She wrote **KAL**.

It took about a second and a half. The woman did not look up. She took the card and put it in the plastic and passed it over the table and said, “Second floor west, room fourteen, four to a room, and if the window sticks it’s the catch and not the frame.”

Kalina put the cord over her head.

She went up the staircase with about eight others, along a corridor with a rail down one side. The room had four beds in it and a window with the sea in it. She was second in.

A girl already sitting on the far bed with her boots off looked up and read the card off her chest, as you do, without thinking about it.

“Kal,” the girl said. “Ida.”

“Hi.”

Ida was from Wejherowo and had a sister four years older who had sat one, and she said both of those things inside the first two minutes and then did not mention either again for eleven days. She was square and dark and slept with her boots by the bed still laced, which Kalina noticed on the first night and asked about on the fourth and got an answer to that made complete sense and that she immediately forgot.

The other two came up at half past seven. Dorota, who was small and polite and cried on the second night with the pillow over her head and was entirely fine from the third onward and never referred to it. And a girl called Bruna, who was in the room for eleven days and about whom Kalina retained, afterwards, nothing at all.

That is not quite true, and it is how she has always put it, and the truth is narrower. She retained the habits and lost the person. Bruna folded everything, including things that had just come off her and were going back on in the morning. Bruna put her boots side by side under the frame with the toes exactly level and adjusted them if they were not. She made a small sound in her sleep at about two, one sound, every night, which Kalina came to expect and which she noticed the absence of on the first night at home. She read a paperback she had brought, standing up, by the window, for exactly as long as the light lasted.

Eleven days of that. And Kalina could not have told you afterwards where she was from, or what she wanted, or one thing she had said.

That was all of it. Ida went back to her bag, and Kalina stood in the middle of a room in a building on a headland where nobody had ever heard of her, wearing a name she had made up ninety seconds earlier, which had already been used.

Then there were six hours.

Nothing was scheduled between the briefing and the first session at four except lunch, and there is no version of a first day in a residential building in which that is anything other than a long time. Kalina unpacked, which took eleven minutes. She made the bed with the sheets off the end of it, badly. She put her boots under the frame and took her coat off and put it back on, because the room was cold and stayed cold.

She went and looked out of the window for a while. From the second floor west you got the corner of the yard, the fence, the grey shoulder of the naval ground, and then the water, which on that morning was the same colour as the sky with a line in it where they met.

At about eleven she went down and walked the ground floor, because there was nothing else, and found that a good number of other people had had the same idea and that the building was full of sixteen-year-olds walking slowly with their hands in their pockets pretending to look at things.

Nobody was doing anything. She noticed that within about ten minutes and could not immediately account for it.

Fifty people in a large building with six hours in front of them, and every one of them was walking about, or sitting on a stair, or standing at a window, and not one of them was occupied. There was nothing to be occupied with. Two girls had brought cards and were playing something at a table by the front door and had drawn six people to watch, which was about five more than the game merited.

She sat on the third step of the east stair for about twenty minutes and did nothing.

She had not done nothing since she was a small child. She had done things that looked like nothing — lying on the bed with her boots on — and every one of them had had something running underneath it. This was different in a way she could feel in her hands and could not name, and it was not restful, and after twenty minutes she got up because she could not stand it any longer, and went and looked at the ship models.

Sixteen

The first session was at four. Ninety minutes, in a room with fifty desks and a clock on the wall at the front.

The paper was six pages.

It was a situation. A small port authority, a dredging contract, a schedule that had slipped, four documents that did not agree with each other and a fifth that was a partial record of a meeting where somebody had said something that mattered and had not been minuted properly. There were figures. Not many, and none of them hard. The question at the end was what should be done and why.

There was no material to look up.

That came at her about eleven minutes in and did not go away. She read the fifth document three times. It was incomplete. It was going to stay incomplete. There was no version of the next hour in which more of it arrived.

She had never in her life sat with a hole in something.

Her hand went to her pocket at twenty-six minutes.

She was aware of it going. That was the strange part — she watched her own right hand come off the desk and go down and flatten against the outside of her thigh where nothing was, and come back up, and the whole thing took under two seconds and she had not authorised any of it. Four rows over somebody else did the same thing eight minutes later. It went on happening in that room for three days and then mostly stopped.

The room was quiet in a particular way. Fifty people breathing and the clock, which was one of the big institutional ones with a hand that moved in jerks, and once, at about twenty past, somebody two rows over put their

pen down hard and picked it up again.

She wrote for the last thirty-five minutes and put down an answer.

It was not good. She knew it was not good while she was writing it, and the knowing did not help her make it better, because what was wrong with it was that she had spent fifty-five minutes waiting for the situation to resolve and had then written the first thing that would fill the space. She got the dredging schedule the wrong way round. She did not use the fifth document at all, because she could not work out what to do with a record of something somebody might have said, and so she left it out, and the whole question had been built on it.

Pan Duda collected the papers from the front row backwards and said, "Thank you. Refectory at half six."

Nobody said anything about how it had gone. Nobody was told anything. They filed out into a corridor with the light already gone from the windows and the sea black on the other side of them.

There was an hour and a half before the refectory.

She did the thing on the way back. She always did the thing; she had done it after every assessment of her life since she was about eleven, and it started before she was out of the room.

You take the paper again from the top. You put the schedule the right way round. You use the fifth document, which you have now understood, and you use it early, and you build the answer round it instead of round the figures, and you write the paragraph you would have written if you had seen it at eleven minutes rather than at fifty-five. It comes out clean. It comes out better than anything in that room. Then you go back to the top and run it again, because the second pass is always better than the first.

She got about eleven minutes into it before she reached the west stair, and went round it again from the top on the stair, and was still going at twenty past six sitting on the end of the bed with her coat on.

It was the most familiar ninety minutes of her life. It was almost comfortable. There is a particular warmth in the improved version, which is

that in the improved version you are the person who saw it at eleven minutes, and you can stay there as long as you like.

Seventeen

The refectory was the best room in the building and had been designed to be. It ran the whole curve of the front, twelve windows, sea on all of them, and a clock over the serving hatch with a brass surround and a second hand.

The food was bad in an organised way. It was the same four things on a rotation of three days: a soup with barley in it that was the best of them, a grey stew, something with cabbage, and on two mornings a week eggs that had been done in a tray in an oven an hour before and had gone rubbery at the edge and wept. There was bread with everything and the bread was good, because bread is hard to ruin and somebody local was bringing it in. By the fourth day the entire building had worked out that the answer was bread.

Fifty people at long tables and nobody knowing where to sit. It lasted about four minutes. Then everybody sat somewhere and the somewhere became permanent for eleven days.

Kalina ended up with Ida, and with a very small girl in glasses who said nothing, and with a large slow boy called Oskar who knocked his water over inside the first minute and was so unembarrassed about it that two people further down the table relaxed visibly.

Across from her was the boy in the good coat, which he had not taken off and did not take off at any point in eleven days that she witnessed.

"Tomek," he said, before anybody asked. "Technical, in Gdańsk. What did you make of the fifth one?"

"The meeting note?"

“The meeting note. Because either it’s the whole thing or it’s a trap and I’ve been going round on it since four.” He put his fork down. “It’s the whole thing. It has to be. Why give you a bad record of a conversation if you’re not supposed to —”

“It’s the whole thing,” Kalina said. “And they know you can’t check it. That’s the point of it. It’s the only document in there you can’t do anything with, and it’s the only one that matters, and they’ve done that on purpose to see what you do with a thing you can’t do anything with.”

Tomek stopped.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes. That’s it.”

She had not used the fifth document. She had left it out of her answer entirely and had walked out of the room knowing she had failed at it, and had worked out what it was for somewhere on the stairs, forty minutes too late to be worth anything.

She had said it anyway.

She had said it flat and unhurried and without appearing to have prepared it, which was true, because she had not prepared it, and it had landed on a table of four people who did not know that she had got it wrong.

Ida said, “So what should you have put?”

And Kalina told them, and it was right, and Tomek argued with a bit of it and lost, and the conversation went on for about forty minutes and Kalina was in the middle of it the whole time.

Nobody at the table had a story about her from before she was twelve. Nobody at the table could get one. There was no corridor anywhere in the building that Ola could come round.

The room sorted itself while she was talking and she watched about half of it happen.

Fifty people who have never met, in one hall, on a first evening, with nothing to do and no way to find out anything about each other. Ordinarily that takes a fortnight and is done mostly in advance; you arrive knowing

who is who and the first evening is confirmation. Here it was being done from nothing, at speed, out of nine hours of material, by voice and posture and where somebody had put their tray.

It went wrong constantly. A boy at the next table was doing the thing you do when you have decided to be the funny one and had misjudged the room by a considerable margin, and would spend eleven days coming back from it. A girl with a very good manner was already at the centre of the second table and would not be there by Thursday.

Nobody could check anybody. Everything anybody had was what they had said in the last four hours.

At half eight they cleared the plates and a supervisor said something about lights, and Kalina went up the stairs and lay on a bed in a cold room with three strangers in it and did not sleep for a long time, and the reason was not anxiety.

Eighteen

DAY TWO

She woke at twenty to seven and lay there and waited for it.

It did not come.

The nine o'clock on the second morning was arithmetic, which nobody had expected. Two hours, no calculator, four sheets of costings for a haulage contract with an error somewhere in them, and the question was where and what it did.

It was the least interesting paper of the eleven and Kalina came out of it feeling better than she had felt since the coach, because she found the error at eighty minutes and it was in the third sheet and it did not do very much, and she wrote a paragraph on what it did not do, which she was fairly sure was the point.

Half the room did not find it. She knew that because Oskar said so at lunch, with feeling, having spent two hours going down the same column four times.

"There isn't an error," he said. "I'd have found it."

"There's an error."

"Where."

"Third sheet. It's in the fuel line, it's the wrong quarter."

Oskar put his head in his hands and said something into the table that nobody caught, and Ida laughed so much she had to put her fork down.

That was Day Two, more or less, in its entirety: a whole day of waiting for the correction and the correction not arriving. She said things at

breakfast and they held. She said a thing in a corridor at eleven and it held. At lunch somebody she had not spoken to asked her what she thought about the morning paper, by name — by the name — because she had said the thing about the fifth document at a table on the first night and it had gone round.

She kept turning to see who was coming.

Somewhere in the middle of that day she remembered a man on a hill in October telling her that the first two days were the worst and that it settled by the fourth. She turned it over for about as long as it takes to cross a corridor. He had been so certain about it that she had not thought to ask him how he knew.

It was worse than the collapse would have been.

She could feel herself putting weight on things and testing them and putting more weight on, and every hour the drop underneath got further away, and there was no floor she could see and no way of finding out how deep it was except by going on.

She went up to the room after lunch on some errand she invented and sat on the bed for four minutes with the door shut.

It is difficult to describe what she was doing, because from outside she was doing nothing. What she was doing was waiting for the moment when somebody came round a corner. It had come round a corner every time in sixteen years. It had come round a corner at the coach at the harbour when she was eleven and on the wall by the science block in September, and it came from a person who was fond of her and who meant nothing by it, and it always came, and the interval before it was the interval she had spent her entire life inside.

There was no corner. There was a headland with the sea on two sides and a fence with a naval establishment behind it, and fifty people who had met her the previous afternoon.

She came down at ten past two and said something to Lena in the corridor about the arithmetic paper, and it worked, and the vertigo of it

went through her like cold water.

The first argument that could not be settled happened at lunch on the second day, and Kalina watched it and did not understand at the time that she was watching anything.

It was about a bridge. Somebody said the one at Tczew had been blown in the war by the Poles and somebody else said no, by the Germans, on the way out. It took about ninety seconds to get to the point where both of them had said their thing twice.

And then it stopped, because there was nowhere for it to go.

Everybody at that table had spent their whole lives inside about four seconds of the answer to any question of that kind. Not one of them had ever had to leave one lying there. What they did was look at each other, and then somebody laughed, and then somebody said “we’ll find out on the twentieth,” and it went away.

It came back on the fourth day. It came back twice more after that. By the eighth it had a life of its own and had acquired two other bridges, and it was still going on the night before egress, and it had never once got nearer to being resolved.

She caught herself, in the middle of the afternoon session, thinking about Ola. Not fondly. Working out where Ola was — thirty kilometres south, at a desk, with a whole afternoon of her own going on, entirely unaware of any of this. Ola had not stopped existing. She had just stopped being able to reach.

Kalina got her answer down with nine minutes to spare and read it back and it was better than anything she had done in a year.

She was not clear on why. She would have said, if pressed, that she had been concentrating.

Nineteen

DAY TWO INTO THREE

The nine o'clock on the third morning was the one about the fishing quota, and it was the first paper that had a person in it.

Everything so far had been documents and money. This one had a name in it: a licence holder, given, with a family and a boat and eleven years of returns, and a schedule that made it plain that the returns had been inflated in three of those years by an amount that was not large. The question was what the authority should do, and there was room in the material to do four different things.

Kalina recommended the middle one and spent her last twenty minutes on why she had not recommended the hardest, and came out of the room fairly satisfied and then heard Tomek in the corridor say that he had recommended the hardest and that anything else was sentiment.

She thought about that on and off for two days and never entirely got clear of it.

There was a boy at the end of the second table who did not eat properly and did not talk.

The evenings were the discovery of that week.

There were three hours between the end of the meal and the refectory going dark, and there was nothing in them, and there was no possibility of there being anything in them. In eleven days there was no music in that building, and nothing to watch, and nothing to read except what people had brought and a shelf of paperbacks in the front hall that had been there since the college and that turned out to be mostly navigation.

What there was instead was fifty people and some tables.

It reorganised the whole day. By the second evening the refectory had become the only room that existed, and the two hours after the plates went were doing the work that an entire apparatus normally does, and people talked in a way Kalina had not heard people talk. Not better. Longer. Nobody left a conversation to go and do something, because there was nothing to go and do, and so things went on past the point where they would ordinarily have been abandoned, and got somewhere, or did not.

She registered him on the second night because he was in her sightline. He sat at the corner seat with his back to the window, which meant he sat facing the room, and he put food on a fork and moved it about and ate perhaps a fifth of it and got up before the rest of his table.

His card said **VIG**.

He was small and dark and thin in the forearms, and he wore the same dark green jumper every day of the eleven with the cuffs pulled down over his hands. His cuticles were bitten back past where they should stop. He had a thing he did with his right hand where he pressed the thumbnail into the pad of the index finger, hard, for four or five seconds, and let go, and did it again.

His face was doing something all the time and the something did not correspond to anything in the room. He would be perfectly still for two minutes and then move his hands.

He was not odd in a way that got attention. He was odd in a way you could look at four times without registering it and then, on the fifth, not be able to stop.

What she felt about him on the second night was mild irritation.

He had missed the start of the nine o'clock on the second morning and had come in at twelve minutes past and there had been a whole business about it at the door, and Pan Duda had let him in and had said something to him afterwards, and it had cost the room four minutes at the start of a timed session. That was all. Kalina was annoyed about the four minutes.

She thought: he will not last the week.

She thought it without malice and without much interest, as you think a thing about somebody you are never going to talk to, and then she went up to the room and Ida was telling a story about her brother, and Kalina had a good one to put on top of it, and she did.

Twenty

DAY THREE

The clock over the serving hatch was the only instrument in the building that told anybody anything, and by Day Three everybody in the place had organised themselves around it.

A day went like this.

Up at twenty to seven because everybody was up at twenty to seven. Refectory from half seven and it was worth being there at twenty-five to. Nine o'clock, the long paper, ninety minutes or two hours. Half eleven to one, nothing. One o'clock, the second session, which varied and was sometimes not a session. Half three to half six, nothing. Half six, the meal. Nine, the refectory went dark. Bed when you could not think of a reason not to.

Which is to say that of the fourteen hours a candidate was awake, between five and six of them were spent doing what the institution had brought them there to do, and the rest was theirs, and the rest was the part nobody had prepared them for.

There were no times except the ones on the printed sheet on the corridor wall, and the sheet was for the week and did not change, and there was nothing anywhere to tell you how long a thing had left to run. In the assessment rooms there was a clock at the front. Between rooms there was nothing. People began to arrive at the refectory eleven and twelve minutes early to look at the brass one over the hatch, standing about under it in coats, and by the third night somebody had started calling out the time to the room every few minutes, without being asked, as a service.

The supervisors would not answer questions.

Not the assessments — nobody expected that. Anything. Pani Roszak, who ran the west wing, declined on the first afternoon to say what the weather was going to do, and declined again on the second, and on the third a girl asked her what day of the week it was, half as a joke, and Roszak said, “Thursday,” and then said, “That one I’ll give you,” and something went round the corridor about it for the rest of the evening.

They had their own. Nobody pretended otherwise; you saw them with them, in the office, in the yard by the vans. What they did not have was any way of finding out anything about the fifty people in front of them, and it changed how they spoke.

Kalina noticed it first with Duda, who took a session on the third morning and got somebody’s name wrong twice and had to be told it, and did not mind being told, and got it wrong a third time an hour later. He was about sixty and had been doing this a long while and had the manner of a man running out a contract. He called all of them *young people*, in the plural, at every opportunity, and it was not condescension; it was that fifty names in eleven days had defeated him about nine sittings ago.

Every adult she had ever dealt with had come into the room already holding her. Teachers arrived knowing. The placement office arrived knowing. Her mother arrived knowing, in the kitchen, over the ironing, furnished.

These ones came in and had to look at you.

It made them slower and more careful and, in an odd way, more courteous, and it made the whole building feel like a place where things had to be established out loud. Roszak asked her name on the third day and again on the fourth. It was on the card round her neck. She asked anyway, both times, and the second time she said, “Kal — sorry — I’ll get there,” and Kalina said it was fine, and it was.

Roszak walked the corridors at eleven and again at two.

It was not on the sheet. Kalina worked it out on the third night from the sound: the shoes on the terrazzo, west end to east and back, unhurried, about ninety seconds each way, and no door opened and no light went on. Ida said her sister had told her about it. Ida said her sister had said it was the only thing anybody in the building actually minded.

Nobody slept properly and everybody discussed it.

It was the standing subject of the first week and it was the only one that never got old, because it was the one thing everybody had in common and could verify. The rooms were cold. The beds were the college's and were forty years old and had a bar across the middle. The sea did a thing at about four in the morning on the nights the wind came round to the north – a slow soft thump under the floor, seconds apart, that turned out to be the water going into something below the terrace and that four separate people identified as four separate other things.

By the third night the building had a currency, which was how badly you had slept, and there was an inflation in it immediately.

The third afternoon was free and about twenty of them walked to the fence.

It was not much of a walk. Out of the gravel and along the edge of the ground where the college playing field had been and was now grass with two goalposts in it and no net, and then a hedge, and then the fence, which was three metres of it with a curve at the top and a strip of ploughed ground on the other side and, four hundred metres beyond, a long low grey building with vehicles outside it.

They stood at the fence for a while in the cold and looked at the naval establishment, which did nothing whatever.

"There's somebody in that first window," Tomek said.

"There isn't."

"There is. He's been there since we got here."

"That's a coat on a chair."

"That is a bloke."

It ran for about twenty minutes. Nobody could see well enough to settle it and there was no way of getting closer and no way of finding out, and by the end of it there were two parties and one abstention, and it went in the same box as the bridge and the ships and stayed there.

Walking back, Ida said, "Is it like this all the way through? Nine more days of this."

"Probably."

"I thought there'd be more to it," Ida said, without any complaint in it at all, and put her hands in her sleeves.

The other thing that happened by Day Three was Filip.

Filip was in the east wing and Kalina never had a conversation with him. What he had was certainty. He said things in a level unhurried voice with his chin down, and he never hedged, and by the second evening people were quoting him.

He said the assessments were weighted, the long paper double. He said the staff filed a note on each candidate at egress that went in with the band. He said his cousin had sat one at Lębork and that the fifth-day session was a plant. He said the building had been a sanatorium before it was a college.

Some of that was true. Kalina worked out afterwards that probably two of the four were, and she was never able to establish which two.

Nobody could check him. That was his position entire and he did not have to do anything else with it. In a school he would have lasted about a morning; somebody would have looked, and the looking would have been done casually, by a person not even in the argument, and it would have been over. Here there was no looking, and what was left when you took the looking away was manner — and Filip had manner, and his authority did not erode across eleven days. It grew.

Twenty-One

DAY FOUR

She found him at ten past one in the morning in the corridor on the second floor west, sitting on the floor with his back against the radiator.

She had been going to the toilet at the end. That was all.

There was a night light at each end of the corridor and nothing else on. The floor was terrazzo the whole length and it held the cold off the sea all night and gave it back through anything you put on it. Every forty seconds or so the wind came round the corner of the building and got into the frame of the window at the east end and made a noise like somebody starting to speak.

He was on the floor halfway down with his knees up and his hands flat either side of him.

He was not crying. His breathing was wrong. It was going in three or four short and out long, over and over, and his shoulders were up round his ears, and when she stopped he did not look at her.

“Are you alright?”

He did not answer.

“Do you want me to get somebody?”

“No.” It came out fast and it was the only fast thing about him. “No.”

“Right.”

She stood there.

She has thought about that minute a number of times since and has never been able to make it into anything. There was no decision in it. She

did not think *I will stay*; she thought about going back to the room and got about as far as turning, and then did not do the rest of it, and ended up standing three metres from him with her arms folded against the cold, for what she later worked out was somewhere between twenty and thirty minutes.

She did not sit down. That is a thing she noticed at the time and has never been able to account for: there was floor, and she was cold, and sitting down would have been the obvious move, and she stayed on her feet the entire half hour. Sitting down would have been a decision. Standing there was something that was happening to her.

It was very cold. She had come out in what she slept in with a coat over it and no socks, and after about ten minutes her feet stopped being uncomfortable and started being somewhere else. The night light at the west end put a long shadow off the rail across the floor at an angle. She looked at it a good deal. She counted the terrazzo panels between herself and him — four — and then counted them the other way to the end of the corridor, which came to nine.

She said nothing useful. She said, at one point, “It’s freezing out here,” which was true and was the stupidest sentence available. He did not answer.

She said, some minutes later, “There’s a radiator on in the stairwell.” He did not move.

Twice she got as far as *do you want me to* and did not finish it, because she could not think of anything to put on the end.

What she mostly did was watch him breathe, because there was nothing else in the corridor to look at. In and in and in, short, and then a long one out. His shoulders were up round his ears and stayed there. His hands were flat on the terrazzo either side of him with the fingers spread, pressing, and every so often the pressing got harder and she could see it in his forearms.

He was not looking at anything. That was the part she came back to afterwards. His eyes were open and pointed at the floor about a metre in front of him and there was nothing at that spot, and he did not move them

for twenty minutes.

At some point his breathing changed.

At some point after that he said, "I can't do the mornings."

"Right."

"It's not the tests. I can do the tests." He said it to the floor. "It's the getting to them."

"Okay."

He got up eventually. He did it badly, in stages, using the radiator. He said, "Don't tell anyone," and Kalina said, "I won't," which was a promise she made in a corridor at one in the morning on the fourth night to somebody whose surname she did not know.

Then he went one way and she went the other, and in the morning at breakfast he did not look at her and she did not look at him, and she got seventy per cent on the nine o'clock, which was her best yet.

Twenty-Two

DAY FOUR INTO FIVE

She got it wrong twice.

The first time was at lunch on the fourth day. She sat down opposite him with her tray, which was already a decision, and said, "Are you okay?" — quietly, and kindly, and with her head slightly on one side, in the voice she had heard her mother use on the phone about a hundred times.

He put his fork down and looked at the window for a while and then picked his fork up and said, "I'm fine," and did not speak again, and left before she was half done.

She was angry about it for most of the afternoon. She had gone out of her way. She had crossed a refectory with a tray.

The two o'clock was a written paper about a school closure and she made a hash of it. Not a disaster; a hash. She read the first two documents twice without taking either of them in and had to go back to the beginning at twenty past, and she finished with eleven minutes spare, which had never once been a good sign in her life.

Somewhere in the middle of it she caught herself doing the thing she had done at fourteen when she was falling out with somebody, which was constructing the conversation she was going to have. She had four sentences ready for him by the end of the paper. All four of them started with *I was only*.

She was still angry about it in the laundry at six. There was one machine room in the west wing with three machines and a rota on the door that nobody kept to, and by the fourth day it had become the place where

people went to be on their own for twenty minutes, which meant it was usually occupied by somebody being on their own. That evening it was Dorota, sitting on the folding table with her heels against it, and neither of them said anything, and it was the most restful twenty minutes Kalina had had since the coach.

The second time was that evening, in the corridor by the noticeboard, and it was worse.

"You should tell Roszak," she said. "She's not — it's not like she'd throw you out. They'd sort something."

"They can't."

"They could —"

"There isn't one." He said it very flatly, in the manner of somebody reciting a thing he had been told and had checked and had checked again. "There's no exception. If I say it, I'm withdrawn. Withdrawn is no band. No band is nothing." He shifted his bag on his shoulder. "I looked. Before. I looked at all of it."

"That can't be right."

"It's right." And then, with an edge she had not heard off him: "Do you think I didn't look?"

She stood in the corridor after he had gone and felt the size of what she had just done, which was to walk up to somebody who had spent four months reading a statute and offer him the idea that he might not have thought of asking.

She went and stood at the window at the east end for a while.

The thing she could not get past was that she had done it kindly. Both times. She had crossed a refectory with a tray and put her head on one side, and she had stood at a noticeboard and suggested a course of action to somebody who had already exhausted it, and both times she had felt, at the moment of doing it, like a person being good to somebody.

She had not asked him one question about how any of it actually worked. Not one, in two attempts.

Her mother's voice on the phone about a hundred times. *Are you all right, love.* Furnished, warm, arriving with the answer already in it, and no possible reply to it except the one Kalina had given a thousand times, which was that she was fine.

It was the refusal that told her.

She got it on the stairs that night, or somewhere between the stairs and the room, and there was no sympathy in it at all. It arrived as a sort of click: he had not wanted to be asked how he was, and he had not wanted to be sent to an adult. He had said one thing in a corridor at one in the morning and it had been a description of a mechanism. *It's not the tests. It's the getting to them.*

He was not sad. He was unassembled.

She lay in the dark with Ida breathing four feet away and went at it properly for the first time, the way you go at a fault: not what is he feeling, but what is missing, and what did the missing thing do, and what would have to happen for something to do it instead.

By about two she had something. It was not complicated and it was not clever, and she was faintly ashamed of how long it had taken her.

He had had a thing that told him what happened next and when. Not the answers. The order. They had taken it off him in a fabric sleeve on Day One and sealed the fold and written 44 on three copies of a form, and he had been trying for four days to hold eleven days of sequence in his head, in a building with no clocks in the corridors, on four hours of sleep.

That was a description of what was missing. It was not a description of what was wrong with him, and she knew the difference and could not get past it. A man goes off a ladder because the ladder moved, or because he was always going to go off a ladder and this was the one that was there. She had no way of telling those apart from a corridor floor and she did not have to. What she had to do was the mornings.

Twenty-Three

DAY FIVE

She got up at four.

She had worked out by then that four was the hour. He had told her, in the corridor, in among the rest of it: he woke at four and did not get back, and the three hours after four were where it came apart, and by the time the building got up he had already lost.

She had never got up at four for anything. She discovered that at four the building is a different building: the heating is off and has been for six hours, the sea is louder than it is at any other time because there is nothing else, and the night light at the west end throws a long shadow off the rail that lies across the floor at an angle and does not move.

At two minutes past she came out with a coat over her clothes. He was on the floor by the radiator, which had been cold since ten. He looked up.

She said, "Right," and sat down against the wall opposite him with her knees up.

Then she told him what was happening.

"Half seven, they open the refectory. You want to be there at twenty-five to, because the queue is nothing then and it's eleven minutes at quarter to. Eat the bread. Don't do the eggs, they're not worth it. Quarter past eight you're in the west stair, and the west stair takes four minutes to the room, so quarter past is right, not twenty past. Nine o'clock is the long paper, it's ninety minutes, it's the one with the documents. Half eleven is the gap. Half eleven to one you've got nothing."

He was looking at her.

“Say the half eleven bit again,” he said.

She said it again.

She did not ask him how he was. She did not ask him anything at all, on that morning or on any morning after it.

He was there again on the second morning and on the third and on every morning after that until the eighth.

It settled into a thing very fast. She came out at two or three minutes past four. He was against the radiator with his knees up. She sat opposite with her back to the wall and went through the day from half seven forward, in order, with the minutes on it, and if he asked for a piece of it again she gave him the piece again in the same words. It took between eleven and twenty minutes depending on the day. Then she went back to bed and lay there until twenty to seven and got up.

She was running on about five hours by the fifth day and about four and a half by the seventh, in a building where nobody was sleeping anyway, and the general shortage covered her completely. She looked exactly as tired as everybody else looked.

It cost her in one place and she did not notice for three days.

She stopped reading things properly. Not the papers — the papers had a clock on them and she went at those with everything she had — but the sheet on the corridor wall, and the noticeboard, and whatever anybody said to her before about ten in the morning. She went to the wrong room on the fifth day and was four minutes late and it did not matter, and she got the laundry rota wrong twice, and on the sixth she agreed to something of Oskar's that she had no memory whatever of agreeing to.

It was the first time in her life she had been tired in a way that had consequences, and she found, to her surprise, that she did not mind it. There was something in going about a cold building at half four in the afternoon with her eyes stinging and a paper behind her that she had done well, and having a reason for it that nobody in the building knew about.

On the second morning she brought paper.

She had taken it out of the back of a notebook. She wrote it in a column with the times down the left.

She wrote it with her left hand, because she was cold and had the coat over her right arm and it did not matter.

He read it. He folded it into four and put it in his shirt pocket and said nothing about it.

Ida woke on the fifth morning.

Kalina came back in at twenty past four and got the door shut with the handle turned so it did not click, and Ida said, from the far bed, entirely awake, "Where do you go?"

Kalina stood in the dark.

"Toilet."

"You're gone twenty minutes."

"I sit on the stairs sometimes. I can't get back off."

There was a pause. Kalina got into the bed with her coat still on and lay there with her heart going and waited.

"Fair enough," Ida said, and turned over.

She never asked again. She asked nothing on the sixth morning or the seventh or the eighth, and Kalina has never known whether Ida believed her, or believed her and did not care, or did not believe her and had decided that a person who goes out into a corridor at four in the morning for eleven days is entitled to whatever they are doing.

He came into the nine o'clock on the sixth day at fourteen minutes past eight.

He sat down two rows in front of her. He got his pen out, put it on the desk, squared it up.

Kalina looked at the back of his head and had a feeling she had no experience of and could not identify. It was not pride. It was in the same family.

She had never in her life been the reason a thing worked.

Twenty-Four

DAY FIVE INTO SIX

Her own marks came up.

Nobody was told marks. That was not how it ran; there were no results in the building and there would be no results until the band came in December. But you knew. You knew from the inside, as you know you have run faster, and by the sixth day Kalina was walking out of rooms knowing.

She would have said it was concentration. She said exactly that to Ida on the fifth night, and Ida said something about the air, and they left it there.

What had happened was that she had spent four mornings attending to one person in the absence of anything to attend with.

She had had to watch him. That was the equipment: no summary, no range, no comparison, nothing that arrived furnished. She had had to work out what was wrong with a person by looking at the person, and be wrong twice, and correct it, and try again, and hold the whole of it in her head between four in the morning and half seven with nothing to write on.

The papers had begun to vary by then, and two of them were not papers at all.

They had also begun to ask a different question, and Kalina worked that out on the fifth day and could not tell anybody, because there was nobody in the building to tell.

The first four had been about information: here is a hole, what do you do. The ones from about the fourth day on had somebody in them. The quota man with the eleven years of returns. A works foreman whose evidence was the only evidence and who had an obvious reason to shade it.

A schedule that could be met by one office only if another office was told something that was true and misleading.

The holes were still there. What had changed was that filling them, or declining to, now cost a named person something, and the papers had stopped being interested in whether you could reason and had started being interested in what you would do while reasoning.

She thought it was well made. She thought that on the fifth day, at sixteen, sitting in a refectory with a plate in front of her, and it is the only entirely admiring thought she ever had about the institution.

On the fourth afternoon they were given one hour and a single sheet with a problem on it about the loading of a ferry, and no instructions beyond the hour. Kalina had it in about nine minutes and then discovered that it did not work, and spent the next thirty establishing that it could not be made to work, and the last twenty writing down why. She came out fairly sure she had done it wrong. About a third of the room had spent the full hour on it. Two people left after twenty minutes.

Nobody told them anything, then or afterwards. Within two days the general view had hardened into Filip's, which was that it had been a trick. Kalina thought it was probably not a trick and did not say so.

Then on the fifth morning it was the long paper again, and something happened in the first ten minutes of it.

She stopped waiting for the hole to fill.

That was the change, and she felt it happen. She read the incomplete document and thought: this is what I have got, it is not going to become more, and the question is what can be done with it as it is.

She was sixteen and it was the fifth day and she had slept about eleven hours in three nights, and what she noticed was that the papers had got easier.

By the fifth day the building had stopped being a novelty and had become a place people lived in badly.

The washing had gone wrong for about a third of them, because three machines and fifty people does not work and nobody had believed the rota. Two people had colds. There was a general low-grade complaint about the eggs that had acquired the character of a campaign. Somebody had put a note on the noticeboard, unsigned, listing the days on which the eggs appeared, and somebody else had annotated it.

Kalina's hand hurt. That was the physical fact of the second half of that week and nobody had warned any of them about it: nine days of writing by hand for two and three hours at a stretch, by people who had never in their lives written anything longer than a page, and by the fifth day about half the room had a cramp in the web of the thumb that came on at forty minutes.

Duda, asked about it, said, "Yes," and did not elaborate.

On the sixth morning it was in pairs. Two candidates at a table, half a document each, no showing, one joint recommendation at the end. She got a boy from Reda she had not spoken to. It went badly for eleven minutes because both of them were describing their halves instead of asking about the other's. Then something turned over and it went well, and they came out of it having done a good piece of work, and never spoke again.

Twenty-Five

DAYSIX

Tomek said it at breakfast on the sixth day, with about nine people at the table.

“See, this is what I mean about Kal,” he said. “She just doesn’t panic. Nothing gets to her. I’ve been watching her since the first night and she’s the only person in this building who’s exactly the same on day six as she was on day one.”

There was a general noise of agreement.

Ida said, “It’s true, though.”

“It’s completely true. Everyone else is falling apart —”

“I’m falling apart,” said Oskar, with his mouth full.

“You’re not falling apart, you’re just slow.”

“I’m falling apart slowly.”

“— everyone else is falling apart and she just carries on. It’s actually annoying.”

Kalina said something dry that made them laugh and the conversation moved.

She sat with it for the rest of the meal and for a good part of the morning.

It was not true. Not one clause of it was true. She had done nothing on the first night except say a thing about a document she had failed to use, and she had spent four days since in a condition she had no word for, and she had been up since four every morning that week, and the reason she

did not appear to be falling apart was that she was too tired to display anything.

He had built it out of nine days of looking at her, honestly, and every observation in it was one she had caused.

And she had done nothing to cause it except turn up at breakfast every morning at the same time looking the same, which she had done because she had been awake since four and had run out of ways to fill the hour.

She did not correct him.

That was the part she went at afterwards, on and off, over the following days. There had been a moment at the table — perhaps two seconds — where she could have said *I'm not, actually*, and it would have cost nothing, and the conversation would have gone on, and it would have been a small ordinary true thing to have said.

She had said something dry instead and they had laughed, and it had been better than the true thing. That was the calculation. It had taken under a second and she had not experienced it as a calculation.

She had let it stand. And what she had felt while letting it stand was not guilt.

It was closer to attention. It was the feeling of watching a thing you have made hold weight, and wanting to see how much.

She was still turning it over at ten past eight, and then she stopped, because a girl from the east wing withdrew.

Her name was Halina Bem and Kalina had spoken to her twice, both times about nothing, and would not have been able to describe her afterwards beyond a general impression of somebody quiet and perfectly all right.

About fifteen people saw the end of it. She came down the east stair with her bag already packed and went into the office and was in there for perhaps four minutes, and then Roszak came out with her and they stood in the front hall under the ship cases and waited, and a car came at about twenty to nine and took her away.

Roszak did exactly what she had said she would do at the briefing.

Nobody tried to talk her out of it. Nobody asked her why, in front of anybody, at any point. When the car came Roszak carried one of the two bags out to it herself and said something at the door that nobody heard and came back in, and then went and took the nine o'clock register as though the morning had contained nothing in particular.

The building talked about it for a day and a half.

The theories were extensive. Somebody had it that she had had a call — which was impossible and which about eight people believed anyway. Somebody had it that she had been going to withdraw on the first night and had been persuaded to stay, which contradicted the whole of the briefing and was also believed. Filip had a version by lunchtime that involved the fifth-day session.

Nobody knew anything. There was nothing to know and no way to find out, and the sole item of fact available to fifty people was that a girl called Halina Bem had come down a staircase with a packed bag at ten past eight and had got into a car at twenty to nine.

Her chair at the second table was still there at breakfast the next morning with a gap round it, and about halfway through the meal somebody at the far end reached over and pulled it in and sat in it, and that was that.

Kalina thought about her for a while. What she kept coming back to was that Halina Bem had been in a building where nobody could look anybody up, and had therefore left it without leaving anything behind — no account, no explanation in circulation, nothing that would still be there in a week. She had been present for five days and had gone, and by the eighth day her name had already stopped coming up.

Twenty-Six

DAY SIX INTO SEVEN

The sixth day was the worst weather of the eleven and nobody went outside.

It came in from the north-east at about eleven and did not stop until the following afternoon, and the windows on the seaward side ran the whole time, and the refectory at lunch was fifty people in coats with the sea invisible behind twelve grey rectangles. The heating had never caught up and had now given up entirely. Two of the assessment rooms were unusable because of a thing with the roof, so the afternoon session was done in the big room with everybody in together, which had not happened since the briefing.

Kalina got through it and could not have told you what it was about an hour afterwards.

Something went wrong between Dorota and Tomek on the sixth evening and it did not get put right.

It was about a thing Tomek was supposed to have said on the second night, at the far table, about Dorota crying. Dorota had it from a girl in the east wing who had it from somebody else. Tomek said he had not said it and had never said it and would not say it, and said so twice, and then a third time with an edge on it that did him no good at all.

There was no way of finding out.

That is what the evening turned on and it took about an hour for everybody in the stairwell to arrive at it. Ordinarily this is a thing that takes four seconds and is settled by an object — you look, or somebody looks, and

either the thing was said or it was not, and whichever way it goes the argument is over and the fallout is about the thing rather than about who is lying.

Here there was a girl who was upset and a boy who was denying it and nothing else on earth, and the group had to decide, and the only material available was manner.

Tomek's manner was bad. He was aggrieved, which is what an innocent man is, and it read as guilt to about half the stairwell, and the more he insisted the worse it got. Lena believed him. Ida did not say. Oskar said something meant to make it go away and made it worse.

And at about ten o'clock four people looked at Kalina.

She has thought about that a good deal since. She had been in that building six days. She had no standing of any kind and nothing to go on that anybody else did not have, and what she had was that she was the one things went through, and so a quarrel about whether a sentence had been spoken on the second night arrived in front of a sixteen-year-old to be adjudicated.

She said, "I don't think he said it." She said it flatly and without hurry, as somebody says a thing they have considered.

She had considered nothing. She had no view. She had been at a different table on the second night with her back to it.

It held. It held because she said it as she said things now, and by the following evening it had become the position of the group, and Dorota sat with them on the seventh night and it was all right and was never all right again in the way it had been.

Kalina did not sleep well on the sixth night, and it was not the corridor.

Amsel came back on the sixth night.

He had been gone completely. She noticed the going only in the coming back, which is how she found out that six days had passed without one thought of him — no trolleybus, no kitchen, no walk down to the stop in the black with his hands in his pockets telling her that the models had never

seen the inside of it.

What brought him back was the corridor.

She was on the floor opposite Vig at ten past four on the sixth morning going through the day, and she got to the eleven o'clock, and she heard herself say the word *fourth* — the fourth night, something about the fourth night — and a part of her that had been asleep for six days sat up and said: *that. He'll want that.*

She stopped mid-sentence for about a second and a half. Vig said, "What?"

"Nothing. Eleven o'clock. It's the short one."

But it was in the room after that.

She went through the rest of that day composing.

That was the only word for it. She found herself at the back of the nine o'clock arranging the refectory into sentences. She found herself in the corridor thinking *fifty of them and none of it recorded*, which was not a thought she had had. It was a thing a man had said to her in October and it had been sitting somewhere since, waiting.

She could not stop it. She tried twice, deliberately, in the afternoon, and found that trying to stop composing an account is itself a thing you can only do by attending to the account.

It changed the quality of things. That was what she could not get used to over the next four days and never entirely lost afterwards. A thing would happen in front of her — Oskar knocking something over, Roszak declining to say what the weather was doing, the whole refectory turning at once when somebody dropped a tray — and there would be the thing, and then immediately behind it a second version of the thing with a shape on it, already in words, already about half a sentence long.

She had not asked for the second version. It arrived on its own and it arrived faster every day.

Once, on the seventh evening, she caught it happening to a conversation she was in the middle of, and lost the thread of what she was saying, and

Lena said “What?” and Kalina said “Nothing, sorry,” and picked it up again about four words back.

And she had still done the morning. That was what she could not get to sit next to it. At four that morning she had been on a cold floor telling a boy in what order the day came, and doing it properly, and meaning it, and somewhere behind her eyes a second set of hands had been taking it all down.

Twenty-Seven

DAYSEVEN

It went wrong at about half past two in the morning and it did not come right until after seven, and it was the longest night of Kalina's life to that point and remained so afterwards.

She woke because somebody was in the corridor.

She knew it was him before she was properly awake, which was itself new — six nights in the building and she had learned the sound of one person walking. She got the coat and went out and he was not by the radiator. He was at the far end by the window at the head of the east stair, standing up, with his forehead against the glass.

There was nothing out there. That window faced north-east over the water and on a clear night you could see the light on the mole and, a long way off, the loom of something on the peninsula. It was not clear. The glass had gone opaque with the cold to about chest height and above that there was black, and his forehead had made a mark in the condensation that ran.

"Vig."

He said, "I've lost Tuesday."

"What?"

"I've lost Tuesday. I've got Monday and I've got Wednesday and there's nothing between them." He had his hands up flat on the window either side of his head. "There was a paper. There was a paper on Tuesday and I don't know if I sat it."

"You sat it."

"You don't know that."

“I do know that. You were four seats up on the left and you had the blue pen and you finished early and you sat there with your hands in your lap for the last twenty minutes.”

He turned round.

She had not known she had that. She had not been storing it. It had come up entire, out of nowhere, and it was correct in every part, and it had cost her nothing to produce.

It bought about four minutes. Then it went again.

She has never been able to describe what happened between three and six that morning in a way that satisfies her. The parts that were bad were not dramatic. The parts that would sound dramatic were not the bad parts. He was not hysterical. He was not in danger in any way that she could point to and would not have been able to explain to anybody if she had gone and got Roszak, which she thought about doing eleven or twelve times.

What was wrong was that time had stopped working for him.

He could not hold an order. He would get four items into the sequence and lose the first one and start again, and each time he started again it cost him more, and by four he was doing it out loud and by half four he was doing it out loud and getting it wrong and knowing he was getting it wrong. He asked her three times in forty minutes whether the long paper was on the Thursday. He knew the answer. He knew that he knew it. That was the part that was doing the damage.

At some point between three and four she heard the shoes.

They came up the east stair and turned along the corridor at the far end, unhurried, ninety seconds a length, and Kalina stood in the dark at the head of the stairwell about eleven metres from a woman doing her job.

Vig did not hear them. He was against the window with his hands up and his back to the corridor and he had lost the thread of something and was starting it again out loud.

She had, at the outside, eight seconds.

All she had to do was step out and be seen. A girl in a corridor at half three would have been enough on its own; she would not have had to say anything, and probably would not have been asked anything, and Roszak would have come down the corridor and found the rest of it herself in under a minute.

She stood where she was.

The shoes went to the west end and came back and went down and there was nothing after that except the wind in the window frame, and Kalina found that her hands had gone into fists inside her sleeves and that she could not immediately open them.

She got him onto the floor at about ten to five because he had been standing for two hours.

And then she did the only thing she could think of, which was to stop trying to give him the week and give him the next four minutes instead.

"You're going to sit there," she said. "In four minutes I'm going to say the time. Then in another four minutes I'm going to say it again."

"That's not —"

"Four minutes. That's all you have to hold."

So that is what they did, on a terrazzo floor at the head of the east stair, between about five and half six on the morning of the seventh day: a girl of sixteen saying the time out loud every four minutes to a boy of sixteen, thirty-odd times, without any authority to do it and no training of any kind and nobody in the building aware that it was happening.

There was no clock. She counted.

She had got good at counting by then because everybody in that place had, and she was out by about twenty seconds in four minutes and it did not matter. She did it in her head in blocks of ten and lost the block twice in the first half hour and had to start again, and after that she found a rhythm and stopped losing it.

Twenty to five.

Quarter to five.

Ten to.

Nothing else. She did not put anything on the end of them and he did not answer them, and after the first half hour she stopped looking at him when she said it. The corridor got no lighter. Her back was against the wall and both feet had gone. She thought, at about half past five, with total clarity and no distress, that she could not do this for another hour, and then did it for another hour.

At some point she stopped counting and just said it when it felt like time, and he did not notice, and it went on working.

At twenty past six he said, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay." He put his head back against the wall. "What's first."

"Half seven, refectory."

"Half seven, refectory," he said. "Right."

He sat the nine o'clock. He came into the room at eighteen minutes past eight, which was four minutes later than his best, and he had the folded page out of his shirt pocket on the desk beside the paper the whole time.

Kalina had been awake since half past two.

She went under twice in the first half hour. Not asleep — a thing she had no name for then and has not acquired one for since, where the page went slightly to one side and came back and she had lost a piece of time and could not say whether her eyes had shut. Both times she found her pen had made a mark going nowhere.

The room was very warm because fifty people had been in it since nine.

At about forty minutes her right hand went. It had been going all week, in the web of the thumb, in about half the room, and on the seventh morning it went properly and closed up and she could not hold the pen at any angle that produced a letter.

She put the pen in her left hand and carried on.

She lost about eleven seconds over it and no accuracy. The writing that came out was her writing — indistinguishable, because that had been the point of eleven months of evenings at thirteen — and she wrote the last fifty minutes of that paper with a hand she had trained for no reason whatever, in a room with an invigilator in it, and nobody looked up and nobody would have thought anything of it if they had.

She did not think about it while she was doing it. She noticed it that evening, in the refectory, holding a fork, and sat there for a moment.

She could not afterwards remember a single question on the paper.

The entire detection apparatus available to Wiktor Nadolny between half past two and seven in the morning on the seventh day was a sixteen-year-old girl who happened to have woken up.

Twenty-Eight

DAY SEVEN, AFTER

She held it for the rest of that day and most of the next.

The case for going to Roszak was not difficult and she assembled it standing in a shower with the water not hot at half past seven in the morning.

He was not sleeping. He had lost a day of the week and had needed to be told he had sat a paper. He had been on his feet in a corridor for two hours in the dark and had not been able to hold four items in an order, and had known he could not, which was the part she kept putting back in. If anything happened — and she could not have said what *anything* meant, and the vagueness of it was the strongest thing in the argument — there would be a question afterwards about who had known, and the answer would be that one person had known and had gone back to bed.

She went down it twice, under the water, in order.

It was a complete list. There was nothing on it about the account.

It would end his sitting. He would be withdrawn and there would be no band, and he would go back to Reda in the middle of November having spent four days in that building for nothing, and whatever was wrong with him would still be wrong with him and would now be on a file.

And it would be correct.

She knew that at the time. It is not something she worked out later and put back: she stood in the shower on the seventh morning and understood that reporting him was the right thing to do, and that the reason she was not going to do it was that she had said *I won't* in a corridor on the fourth

night to somebody whose surname she had not then known.

She got as far as the office twice.

The first time was at ten past eight and the door was shut and she went past it and down the west stair, and told herself she would do it after the nine o'clock. The second time was in the afternoon and the door was open and Roszak was in there with Duda and a folder between them, and Kalina stood in the corridor for a moment and then went on to the laundry with nothing in her hands.

She did not do it.

She did not decide not to do it either. There was no moment anywhere in that day where a thing was weighed and came down on a side. She got dressed and went down and ate the bread and did not do it, and then it was nine o'clock and she did not do it, and then it was the eighth day and the question had gone quiet, because he had come into the nine o'clock at eighteen minutes past eight and had sat it and had eaten something afterwards.

She has never made that into a virtue and has never let anybody else make it into one. She has also never been able to say what she would do now, at thirty, with the same corridor and the same boy, and she has stopped putting the question to herself, because the answer she gets depends entirely on the day she asks it.

Twenty-Nine

DAY EIGHT

Pani Roszak came within about a metre of it on the eighth afternoon.

It had been a flat day. Eight days had produced a general slowness in the building that everybody had noticed and nobody could do anything about; people were taking longer over meals and going up earlier, and there had been a session that morning where two candidates put their pens down at fifty minutes and sat.

Kalina was coming back along the second floor west with a jumper over her arm. Roszak was outside the office with a folder against her hip, doing nothing in particular — somebody who has come out of a room in order to be in a corridor.

“Kal.”

“Yes.”

“How’s it going?”

“Fine.”

Roszak nodded. She was in her forties and had grey coming in at the front and wore the same cardigan every day, and she had a habit of standing with her weight on one foot and the folder against her hip. She walked the corridors at eleven and at two, and Kalina had known that since the third night, and had never once in seven nights on that floor between four and half seven heard her.

She did not go anywhere. She looked down the corridor toward the east end, where the window was, and let a few seconds go past.

"You've three days," she said. "Everybody gets funny about now. It's nothing, it's just the number of days it is."

"Right."

"Number 44," she said.

Kalina said nothing.

"Nadolny." Roszak was looking down the corridor and not at her. "He's had a hard week."

"Has he."

"He's made every session." She shifted the folder. "Eight days and he's not missed one since the Wednesday. That's a good week, that. Whatever else it's been."

There was a silence of about three seconds and Kalina stood in it and understood, with total clarity and no evidence at all, that Pani Roszak knew — not the corridor, not the four in the mornings, not the counting; but that something was holding him up and that it was in the building and that it was not her.

Roszak could not ask. She could not query a candidate and she could not ask another candidate about a candidate, and she had eleven years in the job and a statute over her and a girl in front of her with a card round her neck saying a name that was not on any list.

"Anyway," she said. "It's the seventeenth. Three to go."

"Right."

"That one I'll give you," Roszak said, and went into the office and shut the door.

Kalina stood in the corridor for a moment with the jumper over her arm.

Then she went back to the room and sat on the bed and worked out what had happened, which took about four minutes and came out as follows.

Roszak had wanted to say something to her about Wiktor Nadolny, and could not, because saying anything to a candidate about a candidate was

the thing she would be out of the profession for by the end of the month. So she had said a true and neutral fact about his attendance to a girl in a corridor, without any question attached to it, and had waited.

And Kalina had said *has he*, which was nothing, and had given her nothing back, and Roszak had accepted the nothing without a flicker and had told her the date.

They had had a conversation in which neither of them had said anything at all, and both of them had come out of it knowing exactly what the other one was doing.

It was the first conversation of that kind Kalina had ever had, and she found afterwards that she had liked it very much, and that she could not have explained to anybody why.

Thirty

DAY EIGHT INTO NINE

By the eighth night there was a group, and she was in the middle of it, and there is no way to write that down that does not sound like a small thing.

It was eight or nine people depending on the evening. Ida, Tomek, Oskar, Dorota some nights, and Lena — the very small girl in glasses from the first table, who had said nothing to anybody for four days and then on the fifth had said one thing at exactly the right moment and turned out to be the funniest person in the building. She sat with her feet up on the bench and her arms round her knees and delivered everything at about half the volume of everyone else, so that the whole table had to stop to hear it.

They had the two tables nearest the hatch. They had about six running arguments and they had a rule, invented by Oskar and enforced with great seriousness, that nobody was allowed to say what band they thought they were getting.

And they had the ships.

It had started on the fourth night with Tomek saying that the models in the front hall were invented — that the whole row of them was somebody's idea of ships and not any actual vessel. Oskar said they were real, on the grounds of the brass plates. Tomek said anyone can put a plate under anything.

By the sixth night there were positions. Ida had gone through the plates and copied all eleven names and years onto the back of a sheet and read them out, and the reading out settled nothing, because a name and a year is exactly the thing you cannot do anything with when there is nothing to put

it into. Lena's contribution was that six of them were real and five invented and that the invented ones were better. Nobody could shift her and she could not support it.

They went at it for six nights. It was the best argument any of them had, and the reason it was the best was that it had nowhere to go, and every one of them was sixteen years old and had never had one of those before.

And the group went through her. That was the shape of it and she could see the shape from inside it: when there was a disagreement it came to her, and when somebody said a thing that did not land they looked at her to see whether it had, and when the group moved from the tables to the stairwell at nine o'clock it moved when she stood up.

She had never been anywhere near this. Not at nine, not at twelve, not at any point in sixteen years. She had spent her whole life at the edge of a thing calculating the cost of entry, and here she was at the middle of one and had not calculated anything.

She saw Vig twice in those two days and did not speak to him either time.

On the eighth morning he came into the nine o'clock at eleven minutes past eight, which was better than he had managed yet, and sat through the ninety minutes without once taking the folded page out of his pocket. On the ninth he was in the queue at the hatch at twenty-five to eight, where she had put him on the fifth morning, with a tray, talking to somebody she did not know.

She went on getting up at four.

He was on the floor by the radiator most mornings and some mornings he was not, and on the mornings he was not she sat down opposite where he would have been and stayed about ten minutes before she went back.

They had also, by the eighth night, invented something.

It had started as an argument about the assessments and had turned into a game with rules, and the rules were Tomek's and were unnecessarily elaborate. Somebody proposed a situation. Everybody else had four

minutes to say what was missing from it — not to solve it, only to name the hole — and the person who found a hole nobody else had found got something, and what they got was never established and nobody minded.

They played it for four nights. It was not a good game. What it had, and what nothing else in that building had, was that it could be finished: a round ended, somebody won it, and the next round began.

Kalina was very good at it and had the sense not to be good at it every time.

On the eighth night Lena did a thing about Pan Duda getting names wrong that went on for four minutes and had the whole table crying, and Ida had her head on the table, and Kalina laughed until it hurt across her ribs and had to stop and start again.

On the ninth afternoon there was a session cancelled and about thirty of them ended up on the old playing field in the cold, doing nothing much, in the last decent weather of the eleven days.

Somebody had found a ball in a cupboard. It was the wrong sort of ball and had been in the cupboard a long time and nobody could agree what game it was for, and what they played in the end was something invented on the spot with about six rules, most of them Oskar's, and it went on for an hour and forty minutes.

Kalina was not good at it. She was not any good at it at all, and it did not matter in the slightest, and that was the discovery of that afternoon: she was in the middle of something and being bad at it cost her nothing.

She went in at half four with her hands aching from the cold and her hair wrecked, and passed Roszak on the stairs, and Roszak said, "Good?" and Kalina said, "Yeah," and went up.

It was good. It is important that it was good, because everything that happened afterwards happened to somebody who had had it.

Thirty-One

DAY NINE

The stairwell was where they went after nine, because the refectory went dark at nine and the rooms had four people in them and the stairwell had a radiator on the half-landing that held its heat for an hour after the rest of the building went off at ten.

It came up late on the ninth night, out of nothing.

They had got onto what they had been told when they were small.

It started with Oskar, who had been made to believe until he was nine that there was a thing living in the wardrobe on the landing, and that it was not dangerous but was extremely easily offended. His mother had invented it to stop him going in there and had then been unable to get rid of it. He did the business of the apologies he had had to make to a wardrobe, at length, with actions, and it was one of the better things anybody did in eleven days.

Then Ida had one about a saint's day and a cellar. Then Dorota said she had never been told anything by anybody, ever, and had found out about all of it at school and had been furious. Then Lena, at half the volume of everyone else, had the woman who lived in the stove, which was two sentences long and shut the stairwell up.

They went round like that for the better part of an hour. It was the last proper evening and everybody knew it, and there was a quality in that stairwell which Kalina has not met since and has looked for.

Then Tomek said, "We had the one with the lamp."

"Everyone had the one with the lamp."

“No, but ours went on for about nine nights. It was enormous. There was a whole thing with a ring —”

“There’s a ring in it,” Ida said. “I’d forgotten the ring.”

“There’s a ring, and there’s the second one at the end, the brother —”

Kalina sat on the third step from the bottom with her back against the rail and did not say anything.

“Do it, then,” said Oskar.

So Tomek did it, badly, at speed, with the parts in the wrong order and half of it summarised and the group interrupting him throughout, and it took about six minutes.

There was a boy who would not learn. His father had a shop and wanted him in it and he would not go, and he ran about the streets all day with the other ones like him. Then a man came who said he was his uncle, and gave him clothes, and set him up, and took him out of the city to a place in the hills.

“He’s not his uncle.”

“He’s obviously not his uncle.”

“He’s a sorcerer, from the west somewhere —”

Then the cave, and the thing in the cave, and the boy holding on to it at the mouth and refusing to hand it up until he was out, and the man shutting him in.

Then the middle, which Tomek did in about forty seconds and got wrong.

Then the palace, and the princess, and the brother at the end who came in disguise and nearly had him, and the boy seeing through it, and the boy a king.

“And that’s it,” Tomek said. “That’s all of it.”

Ida said, “What happened to the father?”

“He dies,” Tomek said. “At the start. That’s the start — the boy won’t take the trade and his father dies of it.”

“That’s grim.”

“That’s the whole point of it, though,” Tomek said. “That’s why he has to become something. He’s got that on him the whole way through.”

And they went on to the next thing, because it was ten o’clock on the ninth night and there were two days left and nobody in the stairwell thought there was anything remarkable in a story where a boy’s father dies on the first page.

Kalina sat on the third step with her back against the rail.

She did not say anything at all.

PART THREE

THE MOUTH

Thirty-Two

DAY TEN

The last long paper was at nine on the tenth morning and it was eight pages, which was the longest they had had, and it took her about four minutes to see what it was.

A haulage company and a town. There had been an arrangement about a road, twenty years old, and the town had changed and the company had changed and the arrangement had not, and now there was a proposal in front of somebody and six documents to read and a seventh that was a set of figures collected by a person who had since left and who had not written down what any of the columns meant.

She looked at the seventh document and something in her went quiet.

It was the same shape. It was the ferry and it was the meeting note and it was the same shape, and the shape was that there is a hole in the middle of every one of these and the hole is the assessment. They had done it ten days running and she had spent the first four of those days waiting, at a desk, for a document to fill itself in.

She started at the far end.

She did the six she had, properly, one at a time, and set down what each of them established on its own and what it could not establish, and only then went at the seventh — not to decode it, because it could not be decoded, but to work out which of the things she wanted from it she could get by other means and which she would have to do without. Two she could get. One she could bound. The last one she could not have at all, and she wrote that down: *this cannot be established from what is here, and any*

recommendation has to survive not knowing it.

Then she wrote a recommendation that survived not knowing it.

It took the full ninety minutes and she was still writing when Duda said the thing about pens, and she got the last clause down and put the pen across the top of the page.

She knew.

That was the part she was not ready for. She had come out of about four hundred assessments in her life and every single one of them had been followed by the same forty minutes – the walk, the reconstruction, the improved version, the four minutes in before she noticed what she was doing. It was the most reliable process in her.

She got up. She put her chair under. She went out into the corridor with the sea on the left, and Ida said something about her hand hurting, and Kalina said something back, and they went down to the refectory.

And she did not do it.

She waited for it. She got about halfway down the west stair and understood that she was waiting, and stood on the half-landing for a moment with her hand on the rail, and it did not come. There was nothing to run. The paper was behind her and it was finished and it was hers and there was no improved version, because the version she had put down was the one she had meant.

Her hands were steady. That was the other thing. She looked at them on the rail and they were steady, and she had not eaten since half seven, and she had slept four hours.

The rest of the day had very little in it.

Half eleven to one was the gap, and at one there was a session that was not an assessment – Duda, in the big room, on what the band meant and what happened after it and when the letters went out. Everybody sat through it. Nobody listened. By the tenth day the building had gone slack in a way that was quite hard to describe: the assessments still ran and were still taken seriously in the rooms, and outside the rooms something had let

go. Two people in the east wing had effectively stopped. There was a boy who had not been to anything since the seventh day and to whom nothing whatever appeared to be happening.

The orals ran from two.

She waited from twenty past, on one of three chairs in the east corridor, with two others she did not know. Nobody said anything. There was a radiator under the window and it was on and the corridor was the only warm place she had been in all day. The girl nearest the door went in at half past and came out at ten past three looking precisely as she had looked going in, and did not catch anybody's eye, and went off toward the west stair.

Kalina went in at twenty past three.

It was a small room off the corridor with three chairs and a table and a window with the naval ground in it, and there were two of them, neither of whom she had seen in the building. The older was a woman of about sixty with a cardigan and a fountain pen and a way of reading a page at arm's length. The younger was a man in his thirties who had come from somewhere by car that morning and had not taken his scarf off.

Her morning paper was on the table between them, face up, marked in two colours.

"Sit down. This is forty minutes and it's a conversation, and there's no trick in it." The older one turned a page. "You've written that the recommendation has to survive not knowing what's in the seventh document. Take me through what survives."

So Kalina took her through it.

It went twenty-five minutes before anything happened. They picked the recommendation up and turned it over and put pressure on the joints, and they were good at it – neither friendly nor unfriendly, and both of them entirely willing to sit through a silence while she worked something out. The younger one did most of the pressing. He had a habit of saying "all right, then –" and then finding the next place.

“All right, then — you’ve capped the town’s exposure at the twenty-year figure.”

“Yes.”

“On what.”

“On the third document. The schedule of works.”

“The third document is a draft.”

Kalina stopped.

She had not seen it. She read it over in her head and it was there, plainly, on the front of it, and she had used a draft as though it were a schedule, all through the second half of her answer.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s wrong. The cap doesn’t hold. It’s — the shape of the recommendation still works, but the number’s not a number, I’d have to write it as a range and the range is wide enough that it’s not much use.”

“How wide.”

“I don’t know. Wider than the thing it’s supposed to be constraining.”

“Right,” said the younger one, and wrote, and went on.

Four minutes later he found another one and it was not a fault.

He put it that the eleventh paragraph contradicted the sixth. Kalina read both and it did not, and she said so, and he said it again in different words, and she read both again and it still did not, and she said, “No. Six is about what they’re obliged to do and eleven is about what they’re able to do, and those come apart in the second year. That’s the point of the paragraph.”

The younger one looked at the older one.

“It is,” the older one said, without moving her head. “Go on.”

At about thirty-five minutes she took the fountain pen off the page.

“What was in the seventh document?”

“I don’t know.”

“Guess.”

“No,” Kalina said. “I could tell you four things it might have been and I’d have no way of getting from four to one, and if I picked one you’d have no way of knowing I’d picked it rather than found it. That’s why I didn’t put it in.”

The older one wrote something down.

She has never known what. She thought about it for a while afterwards and then stopped thinking about it, and it is one of the very few things in her life she has been able to leave alone.

They let her out at twenty to four. The younger one held the door and said “Thanks. That was a good one,” in the flat way of a man who had said it perhaps three times that fortnight and did not consider that he was giving anything away.

Thirty-Three

DAY TEN, AFTERNOON

There were two hours after the oral and nothing in them, and the weather had come in, so she went to the laundry.

The machines were off. It was the one room in the building with no window and a light you had to hold the switch down for, and by the tenth day it was understood that if the door was shut somebody was in there and you went away. She sat on the folding table with her heels against the leg of it and her coat still on.

The building was going on around her the whole time and she could hear all of it through the wall and the floor. Somebody on the stair above, twice. The pipes, which did something at about ten past every hour and which nobody had ever explained. Two people in the corridor going past the door, arguing about the ferry problem, and one of them saying *no, but listen* three times and never getting to the listen. A door somewhere on the ground floor that did not shut properly and had not shut properly for eleven days.

Forty-nine other people, doing the last afternoon of it, ten metres away through plaster.

None of that was going anywhere either.

She was not thinking about anything. That is the honest account of how it started.

Then she was thinking about Filip.

Not about Filip particularly. About the shape of Filip: a boy with a level voice and no evidence whose standing had gone up every day for ten days

in a building with nothing in it that could look. That was a thing that had happened. It had happened in front of fifty witnesses and it was not going to be in any record anywhere, and in about eighteen hours it would stop being true, because on Friday afternoon somebody would check one of his four claims in four seconds and Filip would be a boy from the east wing again.

And underneath that, immediately, without any sensation of moving from one thought to another: the bridge at Tczew.

Ninety seconds to deadlock and then eight days of an argument with nowhere to go, and how it had grown rather than died, and how by the end it had two other bridges in it, and how not one person in fifty had been able to tolerate leaving it and every one of them had had to.

And then it was not thoughts any more. It was a list.

The reach — the hand going to the pocket at twenty-six minutes, four rows over eight minutes later, three days of it and then mostly stopping. The clock over the hatch and the eleven and twelve minutes early and the boy who started calling the time out to the room as a service, unasked, on the third night. Dorota on the second night with the pillow. The way the tables had set in four minutes on the first evening and had not moved for eleven days. The pairs assessment and the eleven minutes of two people describing their own halves before it turned over. Duda calling them *young people*. Roszak's shoes going west to east at two. The eggs. The bread.

And the ships. Six real and five invented and the invented ones better, and no way on earth to find out.

She sat on the folding table in a windowless room with her coat on and went down it, and then went down it again from the top, and the second time she noticed that she had put the reach first.

That stopped her for a moment.

She had put the reach first because it was the strongest. Because it was the one that would land — a room of fifty going for a thing that was not there, involuntarily, on the first afternoon, and stopping by the third day. It

was the one that made the point without anybody having to make it, and she had put it at the front of a list she was not aware of having made, for a reader who was not in the building.

She got down off the table.

There is no account of this. That was the next thing and it arrived very clean and very cold, the way the number arrives off a meter. Roszak had watched all of it for eleven days and Roszak's watching would be destroyed at egress, by statute, and Duda's, and every other pair of eyes that was being paid. Nothing had been recorded. Nothing in the building could record. The models had never seen the inside of this and were not going to, and there was no mechanism anywhere in the country by which any of what she had just gone down twice could ever get out.

Except one.

She stood in the laundry with the light off, because you had to hold the switch and she had let go of it, and she was aware of what she was feeling and it was not horror and it was not guilt.

It was interest.

She had spent ten days becoming the only instrument in a sealed building, and she had done it by accident, and she was standing in the dark working out what she had got. She could feel the thing having edges. She could feel it being worth something, and she could feel herself wanting to know how much, and there was a small hard pleasure in it that she did not tell anybody about then or afterwards.

Thirty-Four

DAY TEN, EVENING

She worked it out at dinner.

Vig was four tables down and she could see him from where she sat, and he was eating.

She had noticed it on the way in and it was not a small thing, because she had watched him move a fifth of a plate about for nine days. He had a full plate and he was going at it steadily, the way you eat when you have remembered that you are hungry. He had also moved. He was not in the corner any more, and not facing the room; he was two places along, in among a group of four, and one of them was saying something and he was listening to it, and at one point he said something back and the boy next to him laughed.

He looked, from four tables away, like an ordinary sixteen-year-old at the end of a hard fortnight.

She had done that. There was no way to state it that was not vain and no way to avoid the fact of it: he had come into the building unassembled and had spent nine days in pieces and had come out the other side, and the reason was a girl on a cold floor at four in the morning saying the times in order.

At her own table Oskar was arguing that he could have got into the technical school if he had tried. He could not have. He was enjoying it enormously and Tomek was refusing to let him have it, and Lena was waiting with something and had been waiting for about a minute.

None of it was worth anything.

That was the finding and it took about four minutes to arrive and it was not pleasant. She sat with a plate in front of her and went back down the list – the reach, the clock, the bridge, the tables, the ships – and it was all true and all of it had happened and none of it would move one thing.

Because it was not about them.

Amsel had been exact and she had not been listening properly. He had not said *tell me what fifty adolescents are like unobserved*. He had said the models are wrong between fifteen and seventeen and the mispredictions place people wrongly and miss things, and there is a boy in Elbląg he carries about. What he needed was not a portrait. What he needed was a case: one instance, documented from inside, where the thing that predicts a person had been wrong about that person in a way that mattered, in the one interval where nothing was watching to catch it.

She had one.

She had the only one anybody had ever had.

Wiktor Nadolny had come into that building with a diagnosed reliance of the licensed kind, which meant a model somewhere had him assessed and provided for and stable. He had had the provision taken off him in a fabric sleeve on the first morning, lawfully, with his consent, on a form he had signed. And for nine days he had come apart in a corridor at four in the morning in a way that no instrument in the country had registered, and he was going to walk out on Friday with a band, and the entire episode was going to not have happened.

And she could not say why.

That was the thing she kept coming back to and could not resolve, sitting there with the plate in front of her. She had four accounts of him and no way to get from four to one. The sitting had done it to him. Or the sitting had found something already in him that would have come out somewhere else in some other year. Or it had taken a thing he had never had to learn to do without and shown that he had never learned it, which is not the same as breaking him. Or all of it and in proportions nobody could give.

She had watched him for nine days at a range nobody had ever had, and what she had was the fact and not the cause.

She turned it over and found, with something close to unease, that this did not make the account worth less. Amsel would not want it because it explained him. He would want it because it was the only nine days on record where a boy of that age had gone through that and something had been there to see. The not-knowing was the state of the whole field. It was why there was a study at all.

And it meant she would be handing over a thing she could not interpret, to be interpreted by people who had not been in the corridor.

The model would not learn it. Nothing would learn it. Whatever came out of him at the far end of this — and she had no idea what would, and neither did anybody — would be attributed to something else, because the only place the cause lived was in a sealed fortnight and in the head of a girl who had happened to be awake.

That was what Amsel wanted. He did not know it existed. He had asked for eleven days of texture from a candidate who paid attention, and the candidate had come back with the thing the whole study was for.

She left the refectory before the plates went.

She went up to the room and it was empty and she sat on the end of the bed in her coat, and went at it properly, as you go at a fault. Not what do I feel about this. What does it do.

If she gave it, it could not be anonymised. Fifty candidates in one sitting at one college in one November. One boy with a documented reliance. Anybody who wanted to could put a name to it in an afternoon, and the people who would most want to were the people who ran placement offices.

If she gave it, the exception would get built.

She had asked him about that — no, she had not asked him about that. Nobody had said the word to her. She had got there on her own, on a bed in a cold room on the tenth night, and once she had it she could not put it

down: there was no exception in the statute, Vig had checked, Vig had checked everything. And the reason there was no exception was that nobody had ever been able to show what happened to a boy like him inside a sitting, because by design nobody could see it. The wall that protected them all was the wall that made the case unprovable.

She had been through the wall. She had been through it by accident and she was carrying the proof out in her head on Friday morning, and it was, as far as she could see, the only proof there had ever been.

If she gave it, nobody would have to do what he had done.

If she gave it, she would be doing to him precisely the thing the eleven days existed to prevent: taking the one interval in his life that nothing had watched, and handing it to somebody who would put it in a file.

She went back down to the refectory at about nine to get water, and they were clearing, and he was still there.

He was at the end of the long table with three others and a chair turned round, and somebody had got hold of a set of dominoes from somewhere and they were playing badly and slowly with about four rules between them. He had his sleeves down over his hands. He was losing and did not appear to have noticed.

Kalina got the water and stood in the doorway for about ten seconds.

Then she went back up and sat on the end of the bed for a long time.

She did not decide anything, and she was not, at any point, in doubt about what the two sides were. That is the part she has never been able to explain to anybody who has asked her about it since, and she has stopped trying: that she saw both of it clearly, all evening, and that seeing it clearly did nothing at all.

Thirty-Five

DAY TEN, NIGHT

She could not sleep and went down to the stairwell at about half eleven, and the radiator on the half-landing had an hour of heat left in it, and she sat on the step above it with her knees up.

The building had gone quiet in a way it had not been quiet on any other night. There were people awake — you could hear them, doors, the toilet at the end, somebody laughing two floors up — but the awokeness had changed character. Nobody was frightened of the morning. There was no morning left to be frightened of.

The stairwell was the coldest part of the building and had a smell to it that the rest did not, something in the paint, and there was a window at each half-landing with wire in the glass. The one above her had a pane that had been replaced at some point with a slightly different glass, so that the light from the yard came through it a different colour, and she had been looking at that pane on and off for eleven days without once wondering about it.

She began, without any sense of having started, to draft.

The first thing she found was that she was doing it in sentences. Not thoughts. Sentences, of a kind she had never produced in her life — flat and slightly formal, the clauses in a particular order, written as things are written by people who expect to be held to them.

I'll tell you all of it but there's things I want first.

That was the first attempt and she heard it and knew immediately that it was no good, and it took her a minute to work out why, which was that it

sounded like somebody asking. It had *want* in it. You do not put *want* in front of a man who has come to you.

I'll do it. Three things.

Better and still wrong. It gave him the yes at the front, and once he had the yes the three things were a matter for discussion.

I will give you the account on three conditions.

She sat with that one for a while and could not improve it. It said what would happen and it said what it depended on, and it did not ask for anything and did not offer anything, and it put the conditions and the account in the same sentence so that they could not be separated afterwards.

She was aware of the pleasure of getting it right and did not examine the pleasure.

One. Nothing about number 44. Not the corridor, not the mornings, not the reliance, not one word that could be traced to one candidate. He does not exist in it.

She spent the longest on that one, and the reason was that she could hear his answer.

Then what have I got?

She tried three replies. The first was that he would have the other thing — the reach, the clock, the bridge, the ten days of it — which was true and was more than he had ever had off anybody, and which she could hear him receive politely.

The second was to argue that the boy was one instance and that one instance proves nothing anyway, which she got about eight words into before she stopped, because it was not true, and because she had spent the evening establishing that it was not true, and because he would know it was not true inside a second.

The third was the one she kept.

That's the deal. There isn't another one and there isn't anybody else.

Nothing in it about right and wrong. She noticed that when she had it, and thought about putting something in, and did not, because everything she tried made it weaker.

Two. Her name off it. Not anonymous in the published sense; she did not know what the published sense was. She meant that nobody at any placement office, ever, was to be able to establish that the account had come from candidate 31.

She turned that one over and found something underneath it that she did not much like the look of, which was that she wanted it for reasons that had nothing to do with safety, and she left it where it was and did not go down after it.

Three.

She got up off the step for the third one and stood on the half-landing with her hand on the rail, under the pane that was the wrong colour.

She had four goes at it.

That something gets done about it. Nothing. A sentence with no edges, the sort of thing that gets agreed to in a doorway.

That there's an exception put in the statute. Too big, and not his to give, and he would say so, and he would be right, and saying an impossible thing out loud would cost her the other two.

That he tries. Worse than the first.

Then she got the shape of it, and the shape was that it had to be a thing he could be held to.

Whatever is built out of this, the exception gets built too. That a boy with a documented reliance is not made to choose between his provision and his band. That the mechanism is in it — written into whatever comes out of the work, named, and pushed, and pushed by him personally, and that he tells her when it is done.

She stood there and read it back to herself twice.

It was a good condition. It was the best sentence she had ever constructed and she knew it while she was constructing it, and there was a

warmth in her chest that she took, at the time, for the feeling of having done something right.

Then she sat down again and did the other half, because she had been her father's daughter for sixteen years and had watched him take a job and had watched him not take one.

What if he says no.

She went at it and found, with a kind of vertigo, that he could not. There was one of her. There had been two before her and neither had produced anything. The next sitting was in February and he would have to find somebody, and approach them before intake, which he had told her himself he was not supposed to do, and hope they paid attention, and hope they came back with something. He had years in this. He had a body of work with a hole in the middle of it and one person on earth standing in the hole.

She had never in her life had a thing that somebody else needed.

She sat on the step with the radiator going cold behind her and turned that over for about twenty minutes, and it did not feel like power and it did not feel like triumph. It felt like weight. It felt like standing at the bottom of the stairs at home holding a thing her father wanted, and knowing she was going to be the one who decided, and that nothing about the deciding was going to be quick.

At about one she went up.

Ida turned over and said something in her sleep. Dorota was breathing through her mouth. There were eight hours until the sleeves came back and about eleven until the coach, and Kalina lay on her back in the dark with the three conditions in her, worded, in order, each one better than the one before it.

It did not occur to her to tell him.

Not to ask him, and not to warn him, and not to mention to Wiktor Nadolny at any point in the next eighteen hours that a set of conditions existed with him at the centre of them. She had spent an evening working out how to protect a boy and had not, at any stage of it, considered

speaking to the boy, and the thought did not present itself to be dismissed.
It did not present itself at all.

Thirty-Six

DAY ELEVEN

The last breakfast was at seven and the room was loud in a way it had not been since the first night, and for the same reason: nobody knew what the shape of the next hour was, so everybody talked.

There was a great deal of arranging. That was the thing Kalina had not expected and afterwards could not stop looking at. Nobody in that refectory swapped anything. There was nothing to swap. You do not need a number for a person; you need to know who they are, and once you know that you can have them in four seconds from anywhere in the country for the rest of your life.

So the last morning was not an exchange of anything. It was people saying where they were from.

“Reda.”

“Which bit?”

“Up by the water tower.”

“Right. Right, I know it.”

Done forty times across a room, and every one of them understood exactly what it was for. Lena had a small argument with Oskar about whether she needed his school as well as his town, and decided she did, and made him say it twice.

Kalina sat with a piece of bread she did not eat and watched it happen and understood, in a slow flat way that took most of the meal, that the building was ending.

The sleeves came back at half eight, in the front hall, under the ship cases.

It was the same procedure run backwards and it took forty minutes. You went up with your slip. The woman found the number and took the sleeve out of the crate and broke the seal and turned the fold back and handed you the thing and made a mark on all three copies, and you stood there holding it and she said “next”.

Number 31. Kalina took it and it was cold from the crate and heavier than she remembered, which is a thing about eleven days that she has never been able to account for.

She did not switch it on.

She did not decide not to. There was a queue behind her and she moved out of it and stood by the second case with the thing in her hand, and around her people were doing it — you could see the whole hall going up in ones and twos, the faces coming down and lighting from underneath, the small noises, somebody swearing quietly, a girl by the door with both hands over her mouth for reasons that turned out afterwards to be entirely good news.

Tomek had his on before he was out of the queue and was reading the plates. He had got about four names in when he stopped and said, out loud, to nobody, “Oh, you’re joking.”

Nobody asked him. He looked up and around and found that the argument had nobody left in it — that Ida was by the door and Oskar was upstairs and Lena had gone for her bag — and Kalina watched him decide not to shout it across a hall, and put it away, and go and get his coat.

She never found out. She could have had it in four seconds at any point in the following nine years. She has not looked, and the not-looking stopped being a decision at some point and became a fact about her, and she could not now say when.

They went out to the coach at half nine.

The wind had gone round overnight and it was flat cold, no sea in it, the sky white all the way over. Roszak was at the door with a list on a clipboard, ticking, and she said each name as she ticked it, out loud, off the list, because that is how you do it when you cannot do it any other way.

“Wiśniewska. Kaczor. Nadolny.”

Vig went past her without stopping and out to the coach and up the steps, and Kalina saw the back of his head at the third window from the front and he did not turn round, then or when the coach pulled out, and that was the last of it.

“Dorosz.”

Kalina went past and got two steps into the gravel before Lena caught her arm.

“Dorosz?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you were —” Lena had her bag over one shoulder and her glasses had gone opaque coming out of the warm. “Kal.”

“Kal’s what people call me.”

It was true. It had been true for eleven days. It was not a thing she had to make her face do anything for, and it went into Lena without any resistance, because there was no reason on earth for it not to.

“Right,” Lena said. “Dorosz. Gdynia.”

“Grabówek.”

“Grabówek.” She nodded, and put it away somewhere, and grinned. “I’ll find you.”

Then she went off up the coach steps.

Kalina stood in the gravel by the front wheel with her bag against her leg and the wind coming across the headland and about nine people still coming out of the door behind her.

She put it on there. In the yard, on the gravel, with the building still in front of her and the sea on both sides, because she wanted to know what it

was going to be like and she did not want to find out sitting down in front of forty-nine other people.

It came in like water finding a level.

There was nothing dramatic in it. Nothing had gone wrong at home and nothing much had happened anywhere. Eleven days of the world arrived over about ninety seconds and settled, and most of it was nothing, and the shape of it was the shape her whole life had been until the tenth of November: everything already sorted, nothing surprised, the weather for the weekend, the placement dates, her mother twice, her brother once, a thing from the school.

And under it, exactly where it had been, all of it. Every draft. The coach at the harbour when she was eleven and the wrong bay and the crying. The morning she had not got off at the stop before the yard. The girl who had sat at the wrong end of the wall by the science block for a month working out the cost of entry.

Then, in among the rest, one from Ryszard Amsel.

He hoped it had gone well. He would be in Gdynia on the twenty-second and the twenty-third, and either would suit him, and he would leave it to her.

It had been sent on the tenth of November at nineteen minutes past nine in the morning.

She stood in the gravel and worked out what she had been doing at nineteen minutes past nine on the tenth of November, and she had been standing in the front hall at Oksywie in a queue, watching a woman turn a fold over twice and write 31 on three copies of a form.

Somebody behind her said, "Kal, coach."

She got on.

PART FOUR

THE ACCOUNT

Thirty-Seven

DECEMBER

It took about ninety seconds for the coach to become a different vehicle.

They had come up it in the dark on the tenth in near silence, fifty people with bags on their knees and nothing to say to anybody. They went down it on the twentieth with every seat occupied by somebody who had been unable to check anything for eleven days and could now check everything, and the noise was like a room where something has been dropped.

Kalina had a window on the left. Ida was next to her, going as far as the station.

“Right,” Tomek said, from two rows up, standing. “Right. The ships.”

“Sit down.”

“I’m not sitting down. Eleven of them. Nine are real.”

There was a noise from about a third of the coach.

“Nine. Nine real, two invented, and the two invented ones are the two nobody argued about, which is the worst part —”

“Which two?”

“The barque and the one at the end with the funnel.”

“That’s a made-up boat? That’s a *made-up boat*?”

“It’s a class. It’s not a ship, it’s a class, somebody built a model of a design that never got built —”

Lena, from the back, at half the volume of everybody, said, “I said six,” and it went round the coach in about nine and got the biggest laugh of the journey and was, as an account of what she had said, completely

inaccurate.

It went on like that most of the way to Rumia.

The bridge at Tczew went in the first two minutes and it was the Poles, on the first of September, and it took somebody four seconds to establish it and the whole argument was over. Kalina watched the two of them who had started it on the second day receive the answer. Neither of them was pleased. One of them said "I said that," which he had not, and the other one said nothing at all and looked out of the window, and there was a small flatness on the coach for perhaps half a minute afterwards that nobody remarked on.

And somewhere before Gdynia, Filip stopped existing.

She did not see it happen and heard about it twice that week from two people who had not been near each other. Somebody had gone at the four claims, straight off, in the first ten minutes, and the assessments were not weighted, and there was no staff note, and the building had never been a sanatorium. Two of them had been true – the cousin at Łębork was real and something about the fifth-day session was roughly as he had said it.

By the time the coach got in he was a boy from the east wing who had been wrong about some things.

Ten days of standing, in eleven minutes, and nobody was even unkind about it. They just looked.

The coach put them down on the rank at twenty past ten and it took about ninety seconds for fifty people to stop existing as a thing.

There were parents. There were about a dozen of them, standing where they had stood eleven days earlier in the same loose outer ring, and the rest went off to buses and to the SKM and to cars, in twos and threes and then in ones, and the concourse emptied as concourses empty. Ida said something and went. Oskar shouted something from halfway to the doors. Lena had already gone.

Kalina stood on the pavement with her bag and it was over.

Her mother had come, and had brought the car, which she did not drive if she could avoid it, and had parked it somewhere that was going to be a problem.

“Look at the state of you.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ve not eaten.” Her mother had her by the arm and was steering. “I’ve done a soup.”

They went up the hill. The soup was on and the flat was warm and there was a wash going, and her mother talked all through the meal and asked nothing, having been told something about the first day back and having decided to observe it.

Her father came in at twenty-five past six.

He washed his hands and came and sat down and looked at her properly, which he did not always do, and said, “All right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” he said, and went on with his food.

She went up at about nine and lay on the bed with her boots on in a room that was three degrees warmer than the one at Oksywie and did not sleep for a long time. Somewhere below her a door. The knocking from the yard when the wind came round.

She got up at four out of habit and stood in the hall for about a minute before she remembered where she was.

Thirty-Eight

DECEMBER

They met on the twenty-second at a place on Świętojańska that he chose, upstairs, at the back, in the middle of the afternoon when it was empty.

He had a notebook and he did not open it for the first forty minutes.

“How was it?”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” Amsel said, and did not push, and got the coffees, and they talked about nothing for a while — the weather, the coach, whether her mother had got over the thing about the christening. He was good at it, and she was aware of him being good at it, and she let it run because she wanted to see how long he would leave it.

He left it twenty-six minutes.

“Right,” he said.

“There’s conditions.”

He put his cup down and sat back and something in his face changed and got more interested, and it was the first time in three months she had seen him look at her rather than at the space next to her.

“Go on.”

She said it exactly as she had drafted it on the half-landing, and it came out flat and slightly formal and she did not stumble.

I will give you the account on three conditions.

Then she gave him the three, in order, and did not explain any of them, because she had worked out at some point between the coach and the

twenty-second that explaining is what you do when you expect to be argued with.

He was quiet for a moment on the first one.

"Nothing that could be traced to one candidate," he said. "One candidate in particular, or any?"

"One in particular."

"Then there's a person."

"That's the condition."

Amsel looked at the table.

"Then what have I got?" he said.

"You've got the other thing. Ten days of it. It's more than you've had off anybody." She kept her hands where they were. "That's the deal. There isn't another one and there isn't anybody else."

He did not say anything for about four seconds. Then he nodded once, and said, "All right," and she understood that she had won something and could not tell how much.

The second one he took without comment.

The third one he took before she had finished it.

"Yes," he said. "Yes — that's a good condition. That's a very good condition and I'd have wanted it in there anyway. There's a mechanism paper wanting a shove and this is the shove." He was warm about it. He was warmer about it than he had been about anything all afternoon. "Consider that agreed."

She sat with the warmth of it for a second and let it be what she thought it was.

Then he opened the notebook, and they went four hours.

The place was one of those upstairs rooms with six tables and a radiator under the window and a girl downstairs who came up twice in an afternoon. It got dark outside at about half three. Somebody put a lamp on at the other end and it did not reach them.

She was good at it. That surprised her more than anything else in the room: he asked and she answered and it came out ordered, in the order she had put it in on the folding table in the laundry, and when he went back over something she gave him the same account a second time without varying. Twice he asked what she made of a thing and she said she did not know, and both times he wrote that down as carefully as he wrote the rest.

He wrote by hand. She noticed that in the first ten minutes and thought about it afterwards more than she thought about most of it.

In the third hour he asked about the nights.

“What’s it like in there at four in the morning? Is anybody up?”

It was a good question. She has gone back over it a great many times and it is still a good question and there is nothing wrong with it; it is exactly the question a man doing that work should ask, and he asked it in the same flat interested voice he had used about the eggs.

“Some people. Not many.”

“Doing what?”

“Nothing. You can’t do anything.” She had her hands round the cup. “It’s the coldest it gets. The heating’s off from ten and the floors are terrazzo the whole way and it comes up through whatever you’ve got on. There’s a night light at each end and nothing else, and the shadow off the handrail goes across the floor at an angle and it doesn’t move, so you end up looking at it.”

“And no clock.”

“No clock anywhere. So people count. That’s the thing nobody tells you about — by about the fourth day everybody in that building can do four minutes in their head to within about twenty seconds, and none of them could do it when they went in.”

Amsel stopped writing for a moment.

“Say that again,” he said.

She said it again.

He wrote it down and then sat looking at the page for a second or two, and said, "That's very good," and turned over.

At six o'clock it was dark outside and the place had filled up downstairs, and he closed the notebook and said, "I've had four goes at this and you're the first one who was actually there."

She got the trolleybus at twenty past. She was hungry and she had not eaten since eleven and she sat on the 21 going up the hill with her forehead against the glass, and what she felt was not guilt.

She had done a good piece of work. She had held her terms and got them, all three, off a man who had come to her, and she had given him nothing she had said she would not give.

Vig's name had not been said once in four hours.

Thirty-Nine

DECEMBER

The bands came out on the eleventh of December at nine in the morning and Kalina was in a maths lesson and found out about hers because her mother found out about hers.

Band six. One above predicted.

Her mother rang the school, which you were not supposed to do and which about nine parents did that morning, and by the time Kalina got out of the room it had gone round.

Her father heard it at the yard before he heard it from anybody in the house. He came in at the usual time and did the tap and came and sat down, and he did not say anything about it for most of the meal, and then near the end he said, "Six."

"Six."

"That'll do," he said.

That was his response entire, and it was said in the voice he used for a job that had come off, and Kalina waited for the rest of it, and there was no rest of it, and after a while she worked out that there was not going to be any and that this was because nothing had happened. She had been good at a thing. He had always said she would be good at a thing. The world had produced a number that agreed with him, and a man does not celebrate being right about something he was never in doubt about.

Her mother put it out to everybody. That was the December of it: eleven days of a woman of fifty-three telling people in a hospital that her daughter had got a six, and telling the neighbours, and telling Pani Sadowska, who

was eighty-two by then and did not know what a six was and was pleased about it anyway.

Kalina found it hard to be around and could not have said why, and was ashamed of finding it hard, and went out a good deal that fortnight.

The offers came in the second week of January and there were four. The yard track was one of them.

She took the harbour authority.

It was the scheduling and disputes side, in the long building above the basin. It was a better placement than the yard track, and everybody knew it, and her father knew it.

He said, "Right," and asked one question about the hours. He did not mention the yard, then or at any point afterwards.

He got up after the meal and went and stood at the sideboard for a bit.

There was nothing on the sideboard except the meter and a bowl of things nobody used, and he stood there with his back to the room and picked the meter up and turned it over in his hands twice, and coiled the leads round it, which were already coiled. Then he put it down and went in to the football.

Kalina was at the table with the plates and saw all of it and did not say anything, and neither did her mother, who had also seen it and who for once in her life did not remark.

She found out in her first fortnight that the window at the end of the second-floor corridor looked down over the fitting-out quay, and that if you stood at it you could see the west basin end to end and four cranes and, on a clear morning, the shed her father had worked in since before she was born.

He could not see her. There was no angle from the floor of that shed to a window on the second floor of the authority building, and she checked, twice, from both ends.

Forty

DECEMBER

The absorption started before the bands and went on for about four months, and there was no point at which it did anything that could be objected to.

They came back one at a time. Ida on the twenty-first, Oskar on the twenty-fourth, two others in the week after that. It was the same each time and it was ordinary: a message, a bit of catching up, some business about the bands, and then it went into the general run of things and stayed there.

Every one of them looked her up. There was nothing else they could have done. They had eleven days and a district and a surname, and the rest arrives without being asked for.

Nothing went wrong.

That is the accurate account of it. Nobody found anything. Nobody said anything. There was no conversation in which some earlier version of her was produced and compared with the one they had met, and no moment at which anybody's manner altered.

She watched it happen once, properly, because she happened to be looking.

Oskar came back on the twenty-fourth, in the evening, with something about the arithmetic paper. They went back and forth for a bit. Then there was a gap of eleven minutes, and then he came back and said something about a place near the station that her school had used, which he had no way of knowing about and had not been told.

That was all. It was not a question and it did not want an answer. He had looked her up in the gap, as anybody would, and had come back with something friendly in his hand.

She sat on the end of her bed and looked at it for a while.

There was nothing to object to anywhere in it. He had done what fifty people were doing that week and what she had done to every one of them within about four days of the coach, and what she had known for eleven days would happen and had not once thought about.

Tomek sent her a thing about the ships in January, still going, having found a photograph.

Lena turned up in February, having come to Gdynia for something else, and they had two hours in a place near the station and it was one of the better afternoons of that winter.

And at some point in among all of that — she has never been able to date it, and she has tried — the person she had made on the first night at Oksywie stopped being a thing she was doing and became a thing she was.

Forty-One

FEBRUARY

Lena said it in the place near the station, over the second coffee, without any weight on it at all.

“I looked you up after, you know. On the coach. Everybody did.”

“I know.”

“And it was — ” She turned her cup round. “It made sense. That’s what I keep thinking. I’d have said, if you’d asked me on the fourth day, that you were somebody who’d always been like that. And then it’s all there. The whole lot. And it’s not that it contradicted it, it’s that you could see it coming. You could see it in the school stuff from when you were about thirteen.”

“Could you.”

“You could.” Lena grinned at her. “It was there the whole time. It just hadn’t got out yet.”

Then she said something about her brother and the conversation went on and neither of them came back to it.

Forty-Two

FEBRUARY

About ten minutes later, on the way out to the coats, Lena said, "Oh — Dorota's fine, by the way. I saw her at Christmas."

"Good."

"She's not fine about Tomek." Lena was getting her arm into a sleeve. "She's still not right about it. Because he did say it, you know."

Kalina stopped with her bag half up.

"He told her in January. Rang her up about something else and it came out. He'd said it on the second night and he'd forgotten he'd said it, and then when she came at him about it he'd already decided he hadn't, and then he couldn't get back out of it." Lena pulled her hair out of the collar. "He was mortified. She wasn't having it."

"Right."

"It's ages ago," Lena said. "It's nothing. Are you getting the ten past?"

They walked to the station.

She did not think about it that afternoon and she did not think about it that week. It surfaced on a Tuesday about three weeks later, at her desk, with the basin grey in the window, and it came up complete: four people looking at her in a stairwell on the sixth night, and a girl of sixteen who had been at a different table with her back to it, saying *I don't think he said it* in the voice she had by then acquired.

It had held because of how she said it.

She had had nothing. She had had less than anybody in that stairwell — Dorota had the girl from the east wing, Tomek had his own memory, which turned out to be wrong in a way he did not know about, and Kalina had the fact that when she said things now, people took them.

She sat there for a while with a demurrage file open in front of her.

She had been in that building four days at the time and had spent the whole eleven of them noticing that Filip's authority did not erode, and working out why, and being pleased with herself about it.

Forty-Three

FEBRUARY

She saw Vig once, on a Saturday in the middle of February, at the far end of a platform at Gdynia Główna.

She had been going to Gdańsk for something of Bogna's and was early, and she had been standing at the near end for about ten minutes with a coffee when she looked up the platform and knew him at two hundred metres from the shape of his shoulders, which was not a thing she had known she had.

He looked well. That was the first thing and it was not complicated: he had put on a bit and he had a decent coat and he was standing with two other people and one of them was making him laugh.

He saw her. He came down the platform.

"Kal."

"Kalina," she said. "It's Kalina."

"Right." He took that without any reaction at all. "How'd you do?"

"Six. You?"

"Four."

Four was two below what he should have had, and she knew it, and had known it would be something like that since about the seventh day, and there was nothing on his face about it.

"That's the Reda placement, then," he said. "Warehousing side. Start in April." He put his hands in his pockets. "It's fine. I'd have taken it anyway probably."

“Right.”

They stood there for a moment. The train was two minutes out; she could see the board over his shoulder.

She had a thing ready. She had had it ready since December and had not known she was carrying it — some version of *are you all right now*, or *did they sort you out*, or a sentence with the mornings in it. It had been sitting there through the band and the placement and all of January, waiting for a platform.

There was no place to put it. He was standing in front of her talking about warehousing with his hands in his pockets, and there was no gap anywhere in it, and every version she had would have had to be pushed in against the direction of the conversation by her.

She understood, with a coffee going cold in her hand, that he was not going to raise it. Not now and not ever. He had been on a corridor floor at four in the morning for nine days with a girl saying the time out loud, and he had a placement in Reda and a decent coat and two people up the platform waiting for him.

He said, “Anyway. That’s my train.”

“Right.”

“See you,” he said, and went back up the platform to the two people, and one of them said something to him and he answered it, and the three of them got on.

He had not said anything about it. Not thank you and not the other thing either; he had stood on a platform for ninety seconds with the person who had counted four-minute intervals out loud to him for two hours on the seventh morning, and had talked about a warehousing placement in Reda.

She stood there after the train had gone and worked out that she did not know what he remembered.

That had not occurred to her before. She had spent three months assuming that he held it as she held it — the corridor, the window at the east end, the counting — and there was no reason to think so. He had lost a

day of the week inside it. He had been told he had sat a paper he had no memory of sitting. Whatever those nine nights were in him now, they were not a sequence, because a sequence was the one thing he had not been able to make at the time.

She had the account of it. She might have the only account of it.

That was the third time in fourteen weeks she had arrived at that sentence from a completely different direction, and she noticed the arriving and put it down and went to Gdańsk.

She never saw him again.

Forty-Four

FEBRUARY

The work suited her and it was not glamorous and she was good at it in a way that took about six weeks to become visible to anybody including herself.

The authority building was 1930s and had been good once and was now four floors of corridor with the good rooms at the front, and the scheduling office was not at the front. There were eleven people in it. The youngest before Kalina was thirty-four.

They were kind to her as an office is kind to somebody of seventeen: pleasant, expecting nothing, and giving her the filing for three weeks. She did the filing. On the fourth week Ostrowska gave her a small demurrage claim to summarise and did not say why, and Kalina found out about eight months later that this was the test and that everybody got it.

Pani Ostrowska had been in the building twenty-six years and had a system of coloured tabs that nobody else understood and that she had never explained to anybody, on the stated grounds that it would not survive explanation. She had a way of reading standing up. She said good morning to every person in the office individually, by name, every day, and did not otherwise talk.

The scheduling office dealt in disagreements. Somebody had been promised a berth and somebody else had been given it; a contractor had a completion date and the authority had a different one; there was a demurrage claim every fortnight and every one of them turned on what had been agreed in a room eleven months ago between two people who no longer worked there.

In March there was one about a lay-by berth at the north end.

The file had everything in it except the one thing, which was what the harbourmaster's office had actually told the agent on a Tuesday in the previous May. There was a note of the call. The note said *discussed – agreed to review* and had been written by somebody who had left in September.

"It's not in there," Ostrowska said. "I've been through it twice."

"No," Kalina said. "It's not going to be."

And then she did the thing.

She put down what the six documents she had did establish, one at a time, and what each of them could not, and she came to the note last and did not try to decode it. She wrote that the content of the call could not be established from the file; that any position the authority took had to hold whether the call had gone one way or the other; and then she set out a position that held either way, which cost the authority about four thousand less than the one they had been going to take and could not be attacked on the point that was missing.

Ostrowska read it standing up, which she did with everything, and then read it again sitting down, which she did not.

"Where did you learn to do that?"

"I don't know," Kalina said.

It went up. It came back agreed. Nobody made anything of it, because a thing that works does not generate a conversation, and Kalina went on to the next file, and about a week later she noticed that Ostrowska had started giving her the ones with holes in them.

Forty-Five

FEBRUARY

She left it three months before she asked.

There was no reason for that and she has never much liked the reason she eventually found, which was that she did not want to be the sort of person who asks. He had given his word in an upstairs room and she had watched him give it, and to come back in January and check would have been to say something about what she thought of him and, worse, something about what she thought the word was worth.

So she waited until it could be done casually, and then she waited another three weeks for a message that had something else in it.

She asked him about the third condition at the end of February, at the end of a message about something else, because she did not want to make an occasion of it.

How's the mechanism thing going?

He came back the same evening and he came back at length.

He said the paper was with the standards side and that these things move at the speed they move. He said there had been a good meeting in January and a less good one in early February and that the less good one was about money and not about the substance. He said the substance was not in dispute by anybody who had read it. He said the difficulty was that nobody wants to be the person who opens the statute, because once it is open there are eleven other things people want to put in it, and the mechanism would be competing with all eleven.

He said he was pushing.

She read it twice and it was a good answer. It had detail in it, and dates, and a named difficulty that sounded exactly like the sort of difficulty such a thing would actually have.

She could not have said what would have counted as a bad answer.

That did not occur to her at the time. It occurred to her in April.

Forty-Six

APRIL

The circular came round the authority on the ninth of April because it came round every public body, and Kalina read it because she read things.

PLACEMENT OFFICE — PRACTICE NOTE 4/11

Unassisted settings: candidate behaviour in the first seventy-two hours

Issued by the Placement Standards Directorate. For information; no action required.

Recent work on unassisted placement settings has identified a consistent early-period effect which offices may wish to take into account when interpreting first-week performance.

Candidates entering an unassisted setting continue for a period to initiate the physical action associated with consulting an assistant — reaching, checking, orienting toward a device that is not present. The behaviour is involuntary and is reported as occurring without the candidate's prior awareness. It is observed to decline sharply after approximately seventy-two hours.

The effect appears to be near-universal and is not associated with any candidate characteristic so far examined. It has not previously been documented, for reasons connected to the observation conditions in the relevant settings.

Offices are advised that first-period performance in such settings is likely to understate candidate capability, and that the seventy-two-hour point may be a more appropriate reference for interpretation.

She read it at her desk with the window on her left and the west basin in it.

Then she read it again.

Reaching, checking, orienting toward a device that is not present. Her own right hand had come off a desk at twenty-six minutes on the first afternoon and gone down and flattened against the outside of her thigh, and she had

watched it go and had not authorised it, and four rows over somebody else had done it eight minutes later, and it had gone on in that room for three days and then mostly stopped.

She had put it first. On the folding table in the laundry, in the dark, with her coat on, she had gone down the list twice and the second time she had noticed she had put it first because it was the strongest.

It has not previously been documented, for reasons connected to the observation conditions in the relevant settings.

There was no name anywhere on it. There was a directorate at the top and a reference number and no author, and that is how practice notes are issued, and it would have been extraordinary if there had been a name on it.

Forty-Seven

APRIL

She minded, and it took her a long time to establish what she minded about, and she never got all the way to the bottom of it.

It was not that they had used it. She had given it to be used.

It was not that her name was off it. She had made that a condition. She had drafted it on a half-landing at midnight and had noticed at the time that safety was not why she wanted it, and had left that where it was and not gone down after it. It had been granted exactly as she asked. There was no complaint available to her anywhere in the vicinity of it and she knew that within about an hour.

What she came back to, over the following fortnight, was the seventy-two hours.

She had said three days. She was fairly sure she had said three days, and she could not now be certain, because the account existed in one notebook belonging to a man in Gdańsk and nowhere else, and she had no copy of it and had never thought to make one. She had spent four hours in an upstairs room in November giving away the only eleven days of her life that nothing had recorded, and she had recorded none of it herself.

She could not check.

She sat with that on a Tuesday evening in the middle of April and it was the first time since the twentieth of November that she had wanted something and not been able to have it in four seconds. She noticed the shape of the wanting before she noticed what it was for: a small forward lean, a reaching, a thing arriving in her hand that was not there.

She had done it in a room in Oksywie at twenty-six minutes on the first afternoon and had watched her own arm go.

There was a version of that fortnight in which she wrote and asked him for a copy. She composed it four times and did not send it, and the reason she did not send it was in the same family as the reason she had not asked about the third condition until February: asking would have said something about what she thought was going on, and she did not want to have said it.

So she went round it the other way and asked herself what she could establish from what she had, which was the operation she had been performing on other people's paperwork four days a week since January.

What she had was a practice note. What the practice note established was that somebody had used it. What it did not establish, and could not, was how much of what she had said in four hours in November was in that notebook and how much of it was somewhere else.

Forty-Eight

APRIL

She went back through it that fortnight, at night, and found she could not.

She had the list. The reach and the clock and the bridge and the tables and the ships and Duda and the eggs; she could produce that in about a minute and it was intact and it had not degraded. What she could not produce was the four hours. She could not say what she had said in the upstairs room on Świętojańska between two and six on the twenty-second of November, because there had been a great deal of it and it had gone on a long time and he had asked her things she had not prepared for.

She was clear about Vig. She was completely clear about Vig, because she had held that line consciously and had felt herself holding it, and his name had not been said.

She was less clear about the mornings.

The nights she could produce, because she had gone over them since. He had asked what the building was like at four and whether anybody was up, in the same voice he had used about the eggs, and she had told him: the cold off the terrazzo, the night light at each end, the shadow off the rail that did not move, no clock anywhere, and everybody counting by the fourth day.

Say *that again*, he had said, and she had said it again, and he had written it and looked at the page and said it was very good.

She had not said a name. She had not said 44 and she had not said Nadolny and she had not said *there was a boy*.

She sat on the edge of her bed at seventeen with the window black and worked out that she had told a man who studies how people behave when nothing is watching that there was a corridor in that building at four in the morning where somebody had learned to count.

She could not get it any tighter than that. She had held the line she had drafted on a half-landing and had held it exactly, and everything she had given him on either side of it had been true and had been asked for and had been hers to give.

And it had taken him about eleven seconds to sit up.

Forty-Nine

JULY

She moved out in June, into two rooms in Chylonia above a shop, with a girl from the authority called Bogna who worked in permits and whom she had spoken to about four times.

It was not a dramatic departure. Her mother cried for about ninety seconds on the Saturday morning and then organised the whole thing with such efficiency that Kalina was largely in the way of it. Her father put a shelf up and did the socket in the back room, which had been done badly, and went round the flat with the meter before he would leave.

He found two things. One of them mattered.

The rooms were cold and small and had a window that looked at another window, and she lived in them for four years and was happier there than she had been anywhere. She had a wage. She had a key. Nobody in that building had known her at eleven.

There were people in them, too. That is the part she would have found hardest to believe at sixteen and the part that has needed least explaining since: Bogna and two of Bogna's, and a man from the tally office who came for a thing in August and did not particularly leave, and by the autumn there were six or seven of them in and out of two rooms in Chylonia on a Friday.

She was in the middle of it. She had not arranged to be and did not notice for months. It was the same shape as the two tables nearest the hatch — arguments that went through her, a thing said that people looked at her to see whether it had landed — and it had turned out to be a thing

she could do anywhere, with anybody, once she had done it once.

She thought about that a good deal that summer and could not decide whether it was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Her mother came on the third Sunday with a bag of things and stayed two hours, and on the way out said, "It's nice," in a voice that meant it was not nice, and Kalina laughed for the first time in about a fortnight.

Szymon got engaged that same month and there was a thing at the flat in Grabówek for it, and afterwards, at about eleven, he came and sat on the arm of the chair with a beer and said, "You're different, you."

"Am I."

"You are. Since the sitting." He drank some of it. "You talk to people."

"I talked to people before."

"You didn't, though. You'd be in a room and you'd be — " He did something with his hand that meant nothing. "Round the edge. Working it out. Now you just talk to them."

"Right."

"It's good," Szymon said. "Mum's dead pleased about it. She goes on about it."

He got up and went and put his weight on the handle of the kitchen door on the way past, which had been loose since March, and went out to the balcony where the others were.

Her mother came through with a tray at about half eleven and stopped and looked at the room.

"He's happy," she said. "Isn't he. He's just happy."

"He is."

"That's all I wanted for the pair of you," her mother said, and then, without changing tone at all, "You know they do a thing at the authority where you can go on and do the qualification part-time. Ewa's girl did it. I sent you it."

"You did."

“Have you looked at it?”

“I’ve looked at it.”

“Well then,” her mother said, and went out to the balcony with the tray, and Kalina sat where she was.

She had looked at it. She had looked at it on the day it arrived, because it had arrived with a note about who else in her band had taken it and what it did to their progression, and she had read every line of that and had not replied to her mother about it for eleven days.

What Kalina had thought he was going to say was something about the work, or the band, or the way she was with their father now, which had changed and which both of them had noticed and neither had mentioned. He had not said any of that. He had said she talked to people.

It was true and it was the thing she would have named last.

Fifty

JULY

She asked him again in July.

She made more of an occasion of it this time, and sent it on its own, and asked directly: was the mechanism paper going anywhere, and if it was, when.

He came back two days later.

He said it had not moved since February and that he was sorry to have to say so. He said the standards side had been reorganised in the spring and that the person who had been carrying it had gone to something else. He said the substance was still not in dispute. He said he would raise it again in the autumn when the new intake of work was set.

And then he said that these things take years, and that he had been in this a long time, and that he would rather tell her the truth than tell her something comfortable.

She read that four times, sitting on the bed in Chylonia with the window that looked at another window.

Then she did something she had not done before, which was to put the February message and the July message side by side and read them in sequence.

They were consistent. That was the finding and it took about ten minutes. Nothing in July contradicted anything in February; the reorganisation in the spring accounted for the departure, and the departure accounted for the stall, and the stall accounted for the autumn. It was a clean and continuous account of eight months in which nothing had

happened.

It was a better answer than February's. It admitted a failure. It named a reorganisation and a departure and a season. It contained an apology and a piece of hard-won professional realism, and it was the sort of thing a decent man says to a young person he respects.

There was nothing in it she could take hold of. There had been nothing in February's either. She understood in July that she had asked twice and received, on both occasions, an account of why a thing had not happened — and that a man who intended to do nothing at all would produce exactly the same two messages, in exactly that order, in exactly that tone.

She could not tell them apart. That was the finding and it was not an accusation.

Fifty-One

JULY

He receded over the summer and there was no moment in it.

He answered more slowly. Then he answered shortly. In August there was a fortnight of nothing and then a reply that began by apologising for the fortnight, and after that they were on the footing of two people who had done a piece of business together, which is a footing that requires nothing of either party and does not end.

She could not work out whether she had been dropped. That was the difficulty with it, and she went round it a number of times that August: a man of fifty-eight who has taken four hours of material off a girl of seventeen and has since become busy is not doing anything, and there is no version of the complaint that survives being said out loud.

She had also, she noticed, stopped having anything to tell him. The account was given. There was nothing in her life that a man doing that work would want, and she had spent eleven days being the most useful person in the country to him and had spent the eight months since being a junior in a scheduling office in Gdynia.

She did not much like noticing that.

She found out about the others in August, and she found out by asking, and he told her straight away.

Five. Not two. He had approached five candidates before her, across three sittings, and had told her about two of them on a hill in October because two was the number that made a point and five was the number that made a different one. Two had refused. Two had gone in and come

back with nothing usable. One had gone in and withdrawn on the fourth day for reasons that had nothing to do with him and that he had spent some time satisfying himself had nothing to do with him.

He was not defensive about it. He said he should have said five in October and that he had said two because he had wanted her to feel like the answer to a problem rather than the sixth attempt at one.

She sat with that for a while.

It was the straightest thing he ever said to her, and it had cost him nothing to say in August, and she noticed both of those at once and could not decide which of them mattered.

Fifty-Two

SEPTEMBER

She saw Ola in September, on Świętojańska, on a Saturday.

It was entirely accidental and lasted about twenty minutes and they went and had a coffee because there was no reasonable way not to. Ola was doing a course in Gdańsk and was broad and cheerful and walked fast and talked faster and had not changed in any respect whatever since she was seven.

She was pleased about the authority. She asked good questions about it. She talked about three people from school and what had happened to them, and one of them was the girl who had been at the centre of the year since primary and who had come out of it badly, and Ola told that story without any relish, which was characteristic.

And she did not say anything about the coach at the harbour.

She did not say anything about any of it – the sheet, the wrong bay, the crying, or the trip in the spring, or the thing in Year Nine, and there was no occasion in twenty minutes on which any of it would have come up, and Kalina had been braced for it from the moment she saw her.

They said they should do it again and did not.

Walking up the hill afterwards Kalina worked out that the story had not gone anywhere. Ola still had it. Ola would have it at fifty. What had happened was that it had stopped being the thing you reached for when you wanted to say something about Kalina Dorosz, because there was now a great deal else to reach for, and the newer material was better and was nearer the top.

Nothing had been removed. Something had been put on top of it.

She stopped being able to find the seam that September.

It came up because of a photograph. Somebody at the authority had a thing on a Friday and there were pictures afterwards, and in one of them Kalina was in the middle of a group of six with her weight back and one shoulder against a doorframe, saying something, and four of the six were looking at her.

She looked at it for a while.

She could see, quite clearly, the girl on the wall by the science block with one boot up on the brickwork and her weight further back, aware of standing differently and unable to stop. It was the same posture. She had invented it on a Thursday in September when she was sixteen, in front of four people, and it had lasted forty minutes and had then come down.

What she could not do, looking at the photograph, was find any distance between that girl and herself. There was no gap to stand in. She had not been doing anything in the doorway. She had been standing.

The manner had stopped being a manner at some point in the preceding year and she could not put a date on it, and she went and got a coffee and did not think about it again for three months.

Fifty-Three

SEPTEMBER

In the third week of September there was a berth allocation that had been done badly for six years.

It was nobody's fault, which is what made it hard. Four different offices had made four reasonable decisions at four different times and the result did not work, and there was no document anywhere that could be pointed at, and every attempt to fix it in the past had foundered on the fact that the fixing had to start by telling somebody they had been wrong.

Ostrowska gave it to her on a Monday.

Kalina took nine days over it.

The first four she spent going backwards. She got the four decisions out of four files in three offices and put them in order by date, which nobody had done, because each office had only ever had a reason to look at its own. Two of them had been taken in the same fortnight in different buildings by people who did not know the other decision was being taken.

The fifth day she spent trying to find the document that would settle which of them had been the error, and on the sixth she stopped, because there was not one and there was not going to be one.

What she did in the end was write it so that it did not require anybody to have been wrong. She set out what each of the four decisions had established, and what each of them had not been in a position to know, and put the failure in the space between them where nobody was standing. Then she recommended.

It went round four offices and came back agreed, in eleven days, on a thing that had been stuck for six years.

Ostrowska said, "That's a good piece of work," which was the largest thing she had ever said to anybody in that office.

Kalina walked home along the top of the basin.

Where Kalina is assessed by unfamiliar assessors, in settings with no prior contact, and where her earlier record is not available to those present, her performance rises.

She had that sentence intact. She had had it intact for two years and could produce it without effort, and what came with it, on the walk, was the paragraph before it – the one about arriving, the one that had made her put the document down and look at the ceiling.

She had just arrived at something. She had taken nine days over a thing four offices had run away from for six years, in a building where every person she worked with had a complete account of her, in the city she was born in, and she had not been anywhere near not arriving.

She got to the corner by the church and stood for a moment.

Then she went up the hill and had her tea and did not think about it any further, and she would not have been able to say, if anybody had asked her that evening, whether what she had just done was a departure from the document or the fulfilment of it.

Fifty-Four

DECEMBER

Dr Elke Mautner wrote to her on the second of December, and the first thing in the message, before the introduction, was an apology.

She said she had been Ryszard Amsel's senior on the unassisted settings work since the spring reorganisation. She said that in reviewing the file she had established that Kalina had been approached before intake, as an enrolled candidate, by a man with a professional interest in what she did inside the sitting. She said that this was indefensible; that it was not a technicality and not a grey area; that she had raised it, that it had been dealt with, and that she was not going to tell Kalina how it had been dealt with because that was not Kalina's to carry.

Then she said she would like to meet, and that she would understand entirely if the answer was no, and that she would not ask twice.

They met on the eleventh, in Gdańsk, in a room in a building near the medical school, at four in the afternoon.

Kalina took a half day and went over on the train and was forty minutes early and walked about. It was the second week of December and Gdańsk was doing what it does at that time of year, and she stood on the bridge by the old crane for a while with her hands in her pockets and did not enjoy it.

The building was modern and had a desk and a woman who gave her a card on a lanyard, and Kalina looked at the lanyard for slightly too long.

The room was a meeting room. Table, eight chairs, a screen nobody was going to use, a window with a car park in it. There was a jug of water and two glasses and somebody had put out a plate of biscuits, which nobody

touched at any point in four hours and which Kalina thought about afterwards more than she thought about the room.

Mautner was about fifty-five and very direct and had the manner of somebody who had spent a career explaining hard things to people who did not want to hear them. She was tall and had grey hair cut short and wore the same sort of clothes every day and had a fountain pen, and she made notes on paper in front of Kalina rather than out of sight, which was a decision and was clearly a decision. She did not do any of the warming-up that Amsel had done. She got the coffees and sat down and said, "Right. I've read your account. It's the best material we have and I want to tell you what it's done."

Then she told her.

The practice note in April had come out of it, and the practice note had gone into the interpretation guidance in September, and the interpretation guidance was now the reason that first-week performance in unassisted settings was read against a seventy-two-hour reference in every district in the country. It was not a large thing. It was, Mautner said, probably worth about a third of a band to somewhere between two and four hundred people a year, most of whom would never know it had happened and none of whom needed to.

"Three days," Kalina said.

"I'm sorry?"

"Did I say three days or seventy-two hours."

Mautner looked at her for a moment.

"You said three days," she said. "It's in the transcript. Somebody rounded it up into an official register on the way through, which is a thing that happens and which I've stopped fighting."

Kalina sat back.

"There's a transcript."

"There's a transcript. You can have it. You should have had it in November and the fact that you did not is one of about four things about

this that I'd rather had gone differently." Mautner took a folder out of her bag and put it on the table between them and did not push it across. "That's yours. It's the only copy outside the file."

Fifty-Five

DECEMBER

“Now,” Mautner said. “The mechanism.”

“He said it hadn’t moved.”

“It hadn’t. It’s moving.” She turned her cup round. “There’s a draft exception. It’s been drafted for two years — it was drafted before you ever went to Oksywie, by somebody who is now retired, and it has sat there because the case for it is entirely theoretical. Everybody agrees a candidate with a documented provision should not be made to choose between the provision and the band. Nobody has ever been able to show what happens to one who is.”

“Because nobody can see it.”

“Because nobody can see it,” Mautner said. “That’s the whole difficulty and it is a difficulty we made on purpose and I would make it again.”

She let that sit.

“What I want is not another account. I want a placed observer. Somebody who has done it once, well, without being asked to, and who would sit in future sittings under a proper instrument — declared, consented to by every candidate at intake, audited, published. Not smuggled out in somebody’s head. The thing done openly, with the person doing it named in the protocol and answerable.”

“That’s the opposite of what he did.”

“That is the opposite of what he did,” Mautner said, “and I would not be sitting here if he had not done it, and I am aware of what that makes me. I’d rather say it out loud than have you work it out on the train.”

“Under a proper instrument,” Kalina said.

“Declared in the candidate information before enrolment. Consented to at intake, individually, with the option to decline and no consequence for declining. Audited by somebody who is not us. Published in full, including the parts that make us look bad.” Mautner put the pen down. “It will be worse material than yours. Everybody in that building will know an observer is in it and about a third of them will perform, and we will lose things you got and we will never know what they were. I want you to understand that I know that and am proposing it anyway.”

“Why?”

“Because the alternative is what happened to you.”

Kalina did not say anything.

“You were sixteen,” Mautner said. “You were approached before intake by a man with an interest, you were told about the interest, you were given a reason to feel useful, and you went into a sealed building carrying somebody else’s question. Nobody consented to your being there. Not you, in any sense I’d defend, and certainly not the other forty-nine.” She turned the pen over. “I have read your account four times. It is very good and I am using it and I would rather it had never existed.”

Kalina asked how many sittings.

Four a year, Mautner said. Probably two of them for the first period. Eleven days each time out of whatever she was doing, and the authority would have to agree it, and the authority would agree it because the standards side would ask them nicely.

“Why me?”

“Because you can do it and almost nobody can. Not the noticing — the noticing is common. Holding it for eleven days with nothing to write on and coming out with it in order.” Mautner did not soften any of that. “I’ve read four accounts of sittings by people who were in them and yours is the only one that is any use. The rest are weather.”

“That’s what he said.”

"I expect it is," Mautner said. "It's true. He was a very good judge of what he needed and a poor judge of nearly everything else, and I would not have had his job, and I am doing the part of it that was worth doing."

That was the only time in four hours she said anything about him that was not procedural. She said it without heat and moved on.

Somewhere in the middle of the fourth hour Vig came up.

Mautner brought him. Not by name — she did not have the name, and Kalina understood at once that she did not — but as the shape of a thing: *there will have been candidates in the last ten years who went in with a documented provision and came apart in there and never told anybody, and every one of them is a person the exception would have caught, and we have not got one of them on paper.*

"Yes," Kalina said.

"You saw one."

There was a pause of about three seconds.

"I don't know," Kalina said. "I'd have to think about what I actually saw."

Mautner accepted that without any expression at all and moved on, and Kalina has never been able to decide whether she was believed.

She said yes on the way home, on the train, before Gdynia.

She had reasons and they were good ones. The instrument would be declared and consented to and audited, and that was the thing that had been wrong with all of it from the trolleybus onward. She was good at it and there were very few people who were. The exception would get built and it would be built out of something rather than nothing, and boys like the one she was not going to describe would not be put in front of that choice.

She sent it from the train. It took about forty seconds and she did not draft it.

Fifty-Six

DECEMBER

She told them on the Sunday, at the table, because there was no other way of doing it.

“There’s a thing I’ve said yes to. At the sittings. Going back in and watching, and writing it up.”

“Watching.”

“There’s a study. They want somebody who’s been in one.”

“The Directorate one,” her mother said.

Kalina looked at her.

“Well, I looked it up. When you said you’d been over to Gdańsk.” Her mother went on eating. “There’s a thing about it on the standards site. There’s a mechanism they’re putting through about candidates with a provision, so they’re not made to choose, and it says there they’ve had it drafted years and it’s been stuck.” She reached for the bread. “That’ll be why they want somebody. They’ll want somebody who was in one so they can say it’s not all theory.”

“That’s — yes. That’s more or less it.”

“Well, I thought so.”

Her mother did not look up and did not make anything of it, and went on to a thing about the ward.

She had it exactly right. She had the mechanism and the years and the reason, and she had got all of it in about four minutes off a public page, and she had not asked her daughter one question about any of it in the three

weeks since Gdańsk.

Kalina sat with a piece of bread and understood that her mother was proud of her, and that the pride was built out of a standards-site notice and a district figure and the fact that the Directorate had asked, and that not one part of it had come from having been in a room with her.

And that it was correct. Every clause of it was correct, and there was nothing in it Kalina could have improved.

Her father ate for a while.

“Do they pay you?”

“The authority keeps paying me. It’s eleven days.”

“Right,” he said.

He did not ask what the study was for and he did not ask what she would be watching, and she waited through the rest of the meal for the question and it did not come. He asked one thing at the end — whether it meant she would be away in November — and she said it did, and he said, “Right,” and finished his food.

She helped with the plates afterwards and he dried, because that was the arrangement and had been since she was nine, and they did it end to end without saying anything, and it was the good kind.

“That socket at yours,” he said, at the end.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine, it’s on the same leg as the heater. I’ll come Saturday.”

“You did it in June.”

“I did the one in the back,” her father said, and hung the towel up squarely, and went in.

She sat with it afterwards and worked out what had happened, which was that he did not have a version of her that the news could contradict.

He had had one for sixteen years. He had built it by hand out of things he had seen, and it had been wrong in a particular direction, and there had been no way into it. Then she had come back from Oksywie with a band and

taken a placement and been good at it for two years, and the old version had gone, and he had not built another one. He was not disappointed any more. He was not proud either. There was a woman of eighteen at his table doing something he did not understand and would not be asked to, and he had stopped keeping an account of her, and that was what the end of it looked like.

There was one exception and she found it about a fortnight later, in the middle of something else.

He had a version of her hands. He had never said so and she had never told him she knew, but he handed her things now — a torch, an end of cable, the meter itself when they were doing the socket on the Saturday — without checking whether she wanted them, as you hand a thing to somebody who is going to hold it properly. He had started doing it at some point in the year and she could not date it either.

That was the only account of her he had kept, and it was four inches long and had no words in it, and it was the one that had been true the whole time.

She would have given a great deal, that evening, for him to have said one wrong thing about it.

Fifty-Seven

DECEMBER

The first sitting she was to observe went in on the tenth of the following November, and on the ninth she was in a hotel room in Gdynia, four kilometres from the flat, because the protocol required the observer to be on site at intake.

She had the folder from Mautner with her and had not opened it.

She had not opened it in eleven months. It had gone in a drawer in December and had moved house with her in June and had come out of the box and gone into another drawer, and she had known where it was at every point.

She got it out at about ten.

There were forty pages of it. It was her own voice done into somebody else's typing, with the *ums* left in and a note at the top saying where the recording had been made and by what.

She read four pages and stopped.

RA: And nobody's up.

Subject: Some people. Not — um. Not many. It's the coldest it gets, the heating's off from ten, and the floors are that stuff, the — terrazzo, and it comes up through whatever you've got on, so you. Um. There's a night light at each end and the shadow off the handrail goes across at an angle and it doesn't move, so you end up looking at that, mostly. There's nothing else to look at.

RA: And no clock.

Subject: No clock anywhere. So people count. That's the thing nobody tells you — by about the fourth day everybody in that building can do four minutes in their head to inside

twenty seconds and none of them could when they went in.

RA: Say that again.

It was not the four hours she remembered.

She had remembered herself as ordered. She had been ordered in patches and in other patches she ran on and doubled back and lost sentences and started them again, and the man on the other side of the table let her, and twice he said *go on* in a way she had no memory of.

Subject. Forty pages of it.

She put it back in the folder and put the folder in the bag.

The tale came up on its own at about half eleven.

It came up complete, for the first time since she was six.

She lay in a hotel room at eighteen with the light off and had all of it. The boy who would not learn. The father. The man who said he was his uncle and was not, and the clothes, and the shop he was to be set up in. The cave, and the thing in the cave. The boy holding on to it at the mouth and refusing to hand it up until he was out.

And the palace. And the brother at the end who came back in a disguise and nearly had him.

And the father, who died on the first page.

She had it now. She had had it since a stairwell at Oksywie two years and one week earlier, and she had sat on the third step with her back against the rail and said nothing at all, and she had never gone back and checked, because there had been nothing to check. Tomek had not been lying. Nobody had been lying. A child of six had asked a question in the dark and had been given an answer, and the answer had been shaped for a child of six, and it had worked, and she had gone to sleep on it and slept well.

That was the thing she had spent two years getting away from. It had been kind to her. It had been kind to her before she could read.

She turned over.

And underneath it, where it had been sitting for two years, the other one.

The document had said, in October, before any of it, that she performed above her band where her earlier record was not available to those present. It had said so in the flat considerate voice, hedged twice, reported as a finding of low confidence, and it had suggested the sitting on the strength of it. Her father had taken the suggestion. She had enrolled.

So there was a girl who had gone into a sealed building and invented somebody, and had been that person for eleven days, and had come out and gone on being her.

And there was a document, written before she went, that had described the conditions under which that person would appear.

She could not get from one to the other. She lay there and went at it the way she went at a file — what does each of them establish, what is each of them not in a position to know — and the answer was that either of them accounted for everything and there was nothing on either side that the other could not also explain.

She could check. That was the thing she came to at about one in the morning, and she came to it calmly. The material behind the assessment would come to her if she asked for it. Four instances, two bands, the dates, the assessors, the working. She had never established which the fourth one was. It would take four seconds.

The intake was at ten to seven and she had the protocol in the other bag and fifty people were getting on a coach in about six hours who did not know she existed.

She lay in the dark with her hands behind her head.

She did not check.