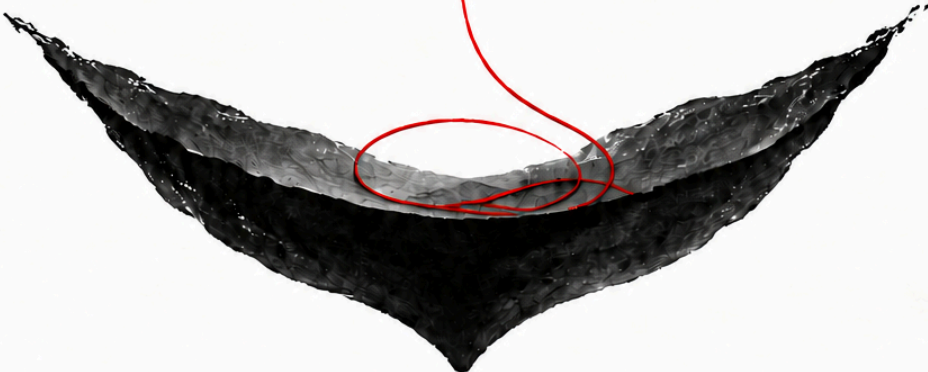


THE TEMPLE
OF
COMPLIANCE

A NOVEL



ORION SAINT

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The Temple of Compliance

A NOVEL



THE TEMPLE OF COMPLIANCE

Orion Saint

A work of fiction.

Explicit consensual femdom. Adults only.

This story contains adult sexual themes
and consensual power exchange.

Expanded English edition

Contents

The Gallery	1
The First Order	6
Under the Table	12
The Floor and the Cage	17
Yellow	22
Inspection	27
The Bookstore	32
Permission	37
The Waiting Weekend	41
Freedom	46
Distant Fire	51
The Ritual	56
The Witness	61
The Invitation	68
The Missing Leaf	76
The Wrong Version	83
Borrowed Rooms	86
The Weight of Paper	93
An Empty Chair	100
Room Four	107
The Return	112
Marginalia	118
The Public Room	124
After the Exhibition	130
Ordinary Hours	135
The Open Door	139
Belonging	150



The Gallery

At four that afternoon, a product manager asked me to remove the word warning from a warning. It frightened customers, he said. We were talking about a dishwasher door that could fall open if the machine had not been secured beneath the counter. I had spent the morning making the instructions shorter. Now he wanted them friendlier.

“The door won’t be any lighter,” I said.

He smiled with the patience people use when they believe you have mistaken a commercial problem for a moral one. We agreed to ask the engineer. After the call I sat with my hand on the mouse and did nothing until the screen darkened.

Daniel’s invitation was still in my messages. A gallery opening, seven o’clock. He had helped the photographer hang the show and wanted somebody there who would tell him if the frames were crooked. I said I might come. He sent back the address, refusing to treat might as an answer.

At home I changed my shirt twice. I was forty-two and had begun to recognize certain arrangements in my life: the unwashed cup beside the keyboard, the lamp left on when I went to bed, the elaborate preparation for evenings I would later claim had meant nothing. I put on the first shirt again and left before I could cancel.

The opening was small and badly lit. Black-and-white photographs of empty rooms hung on temporary walls; people stood in front of them holding plastic cups and talking about other things. I had come because a friend said the work was good and because I had nothing else to do on a Thursday. I stayed because of the woman by the back wall.

She was not looking at the photographs. She was watching the people who were looking at them. Dark coat, hair pulled back, one hand around a glass she had not drunk from. When someone laughed too loud she turned her head a fraction, not toward the sound but toward the person who had made it, as if she were checking the size of the room. I watched her for three minutes before she noticed. When she did, she did not look away.

I crossed the floor with a cup I did not want.

Daniel had already introduced me to three people whose names I had forgotten. He saw where I was looking and raised his eyebrows. I pretended not to notice. He went back to adjusting a print that had probably been straight all along.

The woman had a faint ink stain along the side of one finger. I noticed that before I noticed the shape of her mouth. It was a useful detail to hold on to while I worked out how to cross the remaining distance without looking as though I had rehearsed it.

“Are you waiting for someone?” I asked.

“No,” she said. Her voice was lower than I expected. “Are you?”

“I came for the rooms.” I nodded at the nearest print—an empty hallway, one window, dust on the floor. “They’re quieter than the people.”

She looked at the print, then at me. “Most people come for the people. The rooms are just the excuse.”

“And you?”

“I come to see who stands still.” She took a sip she did not seem to need. “You stood still for a while.”

We talked for twenty minutes. I told her I wrote instructions for appliances and worked on stories at home, though I rarely finished them. She asked which appliances. When I said dishwashers, she laughed.

“Mine has been making the same noise for six months. Your instructions haven’t helped.”

“Have you read them?”

“Of course not.”

She restored books for a university library. That week she was repairing an atlas someone had tried to mend with household tape. She described the adhesive, the hours spent lifting it, the librarian who wanted the book back for an exhibition before it was ready. As she talked she rubbed a small patch of dried paste from her thumb.

“You learn what a thing can take,” she said. “And what it can’t.”

I asked if she ever wanted something that could take a lot.

She was quiet long enough that I thought I had gone too far. Then she said, “I want things that know when to stop. Most people don’t. They want the idea of control. They don’t want the work of it.”

The gallery lights flickered once. Someone dropped a cup. She did not turn.

“I can stop,” I said. It came out smaller than I meant.

She looked at my hands. “Most men say that because they think it will get them something. You said it like you were afraid it might be true.”

“It might be.”

She reached into her coat and took out a card—plain, no title, only a name and a number. Elena. I told her my name. She repeated it once before handing me the card.

“If you call,” she said, “don’t call to be clever. Call if you want to talk about what you actually want. I don’t do riddles.”

“I don’t either.”

“Good.” She put the empty glass on a ledge. Someone near the door called her name, and she looked briefly annoyed. “I promised I’d help carry the unsold prints. Stay if you like.”

I stayed until the lights went up and helped carry two wrapped frames to a waiting car. Elena was inside arguing with the gallery owner about where he had put her coat. I left without finding her again.

Outside, the air was cold enough to hurt my teeth. At the subway entrance I took out the card and read the number under the streetlight.

* * *

I called two days later. “Alex?” she said. I was surprised by the small relief of being remembered.

We met at a café that smelled of burnt sugar and old wood. She ordered black coffee. I watched her stir in two spoonfuls of sugar while I told her what I wanted: to be told, to be used, to stop thinking for stretches of time. She listened without interrupting. When I finished she set down the spoon. “And what do you need to stop?”

“Yellow if I need to slow down. Red if I need everything to end.”

She wrote the words on a napkin in small, careful letters. “Yellow means I stop what I’m doing and ask what you need. Red means the scene is over, no questions until you’re steady. We can renegotiate later. We do not renegotiate in the middle.”

“Understood.”

She looked at the napkin. “I’ve had people agree to this and then try to endure things they didn’t want. I need you to tell me. Even if it interrupts something I want.”

At the next table a man was trying to cut a sandwich with a wooden knife. I watched him for a moment before I could look back at her.

“We’ll begin with one instruction,” she said. “Call me when you’re ready.”

I folded the napkin along the edge of a coffee stain. That evening I put it beside the phone. I left it there until Tuesday.

On Monday, Daniel called to ask what I had thought of the photographs.

“The hallway was good.”

“Everybody likes the hallway. What about the kitchen?”

I could not remember a kitchen. He let me struggle before he laughed.

“You vanished for half the evening.”

“I helped with the frames.”

“Eventually.”

I told him her name. He had met her once before; she knew the photographer through the library. He offered no useful intelligence beyond the fact that she had refused to let him put a crate on a wet pavement.

“Is this why you’re answering in complete sentences?” he asked.

After the call I opened the folder containing my unfinished stories. One had been revised so often that the original title no longer suited it. I read the first page and changed a comma. Then I looked at the napkin beside the phone.

It was not only embarrassment that kept me from calling. At the café she had listened closely enough that my usual qualifications had begun to sound false. I could not say I was merely curious after describing, in such detail, what I hoped to feel. Calling again would mean arriving without that excuse.

On Tuesday I sent a message asking whether Thursday would suit her. She answered after lunch: Seven. Bring yourself. I've got food.

I spent the rest of the afternoon trying to finish a page I had already read nine times.



The First Order

I bought wine on the way and immediately regretted it. She had said she had food. She had not asked me to bring anything. I stood outside the shop with the bottle in its paper bag, trying to decide whether a gift was a courtesy or an attempt to make the evening resemble something I knew.

The distinction was probably less interesting to her than it was to me. I took the bottle.

Her building had a heavy front door and a row of bells with names written in different hands. Hers was printed on a strip of paper beneath a scratched plastic cover. For a few seconds I studied the other names. Somebody kept receiving mail for a person who had moved out; a small note beside the boxes asked the postman to stop.

She buzzed me in before I had thought of anything useful to say through the intercom.

On the stairs I remembered an evening with Nina, years earlier. She had asked where I wanted to eat and I had said anywhere. Then I had disliked the place she chose. We spent most of the meal arguing about a choice I insisted I had been happy to leave to her. I had told that story to friends as evidence that the relationship was failing. It had taken longer to admit that I had helped make it fail.

There was still time to turn around. I resented noticing that. I wanted arriving to be difficult enough to count for something and easy enough that I could pretend I had not been afraid.

Elena opened the door while I was on the last flight.

“You’re early.”

“Four minutes.”

“I know. Come in.”

Her apartment smelled of paper and lemon oil. Books stood in careful stacks on every surface. A sheet of thin tissue lay across the dining table, weighted at the corners with mugs. She caught me looking.

“Don’t put your coat there.”

I stopped with it halfway off my shoulders. She took it from me and hung it by the door.

“Sorry. That wasn’t the first instruction.”

I handed her the wine. She looked pleased, which put an end to most of my theories about it.

“We’ll have some with dinner.”

There was a pan on the stove and a small bowl of cut lemons beside it. She lifted a lid, tasted something, and added salt. I offered to help. She asked me to find two glasses in the cupboard above the sink.

I opened the wrong cupboard. There were three jars of brushes, a stack of mismatched saucers, and a tin labelled BISCUITS that contained screws. She reached past me and opened the next door.

“My mother started that,” she said, seeing the tin. “She saves every useful container and then complains she can’t find anything.”

“Do you see her much?”

“Less than she’d like.” She stirred the pan. “More than I used to.”

The answer was finished. I put the glasses on the counter.

We ate standing in the kitchen because the dining table was occupied. The food was good and slightly too salty. She admitted this before I could decide how polite to be about it. I watched her eat a piece of bread over the sink, catching crumbs in one palm. At the gallery I had assumed every movement was deliberate. Here she kept setting things down and forgetting where she had put them.

“You’re disappointed,” she said.

“No.”

“You keep looking at the dishes.”

“I’m trying to work out where to put my plate.”

She laughed and took it from me. The sound loosened something in my chest. For several minutes we talked about the building's unreliable heat. I was grateful for a problem neither of us could mistake for a revelation.

She was still in her work clothes. There was a red line across the bridge of her nose where her glasses had been. A message sounded on her phone; she read it, began an answer, then erased it.

"The atlas?"

"They've printed the exhibition labels. Apparently that changes how long paste takes to dry." She turned the phone over.

I asked whether she wanted me to come back another night. She looked at me properly then.

"No. I want you here. Give me a minute."

While she finished answering the message, I looked at a photograph on a low shelf. Elena stood beside another woman on a windy beach. Both were holding their hair away from their mouths. She looked younger, though not by much, and furious about something beyond the edge of the frame.

"My sister," she said. "The ferry had gone."

"You don't look pleased."

"She thought it was funny."

"Was it?"

"Eventually."

She put the phone down. I kept looking at the photograph until she came to stand beside me. We were close enough that I could hear a small catch in her breathing. It surprised me. I had been so occupied with being watched that I had forgotten she might also be aware of herself.

"You can ask me things," she said.

I nearly asked what she expected of me. We had already talked about that, and I suspected I would keep asking until she gave me an answer that required no judgment on my part.

"Do you ever get tired of deciding?"

She looked toward the worktable.

“Yes.”

“Then why do you want this?”

“Because wanting to decide something is different from finding another email telling you that you must.” She considered it. “And because I like being with somebody who is paying attention.”

I could have told her that I was paying attention to everything. Instead I put the empty glass down and stayed where I was.

She went to wash her hands. I stood beside the chair until she returned. She closed the door to the workroom and said, “Clothes off. Stand there.”

I undressed. The room was cooler without my clothes, though I had spent most of dinner thinking it was warm. I folded my shirt and put it on the chair. One sleeve hung over the edge. I tucked it in.

Elena waited. She had begun rubbing the side of her thumb with a finger, looking for a trace of paste that was no longer there. When she noticed me watching, she stopped.

She held out the plug, already lubricated.

“Put it in. Slowly. I want to see you choose it.”

In my hand it looked larger. I glanced at her, hoping for a less complicated expression than the one I found. She wanted this. She was also watching closely enough that I could see the effort.

“Twenty minutes at most,” she said. “Then it comes out.”

“All right.”

“And sooner if you want.”

I nodded. I would have preferred to be confident without having to say whether I was.

I bent and pressed the tip against myself. The first pressure made me hold my breath. I pushed a little; the stretch sharpened, and I stopped.

Elena moved closer, then stayed where she was.

“Take your time.”

I waited. There was a faint ticking from the kitchen. I had not noticed a clock earlier and found myself trying to remember where it stood.

When I tried again, I moved more slowly. The pressure increased, then changed as the widest part passed. I made a sound I had meant to keep to myself. Once the plug was seated, I stayed bent, one hand against the chair.

Elena let out a breath.

“Color?”

I took a moment to answer. “Green.”

She nodded, but did not immediately tell me what to do next. Her eyes moved from my hand to my face.

I was hard by then. I could not decide whether being watched made that easier or worse. She walked behind me and rested two fingers against the base of the plug. I felt the slight pressure and the effort I was making to remain still.

“Good. It stays for now. You don’t touch the front unless I say.”

“Yes.”

She left her fingers there for a moment, then stepped back.

“Kneel. I want to look at you.”

I lowered myself carefully. The pressure changed as I moved. I adjusted one knee and looked up, expecting her to correct something.

She was watching my face. Her mouth moved as though she had begun a sentence and decided against it.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Then she shook her head. “I was going to ask whether you were all right again.”

“I’ll tell you.”

“All right.”

She sat on the edge of the couch.

For a while neither of us spoke. I could hear somebody running water in another flat. The folded shirt was still on the chair beside me, looking more carefully arranged than anything I usually wore.

“You did well,” she said.

I looked around at the books, the closed workroom door.

“A temple,” I said, before I could think better of it.

She glanced at the laundry drying by the radiator.

“We’ll have to move the socks.”

I laughed, and she smiled with what looked like relief. I had not expected that part of pleasing her.

Before the twenty minutes were up, she asked how I felt. I told her. She listened, then told me to remove the plug. I did so slowly, with her nearby, and washed before returning to the room.

She said I could dress. I picked up the shirt and discovered that folding it had not saved it from creasing.

At the corner I took out my phone. There was a message from her: Home safe?

I answered from the train: On my way.

She sent a thumbs-up, an absurdly ordinary little hand. I looked at it until the screen went dark. Across from me a woman was asleep against a shopping bag; two schoolboys argued quietly over a game. Nobody had any interest in my face.

At home I hung up my coat instead of dropping it on the chair. There was still work waiting on the desk. I left it until morning, sent Elena the message I had promised, and put the phone where I could hear it.

Her answer came while I was brushing my teeth: Goodnight, Alex.

I did not know what response would sound right. In the end I wrote goodnight back, without adding anything to it.



Under the Table

On Tuesday Elena invited me to meet her after work. I arrived at the library twenty minutes early and walked through an exhibition of maps while I waited. There were coastlines drawn with impossible confidence, rivers that dwindled into blank paper, a continent whose interior had been filled with decorative animals. Somebody had decided the empty space needed something.

I was reading a label when she appeared through a door marked STAFF ONLY. She carried her coat over one arm and was still wearing her glasses. A woman followed her out, speaking rapidly about a loan agreement. Elena listened until they reached me.

“Beth, this is Alex.”

Beth shook my hand. She had a pencil behind one ear and a strip of blue tape stuck to her sleeve. “Has she told you about the atlas?”

“A little.”

“Then you have the short version.”

Elena gave her a look, but it was an old look, worn smooth by use. Beth smiled and went back through the staff door.

Outside I asked whether the book was causing trouble.

“The book is behaving exactly like a damaged book. It’s everyone else.”

We walked to a small grocery near the station. She needed rice, onions, and something she had forgotten to write down. She stood in front of the shelves, visibly irritated by the missing item. I suggested we could come back if she remembered it later.

“That would mean doing this twice.”

“Yes.”

She looked at me, waiting for the joke. There wasn't one. After a moment she put a packet of rice in the basket and moved on.

At the till she remembered washing-up liquid. I went back for it. When I returned, she was explaining to the cashier that she had picked up the wrong price label. She paid the difference without trying to win.

We divided the shopping between our bags. It was the first time I had walked beside her carrying something as unremarkable as onions. I wanted to tell her how much I liked it and was embarrassed by how much that would reveal. Instead I asked what time she wanted dinner the following evening.

On Wednesday she had me cook naked while she sat at the table with a book open and unread. The plug had gone in twenty minutes before. We had agreed on an hour at most; a timer stood beside the salt. When I brought her plate, she pointed beneath the table.

“Mouth. While I eat. If you need to stop, tap my ankle twice.”

There was less room than I had imagined. I moved a chair leg away from my knee and heard her put down her fork.

“Can you manage there?”

“If you don't need the chair back.”

She shifted it herself. I settled between her knees and put my mouth against her. She was wet. I moved my tongue slowly, uncertain of the pressure she wanted until her hand rested in my hair. Above me the fork touched the plate, stopped, touched it again. I had cooked something that needed cutting. Neither of us had considered this.

Her fingers tightened. I paused, and she loosened them before I could say anything. When she came, the fork fell against the plate. For a moment her hand covered her mouth. Then she looked down at me with an expression I could not have mistaken for composure.

“Stay there.”

She took a lipstick from her bag. I watched her uncapping it, testing the colour against the side of her thumb. She drew a short red line across my wrist and turned my hand to see it properly.

“Leave that until you go.”

I remained on the floor while she finished eating. The mark was slightly crooked. I wanted to protect it from everything, including the ordinary movement of my own hand.

“How was that?” she asked. “You can speak now.”

I told her I wanted to stay. She nodded and opened the book again, though she had lost her place. I was still hard. She let me wait while she found the paragraph, then asked me to read her the time on the timer. Forty minutes had passed. She told me to remove the plug and wash before we did the dishes.

Later we washed the dishes. She filled the sink too high and I took water out with a saucepan while she searched for a tea towel. Neither of us could find the new washing-up liquid. Eventually she discovered it in her bag, next to a paperback and a receipt from the library café.

“You’re quiet,” she said.

“I’m usually quiet.”

“At the gallery you weren’t.”

“I was trying to make an impression.”

She turned off the tap. “You can stop trying for a minute.”

That was harder to hear than I expected. I had been treating every answer as part of an examination whose rules I might discover by being sufficiently careful. She handed me a plate. There was still a little soap on it.

“This needs rinsing,” I said.

“Then rinse it.”

I did. She found the towel beneath a magazine. By the time we finished, she was telling me about Beth’s habit of labelling everything, including the packet of biscuits she believed the interns were stealing. The story was long and had no lesson. I liked hearing Elena do the different voices.

* * *

In the morning she showed me a code on her phone. “This opens a private page. Short tasks, with timers. Only during the hours we agree. If a task feels wrong, text Yellow and leave it. Understood?”

“Yes.”

We chose seven to eight in the evening for remote tasks. She would confirm that she was available before I began; I would report when I had finished, and she would answer before eight. No confirmation meant no task. A missed final check-in ended the arrangement until we spoke again. We also agreed to delete the photographs afterward.

For the first attempt she was still in the room. We gave it ten minutes, with a check at the end. The message arrived almost at once: plug seated, photograph from behind, caption exactly “Thank you for using me.”

I put it in slowly, noticing how different it felt to follow words on a screen while the person who had written them watched me. I took the photograph and sent it. She studied her phone, then looked at me. Her reply was one word: Good.

At ten minutes I removed it and sent the completion message. She answered aloud before remembering the page. We both waited for the little confirmation to appear.

Later, at my own desk, I tried to finish a paragraph about a rinse cycle. I kept waking the phone to check the screen.

By eleven I had moved the same sentence three times. Eva, the editor who handled most of my work, called to ask whether I had seen her notes. I said yes, although the email was still unopened.

“There’s a problem with the diagram,” she said. “You’ve got the bracket facing the wrong way.”

I opened the file. She was right. It was an early drawing I should have replaced. The engineer’s correction was in a folder I had not checked since Monday.

“I’ll fix it.”

“Before two. They’re taking it to production.”

She hung up before I could give her the lengthy explanation I had already begun composing. I put the phone in a drawer. For the next hour I worked without touching it. The correction took ten minutes; checking the rest took fifty.

At two I sent the file. Eva replied with a brief thanks and a question about next month's schedule. I answered that too. Then I opened the drawer.

There was nothing from Elena. I felt foolishly injured by this, as if I had performed a sacrifice she ought to have detected. We had agreed on a period in the evening. It was only afternoon. I knew these things and still stared at the screen.

When we spoke later I told her I had made a mistake at work. She asked whether I had corrected it.

"Yes."

"Good. I spent half the morning looking for a page that was in the folder I was holding."

I had wanted her to say something about discipline. Instead we complained about our days. Her attention wandered once when somebody knocked on her door. She went to answer it and left the phone on the table. I listened to the distant exchange, a parcel delivered to the wrong flat, and waited without knowing whether to hang up.

"Still there?" she said when she returned.

"Still here."

"Tell me the rest."

I had already told her the part that mattered. I began describing Eva's email, and while I spoke I opened the next document on my desk. There was something reassuring about being allowed to finish an ordinary complaint.



The Floor and the Cage

By Monday the corrected instructions were back on my desk. Someone had changed a measurement while adjusting the drawing. I noticed it because I was looking for the mistake I had already made.

Eva called the engineer. I stayed on the line while they compared versions. For a few minutes everyone spoke in the careful tone people use when a small error has become expensive. Then the engineer found his earlier email. The measurement in my version was right.

I should have felt vindicated. Mostly I felt tired. We had spent twenty minutes proving that a number had once been correct, and the number was still waiting to be put back.

After the call Eva asked whether I could take on another job. A different manufacturer, a short deadline, better money. I said yes before she had finished explaining it.

“You can look at the schedule first.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“That’s not a date, Alex.”

I opened the calendar. There were already three deadlines that week. We settled on the following Wednesday. She told me to send an estimate before I started, then went to another meeting.

Elena and I had set aside Saturday. I had marked it on the calendar with a single initial, then felt ridiculous and changed it to her name. Looking at it now, I imagined the relief of arriving with the work finished, the files sent, nothing left that anybody could reasonably ask of me.

By Friday evening I was still working. I sent Eva the estimate at ten. She replied the next morning with a correction to the fee and the words: Please stop giving away the extra revisions.

I read the message while eating toast over the sink. It annoyed me that she had noticed. It annoyed me more that she was trying to help.

On Saturday, during the time we had set aside, a video arrived: Elena's empty chair, a little of her sleeve at the edge of the picture. Then her hand entered the frame and rested on the chair back. No words. The message followed: Come now. I told her I would be there in half an hour; she confirmed that she would be waiting.

At her door she said, "Inside. Knees. Undress me."

I removed her clothes carefully. One button resisted and she reached to help, then let her hand fall. I could hear her breathing while I worked it through the hole. She handed me the harness. I fastened it around her hips and waited while she checked the straps. She adjusted one herself, her mouth set with concentration.

At the couch she asked my colour. I said green. She bent me over it and pressed the harness against me, entering slowly. I gripped the cushion. There was a seam beneath my thumb, a small hard ridge I kept finding as she began to move.

"Thank me," she said. "While I use you."

I did. At first the words felt prepared; then I had trouble finishing them. She kept one hand on my hip. When I turned my head she slowed, watching until I nodded. She did not let me finish.

After she withdrew, I expected the next instruction immediately. Instead she unbuckled the harness and laid it on a towel. She helped me sit. We drank water, and she asked whether I wanted to continue or leave it there.

"Continue."

"Color?"

"Green."

She waited another minute. I watched her move the glass away from the edge of the table, then move it a little farther.

"On your back," she said. "On the floor."

She took a washable pen from the drawer and knelt beside me. The cap was difficult to remove. She frowned at it, and for a second I thought she was dissatisfied with me. Then it came free and she drew a small circle on my chest. She sat back to look. I could feel the mark drying and the cool floor beneath my shoulders.

She lowered herself onto me. I held her hips as she moved, trying to remain where she wanted me. When she came she closed her eyes and leaned forward, one hand braced beside my head. Her hair caught against my mouth. She brushed it away with an impatient laugh that ended in a breath.

“Stay inside. Do not come.”

I held still. It was difficult enough that I stopped trying to look graceful. She stayed until the shaking in my thighs eased, then lifted herself away.

“Knees. Clean me.”

I used my mouth. Her hand rested on my shoulder now, without pushing. I was still hard, and every pause felt longer than it could have been.

“Come,” she said at last. “On the floor. Hands off.”

I came without touching myself. She watched, then pointed to the tile. “Clean it. Thank me.” I bent and used my tongue as she had asked. I could see the edge of the towel a few inches away. When I had finished, she passed it to me and sat on the floor beside me.

We stayed there until I could speak comfortably. She rubbed her knee, then caught me looking and said the floor was harder than she remembered. I was glad she had said it first.

Only after we had washed and rested did she bring the cage. She asked again whether I wanted the night we had discussed. I said yes. There was no plug for sleeping. She locked the cage and put a second key in my hand.

“In case. You don’t need to ask.”

I put it with my keys, where I could reach it. We agreed that I would come to her on the hour until midnight, ask for a mark, and then sleep.

Missing an hour would not extend the night. Yellow would bring a pause and a conversation; Red would end it.

At the foot of the bed I waited for the agreed hours. Each time I came to her, she added a small ink mark beside the first on my chest. After midnight she put the pen away and I slept. In the morning she found me looking at the clock and reached past me to turn it toward the wall.

She made breakfast badly. The eggs stuck, and she dropped a piece of shell into the pan. I offered to take over, but she was already trying to fish it out with a spoon.

“Let me make you breakfast,” she said.

I stayed by the door. After a minute she pointed at the cupboard. “You could get the plates.”

We ate at the cleared end of the table. She had moved the tissue and the mugs into the workroom. The bottle of wine from my first visit stood on the sideboard with less than a glass left in it. I had forgotten bringing it.

She asked whether I had plans for the afternoon. I said Daniel wanted help at the gallery. The photographer was changing two of the prints, and Daniel had discovered that his promise to assist involved carrying things up stairs again.

“You should go.”

“I said I would.”

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

I looked down at my plate. I had been waiting for her to make the plan unnecessary. I did not say so.

At the gallery Daniel had already moved most of the frames. He gave me the heavy one without comment. We carried it down a narrow stairwell, stopping twice while he tried to remember which way the corners had fitted on the way up.

“Other end higher,” he said.

“It is higher.”

“Your other end.”

We laughed, lost our balance, and nearly put the frame through the banister. On the pavement afterward he smoked while I held the packaging open against the wind.

“You seem elsewhere.”

“New work.”

“That sounds terrible.”

I told him the fee. He whistled, then asked about Elena. I said I was seeing her. He waited for more. When I supplied nothing, he ground the cigarette out beneath his shoe.

“You could just say you don’t want to discuss it.”

“I don’t want to discuss it.”

“There. Easier.”

We loaded the frame into the car. He asked whether I wanted a drink, and I almost said I had to get home. I had nothing there that required me. I went with him to a bar near the station and drank a beer slowly while he described an argument about the exhibition lighting.

For most of an hour I forgot to look at my phone. When I finally checked it, Elena had sent a photograph of the burnt pan with the question: Does your company write instructions for these?

I showed Daniel the pan. He laughed without asking to see anything else.



Yellow

Thursday began with a call I should have returned the night before. A client wanted an explanation for an invoice. The additional work was listed on the second page. He had not read the second page.

I talked him through it while my coffee cooled. He remained pleasant throughout, which made it harder to say that the work had already been approved. When he asked whether I could reduce the total, I heard myself saying I would look at it.

Afterward I wrote a different answer. I attached the email approving the changes and left the amount as it was. Then I spent twenty minutes deciding whether the message sounded hostile.

At noon Elena asked how my day was going. I wrote: Fine. Looking forward to tonight.

Both sentences were partly true. By six the invoice had been paid. The work was finished. Nothing was wrong that I could easily name. On the train I watched an advertisement change above the opposite seats, a smiling woman replaced by a landscape, the landscape by a smiling man. Every time I looked up the display had become something else.

Elena opened the door with flour on her sleeve. She had tried making bread and was unhappy with the result. There was a loaf on the counter, low and heavy, with one side split open.

“It tastes better than it looks,” she said.

I took a piece. It tasted exactly as it looked. She watched me trying to chew it politely and took the plate away.

“You’re allowed to have an opinion.”

“It might be better toasted.”

“That’s a very diplomatic opinion.”

We laughed. I thought the sound meant I had arrived properly, that whatever had followed me through the day could now be left in the hall with my coat.

She asked whether I was tired. I said a little. She offered to eat first, and I said I would rather wait. I wanted the evening to begin as I had imagined it. I wanted that more than I wanted to examine how I felt.

Later that evening we put the cage back on, and she brought out the harness. I bent over the couch. I knew the room, the cushion, where her hand would rest. When she began to enter me, the pressure was familiar and my response was not. I held my breath. The room seemed to move slightly away from me. I tried to find the seam beneath my thumb and could not.

“Yellow.”

She stopped at once, then withdrew carefully and took her hands off my hips. Her mouth opened before any words came. “I’m here. What do you need?”

“Floor.”

She helped me down, brought a blanket, and unlocked the cage. I drank some water. She asked where I wanted her. Behind me, I said. Hair and wrists: yes. Anything lower: not yet. She sat with my back against her chest until the shaking changed.

The room had not changed, but I could no longer place myself comfortably inside it. The lamp was too bright. A car door slammed outside and I felt it in my shoulders. Elena reached toward the lamp, then stopped to ask whether I wanted it off.

“Turn it away.”

She turned the shade toward the wall. The light softened. I watched the patch it made on the plaster.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You don’t have to be.”

I nodded because it was the answer I expected. A minute later I apologized again.

She did not correct me a second time. She stayed still. After a while I became aware of the pressure of the floor beneath my heel and the edge of the blanket against my arm. I could hear the refrigerator start in the kitchen. The familiar, indifferent noise helped.

I wanted to explain what had happened. I was good at explaining things once they had happened; I could make them seem inevitable, even reasonable. But I could not identify the moment before the word, only the word itself and the relief that followed it.

“I thought I was all right.”

“I know.”

“I wasn’t trying to prove anything.”

She looked down at my hand, which had closed around the blanket. “You don’t have to work that out tonight.”

This time I was grateful. I was also angry, a little, that the evening had become one in which gratitude was necessary. I had arrived wanting to be elsewhere in my own mind. Now I could think about nothing except how I appeared to her.

“Don’t look at me for a minute.”

She turned her head. The small obedience startled me. We sat facing the same wall until I let go of the blanket.

Later, toast on the bed. She burned the first slice and scraped it over the sink. When she brought the plate, her sleeve was wet. Neither of us said much. I asked her to leave the lamp on.

The toast was from ordinary sliced bread. I asked what had happened to the loaf.

“It’s waiting for a use.”

“Doorstop.”

She smiled, but it disappeared quickly. She sat at the foot of the bed and rubbed a patch of flour from her sleeve. I watched until she noticed.

“You’re doing it again,” I said.

“What?”

“Trying to clean something that isn’t coming off.”

She looked at her sleeve and let her hand fall. “I don’t know what to do with my hands.”

I had been waiting for her to seem certain. Hearing that she wasn’t made the room feel less crowded. I moved the plate to the table and asked whether she could sit closer. She did, leaving enough space that I had to close the last part myself.

At some point we talked about the invoice. It was a relief to be irritated about money. She listened, then asked whether the client had paid. When I said yes, she wanted to know why I was still arguing with him in my head.

“I don’t know how to stop once I’ve started.”

“I do that too.”

She told me about an email she had drafted to the exhibition curator. It was still unsent. She had rewritten the first sentence so often that she could recite all four versions. I preferred the shortest. She preferred the angriest and admitted it.

We did not finish the toast. The butter softened on the plate. When she asked whether I wanted to go home, I said no before I had considered how the answer might sound.

I slept in pieces against her. Once I woke and found her awake too, looking at the plate on the bedside table.

In the morning she had to leave for the library. She moved quietly around the room until I told her I was awake. The curtains were still closed. Through the gap between them I could see a pale strip of sky and part of the building opposite.

“You can stay for a while,” she said.

I shook my head. I wanted my own shower, my own clothes, the cup with the chipped handle that nobody else liked. She put the kettle on while I dressed.

At the door neither of us knew how to say goodbye. We had become unusually polite. She touched my arm, and I covered her hand with mine for a moment. Then I went down the stairs.

On the train home I opened her message and closed it without answering. She had written only: Let me know you got back.

I answered when I reached my kitchen. Then I stood at the sink and ate the last piece of bread from my own packet, without toasting it.



Inspection

The first day I worked very little and pretended otherwise. I rearranged the files on my computer, answered messages that could have waited, and took a long time to buy groceries. At the shop I read the ingredients on a jar I had bought for years.

Daniel called in the afternoon. I let it ring, then sent a message saying I was busy. A minute later I wished I had answered. I was not ready to tell him what had happened, but I could have listened to him talk about the gallery. I had begun confusing company with disclosure, as if accepting one obliged me to supply the other.

The second day I went for a walk. At a crossing a child dropped a glove. I picked it up and handed it to his father. For the rest of the block I felt oddly steadier. It was possible to notice something, do a small useful thing, and have it end there.

When Elena asked how I had slept, I said better. When she asked whether I wanted to talk, I said soon. I meant both answers. I also knew how convenient soon could become if nobody questioned it.

On the third evening she called. I was sitting at the desk with a document open that I had stopped reading.

“Would you come over? We could talk.”

I arrived a little after seven. She opened the door with wet hair and a sweater I hadn’t seen. She didn’t kiss me. She only stepped aside.

“Sit wherever you like.”

I chose the chair. She sat on the edge of the couch. The room was warm, but I kept my coat on until she asked whether I was leaving soon. I took it off and draped it over the chair back.

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

“You keep saying that.” She picked at a loose thread on the cushion. “I don’t know whether to believe you.”

I looked at the floor. “I stopped. You stopped. That mattered.”

She nodded. Then she said something I hadn’t expected.

“I was frightened,” she said. “I keep going over what I missed before you said it.”

“I didn’t know before I said it.”

She pulled the thread too hard. A few stitches opened along the cushion seam.

“I wanted to be good at this,” she said.

“So did I.”

She gave a short, unhappy laugh. For a while we looked at the damaged seam.

I had imagined her remembering the evening as a sequence of choices she could defend. Instead she looked embarrassed by the admission. She had come to the couch carrying a cup she had not drunk from. A thin skin had formed on the tea.

“I keep thinking I should have noticed sooner,” she said.

“I keep thinking I should have known sooner.”

She looked at me. We had found the same useless work and were both reluctant to put it down.

“If we keep saying that,” I said, “we’ll have to decide which one of us failed first.”

“I wasn’t asking you to decide that.”

“I know.”

I looked away. I had made it sound sharper than I intended. She set the cup down, carefully enough that I knew she was irritated. For a while the only sound came from the pipes in the wall.

"I'd like to sit closer," she said at last. "Would that be all right?"

"Yes."

She made room on the couch. I left the chair and sat beside her.

The collar lay on the table. "Do you want that put away?" she asked.

"Not put away. Not on yet."

She left it where it was. Her hands stayed in her lap.

After a while I leaned my shoulder against hers.

She let out a breath. I had not noticed she was holding it.

"Better?" she asked.

"Yes. A little."

We stayed like that until her phone rang. She checked the screen and swore softly. The library again.

She declined the call, but the interruption had changed the room. I sat up. She went to the kitchen to empty the cold tea and came back with water for both of us.

"Beth says I should hand the atlas over for a few days."

"Will you?"

"I don't know."

"Is she good at it?"

"She's very good."

I waited. Elena looked at the workroom door.

"Then she'll see how far behind I am."

The answer came out so plainly that she seemed annoyed with herself. I had expected a technical reason, some difference in training that made her necessary to the work. I knew the other kind of reason too well.

"Eva found a mistake in my drawing last week," I said. "It wasn't even a difficult mistake. I'd left the old version in."

"What did she say?"

"To correct it."

"That sounds reasonable."

"It was. I hated her for about ten minutes."

Elena laughed. She took a drink of water and put the glass down on a book. When I pointed at it, she lifted it quickly and checked for a mark.

“Don’t tell Beth.”

We talked about work until it stopped being a way of avoiding what had happened. I told her about the extra revisions I kept agreeing to. She asked why I did that, and I gave an answer about keeping clients. She did not argue with it. After a while I admitted that I liked being asked, even when I resented the work.

She turned the glass between her palms. “Sometimes I like being needed more than I like the person needing me.”

I felt the sentence before I knew what to do with it.

“Is that what this is?”

“I don’t want it to be.”

It would have been easier if she had simply said no. I looked at her face and could not decide whether her uncertainty should reassure me. At least she had not made the answer neat for my benefit.

She asked about one of my stories. I told her I had not touched it in weeks. She wanted to know why. I said I was busy, then stopped. We had both become bored with that answer.

“I don’t know whether it’s any good.”

“Do you want me to read it?”

“Not yet.”

“All right.”

She said it without disappointment. I had expected persuasion, and for a moment I did not know what to do with the decision being left where I had put it.

Before I left, she asked whether I would go to the bookstore with her on Saturday. I picked up the collar and turned it over in my hands. “Could I wear this?”

“Under your sweater,” she said. “And we can leave whenever you need.”

I put it back on the table for Saturday.

At the door she caught my hand. For a second I thought she was going to tell me to stay.

“Call when you get home?”

I said I would. It was still raining, and I had left my umbrella in the café two days before.

At home I called while taking off my wet shoes. She answered on speaker. I could hear her moving dishes.

“Did you get drenched?”

“Only on one side. The wind was very organized.”

She laughed. I sat on the floor beside the shoe rack and told her about a man on the train who had spent the entire journey trying to fold a newspaper back into its original shape.

“Did he manage it?”

“I got off before the ending.”

We stayed on the line for a few minutes longer. Then she said she needed to make dinner, and I said I did too. I had been waiting all day for a conversation that would settle things. Instead I went to the kitchen and began chopping an onion, feeling a little less afraid of Saturday.



The Bookstore

On Saturday I woke before the alarm and spent ten minutes deciding what to wear. The sweater I wanted had a loose thread at the cuff. I tried to pull it through with a needle, made the hole larger, and chose another one. The small failure steadied me more than the careful preparations had.

Elena was late opening the door. I could hear her coming down the hall, saying something to someone on the phone. When she let me in, she was still listening. She held up one finger and pointed toward the kitchen.

There was coffee in the pot. I poured a cup and stood by the window. In the courtyard below, a man was trying to protect a bicycle from the rain with a sheet of plastic that kept lifting in the wind.

Elena came in five minutes later.

“My mother. She’s bought a new television.”

“Does she want help installing it?”

“She wants the old one back. The new one has opinions.”

We drank coffee and watched the man struggle with the plastic. Elena said she should offer him a proper cover. I said he seemed to be nearly finished. The wind took it again. She went to the window, opened it, and called down. He declined her help with considerable dignity while holding the plastic against his face.

She shut the window. “All right, then.”

For the first time that morning I stopped calculating how I would feel once we were outside together.

She fastened the collar before we left her apartment.

At the station we met Beth coming up the stairs with a bunch of flowers wrapped in brown paper. She stopped when she saw Elena.

“You’re actually out.”

“People keep expressing surprise.”

Beth asked about the atlas. Elena gave a brief answer that made it sound less troublesome than I knew it was. Beth looked at her for a moment, then turned to me and asked whether I had recovered from being introduced at the end of an argument.

I said I had not realized there was an argument.

“Then we were more discreet than usual.”

The flowers were for her father. He had retired twice and was considering doing it again. Beth described the family lunch waiting for her, then glanced at the station clock and swore. She kissed Elena on the cheek and hurried away.

“You didn’t tell her you’re behind,” I said.

“She knows.”

“Then why pretend?”

Elena looked back toward the stairs. “Because she’s on her way to lunch with her father.”

It was a better answer than the one I had prepared to hear. We walked the rest of the way without discussing the atlas. I was conscious of the collar beneath my clothes, but also of the fact that Beth had spoken to me without needing to know anything about it.

At the bookstore rain struck the window. Inside it smelled of wet paper and coffee. The leather stayed hidden beneath my sweater.

She moved slowly between the shelves. I followed a step behind until she stopped in front of a shelf of dictionaries and pulled out a battered green volume.

“I had this edition when I was a student.”

She opened it near the middle. A previous owner had underlined several words in purple ink. She read one, snorted, and showed me. It

was a perfectly ordinary word. The definition was unintentionally obscene.

I laughed too loudly. Someone looked over. Elena shut the book, still smiling.

At the counter she found a loose gathering of pages. She pointed it out to the bookseller, who reduced the price. Outside his hearing she admitted she would have bought it anyway.

“Another thing to repair?”

“This one can stay broken. It opens flat.”

I looked for a book I had owned years earlier, a collection of stories with a yellow cover. I remembered one scene exactly: a man arriving at a house and realizing he had brought the wrong bag. I could not remember the author. Elena asked what else happened.

“That’s the trouble. I remember the bag.”

“Was the bag important?”

“At the time.”

We searched separate shelves. She found a yellow book about gardening and held it up across the aisle. I shook my head. A little later I found a different edition of something I had read at university and forgot what I had been looking for.

Elena came to stand beside me. “That one?”

“No. I liked this when I was younger.”

“Do you still?”

I opened it in the middle. The paragraph was longer than I remembered and much more certain of itself. I read it twice. “I’m not sure.”

“You can leave it here.”

I put it back, then took it out again. She went to pay for the dictionary without watching me decide. In the end I bought it. I wanted to find out whether the book had changed or whether I had.

In the café she sat across from me with the book beside her cup. Her knee touched mine under the table and stayed there.

“How many people in this room know you’re mine?”

“Two.”

“Keep it that way.”

She opened the little book of poems she had brought in her bag. There was a folded receipt marking a page. “Would you read this?”

The poem was short. About a man who stands on a threshold and does not enter until he is called. I read it aloud, quietly. My voice held.

“Again,” she said, then shook her head. “Sorry. I wasn’t listening to the last part.”

Her phone was lit up beside the dictionary. She had been reading a message from work.

I closed the book. “You asked me to read it.”

“I know.” She put the phone in her bag. “I’m here now.”

I was still annoyed. I took a drink of coffee before I opened the book again. This time she listened to the end.

We sat over the empty cups. She asked which line I liked best. I told her I wasn’t sure I liked the poem.

She looked surprised. “Why did you read it so carefully?”

“You asked me to.”

“That’s not a review.”

I read the last few lines again to myself. I disliked the way the man seemed proud of never having entered the house. It sounded like a life organized around an excuse. Elena said she thought he was waiting for someone he loved. I said that did not necessarily improve it.

For several minutes we argued about a fictional doorway. She did not soften her opinion, and I stopped trying to make mine compatible with it. A waiter came to clear the cups. We both reached for the book at once to move it out of his way.

“Keep it for a few days,” she said.

“So I can learn to appreciate it?”

“So you can tell me what you dislike after you’ve read the rest.”

I put it in my bag. Later I would find the folded receipt still marking the page. It was from a grocery near the library, dated weeks before we

met. I would look at the ordinary things she had bought and feel embarrassed by my interest in them.

We left when the rain eased. Outside she straightened my sweater so the leather stayed hidden. Back at her apartment she took off her shoes and set the green dictionary on the floor beside the couch.

“Come.”

I sat beside her. She put my head in her lap and stroked my hair. She said nothing. She asked for nothing. She only kept her hand there while the rain began again against the window.

Her phone sounded inside her bag. She reached for it, hesitated, then let it ring.

A loose page from the dictionary had slipped under the couch. When I pointed it out, she said she would get it later.



Permission

On Sunday morning Daniel asked whether I could help him hang a picture at his flat. He said it would take half an hour, which usually meant he had not found the tools yet.

I arrived to discover the picture was still in its packaging and the wall was covered with small pencil marks. He had changed his mind about the height several times. Each new decision had left evidence.

“Stand over there,” he said. “Tell me if that’s central.”

I stood where he pointed. The picture was not central. He moved it an inch to the left.

“Now?”

“Too far.”

He put it down and looked at the wall. We found the tape measure beneath a newspaper. Once we measured, the argument became disappointingly easy to settle.

Afterward he made coffee and sat on the floor because the chairs were covered with books. There was a letter from his landlord on the table. He caught me looking at it and said the rent was going up.

“Can you manage it?”

“I can manage it. I don’t want to manage it.”

He was trying to decide whether to move. I asked where he would go, and he named three places, each with a different disadvantage. He did not want solutions yet. I recognized the stage of the conversation and let him complain.

When he asked about Elena, I told him she restored books and was frequently annoyed with people who preferred exhibitions to actual books. He said that sounded promising.

“Are you happy?”

I looked at the picture. It was still not quite level.

“Sometimes I don’t know what I am.”

“That’s a long way to say yes.”

“It wasn’t a yes.”

He accepted the correction. We drank our coffee. I told him I liked being with her and that I was finding some of it difficult. He did not ask for details. He told me he had once spent six months pretending to like someone else’s friends because he thought that was what a good relationship required.

“Did she ask you to?”

“No. She didn’t even like most of them.”

We laughed. Then he asked why I had stopped sending him stories. I said I hadn’t finished anything.

“Send me something unfinished.”

“You always want to fix the ending.”

“Your endings always need fixing.”

I threatened to tilt the picture before I left. He walked me to the door and told me to call more often, even when I had nothing to report.

At home I found the book of poems in my bag. I read three more, standing at the counter while water heated on the stove. I liked one of them. I sent Elena its page number and waited to see whether she would ask why.

Her reply came while I was cooking: Read it to me sometime.

The call came on Sunday evening at nine, the beginning of the half hour we had agreed to keep free. I was washing a pan. I turned off the tap when I heard her voice.

“Still a good time?”

I said yes. She was quiet for a moment before giving the first instruction.

“Kneel. Listen.”

I put the phone on speaker and knelt. The cupboard door stood open beside me. I closed it because I knew I would keep looking at it.

“Tell me what you want.”

I looked at the unwashed dishes. “To listen to you for a while.”

I heard her take a breath. “You may stroke. Slowly. Tell me when you’re close.”

I touched myself. My hand shook at first, which embarrassed me even though she could not see it. She asked whether I was cold. I said no. The answer seemed inadequate, but she let it be.

When I was close, I told her. She made me wait. I could hear a faint mechanical hum at her end of the call and the little sound she made before speaking, as though she had tested the word silently.

“Now.”

I came, my other hand flat on the floor. For a few seconds I could see only the pattern in the tile. I stayed on my knees while she listened.

“Clean your chest with your tongue,” she said. “Then the plug, for ten minutes. I’ll stay on the phone until it’s out.”

“Understood.”

I did as she asked. We were quiet while the timer ran. Once she said my name to check that I was there; I answered, and she admitted she had thought the call had dropped. At the end of the ten minutes I removed the plug and told her. It was still before half past nine.

She didn’t hang up at once. She listened until my breathing steadied. Then a loud clatter came from her kitchen, and she swore at the dishwasher. I laughed before I could stop myself. She started laughing too.

After we said goodnight I returned to the kitchen. The pan was where I had left it, half full of cooling water. I finished washing it and put it upside down on the draining board.

I was not sleepy. I opened the story Daniel had asked to see. The man in it arrived at a house carrying a bag; I had been borrowing more from the book I could not remember than I wanted to admit. I deleted the bag.

Immediately the man seemed less purposeful. He stood on the pavement with nothing to do.

I wrote a paragraph in which he walked past the house. It was a bad paragraph, full of weather I had introduced to avoid deciding what he wanted. I deleted most of that too.

At midnight I sent Daniel two pages. He answered before I had closed the file: Finally.

“Don’t read it now,” I wrote.

“Then why did you send it now?”

I had no useful answer. I turned off the computer and went to bed.

On Monday he called at lunchtime. He liked the first page. He thought the second was trying too hard to explain the first. I defended a sentence I had already suspected was unnecessary. He read it aloud in a voice of exaggerated importance, and I hated him briefly.

Then he read the next sentence normally. Without the first one, it worked better.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

“That’s what people say when they’re about to make the change.”

I did not make it until evening. Between paid work and the story, the day acquired a shape that did not depend on a message arriving. I still checked the phone too often. Once I put it facedown, then turned it over again before I had reached the next paragraph.

Elena called after dinner. She had given Beth part of the atlas to work on and was trying not to ask every twenty minutes whether it was finished. I told her about Daniel reading my sentence aloud.

“Was he right?”

“Annoyingly.”

“Beth usually is.”

We compared the inconveniences of knowing competent people. When we hung up, I worked for another half hour. The man in the story still did not enter the house, but I had stopped insisting that he understand himself before he moved.



The Waiting Weekend

We resumed the cage on Thursday, agreeing to meet the following Wednesday. The spare key she had given me stayed with my own keys. I could remove the cage whenever I needed to, without waiting for permission; washing and ordinary breaks were part of what we had agreed. On Friday morning she sent the weekend's task: twenty minutes with the plug, morning and evening, inside our eight-to-eight-thirty check-in windows. I would report when it was out. If either of us missed the final check-in, there would be no further tasks until we spoke. On Friday we completed both windows.

On Friday evening Daniel invited me to dinner with two friends from the gallery. I started to say yes, then looked at the phone on the table. Elena might send something. We had agreed on hours, but I wanted to be available before and after them too.

I told Daniel I had work.

"You always have work."

"This week I actually do."

He said he would send me the address in case I changed my mind. At eight I reheated leftovers and opened a file. I completed one paragraph. At nine I looked up the restaurant and calculated how long it would take to get there. At ten I decided it was too late.

Elena had not asked me to stay home. I knew that. Knowing it did not prevent me from feeling abandoned in a room I had chosen not to leave.

On Saturday I made coffee and drank it standing. At eight she confirmed that I could begin. I completed the morning's twenty minutes and sent the message when the plug was out. Eight thirty passed without

a reply. I put it away; there would be no evening task. At noon I sent the thank-you anyway. She did not answer. I cleaned the bathroom on my knees.

The bathroom did not need cleaning. I took everything off the shelf anyway, wiped beneath it, and rearranged the bottles. One had been empty for months. I threw it away and immediately had the impression that I had accomplished something important.

At two Eva sent a question about next week's work. I answered promptly. The ease of that exchange annoyed me. She wanted a date; I supplied one; she said thank you. I kept returning to the message because it had completed itself.

I tried to work on the story. The man reached the front door and discovered it was locked. That was convenient for him and dishonest of me. I deleted the sentence and went to make more coffee.

From the kitchen window I could see people waiting at the bus stop. A woman held a newspaper above her head though it had stopped raining. One bus passed without stopping, and everybody stepped forward together, then back. I watched them until another bus came.

I could have gone out. I could have called someone. Each possible action seemed to require a justification I could not quite assemble. I began writing Elena a message about the story, then replaced it with a much shorter one saying I had finished the morning task and would leave the evening one.

In the afternoon I cooked and ate on the floor facing the empty chair. I said aloud that I was saving everything. Then I heard someone in the hall laughing on the phone, and wanted, suddenly, to be asked a question.

On Sunday the plug stayed in the drawer. The spare key lay beside my phone. I used it for the ordinary breaks we had agreed, then put the cage back on because I still wanted Wednesday to mean something. I wrote three messages and deleted them all. I sent: I have not touched. I am waiting. I am yours. I am ready.

She replied two hours later: Good.

I read the word until it ceased to look like a word. On other evenings it had been enough. I had treated its brevity as precision, as evidence that

she saw exactly what I was offering. Now I wanted a second sentence and was ashamed of wanting it.

I put the phone in the kitchen and went back to the desk. After ten minutes I went to check it. There was a photograph from Daniel: four people crowded around a restaurant table, one place empty at the end. He had written: You would have hated the music.

I enlarged the photograph. I knew two of the faces. Somebody had spilled wine on the tablecloth. The empty place might have belonged to the person taking the picture; it had probably never been mine. Still, I looked at it for a long time.

I wrote back: Next time.

He sent a thumbs-up. The small hand irritated me so much that I laughed. It was the same symbol I had once stared at on the train as if it contained an answer.

On Monday morning there was still no task. Her single word had not reopened the arrangement. I left the timer unset and sat at my desk, wanting something I had not found a useful way to ask for.

She called on Monday afternoon. Her voice was rough. "I'm sick. Fever. The library still wants the atlas by Thursday. I haven't the energy for tasks. I should have told you on Friday."

I said I understood. I waited for her to say something else. When she didn't, I asked, "Do you ever want me there when there isn't anything for me to do?"

"What?"

"I don't mean carrying books. I mean us."

"Alex, I've spent two days in bed." Her voice had sharpened. "I can barely look at the phone."

I nearly apologized and left it there. "I didn't know that."

She coughed away from the receiver. I could hear a television in another room.

"No," she said. "You didn't."

"I was afraid you only wanted the Temple. The rules. Not the rest of me."

She was quiet long enough that I checked whether the call had ended.

“I want you,” she said. “I’m not very good company when I can’t manage things.”

“You could have told me you were ill.”

“Yes.”

I wanted a fuller answer. She sounded exhausted, and I was tired of trying to phrase everything so it would be easy to hear. We listened to each other breathe.

“Can I call tomorrow?” I asked. “Without a report.”

“Please.”

That evening I made toast and ate at the table. The next day I called as we had agreed. We talked for six minutes about the awful programme she was watching.

After the call I realized I had not asked whether she needed anything. I called back. She answered sounding worried, and I told her it was only groceries.

“I’ve got food.”

“All right.”

“Beth brought some yesterday.”

I felt a brief, ugly disappointment. Somebody else had done the useful thing before I thought to offer it. Elena heard something in my silence.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Alex.”

“I wanted to help.”

“You can still call me. The groceries aren’t a competition.”

I was embarrassed that she had understood me so quickly. I said I knew, although I had only just understood it myself.

She asked what I had done that day. I told her about the files, the shop, the story that was still refusing to move. She wanted to know whether I had gone to Daniel’s dinner. I had mentioned the invitation in a message on Friday.

“No.”

“Why not?”

I could have said work again. “I thought you might want me.”

There was a long pause.

“I didn’t ask you to miss it.”

“I know.”

She sounded upset now, and I resented having to reassure her while I was still trying to say what had upset me. I told her that too, less gracefully than I would have liked.

“I’m not asking you to reassure me,” she said.

“Then let me be annoyed for a minute.”

She went quiet. I could hear a cup being set down. My face was hot. I had spoken more sharply than I ever had to her, and the silence that followed seemed enormous until she coughed and said, “All right.”

We did not solve it. She was tired, and I had begun repeating myself. Before we hung up we confirmed Wednesday. I almost asked whether she still wanted me to come. Instead I said I would be there after work.

I called Daniel next. He described the dinner without reproach and asked whether I wanted to see a film the following week. I said yes before I could make the answer conditional on somebody else’s plans.



Freedom

On Wednesday I finished work at five and sat for a while with the finished file still open. Eva had approved the changes. There was nothing left to adjust, but I kept moving the cursor over the page as if a new problem might give me a reason to remain at the desk.

Elena sent the door code. I knew it already. I could not decide whether the repetition meant she wanted to make arriving easy or was reminding me that I was expected. I typed a thank-you, deleted it, and put on my coat.

At the station a train had been cancelled. The platform filled slowly. People checked the sign, checked their phones, and checked the sign again. I told Elena I would be late. She replied: I'm not going anywhere.

I bought oranges from the shop near her building. They were too expensive and looked better than they tasted; I could tell that even before buying them, but I wanted something to carry. When she opened the door I held up the bag.

"You didn't have to bring anything."

"I know. They're oranges."

She took them and stepped aside. The apartment was warm and untidy. There was a blanket on the couch, a mug on the floor, a packet of tissues wedged between two books. I could see the impression of her body in the cushions.

"Have you eaten?" I asked.

"A little."

I put the oranges in the kitchen. She followed me, then leaned against the doorframe as if the short walk had tired her.

“We can leave everything else,” I said. “I can just stay for a while.”

“I want to finish what we agreed.”

She said it quietly. I looked at her and nodded. There was no performance in the way she led me back into the room.

She was still pale. My own key was in my coat pocket; I had used it during the week. Now I let her unlock the cage. She kissed me once, without heat.

“Free tonight. No tasks. No toys.” She put the key on the bedside table. “I’d like you to stay.”

I knelt beside the bed. She sat and opened her arms. I put my head in her lap. She stroked my hair.

For a while we listened to somebody moving furniture in the flat above. A chair scraped, stopped, scraped again. Elena looked toward the ceiling.

“He’s been doing that all week.”

“Perhaps he hasn’t found the right place.”

“Perhaps he could try measuring.”

I laughed. Her hand moved once through my hair, then rested. I could feel how tired she was in the stillness of it.

She asked whether I was comfortable. I said yes, then admitted my knee was beginning to hurt. She moved her leg so I could sit beside the bed instead. Nothing in the room changed because I had said it. That fact should have been obvious. I was still learning how many obvious things I had made difficult.

We peeled an orange. It was dry, as I had expected. She ate two segments and put the rest on a plate.

“I bought them because they looked like a considerate thing to bring,” I said.

“They do look considerate.”

“They don’t taste considerate.”

She laughed properly then, coughing at the end. I passed her water. When she had finished, she asked whether I would open the window a little. I did, and the cool air changed the smell of the room.

After a while she lay down and lifted the edge of the blanket. I got into bed beside her.

She fell asleep before I did. In the morning I made coffee. She took one sip and reached for the sugar without opening her eyes.

The atlas lay on the worktable beneath a sheet of tissue. I asked whether she had finished it.

“No. They’re using a photograph for the exhibition.”

“Were they angry?”

“Very.” She sat up. “I was horrible on the phone. To them as well.”

I looked at her over my cup. She looked back, and this time neither of us smiled.

“You could have told me,” I said again.

“I’ll try to next time.”

I wanted to ask what trying would mean. A message? A call? How soon? I could feel a new set of rules assembling itself in my head, each one designed to prevent the exact pain I had just experienced. I was tired enough of my own planning to notice what I was doing.

“I don’t need a report either,” I said. “I need to know when I’m waiting for something that isn’t going to happen.”

She nodded. “I can tell you that.”

“And I shouldn’t cancel my own plans because you might ask.”

“No.”

I disliked how quickly she answered. Then I disliked myself for wanting her to object.

She reached for the coffee and made a face. It had gone cold.

“We can’t keep reheating this,” she said.

I looked at her. She pointed at the cup. “I mean the coffee.”

We laughed because the other meaning was too available. I went to make a fresh pot.

In the kitchen my phone rang. It was Eva asking whether I could look at a new brief. I said I was out and would open it that afternoon. The conversation lasted less than a minute. When I returned, Elena asked whether there was trouble at work.

“No. Something new.”

“You can go if you need to.”

“I said this afternoon.”

She moved her papers to make room for my cup. I sat down again.

She asked what I was working on. I began telling her about the new instruction manual, and she interrupted. “The thing you write after that.”

It took me a moment to answer. I told her about a story I had abandoned because I couldn’t decide why the man in it left his house. She listened, occasionally asking a question. By the time we got up, the coffee was cold.

I had described the story as though it were a technical problem. Elena asked who lived in the house. I said a woman the man used to know. She asked why he had not called first.

“Because then she could tell him not to come.”

“That seems like a reason to call.”

I looked at the table. She waited, and I began to see the scene I had been avoiding. The man did not need a better reason to arrive. He needed to understand that arriving did not entitle him to be admitted.

I said some of that aloud. Elena listened without agreeing too quickly. Then she asked whether the woman ever appeared in the story or whether she existed only to be waited for.

“Not yet,” I said.

“I’d like to meet her.”

I was annoyed, then interested. I borrowed a sheet of paper and wrote down a line before I forgot it. Elena went to answer an email. We sat at opposite ends of the same table, occasionally interrupting each other with questions neither of us could answer.

Near noon she carried the cups to the sink. I packed my bag and told her I needed to go home and work. She asked whether I would call that evening. I said I would be at the cinema with Daniel.

“Tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow.”

At the door she kissed me and adjusted my scarf because I had caught it beneath the bag strap. I went downstairs carrying the page I had written. Outside, I stopped beneath the awning to read it. The sentence was rough and the last word was wrong. I folded it carefully and put it in my pocket.



Distant Fire

The week before her trip was uneven. We spoke most evenings, missed one another twice, and had an argument about a message I thought sounded dismissive. She had written it while waiting for a bus. When she read it aloud over the phone, it sounded different. That did not make my first reading imaginary, but it made it harder to defend as the only possible one.

She finished the atlas on Tuesday. Beth had repaired one section while Elena dealt with the binding. Together they discovered a page had been placed incorrectly during an older repair. Fixing it required undoing work they had both thought complete.

“Whose mistake?” I asked.

“Somebody’s from thirty years ago. Mine for not seeing it sooner. The curator’s for wanting it yesterday. Choose whichever one makes the best story.”

She sounded tired and amused. I asked whether she wanted company. She said she wanted sleep. I told her to call the next day.

At home I worked on my story until the woman in the house finally opened the door. She did not say what I had planned for her. I wrote down what she said instead and left the rest for morning.

The following Friday she left for a three-day conservation workshop. Before she went she said, “There’s no task this weekend. If you want the plug, that’s your choice. Twenty minutes, as usual. Message me if the silence gets difficult. I’ll call after the sessions.”

I walked with her to the station. She had packed too many books and was unwilling to admit it. The bag pulled at her shoulder. I offered to carry it; she refused, then gave it to me after half a block.

On the platform she checked her ticket, her phone, and the pocket containing the ticket again. I teased her about this until she told me to stop. She had nearly missed a train on her last trip and was not finding it funny yet.

We bought coffee from a kiosk. Hers leaked through the lid. While she went back for a napkin, I held the bag and watched people greeting one another near the departure board. Everyone seemed to know how long they were allowed to hold on.

When she returned, we had only a minute. She kissed me, took the bag, and moved toward the gate. I had prepared a sentence about missing her. There was no time to say it without making her stop.

She turned once before boarding and lifted the faulty coffee cup in a brief salute.

I went to work carrying the second cup, the one she had bought for me. It stayed warm all the way to the station exit.

On Friday I chose the familiar twenty minutes, then removed the plug and put everything away before her call. She complained about a lecturer who had spent forty minutes explaining something everyone in the room already knew.

I asked whether she had met anyone she knew. She named two people and described a third whose work she admired but whose conversation was unbearable. They had spent dinner discussing a method she disliked. She had argued longer than she meant to and was now wondering whether she had been rude.

“Were you right?”

“Possibly. That’s not always the same question.”

She asked about my day. I told her I had gone to the cinema with Daniel earlier in the week and had disliked the ending so much that we stayed outside arguing about it until the staff locked up. She wanted to know what I would have done differently.

I began explaining. Halfway through I realized I was talking to someone who had not seen the film. She let me finish before pointing this out.

“You’re very patient,” I said.

“I’ve got another twelve minutes before I need to sleep.”

I tried to summarize the entire film in twelve minutes. She stopped me after three and told me to write the better ending if I was so certain.

On Saturday I went to the store. I bought coffee and vegetables, then spent most of the afternoon at my desk. I sent her a message: Three pages. Finished.

The finished pages were not the beginning. I had written a scene from the middle, where the woman in the house was trying to find an old document while the man waited in the kitchen. There were no speeches in it. She was irritated because he kept offering to help without knowing where anything belonged.

I could hear Elena in one line and removed it. The woman needed her own irritation. I gave her a drawer that jammed and let her swear at it.

At four Daniel came by with a book he thought I might like. We ate bread and cheese standing in the kitchen. He looked at the pages on the desk but did not ask to read them. I offered, then changed my mind. He said that was fine and took another piece of cheese.

“How’s the flat search?”

“I’ve decided I hate every other flat more than this one.”

He had written to the landlord proposing a smaller increase. I asked whether it had worked. He said he was waiting for an answer.

“You should have told me you were doing that.”

“Why?”

I had no good reason. I wanted to have been useful, to have supplied a sentence or a calculation. Daniel recognized the expression and smiled.

“I’ll let you carry the boxes if it fails.”

After he left I cleared the kitchen and worked for another hour. I knew when Elena’s last session ended. At that time I put the phone beside the

keyboard. When it did not ring, I moved it farther away, which was less effective than I hoped.

Earlier, between sessions, she had replied: Don't tell me how it ends.

That evening she called later than promised. I had been looking at the phone. When it rang, I told her so. She said the group had gone for dinner and she had lost track of time. I was annoyed for the first few minutes of the call. She let me be.

At first I answered her questions too briefly. She asked whether I was working, and I said I had been. The small accusation in it was audible to both of us.

"I should have sent a message," she said.

"Yes."

I had expected an argument and felt awkward without one. She told me she had enjoyed dinner. I wanted to be pleased for her. I was also aware that enjoying herself had made her forget to call me.

"You don't have to make the evening sound bad," I said.

"I'm not."

"I think you're trying to."

She considered that. "It was a good evening. Then I remembered I'd said I'd call."

I leaned back in the chair. "All right. Tell me about the good part."

She did. I listened, still annoyed for a little while, then interested despite myself. One of the people at dinner had worked on a collection she had studied years earlier. They had argued about a decision made before either of them was born. She described it with such fierce pleasure that I could imagine the whole table leaning toward her.

When we hung up, I read what I had written that afternoon. For once I did not try to make the day better by writing a better version of the phone call. I corrected a sentence about the kitchen drawer and left the rest alone.

On Sunday I met her at the station. She was carrying a canvas bag full of papers and one very bad sandwich. In the cab she rested her head on my shoulder. We divided the sandwich because neither of us had eaten.

At her building I carried the bag upstairs. She opened it in the hall to look for a borrowed book she thought she had left on the train. It was beneath the clothes. She held it up with the expression of someone narrowly acquitted.

“Tea?” she asked.

I looked at the time. I had work to finish before morning.

“An hour.”

“That’s enough.”

We sat in the kitchen while she told me the parts of the trip she had forgotten on the phone. When the hour was gone I stood up. She reached for my hand, held it briefly, then let go so I could put on my coat.

At home I finished the work. It was late when I sent the file. There was a message from her waiting: Found three more books in the bag. You were right.

I answered: I’m keeping that in writing.



The Ritual

The atlas went on display the following week, after the exhibition had already opened. Elena invited me to the small reception the library held for the staff who had worked on it. She called it an event designed to use up wine bought for a more important event.

I arrived straight from work. Beth was standing beside the display case with a paper cup and a piece of pastry balanced on a napkin. She introduced me to the curator, who shook my hand while looking for somebody else.

Elena stood at the other side of the room talking to a student. She had her hair down. I had seen her like that before, but something about the public room made it unfamiliar. When she noticed me, she lifted her hand and finished her sentence before coming over.

“You came.”

“You invited me.”

“Yes. I know.”

The atlas lay open beneath the glass. From a distance it looked complete, almost untouched. Up close I could see the repairs. I asked which part she had done. She showed me, then pointed out Beth’s work and the older repair they had corrected.

“Does it bother you that people won’t notice?”

“Sometimes.”

I had expected her to say that invisibility was the point. She saw the expectation on my face.

“I still like being told I’ve done a good job.”

“You have.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Beth seems to think so.”

She looked across the room. Beth was laughing with the student. Elena smiled and took a drink of the disappointing wine.

We stayed until the cups had been collected. On the way out she stopped to read the label beside the case. A date was wrong. She pointed it out to a member of staff, who promised to change it the next morning. For a moment I thought we would remain there until it was corrected. Then she put on her coat and came outside with me.

On Thursday she asked me over. The apartment smelled of paper and lemon oil again. The atlas had gone back to the library; the green dictionary was still on the floor. She closed the door and waited while I hung up my coat.

There were two envelopes on the kitchen counter. One contained the final payment for my latest job; the other was the copy of the story I had printed that afternoon. I had brought both by mistake, taking the whole stack from the desk when I left.

Elena noticed the pages before I could put them back in my bag.

“Is that it?”

“Some of it.”

“May I?”

I held the envelope for a moment. I had imagined giving it to her in a way that made the gesture seem casual. Now it felt too deliberate to disguise.

“It’s still rough.”

“You said that last time.”

“It was rough last time too.”

She waited. I put it on the table beside the dictionary.

“Read it later,” I said. “I’d rather not sit here watching.”

“All right.”

We made tea. She asked whether I wanted her response or only wanted her to have it. I said I wanted her response, then qualified the answer so extensively that she began to smile.

“Perhaps I should read it first.”

“Perhaps.”

She moved the envelope away from the cups. I watched her do it and felt an unreasonable tenderness toward the practical care of the movement.

“Clothes off,” she said. “Stand there.”

I undressed. She watched while I folded my shirt and set it on the same chair. A sleeve hung over the edge. I remembered tucking it in the first evening; this time I left it. She held out the plug, already lubricated.

“Put it in. Slowly. I want to see you choose it.”

I remembered how much of that first evening I had spent trying to guess what would please her. Now she had told me, and I still needed a moment. I bent and pressed the tip against myself. The pressure sharpened. I stopped, breathed, and tried again more slowly. When the widest part passed, I made a sound she must have heard before; her expression changed as though she had not expected to hear it quite that way.

I stayed bent. She came behind me and rested two fingers on the base.

“Good. It stays for now. Twenty minutes at most.”

She left her hand there, then said my name—Alex—before she said, “Kneel.”

I lowered myself carefully. She touched my hair and began to speak, but stopped to move the chair farther from the couch.

“Tell me if you need more room.”

She fastened the collar. The buckle resisted; she loosened it, checked it again, and looked at me.

“Color?”

“Green.”

Her hand remained briefly against my shoulder. I could see the place near her thumb where work had roughened the skin. Then she brought the harness, and I fastened it around her hips.

We were still within the twenty minutes when she removed the plug. At the couch she waited for me to settle before entering. I turned to look at her. She stopped moving until I nodded, and I thanked her without being told.

She began slowly. I felt each movement and the effort I was making to keep my hands open on the cushion. Her breathing became less even. When I started to shake she slowed again, one hand steady on my hip.

“Stay with me,” she said. “You can come when I say.”

I waited. I could no longer see the shirt, only the corner of the chair and a line of light beneath the workroom door. Once she asked whether I was still with her. I answered instead of nodding into the cushion.

When she finally said now, I came quietly, surprised by how little strength I had left for anything else. She waited before withdrawing. Afterward she removed the harness and collar and set them beside the plug on the towel. She missed the edge of the table with the buckle, caught it, and looked at me with a tired, embarrassed smile.

She brought water. I drank half and passed her the glass.

We sat for a while without talking. Through the window I could hear a bus stopping at the corner, the sigh of its brakes, somebody calling to the driver. Elena stood to close the curtain and caught the hem on a book. She freed it impatiently.

“That dictionary is going to kill one of us,” I said.

“It opens flat.”

“On the floor.”

She picked it up and put it on the shelf. A loose page remained behind. We both looked at it, then she bent to retrieve that too.

When she sat again, she asked whether I had time to eat. I said yes. We heated soup and stood in the kitchen waiting for it, too tired to make much conversation. She tasted it with a spoon and added pepper. I asked whether she ever followed a recipe. She said only far enough to know which part she was ignoring.

At the table I saw my envelope beside the atlas's old folder. I wanted to take it home. I wanted her to have read it already. The two desires occupied the same uncomfortable space.

"Leave it," she said, seeing me look.

"I was going to."

She raised an eyebrow. I laughed and moved the envelope farther from my plate.

We talked about the next week. She had two late evenings at the library. I had a deadline on Tuesday and had promised Daniel a drink on Friday. We found a night that suited us without making the other nights seem like absences that needed explaining.

Before I left, she wrote the date on the back of an old envelope because her phone was charging in the other room. I watched her search for a pen among the books. When she found one, it had no ink. She swore, found another, and wrote my name beside the date.

I dressed while she looked for my scarf. We found it underneath her coat. Outside, the air was cold, and I wrapped it twice around my neck before walking to the subway.

At home I opened the copy of the story on my computer. There were changes I could still make before she read it, but the pages on her table would remain as they were. I would have to let her encounter a version I had stopped controlling.

I wrote one note for the morning and shut the file. Then I answered a message from Daniel about Friday. He had received the landlord's reply. The increase would be smaller. He wanted to celebrate his partial victory somewhere cheap.

I suggested the bar near the station. He said the music there was terrible. I told him I remembered.



The Witness

Daniel arrived with a bottle wrapped in a scarf and a chair he had found beside the bins.

“The chair isn’t a gift,” he said. “I’m only leaving it here until Monday.”

“You said you were bringing wine.”

“I brought wine.”

He pushed past me into the hall. One of the chair’s legs was tied to another with garden string. He set it beside the radiator, stepped back, and regarded it with the satisfaction of a man who had improved a room. I had spent the afternoon clearing that room. There were still damp rings on the coffee table where I had wiped it too enthusiastically.

Elena was due in twenty minutes. They had met at the gallery, briefly, before she and I knew each other. This would be different. I could hear the machinery of the evening before anybody spoke: Daniel asking a question, Elena considering it, me explaining each of them to the other until both wished I would leave.

“You look appalled,” he said.

“I’ve only got three chairs.”

“Now you’ve got four.”

“One of them can’t be sat on.”

“Then don’t sit on it.”

He put the bottle in the kitchen and lifted the lid of the pan. I slapped his hand away with a towel. The sauce had been reducing for an hour and I had begun to suspect it might continue until nothing remained. He said

it smelled good. This small kindness made me briefly angry, because I had prepared for mockery.

The pages Elena had returned were on my desk, inside their envelope. There had been no marks on the manuscript itself. She had written her comments on a separate sheet. On the train home I had read the first two, put the sheet away, taken it out again, and found the question about the woman that I could not answer. She liked the scene in the kitchen. She did not believe the man's explanation for leaving. I had known immediately which paragraph would have to go and had left it in for another three days.

Now the revised version was under a stack of appliance diagrams. I had changed the title. The new one was no better, but changing it had allowed me to feel that work had occurred.

Daniel glanced at the desk. "How's the masterpiece?"

"It's a short story."

"All right. How's the short masterpiece?"

I was saved by the doorbell.

Elena had brought pears. She stood in the hall holding the paper bag against her coat while Daniel attempted to move the damaged chair out of her way. The string came loose. For several seconds all three of us were concerned exclusively with furniture.

"Don't touch that leg," Daniel said.

"Which one?"

"The one you're touching."

She released it. He caught it. I took the pears.

At the table she asked about his landlord. Daniel described the negotiation with considerably more drama than he had used when telling me. In this version there had been a moment of near collapse, a perfectly timed silence, a sentence delivered with devastating restraint. I reminded him that it had happened by email.

"Restraint is possible in writing."

"So is invention."

"You should try it."

Elena laughed. I had been waiting for her to laugh at something I said. The realization was sufficiently embarrassing that I reached for the wine too quickly and struck my glass against my plate.

We ate. The sauce was salty, although both of them denied it until Daniel asked for more bread. Outside, somebody was moving bottles into a recycling bin one at a time. Every few minutes a crash interrupted the conversation and we waited, expecting it to be the last. It never was.

Daniel asked Elena whether she ever repaired books people actually wanted to read.

“Occasionally. It’s awkward when they do.”

She told him about a reader who had requested a volume while it was in pieces. He had asked if he could borrow only the chapter he needed. Daniel said the man sounded practical. Soon they were arguing about whether an object had to survive in order to remain useful. He built frames for photographs; she disliked the word preservation when it pretended that nothing would change. I listened for an opening and found none that would not involve stating something obvious.

“Alex thinks I should have thrown the dictionary away,” she said.

“Alex threw away a perfectly good lamp because the switch broke.”

“It smelled of burning.”

“Briefly.”

I objected to being represented by these incidents. Elena asked about the lamp. Daniel began at the beginning, which was years before the lamp had broken and included an apartment she had never seen. He described the unreliable boiler, the neighbor who practiced a trumpet at noon, the evening we had eaten dinner by the light of an open refrigerator because I had refused to acknowledge that the electricity meter needed topping up.

“You told me the power had gone out,” he said.

“It had.”

“For you.”

I remembered the kitchen with an unexpected physical clarity: green tiles, one drawer that would not shut, the dark window behind his head. I had been newly alone then. Daniel had brought takeaway food and

pretended to need my help with a letter. For years I had allowed myself to remember the evening as something I had done for him.

Elena looked at me, then back at Daniel. She did not ask the question I could feel beside the story.

After dinner he helped clear the plates. She washed while I dried. He stood between us with a saucepan and offered advice neither of us wanted. It was an ordinary arrangement, cramped and faintly irritating. I could not remember the last time three people had occupied my kitchen without a reason involving a repair.

When Elena went to the bathroom, Daniel lowered his voice.

“I like her.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I know. That’s why I waited until she left.”

He turned the saucepan over, inspecting something on its base. “You’re working very hard.”

“I cooked dinner.”

“I mean tonight.”

I put a plate down more sharply than necessary. He raised one hand. We stood in silence until the tap stopped dripping. Then he asked where I kept the leftovers and I pointed to a cupboard.

Later Elena went home first. She had an early start and refused a second cup of coffee, although she remained another twenty minutes discussing the chair. Daniel promised to take it away on Monday. She said the joint would need more than glue. He asked whether she was free on Monday. She said absolutely not.

At the door she touched my wrist beneath the sleeve of my shirt. No one could have mistaken it for an instruction. I noticed how much I wanted Daniel to notice, and then how much I wanted him not to.

“Call tomorrow?” she asked.

“After six.”

She nodded and went down the stairs. I watched until she reached the turn, then closed the door.

Daniel was wrapping the remaining pears in the paper bag.

“Those aren’t yours,” I said.

“She brought six.”

“There are three of us.”

He removed one pear and set it on the counter with exaggerated care.

We sat for a while with the last of the wine. The conversation moved through work, his rent, a mutual acquaintance neither of us had contacted for months. At some point he asked whether Elena knew about the time I had stopped writing altogether. I said she knew I found finishing difficult.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.”

He did not pursue it. I wanted him to ask again so I could refuse more convincingly. Instead he began putting on his coat.

At the door he said, “You don’t have to make us like each other by explaining every sentence.”

“Was I doing that?”

“A bit.”

“You tell stories that need explaining.”

“Some of them are about you. You’re allowed to survive them.”

He took the pear and left the chair.

The next evening Elena called while I was attempting to rescue the remains of dinner with unsalted tomatoes. She could hear the pan and asked what I was doing. I told her. There was a brief silence.

“It was quite salty,” she said.

“You could have said.”

“You looked as though you’d spent all day cooking.”

“I had.”

“Then I was right.”

I asked whether she had enjoyed herself. She said yes. I asked whether Daniel had talked too much. She said he had talked exactly as much as she expected someone called Daniel to talk. I asked whether anything had made her uncomfortable.

“Alex.”

I stopped stirring.

“What are you asking?”

I looked at the pear on the windowsill. One side had softened where it touched the glass. I had moved it there that morning because the counter was crowded, not because it belonged there.

“He knows things I haven’t told you.”

“So do lots of people.”

“I know.”

“You don’t sound as though you know.”

The pan began to spit. I lowered the heat. She waited while I found a lid, and the practical interruption helped. I told her about the apartment, the relationship that had ended before it, the months when I answered messages late and accepted work I did not want because being busy seemed less conspicuous than being unhappy. There was no dramatic secret. There were bills, a succession of Sunday afternoons, a story I had abandoned after somebody whose opinion mattered said the narrator sounded sorry for himself.

“Did he?” she asked.

I laughed once. “Probably.”

“Have you read it again?”

“No.”

She did not tell me I should. I had expected encouragement and was grateful for its absence, then disappointed, then aware of how tiresome that sequence would be to explain.

“Daniel was kind,” I said. “At the time. Last night made me remember it.”

“Have you told him?”

“He’d hate that.”

“Would he?”

I leaned against the counter. Across the courtyard, a woman was taking laundry from a line in the dark. She found each peg by touch, dropped it into a container, reached again.

Elena told me about a friend she had once stopped seeing because every meeting became a report on how well she was managing. At first the friend had asked the questions; later Elena had supplied the answers before being asked. She had found it easier to disappear than to say she was tired of being competent in company.

“Did you get back in touch?”

“Not properly.”

“You could.”

“Yes,” she said, with a slight impatience I deserved. “I know.”

We spoke about something else. A parcel had arrived at the library with no return address, containing a book nobody had ordered and a note that said, You will know what to do. Beth had suggested returning the note without the book. Elena said she had laughed so loudly the curator came to see what had happened.

When we ended the call, the sauce had improved. I ate standing up, then sat down because there was no reason to hurry. Daniel’s chair faced me across the room. It looked less like a temporary inconvenience than something waiting for its turn.

I sent him a message about the old apartment. Not a speech. I said I remembered the dinner with the refrigerator open, and that I had needed company more than I admitted.

His reply arrived while I was washing the pan.

You still owe me for the noodles.

A second message followed.

Monday. Six. Don’t let anyone sit on it.



The Invitation

The letter was folded into quarters by the time Elena showed it to me. She had carried it in her coat for three days, taking it out on buses and in queues, returning it to the same pocket before she reached a decision. The folds ran through her name and the figure beside the word allowance.

We were in a café near the library. She pushed the letter across the table between a sugar bowl and a vase containing one exhausted flower. I read the first paragraph twice because I could feel her watching.

Six weeks at a small research collection in another city. A temporary place on a project cataloguing and stabilizing a group of working notebooks, with a room provided in a house used by visiting staff. One of the people she had met at the workshop had recommended her. The work would begin in a month.

“Is this good?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t have brought the letter if it were terrible.”

“I mean for your work.”

She explained. The notebooks had been used by several generations of a family who ran a printing business. They contained accounts, sketches, recipes, addresses, sometimes three kinds of information on the same page. The collection had resources for a short project, and Elena would be able to help determine what could be handled and what should first be photographed. She spoke quickly, using her teaspoon to indicate arrangements of things I could not see.

“There are decisions I’d get to make at the beginning,” she said. “Before somebody promises an opening date.”

I smiled. She did not.

"I'm serious."

"I know."

I read the letter again. The city was a little over three hours away by train. Six weeks meant forty-two days, though I knew better than to say this. I began calculating weekends and stopped when I saw her expression change.

"What?" I asked.

"You haven't said whether you think I should go."

"Do you want me to?"

She looked away. The woman at the next table was trying to put a small dog into a coat. The dog had accepted one sleeve and was refusing the other with complete seriousness.

"I'd like to know what you think," Elena said.

I said she should go if she wanted the work. Even as I said it, I heard the condition removing me from the answer. She folded the letter along its existing creases and put it back in her pocket.

"I haven't accepted yet."

"When do they need to know?"

"Friday."

It was Tuesday. I had already started treating the arrangement as something done to me, although she was still asking a question.

We walked back toward the library without resolving it. A delivery van blocked the pavement, and for a few seconds she walked ahead of me. I watched her step into the road and lift a hand to thank a driver who had stopped. I had never disliked the fact that she could go places without me. What I disliked was discovering how quickly I could begin to.

At the library door she kissed my cheek. It was an absent gesture. She was looking through the glass at someone waiting beside the stairs.

"Tonight?" I asked.

"I said I was working late."

"Right. Sorry."

She touched my arm, but the person inside had seen her and was waving. We separated before either of us could improve the moment.

That afternoon I did very little useful work. I opened the train company's booking page, looked at fares, and closed it. I opened the story and changed a description of weather. I answered a message from Eva about an instruction sheet that had come back from design with two steps reversed. It was an ordinary error, easily fixed. I felt a disproportionate satisfaction at having found something I could correct.

On Wednesday Daniel came for the chair. He had borrowed clamps and wanted help carrying it downstairs. I told him about the invitation while he untied the string.

"Six weeks," he said.

"I heard that part."

"It sounds good."

"For her."

He looked up.

I regretted the words before he answered, but regret did not remove them from the room.

"Are you planning to suffer professionally while she's away?" he asked.

"Could you be serious?"

"I am being serious. You sound as though she won a prize and the prize is making you miserable."

We carried the chair in silence. On the stairs one leg caught the banister and Daniel swore. By the time we reached the street I had become angry enough to explain myself badly. It was not the trip. It was the uncertainty, the interruption of something we had only just learned how to do. He leaned the chair against his car and listened until I ran out.

"Tell her that," he said.

"She knows."

"Then why are you telling me?"

I helped him load the chair. Before he drove away he asked whether I wanted to come over on Saturday. He was going to attempt the repair

and expected failure to be more entertaining with company. I said yes. He made me say a time.

Elena called that night. She had spoken to the person running the project. There would be another conservator for the first fortnight, then a photographer and two volunteers on different days. The room had a desk. She seemed especially pleased about the desk.

I told her I was afraid of becoming a scheduled call she resented.

The sentence surprised me. I had intended to begin more calmly, with something about distance. Instead there it was, blunt and embarrassing, between the description of the desk and the question of meals.

She was quiet.

“Have I made you feel that?”

“Sometimes. When we try to fit things in.”

“I also try to fit things in because I want to speak to you.”

“I know.”

I sat on the edge of the bed. There was a clean sheet folded beside me that I had meant to put on before the call. Its squared corners made the rest of the room seem particularly disordered.

“I want you to go,” I said. “I don’t like that I want you to stay too.”

“You can dislike it.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“I wasn’t trying to make it disappear.”

She told me what frightened her. The work might be beyond what could be done in six weeks. She might arrive and find that the apparent freedom meant there was nobody to make decisions with. She would be away from the tools and people she knew. She was worried about money, which she had not mentioned in the café because the word allowance had made the offer sound more generous than it was.

“And I don’t want to spend every evening proving I haven’t forgotten you,” she said.

I let the sentence hurt before answering. “I don’t want you to have to.”

“All right.”

Neither of us spoke for a while. I unfolded the sheet one corner at a time, then put it down.

We discussed a visit in the middle. She wanted the first week to herself, to learn the place and the work. I heard the request without liking it. She said that a visit would mean arranging somewhere else to sleep; the staff house did not take guests. I said I could book a room. She asked me not to book anything yet.

“Because you might not go?”

“Because I haven’t said yes.”

On Thursday she invited me to help make a list. I expected dates and train times. Instead she had written down the work she would leave behind, the people who would cover it, the bills that would continue arriving, the books she would need to return. The practical weight of going was spread over two sheets of paper.

Beth could take one repair but not the current backlog. Elena would need to say so clearly to the curator. She would ask for the full terms of the room in writing. She wanted confirmation about travel costs. I offered to look at the sums and she passed me a pencil.

It was easier to love her beside a column of numbers than beside the folded letter. The letter contained a possible life I could not enter. The numbers contained a train fare, an electric bill, the price of eating alone somewhere unfamiliar. I could understand those without turning them into a judgment about us.

“This is less than you usually earn,” I said.

“For the same six weeks, yes.”

“Can you afford it?”

“I can afford it if I decide it is what I want to spend money on.”

There was a sharpness in her voice. I put the pencil down. She rubbed her face and apologized.

“My mother asked that exact question yesterday.”

“Was it a bad question then?”

“No. That made it more annoying.”

She made coffee. I read the description of the notebooks she had printed. A page reproduced at the bottom contained a list of debts and, beneath it, a drawing of a bird. The bird looked furious. I asked if she knew who had drawn it.

“No.”

“Will you find out?”

“Maybe not.”

She set my cup down and bent over the page. Her hair fell forward. She moved it with the back of her wrist, careful not to touch the coffee.

“That’s part of what I like,” she said. “There’s room to find something without promising what it will be.”

Her mother called while we were putting the papers away. Elena looked at the screen, sighed, and answered. I took the cups to the sink. From the kitchen I could hear only Elena’s half of the conversation, which consisted mostly of corrections. The room was included. The trip was six weeks. She would not be moving permanently. Yes, she had checked the dates.

Then she said, “Alex is here.”

I turned off the tap. She looked toward me with a question in her face and held out the phone. I could have declined. Instead I dried my hands and took it.

Her mother’s voice was brisk and warmer than I expected. She asked whether I was the person who wrote instructions. I said I was. She told me she had a washing machine whose instructions required the patience of a saint. I said I could not accept responsibility for every machine in the country. She laughed, then asked whether Elena had told me about the trip.

“She has.”

“You’ll tell her to take a proper coat. She thinks walking quickly is the same as being warm.”

Elena could hear enough to know the subject. She closed her eyes and held out her hand for the phone. I said I would leave the coat decision to her and passed it back. Her mother was still talking when it reached Elena’s ear.

The call ended a few minutes later. Elena put the phone on the table and began stacking the printed photographs with exaggerated precision. I asked whether I had said something wrong.

“No. She wants an ally.”

“About the coat?”

“About everything I might fail to arrange properly.”

I waited. Elena squared the pages, spoiled the alignment by adding another sheet, and began again.

“She’s worried,” I said.

“I know she’s worried. I’ve spent years knowing.”

There was more force in the answer than the conversation seemed to justify. I stopped trying to supply her mother’s explanation. Elena sat down and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

She said she had become the person in her family who understood forms, found appointments, checked reservations, and remembered which number to call. She did not mind most of it. She minded being treated as reckless when she made a decision that could not be explained as helping somebody else.

“Does she think this is reckless?”

“She asked whether I could afford it three times. The answer didn’t change.”

I sat opposite her. I had asked the same question once, and for the same mixed reasons: care, curiosity, and a wish to find a practical objection that would not expose a less practical fear. I told her that.

She looked at me for a moment, then said she had known.

“You could have said.”

“Would you have heard it yesterday?”

I considered the question. “Probably not very well.”

She pushed the photographs into their envelope. The small task was finished at last. I asked whether she wanted me to stay while she answered the remaining email about the room. She said no, but she would like me to stay afterward if I had time.

I read in the kitchen while she wrote. Through the open door I could hear the keyboard, a pause, the sound of a sentence being removed. When she came in, she was carrying the folded letter again. She put it on the table and sat beside me.

“I want the work,” she said.

I could have told her I knew. Instead I asked which part she wanted to see first. She took out the photograph of the bird and showed me the marks beside it, the ones she could not yet read.

On Friday she accepted. She sent me a message at lunchtime: I’ve said yes.

I was in a meeting when it arrived. The product manager was explaining that customers preferred diagrams to words, as though pictures were immune to ambiguity. I looked at the message under the table and wrote, Good. Then I deleted it. Congratulations sounded as though she had passed an examination. I finally wrote, I’m glad you chose it. Dinner tonight?

She replied an hour later. Yes. Somewhere with no washing up.

We went to a crowded place near the station. She talked about the notebooks, then about a woman at work who had announced that six weeks would be over before she noticed. Elena disliked this almost as much as I did.

“I want to notice,” she said.

The waiter brought the wrong dish. We had both already taken a bite before discovering it. He apologized and offered to replace it, but Elena asked what it was and ordered another. We laughed too much about the error. I think we were relieved to have something small go wrong.

After dinner we walked to her apartment. On the stairs she asked if I wanted to stay. There was no particular emphasis in the question. I said I did, and we went up together carrying the paper packet of food she had insisted we should not waste.

In the kitchen she put the folded letter on the shelf beside the green dictionary. It would remain there until she began packing, visible between a book that was coming apart and a mug full of pens that mostly did not work.



The Missing Leaf

Three weeks before Elena was due to leave, I found her standing outside the library with her coat unbuttoned and no bag. She had asked me to meet her for lunch. When I arrived, she seemed surprised to see me.

“Have you eaten?” I asked.

“No.”

“Then we’re doing well so far.”

She looked back through the glass doors. Someone inside was moving a trolley of boxes toward the lift. I waited for her to decide whether she belonged inside with the boxes or outside with me. Eventually she buttoned the coat.

We bought sandwiches and took them to a small square behind the library. The benches were wet on the side that faced the fountain. We sat at the far end of one, squeezed together beside a man reading a newspaper so slowly that he might have been memorizing it.

Elena removed the tomato from her sandwich and put it into the wrapper. I had never seen her do this before.

“Beth’s angry with me.”

“About the trip?”

“About the work I’m leaving.”

I began to say that she had a right to go. She stopped me with a glance.

“I know I have a right to go. That’s not the problem.”

The curator had spoken to Beth as though the cover were already agreed. Elena had described what she thought Beth could reasonably

take on, intending it as a limit. The description had traveled through two conversations and returned as a commitment. Beth had heard about it in front of a student and had said yes because saying no would have required an explanation she had not been prepared to give.

“You should tell the curator,” I said.

“I have.”

“Then why is she angry with you?”

“Because I discussed her time before I discussed it with her.”

She folded the wrapper over the abandoned tomato. A pigeon approached, saw nothing promising, and moved on.

I wanted an uncomplicated account in which Elena had done her best and someone else had misunderstood. She would not give me one. She had made an assumption. She had been relieved to imagine that Beth would keep things running. When the invitation arrived, she had pictured the notebooks and the desk in the other city. She had not pictured Beth answering questions about her absence for six weeks.

“What does she want?”

“For some of it to wait.”

“Can it?”

“Yes.”

“Then let it.”

She looked at me with an expression I had seen when a drawer refused to shut. “I’m attempting to.”

We finished eating. I asked whether she wanted coffee and she said she wanted to walk without speaking for ten minutes. The request was so specific that I almost smiled. Then I saw how tired she was and stood up.

We walked around the square twice. On the second circuit she took my hand. When we reached the library, she let go and thanked me for lunch, though we had paid separately. I watched her disappear through the doors. I was beginning to recognize how little a pleasant afternoon could tell me about the afternoon she had come from.

That evening she sent me a photograph of a notebook page. Across the top, in a sloping hand, somebody had written purchases for a household.

Beneath that were calculations, crossed out and done again. At the bottom a different hand had copied a line of verse and then stopped halfway through the next.

This is why, she wrote.

I enlarged the image. The words became blurred, then pixelated. I could read less the closer I looked. I sent it back with a circle around something that resembled a shopping list for six dozen eggs.

How big was this family?

Probably the print shop, she replied. Paste. Or I'm reading it wrong.

The uncertainty pleased her. I could tell from the next three messages, which arrived before I had answered the first. She described the different inks, the changing uses of the page, the difficulty of knowing whether two similar hands belonged to one person at different ages. I read them at my desk, where a manufacturer had just asked me to make a sequence of drawings usable without the captions. My day and hers seemed to touch briefly through the problem of deciding what another person would be able to see.

On Saturday I went with her to a secondhand shop to find a small lamp for the room. The description of the house had mentioned a desk but said nothing about lighting. She refused to spend six weeks under a ceiling bulb. There were three lamps on a shelf. One had no plug. One leaned. The third was an ugly, sturdy thing with a green shade.

"It looks like an interrogation lamp," I said.

"It looks like it can be switched on."

The shopkeeper plugged it in. Nothing happened. Elena and I looked at each other. He replaced the bulb and tried again, this time successfully. She bought it after persuading him to include the bulb.

We carried it home in a bag that was too small. The shade protruded, catching rain. She held her umbrella over it and allowed one shoulder of her coat to become soaked. I moved closer and took the umbrella. For three blocks we walked in an awkward formation dictated by an object neither of us liked very much.

At her apartment a large envelope had arrived from the project. Inside were a room key, directions, and a set of printed images from the notebooks. She left the key on the table and began arranging the pages.

“There’s one missing,” she said.

“A photograph?”

“Maybe. The list jumps from twenty-three to twenty-five.”

She checked the envelope, the floor, the back of another page. Nothing. I offered to help and was given the list, which made me feel useful without requiring expertise. We counted again. The envelope contained exactly what it appeared to contain.

“Ask them,” I said.

“I will.”

But she continued looking at the images. One page showed a sentence disappearing into the fold. The next began in the middle of something else. She could not tell whether the missing number referred to a lost image, a blank side, or a leaf that had been absent for years.

“Does it matter tonight?”

She turned sharply. “It matters if they’ve planned the whole schedule from photographs that don’t show what needs doing.”

“I meant whether you could wait for an answer on Monday.”

She put the page down. I could see her trying to choose between annoyance and apology. She chose neither and went to make tea.

While she was in the kitchen, I looked at the key. It was smaller than I expected, attached to a plastic label with a room number written in fading ink. I turned it over. On the other side someone had drawn a star. The ordinary ugliness of the thing made the trip real in a way the invitation had not. There would be a door she opened every evening, a landing where she learned which board creaked, a view I would have to be shown.

She returned with two mugs and found me holding it.

“Room four,” I said.

“Apparently.”

“Do you know who’s in the other rooms?”

“Not yet.”

I put it down beside the photographs. She sat on the floor because the table was covered, and I sat beside her. We drank tea while the rain struck the window hard enough to obscure the street.

“I was rude,” she said.

“A little.”

“I don’t want to arrive and discover I’m supposed to make six weeks of work look like six months.”

“Can you tell them that?”

“I need to see it first.”

She leaned back against the sofa. I wanted to put my head in her lap, to make the room familiar through a movement we both understood. Instead I asked if she wanted company while she checked the rest. She said she wanted to stop checking. We cleared enough of the table to eat.

The answer about the missing image arrived on Monday. A volunteer had skipped a number while saving the files. No leaf was missing. The folded inner edges, however, had not been photographed closely, and there were notebooks not represented in the packet at all. Elena asked for an inventory and a conversation about the priorities. The project lead agreed without argument, which seemed to unsettle her more than resistance would have.

“I made it into a fight before it was one,” she told me.

“You had been practicing.”

She laughed reluctantly. “Yes.”

At the library, the conversation with Beth took longer. I heard about it in pieces over the following days. Elena had offered to come in on two evenings before leaving to finish work that could wait. Beth said that this would solve the wrong problem. The curator needed to say which tasks would pause and tell the people who expected them. Elena could not make her own absence painless by exhausting herself in advance.

“She said it more sharply than that,” Elena added.

“Did you listen?”

“Eventually.”

The following Thursday they made a list together. Elena showed it to me that night. There were three columns: continue, pause, decide after return. The third was the longest. She had expected the act of writing it down to feel like abandoning work. Instead she had found that some of the tasks had no urgent reason to exist. They had survived because nobody had asked whose problem they were.

“What did the curator say?”

“That we should have done this months ago.”

“Did you kill him?”

“Beth stood on my foot.”

I laughed. She smiled, then reached for the list and folded it away.

Two days later I saw Beth outside the library. I had come to meet Elena, who was still upstairs. Beth was smoking beside a drainpipe, shielding the cigarette from the wind with one hand. I had not known she smoked. I said so before I could think of anything less intrusive.

“Neither does my mother,” she said.

We waited together. She asked whether I was going to visit. I said we were working out dates. She nodded and looked down the street.

“She’s excited,” Beth said.

“I know.”

“She’ll pretend she isn’t when she gets frightened.”

I could have offered something equally intimate in return, a small piece of Elena that would establish my own knowledge. The impulse rose quickly and left me ashamed. I asked instead whether Beth had plans for the weekend.

“Sleeping. Unless someone needs a book repaired in their dreams.”

Elena emerged carrying a box of her own things. Beth crushed the cigarette, took the box from her without asking, and walked with us to the bus stop. They argued about a pencil Elena claimed was hers. Beth said she had possessed it for eleven years. Elena said that explained why she could never find it.

When the bus arrived, Beth handed back the box. Elena shifted it to one arm and touched her shoulder. Neither thanked the other for the conversation I had not heard.

On the bus I asked what was in the box. Elena lifted the lid. A mug, two books, a worn cardigan, a ruler, a packet of biscuits opened so long ago the top had begun to curl. She had cleared a shelf for Beth to use while she was away.

“It’s only six weeks,” I said.

She looked at me.

I heard myself and laughed. “Sorry.”

“You see how quickly it happens.”

We sat with the box across our knees. At the next stop a child got on carrying a balloon and stared at it with absolute concentration, as if the string were the only reliable thing on the bus. Elena watched him for a while, then rested her hand on the lid to keep it from sliding.

When we reached her building, I carried the box upstairs. She opened the apartment and asked me to leave it by the shelf. There was already a space there, cleared between the dictionary and the stack of photographs. I set the box down carefully. For the first time since the letter arrived, the things she was leaving seemed as deliberately arranged as the things she would take.



The Wrong Version

The file Eva sent me had my initials in its name and a paragraph I had never written.

The installation steps had been combined and a warning removed. Elena had also sent a message asking about her scarf. I opened the wrong message twice.

Eva's message said, Can you confirm this is your latest?

I sent Eva my version. When she called, I asked whether the proof had gone to customers. It had not; the supplier had been told to hold it. My approval had been forwarded without its attached comments, and later changes still carried my initials.

We marked the disputed pages. On the call with the product manager, I refused to approve changes the engineer had not reviewed. Eva backed me. By the next morning we had a corrected proof and an agreement on one named master with a final sign-off after layout.

The product manager asked me to estimate the extra review time. When I sent the figure, he said their budget might require a different arrangement. I read the message again. It said nothing I could argue with.

On Thursday I went to Elena's apartment with the scarf folded inside my bag. I had planned to tell her after dinner. Instead I began in the hall and continued while she took off her shoes.

She listened, then asked what I had agreed to.

"Nothing I can't defend."

"That's not what I asked."

I heard criticism where she had meant a request for details. By the time we reached the kitchen I was explaining the sequence as though she were another person trying to prove I had caused the delay.

“I believe you,” she said.

“You keep asking questions.”

“Because you keep telling me how angry you are instead of what happened next.”

I stopped. She put the kettle down without filling it.

I looked toward the familiar chair in the other room. I wanted her to tell me what to do next. Instead of asking, I waited for her to understand.

“I can’t do this tonight,” she said.

“Do what?”

“Guess which conversation we’re having.”

I looked toward the other room. She followed the glance.

“No,” she said, more gently. “Not while you’re this wound up and I’m trying to pack half my life into a bag.”

“Then I should go,” I said.

Her face changed. “Why?”

“You have things to do.”

“I asked you here for dinner.”

“I don’t want to be in the way.”

She turned to the cupboard and stood with a packet of rice in her hand.

“Stop deciding what I mean,” she said.

“I don’t want to give you instructions tonight,” she said. “I do want to eat dinner with you. Those are the two things I’ve said.”

I put my bag on the floor. “All right.”

It took several minutes before either of us believed it. We cooked without much conversation. I washed vegetables. She found a pan. Twice I asked whether I was cutting something correctly, and the second time she looked at me until I smiled despite myself.

At the table I told her the rest. The estimate, the budget, the possibility that the next project would go elsewhere. She asked how much work the

client represented. I told her. Saying the number made my anxiety less theatrical and more concrete.

“Do you have other people you can contact?”

“Yes.”

“Will you?”

“I don’t want to spend tonight being managed.”

She set her fork down. “Then don’t ask me to be responsible for the answer.”

We finished dinner. The rice stuck to the pan. She left it soaking and said she was going to pack books for twenty minutes. I asked whether I should help. She said I could sit with her if I wanted, but she would choose them herself.

I sat on the bed while she chose books, adding one to the bag and removing two. I watched without offering to decide for her.

After a while she asked whether I wanted to stay the night. I said yes. She handed me a pillow because she needed the bedspread to wrap the lamp.

On Friday the client canceled the next review meeting. I could not tell whether the project had really been postponed. I sent two emails to other clients and asked Eva for a reference. She agreed.

I checked the figures and shortened the planned visit to one night.

When I told Elena, she said we could split the room. I began to refuse, heard how automatic the refusal was, and asked what she could afford. She gave me a figure. We checked the dates together.

That evening I took the blue scarf from my bag. I had brought it home again. I called her, held it up to the camera, and waited for her to stop laughing.

“Keep it until I leave,” she said. “At least then I’ll know where it is.”



Borrowed Rooms

At the station Elena discovered she had packed the lamp beside the sandwiches.

“That explains the shape,” she said, looking into the bag.

One sandwich had been compressed against the green shade. She unwrapped it enough to inspect the damage, decided it remained food, and put it back. I stood beside her with the suitcase while commuters divided around us. We had arrived early because she preferred waiting at a platform to waiting in traffic. Now there was nothing to do except wait.

I had brought the blue scarf. It was looped around the suitcase handle so I could not forget it. She took it and wound it around her neck, though the station was warm.

“I’ll call when I get in.”

“You don’t have to call the moment you arrive.”

“I know.”

“Just when you’ve settled.”

“Alex.”

I smiled. “Right.”

Her train appeared on the board. We moved toward the platform. She wanted to carry the bag with the lamp, which made sense, and her own coat, which did not. At the carriage door we exchanged objects several times before achieving an arrangement that allowed her to board. Our goodbye occurred in the middle of this small confusion. A kiss, a hand against my cheek, the sudden need to move because someone behind her was waiting.

I watched her find her seat. She held up the misshapen sandwich. I shook my head. Then the doors closed, and she became a person behind glass who could no longer hear anything I said.

The first week contained no crisis. I found this unexpectedly difficult. I had prepared myself for longing as an event, something that would declare itself and could be endured. Instead there were six or seven moments a day when I reached for a habit and discovered it had no immediate use. A joke she would appreciate. A loaf too large for one person. An evening left open because I had forgotten she would not be in the city.

She sent photographs of the room. Narrow bed, small desk, tall window overlooking a roof. The lamp occupied nearly half the desk and looked as ugly there as it had in the shop. A notice above the kitchen sink asked residents not to leave food in unmarked containers. Somebody had written *What counts as food?* beneath it in pencil.

Her first call was short. The room was cold and she could not find the heating control. Another resident had offered a blanket and a theory about the boiler. She had unpacked her books but not her clothes. I wanted to hear every detail and could tell she wanted to sleep.

“Go to bed,” I said.

“I’m already in it.”

“Then stop holding the phone.”

She laughed. We said goodnight. I remained in my kitchen for a while after the screen went dark, listening to a refrigerator that had become too loud.

During the day I contacted clients. One replied immediately with work I could not do. Another offered a meeting in three weeks. A third did not answer. I began a small project rewriting instructions for a piece of office equipment, which paid less than the appliance work but had the advantage of existing. I told Elena about it without apologizing for the size of the fee. She asked whether the equipment was as bad as its instructions. I said the instructions had not yet had a chance to redeem it.

At the end of her first week she called from the common kitchen while someone behind her argued with a toaster. She looked tired and

animated. The collection contained more material than the photographs suggested. The project lead, Ruth, had agreed that the first priority should be a usable record of its condition. Elena had spent two days looking before doing anything that could be described as repair.

“Does that bother you?” I asked.

“Only when someone comes in and asks if I’ve started.”

She introduced me to the man with the toaster. His name was Martin, and he was researching a local architect whose correspondence apparently consisted mostly of complaints. He lifted the toaster into view and asked whether I knew anything about appliances. Elena had told him what I did.

“Unplug it,” I said.

“Excellent. A professional opinion.”

He left. Elena lowered her voice to tell me he sang while washing dishes and knew only half the words to anything. I could hear him in the next room beginning a song I recognized. For the first time I could picture an evening of hers that did not depend on a description addressed to me.

We fixed the visit for the third weekend. One night, a modest room near the station, the cost divided. She would work until four on Friday. I would arrive at five. On Saturday we had no plan beyond breakfast and walking somewhere she had not already walked.

I printed the booking confirmation, then felt foolish and put it in my bag anyway. I packed a book, a shirt, and the draft of my story, though I had not yet asked whether she wanted to read it. The draft had grown. The man had stopped leaving the house at the end. I was trying to discover whether he could remain without making the woman responsible for his transformation.

The train was delayed. At first by ten minutes, then twenty-five. I watched the expected arrival time move while the landscape remained stubbornly still. Elena said she would wait in the station café. I asked her not to wait if she had something else to do. She sent back a photograph of a piece of cake.

Too late.

When I arrived, she was reading a sheet covered in notes. There were crumbs on her coat. She stood before I reached the table, leaving the notes behind, and held me with a force that made the rehearsed casualness of the journey unnecessary.

“You’re here,” she said into my shoulder.

“Eventually.”

We walked to the hotel. It was farther than the map suggested and located above a restaurant whose extractor fan hummed against the wall. The room was clean, small, and painted a yellow neither of us would have chosen. One bedside lamp did not work. Elena looked at it and then at me.

“Don’t,” I said.

She laughed until she had to sit down.

We ate downstairs because we were hungry and the rain had begun. The waiter assumed she was visiting too. She corrected him, then spent several minutes explaining her project to a man who only needed to know whether we wanted water. When he left, she covered her face with one hand.

“I’ve become unbearable.”

“Only to waiters.”

“There were five notebooks on one shelf that nobody had opened.”

“Tell me.”

She did. This time I understood enough to ask useful questions. Some of the pages were blank; some held entries written from opposite ends of the book. A list assumed to be business accounts turned out to include domestic purchases. She was not making grand discoveries. She was making the collection easier for someone else to study, and the work had begun to satisfy her in ways she had not expected.

After dinner we returned to the room. For a while we were shy. I had imagined reunion as an immediate return to fluency, but there was a strange chair, a suitcase open on the floor, a conversation still carrying the noise of the restaurant. She took my hand and said she wanted a quiet evening. I said I did too. Later we slept badly because the extractor fan

continued until midnight and someone in the corridor mistook our door for theirs.

In the morning I woke first. Elena had one arm across her face. I moved carefully, trying not to disturb her, and managed to knock the remote control off the bedside table.

“You’re exceptionally quiet,” she said.

We found breakfast in a café with steamed windows. She knew which pastries would sell out first. I resented her knowledge for perhaps two seconds, then asked her to order for both of us because she was right about the one she chose.

Afterward she offered to show me the reading room. The collection was closed to readers on Saturdays, but Ruth had said she could bring me through the public areas. We signed in with a man who appeared to know Elena entirely through her arguments with the heating. She greeted him by name. I stood beside her holding the visitor badge until she pointed out which side should face outward.

The building smelled of dry paper and floor polish. A staircase curved around a wall lined with photographs of people who had once been important to it. Elena took me to a window overlooking a small enclosed garden. From there I could see the room where she worked, empty except for tables and covered supports.

“That one,” she said, pointing.

Her table was unremarkable. There was a pencil, a stack of forms, a mug she assured me contained no drink. I had expected the place to reveal something about her absence. Instead it looked like work, specific and demanding, continuing whether I understood it or not.

Ruth appeared as we were leaving. She was carrying a box and wearing trainers with a formal coat. She asked if I was Alex and told me Elena had improved their recording system so much that everyone was now annoyed by the information they had failed to record before.

“She makes a habit of that,” I said.

Elena looked at me. The remark had been affectionate in my head. Aloud it sounded as though I were performing familiarity for Ruth’s benefit.

Ruth smiled politely and asked about the journey. We spoke for another minute, then she took the box upstairs. Outside, Elena said she disliked being described as difficult by people who loved her.

“I didn’t say difficult.”

“I know what you said.”

We walked half a block before I answered. “I wanted to sound as though I knew you.”

She stopped at a crossing. “You do know me.”

“That wasn’t how it came out.”

The light changed. We crossed with a group of schoolchildren in bright coats. By the time we reached the other side, the argument had lost some of its heat, though she remained quiet.

We walked beside the river. There were warehouses converted into apartments and a footbridge crowded with people taking photographs of water that looked better from a distance. Elena pointed out a shop where she had bought a bowl for the communal kitchen. She had liked it enough to want something of her own in a place she would leave.

This led her to tell me about her father’s shop. It had sold paper, envelopes, small office supplies, things that people increasingly bought elsewhere. Near the end, when she was young, her mother had sold a good winter coat and told him she had lost it on a train. The money paid an overdue bill. Elena had known because she had gone with her to the woman who bought it. Her father had complained about the lost coat for years.

“Did she ever tell him?”

“No.”

“Did you?”

Elena shook her head. “I was angry with her for making me part of it. Then I got older and found other things to be angry about.”

She picked a small piece of bark from the railing and let it fall. “Don’t make that sound noble. It wasn’t a beautiful sacrifice. She was cold for the rest of the winter and furious with him.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

She leaned against me. We watched a boat pass beneath the bridge with only one passenger visible. The passenger was looking at a phone. I remember this because I had expected everyone on a boat to behave as though the experience justified attention.

At lunch we talked about nothing difficult. I told her about Daniel's chair, which now stood upright but could not be moved without complaint. She told me Martin had learned the missing verse of his song and somehow become worse. I gave her the draft when we returned to collect my bag. She asked whether I wanted comments. I said yes, and this time I did not surround the answer with qualifications.

She walked me to the station. The goodbye was less hurried than the first and more difficult. We had time to stand together without luggage changing hands. At the barrier she took the printed pages from her bag and tapped them lightly against my arm.

"I'll read it when I can."

"I know."

On the train I found a packet of pastries she had put beside my book. One had been crushed. I ate that one first, scattering flakes over the booking confirmation I had never needed to show.



The Weight of Paper

I wrote the coat into the story on Monday.

Not Elena's mother, I told myself. A different woman, a different shop, a different winter. I changed the coat to a watch, then changed it back because the coat mattered. Cold could be felt. A missing watch made the gesture too clean.

The paragraph took twenty minutes. I spent another hour adjusting it until the woman in the story seemed to remember the sale reluctantly, without explaining why she had mentioned it. It was the strongest passage I had written in weeks. This made the question I should have asked feel like an obstacle invented by someone who did not understand writing.

I had promised myself not to borrow Elena's voice. I had removed sentences that sounded like her. I could point to these small acts of restraint as evidence of care. The story was set in a house unlike hers, the woman had a different job, the man was younger than I was and less able to make jokes at his own expense. I had changed enough details to permit myself not to think about the one that mattered.

On Tuesday I sent the new draft to Daniel. He replied that he would read it at the weekend. I told Elena I had revised the middle and asked if she wanted the newer version. She said she had not started the old one, so yes. I attached it before I could become anxious about the ending.

For two days she said nothing. We spoke about the collection, my work, a leak in the staff-house kitchen that had required a saucepan under the sink. I assumed she had not read it. I was pleased by my own

patience. This is one of the details I would remove if I wanted the account to make me look better.

On Friday she called earlier than usual.

“Who else has this?” she asked.

I knew before she explained. Something in the abruptness of the question reached the part of me that had been avoiding it.

“Daniel.”

“Anyone else?”

“No.”

She was silent long enough for me to hear a door close at her end.

“You used my mother’s coat.”

“I changed the circumstances.”

“Not that circumstance.”

I began explaining the story. The woman was not her mother. The relationship between the characters was different. The shop was different. Elena let me speak until I heard how closely my defense resembled an inventory of everything I had altered around the thing I had taken.

“I told you something about my family,” she said. “I didn’t give it to your narrator.”

“People use things that happen.”

“Yes.”

The agreement gave me nowhere to go. I had been preparing to defend a principle, and she was asking about a particular act performed by me.

“Would you have said no if I’d asked?”

“I don’t know. You didn’t.”

I sat on the floor beside the desk because the chair felt too far from the ground. A cable pressed against my ankle. I moved it, then put it back without meaning to.

“I’ll take it out.”

“All right.”

“I mean it.”

“I heard you.”

I wanted her to acknowledge the speed of my agreement. I had offered a remedy. The fact that she remained hurt felt, in that moment, like a refusal to let the remedy work. I could hear this unreasonable expectation forming and still could not stop myself from speaking.

“I wasn’t trying to expose anyone.”

“I know. You were trying to write a good paragraph.”

There was no cruelty in her voice. That made it worse.

She asked me to imagine her mother reading it. I said her mother would be unlikely to see an unfinished draft. Elena said that was not what she had asked me to imagine.

I tried. Not a reader encountering a moving detail, but a woman recognizing a winter she had endured, then discovering that the man her daughter was seeing had made it available to someone else. I could not make that version comfortable by changing the name of the shop.

“I didn’t tell you because it was a useful story,” Elena said. “We were walking. I remembered it. I wanted to tell you.”

I looked at the open file on the screen. Until that moment I had been thinking about what I would lose by removing the passage. She was talking about what might become harder to say the next time we walked together.

“I understand,” I said.

“I hope so.”

She sounded tired now, which frightened me more than anger. I wanted to promise that nothing like this could happen again. I had promised things before without yet understanding the habits that would make keeping them difficult. I closed the file and listened.

We ended the call without deciding when we would speak again. She said she needed to go downstairs and make food. I asked whether we were all right, which was a request for something she could not truthfully provide at that moment.

“I’m angry,” she said. “That’s what I can tell you.”

I opened the manuscript. The paragraph looked unchanged. It contained no visible sign of what had happened. I selected it, then stopped before deleting. I copied it into a separate file labeled fragments. It seemed wasteful to destroy good writing. Only after saving the file did I understand that I had preserved the very possibility she was asking me to relinquish.

I deleted the fragment too. Then I sat looking at the space left in the story. It was shorter than I expected.

I wrote to Daniel asking him to stop reading and delete the draft. I said I had included a family detail Elena had told me privately and needed to remove it. I did not describe the detail. He called almost immediately.

“I’ve already read it.”

My stomach tightened. “All of it?”

“Yes.”

“Right.”

He asked which part, then corrected himself before I answered. “No. Don’t tell me. I’ll delete it.”

I thanked him.

“For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t have known which bits came from her.”

I nearly repeated this to Elena in a message. I could already hear how useful it would be to my case. Then I imagined her reading a reassurance that depended on Daniel’s inability to identify the piece of her life I had sent him.

“I don’t think that’s the point,” I said.

“Probably not.”

We stayed on the phone. I told him I had thought the changes were enough. He said he believed me, then asked whether I had thought that before writing it or afterward. I could not remember a clear moment in which I had decided. There had been a desire to use the story and a sequence of reasons that made the desire easier to obey.

“Are you going to tell her you’ve deleted it?”

“Yes.”

“Then do that. Don’t send her an essay.”

I sent three sentences. The passage was removed. Daniel had read the draft, but I had asked him to delete it and he had agreed. I was sorry I had shared it without asking.

Her reply came the next morning. Thank you for telling me who had it. I need a few days without talking about the story.

I read without talking about the story as without talking to me. I knew the words did not say that. I also knew how often I had found a way to turn uncertainty into the worst available instruction.

On Saturday I cleaned the apartment. This was not a metaphorical cleansing. The bathroom needed it. I bought food and discovered at the checkout that I had forgotten the bag I had placed beside the door for the purpose. I worked for two hours on a client document and made three mistakes I caught before sending it. The day continued with an indifference I initially resented and eventually found useful.

At six Elena sent a photograph of a bowl of soup. The caption said, Martin says this contains lentils. Evidence inconclusive.

I laughed, then became afraid to answer too warmly. I wrote, Ask the toaster. Deleted it. Wrote something about soup. Deleted that too. Finally I sent, It looks better than my dinner. This was not especially true, but it was sufficiently ordinary.

She asked what I was eating. We exchanged a few messages. Neither mentioned the manuscript. I could feel myself searching the small conversation for a verdict. It offered none.

On Sunday I went to Daniel’s apartment. The repaired chair stood beside his table. He warned me before I sat that it was secure but would sound alarming. It creaked like a person reluctant to agree.

“You should fix that,” I said.

“I did. Before, it fell over.”

We ate lunch. He talked about a photographer who had changed the size of an entire exhibition after the frames had been ordered. I was grateful to dislike someone else’s decision for a while. Then he asked how Elena was.

“Still speaking to me.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I looked down at my plate. “I don’t know. Busy. Tired.”

“Ask her.”

“I don’t want to keep demanding reassurance.”

“Then ask how she is and listen to the answer.”

He made it sound simple because he was not the person trying to do it. I told him so. He said that being outside the problem was one of the few advantages friendship offered and he intended to use it.

We washed up. I told him I had stopped working on the story. He asked why. I said I did not know how to separate what belonged to me from what belonged to other people.

“You don’t have to solve that for every writer who has ever lived,” he said. “You have to solve it for this draft.”

I had wanted a rule large enough to prevent future discomfort. He offered me a smaller task. I disliked it, which did not mean it was useless.

That evening I called Elena after asking if it was a good time. She said she had twenty minutes before she needed to prepare for a Monday meeting with Ruth about the final part of the project. I asked how she was and listened as she described a disagreement over a display planned for the collection. Someone wanted a neat narrative about a single family. The notebooks suggested more people, uncertain relationships, entries that did not fit the proposed sequence. She was trying to keep the description honest without making it so cautious that nobody would read it.

“That sounds difficult,” I said.

“It is.”

I did not turn the problem into an analogy for my own. The restraint was less satisfying than a clever connection would have been, but she kept talking. When the twenty minutes ended, she said she would call the next evening if she had energy.

“All right.”

“I’m still angry about the story.”

“I know.”

“I also wanted to tell you about my day.”

Afterward I opened the draft. I read it without changing anything. The woman in the house had acquired several of Elena’s habits despite my efforts to disguise her voice. Some were ordinary enough to belong to thousands of people. Others came from moments I had valued because they were ours. I marked them. I did not remove them all immediately, because I wanted to understand what I was doing rather than perform a dramatic purge.

The next morning I began again from an earlier scene. I gave the woman a problem that had nothing to do with Elena’s work or family. She needed to sell the house, and the person waiting in the kitchen had mistaken his invitation for a promise. It changed the balance of the story. For the first time the woman wanted something that the man’s arrival actively obstructed.

I wrote badly for three pages. The sentences lacked the polish of the removed paragraph. Nobody said anything memorable. A window stuck; a telephone rang; the man offered help he had no reason to believe would be welcome. At the bottom of the third page, the woman asked him to leave for an hour so she could speak to the buyer alone.

I stopped there. I wanted to know what he would do, and for once I could not settle the question by remembering what I had done myself.



An Empty Chair

The following week Elena asked to leave Thursday evening unplanned.

There was nothing remarkable about the request. We had spoken most Thursdays since she left, but neither of us had called it an obligation. She had a long day ahead and wanted to eat with the people in the house without watching the time. She said we could speak on Friday.

I answered, Of course.

Then I spent the afternoon behaving as though I had been wronged.

I did the work in front of me. I answered emails, checked a diagram, sent an invoice. Between these actions I returned to her message, looking for something hidden in its unexceptional words. She wanted an evening in which I did not take up space. I knew that this was not the same as wanting a life in which I took up none. Knowing it did not prevent the second interpretation from recurring.

At seven I made dinner. I set two plates on the counter because the second had been beneath the first in the cupboard. For a moment I considered leaving it there. The gesture seemed so obviously designed for an audience that I put it away with unnecessary force.

Daniel called while I was eating. He wanted help installing a set of shelves on Saturday. I said I was busy.

“Doing what?”

“Work.”

“All day?”

I said probably. He accepted this, which deprived me of the opportunity to complain that he was pressuring me. After the call I

looked at the calendar. Saturday was empty except for a note reminding me to buy coffee.

On Friday Elena sounded cheerful and exhausted. The dinner had turned into an argument about whether a particular building in the city was beautiful or merely expensive. Martin had produced photographs, Ruth had arrived with dessert, and somebody had stayed up to watch a film that Elena had slept through. She told me this expecting me to enjoy the account.

“Sounds better than talking on the phone,” I said.

The silence afterward was immediate.

“It was a good evening.”

“I said that.”

“No. You didn’t.”

I could have apologized there. Instead I asked whether she had decided when she was coming home. The project had another week to run. The date was already on both our calendars. She heard the question underneath mine and did not answer the easier version.

“I’m coming back next Sunday,” she said. “I’m not arriving with a plan for every evening after that.”

“I haven’t asked for every evening.”

“You just made me feel guilty for one.”

I stood up and walked to the window. Across the courtyard, someone was watering a plant that seemed long beyond rescue. I watched the water darken the soil. Elena waited. I wanted to tell her that guilt was not something I could simply put into another person, which would have been both technically arguable and contemptibly evasive.

“I miss you,” I said.

“I miss you too.”

“It doesn’t sound like it.”

As soon as I said it, I knew we had reached a different part of the conversation. She did not raise her voice. She asked what missing me was supposed to sound like. I had no answer that would not expose the

requirement I was making: less pleasure, more evidence of discomfort, a life elsewhere diminished enough to reassure me about my place in it.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then tell me what you meant.”

I tried. The story had damaged something. We were being careful, and I did not know whether careful meant temporary or permanent. She had stopped using certain familiar words. We talked about work and meals and trains. I did not know whether the private part of us had been set aside or quietly abandoned.

“I asked for time about the manuscript,” she said. “That wasn’t a decision about everything.”

“But it affects everything.”

“Yes.”

She said it simply, without rescuing me from the fact. I sat down again.

After a while she told me she did not want to resume our arrangement immediately when she returned. She wanted to come home, unpack, go to her own work, and see me without the evening carrying an expectation. She was not sure how long that would take.

“So I wait until you decide.”

“You decide what you want to do.”

“That’s very convenient.”

She inhaled sharply. I had found a way to make her right to refuse sound like an abuse of power. I recognized the shape of it before I was willing to admit what I had done.

“I’m going to end this call,” she said. “We can talk tomorrow if we can talk without punishing each other.”

I said her name, but she had not hung up yet. She waited for the rest. I wanted to say something that would change the ending of the conversation. Nothing came that was not another demand.

“All right,” I said.

When the call ended, I remained in the chair. I had spent so much time fearing that she wanted only my obedience that I had barely considered

what happened when I wanted hers. I did not enjoy the discovery. It offered no immediate improvement. I was still lonely, still frightened, and now ashamed as well.

At ten I sent a message saying the last remark had been unfair. I did not ask her to answer. Then I called Daniel and asked if he still wanted help with the shelves.

“I thought you were working.”

“I was lying.”

“Nine thirty. Bring the drill.”

His apartment was full of books in piles sorted by a system he could not explain without changing it. The shelves were intended for a small alcove beside the window. He had measured it three times, which did not prevent us from discovering that the lowest board was too long.

“The wall narrows,” he said.

“Walls do that.”

“Not helpfully.”

We took the board to a workshop he used and had it cut. The owner asked whose measurements were responsible. Daniel said mine before I could speak. I let him because the joke was easier to occupy than my own thoughts.

Back at the apartment we marked the wall. I held a level while he drew a line, then he held it while I checked his line. It was a process designed to make two reasonably intelligent men suspicious of one another. By noon the first shelf was up. By one the second had exposed the fact that the first was not quite where we wanted it.

We ate sandwiches on the floor. Daniel asked whether Elena had called. I said we were talking later. He waited with the patience of a person who had known me long enough to recognize when silence was doing work.

“I said something ugly,” I told him.

“What?”

I repeated it. He considered the words rather than immediately reassuring me about my character.

“Yes,” he said. “That was ugly.”

“Thanks.”

“You asked me by telling me.”

I picked a piece of bread from the wrapper. He said that when his last relationship ended, he had spent months describing himself as someone who wanted too much. It had sounded honest, even brave. Eventually his former partner told him that wanting had not been the problem. It was making his disappointment everyone else’s emergency.

“Did that help?” I asked.

“Not at the time. At the time I thought she was being cruel.”

“And now?”

“Now I can occasionally be disappointed without issuing a weather warning.”

I laughed. He reached for the next bracket.

We finished the shelves by four. They were level enough to survive the books, which immediately concealed the quality of our workmanship. Daniel put the first volume on with unnecessary ceremony. I told him it was upside down. He turned it over and said nothing.

Before I left, he asked whether I wanted to come to a small reading at the gallery the following month. One of the photographers was organizing an evening of work in progress. There would be poems, short prose, probably too much wine. He thought I might read something.

“Absolutely not.”

“Come and listen, then.”

I said I would think about it. He wrote the date on a scrap of paper and put it in the pocket of my coat. It was the kind of small intrusion I would complain about later and be grateful for immediately.

Elena called at six. She had been walking and was still outside. I could hear traffic and the occasional burst of wind against the microphone. I apologized without explaining what had made the remark possible. The explanation existed; she had heard most of it already.

“Thank you,” she said.

We spoke slowly. She said she wanted the Temple to remain something we entered together, not a standing responsibility she carried while working, traveling, or being angry. I said I had understood that in principle and had begun to rely on something different in practice.

"I liked being needed," she said. "Sometimes I encouraged it because I liked what it made me feel."

I wanted to seize the admission, to distribute the blame more comfortably. Instead I asked what she meant.

There had been evenings when she offered certainty she did not have, times she had given a direction because admitting uncertainty felt like losing something. She did not want to keep pretending that confidence arrived automatically with a role. She had enjoyed the first weeks away partly because nobody expected that version of her. The admission cost her enough that I could hear her stop walking before she finished.

"Are you happier there?" I asked.

"Sometimes. Sometimes I'm miserable because the shower won't get warm and I want my own kitchen. It isn't one answer."

I looked around my room. The empty space where Daniel's damaged chair had stood was visible again. I had been meaning to move a lamp there. I had not done it because the absence had begun to seem like an arrangement in itself.

"I want to see you when you come home," I said. "Without deciding what it means before you get here."

"I want that too."

We agreed on dinner the Tuesday after her return. She would have Monday to herself. No promised scene, no test of whether everything had returned to normal. I asked whether she wanted me to meet the train. She said she would like that, then asked if the answer would be different if she changed her mind on the day.

"It would disappoint me," I said.

"Yes."

"You could still change it."

She began walking again. We spoke about the shelves, about a notebook she had finished describing, about the absurdly small towels in

the staff house. The conversation did not become easy all at once. We had to return to ordinary subjects more deliberately than before, like people testing whether a familiar path was still passable after rain.

When we said goodnight, I wanted another minute. I said so. She said she needed to eat. We laughed a little at the plainness of the exchange, then ended the call.

I moved the lamp into the space beside the radiator. Its light fell differently from there, reaching the corner of the desk where I kept unused envelopes. I sat down and worked for half an hour. The story was not better because I had suffered. It was better only where I had found the right words, and that remained a separate, less flattering task.



Room Four

During Elena's last week away, our calls grew shorter. She was finishing records and packing; I had two jobs due and a meeting with a company that called its filing systems spatial solutions. She sent a photograph from a supermarket, asking which biscuits Beth liked. I recognized the packet. By Wednesday the desk in her photographs was almost clear.

Thursday was the difficult day. She called at nine, later than usual, and said the project had become exactly the conversation she had hoped to avoid.

Ruth wanted a summary for the committee that funded the work. She needed to show what six weeks had produced. This was reasonable. A draft had been prepared by someone who had attended only the first meeting. It described the notebooks as a complete record of the Vale family's business and promised that a selection would be available for display by the end of the month.

"They aren't complete," Elena said. "And a selection isn't a decision. It depends which ones."

"Have you told Ruth?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"That the committee doesn't need every qualification."

I asked if she wanted me to look at the wording. She said no quickly enough that I was glad we were on the phone. Then she softened the refusal.

“I need to do this with her. I don’t need a better sentence from someone who hasn’t been in the room.”

I said all right. A minute later I offered a sentence anyway.

“Alex.”

“Sorry.”

She laughed, briefly. “It’s a good sentence. That’s not the problem.”

Ruth had also suggested another short visit later in the year. Elena wanted to consider it. She worried that refusing the wording now would make her seem indifferent to how the collection survived financially.

“We know which volumes need support,” she said. “We have records we didn’t have. That counts.”

“It sounds as though it counts.”

She said she was tired and should stop trying to settle it at nine at night.

Before we ended the call, she asked about my meeting. The filing company had offered a paid trial: assembly instructions to be tested before the design was fixed.

“Will you enjoy it?” she asked.

“Possibly. They let me look at the thing before asking me to explain it.”

“A radical practice.”

On Friday she called after meeting Ruth. They had rewritten the report together. A smaller display would be described as proposed; the limitations would sit beside the achievements. Neither woman had obtained the version she first wanted.

“Did she mind?” I asked.

“Yes. So did I.”

“But you did it.”

“We did it.”

Ruth had offered a final afternoon for Elena to speak informally to staff and volunteers about what they had found. It was not a public lecture, only a chance to show the work before she left. Elena had initially refused because there were records still to finish. Then a

volunteer asked if she could at least explain why two pages that appeared identical had been described differently. She agreed to twenty minutes and spoke for forty.

“You enjoyed it,” I said.

“Eventually.”

One volunteer asked a question Elena could not answer. They looked at photographs together, and a man who sorted the papers recognized an address. He would check it against an uncatalogued box. She sounded pleased that the work could continue after she left.

Saturday was packing. She called with the camera turned toward the open suitcase so I could adjudicate whether a book could fit beside the lamp. I said it could if she did not also intend to bring clothes. She removed the book and accused me of having no imagination.

I asked whether she wanted to leave the lamp for the next person.

“I bought it.”

“You dislike it.”

“That’s not the same as wanting someone else to have it.”

She looked at the suitcase, then at the lamp, and began to laugh. A few minutes later she carried it downstairs. Martin was in the kitchen. She asked him to help find a place for it in the sitting room, where the light had bothered everyone for weeks.

I watched the ceiling on the phone while they moved furniture. There was a scraping sound, an objection, another scrape. Finally the camera returned to Elena’s face. Behind her the lamp stood on a small table beside an armchair. In that room it looked almost appropriate.

“You’re leaving it?” I asked.

“I’m lending it to the house indefinitely.”

“Very different.”

“Entirely.”

That night she called from room four after the suitcase was closed. The desk was empty. Without the lamp, the room looked smaller and less inhabited. She sat on the bed with her knees drawn up, wearing the cardigan she had taken from the library.

She said she was sad to leave.

I let her say it. I did not remind her that she had missed home. I did not ask whether she was looking forward to seeing me. After a while she began describing things she would miss: the walk to the collection, the bakery that opened early, the strange conversations over breakfast, a tree outside the kitchen window whose leaves had changed while she was busy with paper.

“I didn’t think I’d make a place here,” she said.

“You bought a bowl.”

She smiled. “I did.”

The bowl was going home. It was wrapped in the scarf I had returned at the station. This seemed so fitting that I was tempted to make a sentence of it for the story. I noticed the temptation and left it alone. Some things could be remembered without being recruited.

She asked what the apartment looked like. I turned the camera. The moved lamp, the desk, the chair, a pile of laundry I had forgotten to hide. She told me the lamp was better there. I said I thought so too.

“You’ve changed things.”

“One lamp.”

“Still.”

I asked whether she still wanted me at the train. She said yes. We checked the arrival time, then stopped talking about logistics. For several minutes we stayed on the call while she folded a receipt and I cleared cups from the desk. The silence was not one of the silences we had named. It was only two people doing small things before bed.

After the call I took out the scrap of paper Daniel had put in my coat. The gallery reading was three weeks away. I could go and listen, or ask for a place.

I opened the revised story and read the first page aloud. The room gave the words back without sympathy. Several sentences sounded longer than they looked. I shortened one, crossed out another, and read again. After a while the man in the kitchen began to sound less like someone explaining himself and more like someone who had entered a room without knowing what he would find there.

I wrote to Daniel asking how long a reading could be. He replied almost at once.

Five minutes. Seven if you're magnificent.

I asked whether he was organizing it.

No. I just know how long I can sit still.

The next message contained the organizer's address. I copied it into a new email, wrote a brief description of the piece, and attached nothing. Before sending, I checked that I had not described the work as a masterpiece, even as a joke. Then I pressed send and went to bed while the decision was still small enough to live with.



The Return

Elena's train arrived on time. I had prepared for a delay and found punctuality disconcerting.

I stood near the barrier with a paper cup of coffee that was already becoming unpleasant. People emerged in groups, then singly, then in another group held back by someone struggling with a suitcase. I saw a woman in a coat like Elena's and took a step forward before realizing my mistake. The woman looked at me with mild alarm. I pretended to be moving toward a bin.

Elena came through last, carrying the suitcase in one hand and a bag that appeared to contain most of a bakery in the other. Her hair had escaped its tie. She stopped when she saw me, and for a second neither of us moved. Then she left the suitcase upright between us and reached around it.

"You're warm," she said.

"I've been inside."

"Don't ruin it."

I held her. The bag pressed against my leg. Someone asked us to move and we stepped aside without letting go completely, awkward and laughing. When she drew back, she looked at my face as though checking it against something she remembered.

We took a taxi because the suitcase had acquired a temperamental wheel. She told me about the journey, a child who had sung the same line of a song for forty minutes, the man opposite who had apologized every time he opened a packet. I offered the coffee. She tasted it, made a face, and returned it.

“You waited too long.”

“I didn’t know when you’d get through.”

“I mean the coffee.”

At her building I carried the suitcase upstairs. She opened the door, stepped inside, and stopped. The apartment smelled faintly closed. Nothing dramatic had happened in her absence. The books remained where she had left them. A plant near the window had leaned toward the light. Dust showed on a dark shelf she usually ignored.

“It looks smaller,” she said.

She put down her bag and opened a window. The street noise entered at once: a bus, voices, the scrape of something being dragged over pavement. I stood in the hall holding the suitcase handle because I did not know where she wanted it.

“Bedroom,” she said, then caught herself. “Please.”

I smiled. “I know how moving luggage works.”

“Apparently I don’t. I’ve carried that bag for six hours.”

She found the bowl inside the scarf and set it on the kitchen table. It was blue with an uneven rim. I had expected something more distinctive from the amount of attention it had acquired in our conversations. She filled it with the biscuits she had bought for herself and left Beth’s packets in the bag.

We made tea. She used the kettle as though relieved to know exactly how much water it held. I sat at the table while she opened cupboards, finding the things she remembered and occasionally discovering that she remembered them incorrectly. She had left coffee in a jar she usually used for rice. She blamed packing. I said nothing.

After half an hour she began to yawn. I asked whether she wanted me to go. She looked at the clock, then at me.

“Yes. In a little while.”

The answer was so plain that I had no space to misunderstand it without effort. We sat together for another ten minutes. She rested her foot against mine beneath the table. We spoke about the weather, then stopped speaking. When she yawned again, I stood up.

At the door she kissed me slowly. I wanted to stay. She wanted to be alone in her own rooms. I could feel both facts at once, neither replacing the other.

“Tuesday,” she said.

“Tuesday.”

On the way home I bought coffee and a small bunch of tulips for my own table. I had never thought of buying flowers without a recipient. Choosing them felt oddly exposed. The woman in the shop asked whether I wanted them wrapped. I said no, then yes, because I still had to carry them on the train.

Monday was busy. The filing company sent drawings with dimensions that did not match the prototype they had shown me. I asked which was current and received an answer before lunch. This should not have seemed remarkable. It did. I spent the afternoon writing clear, undramatic sentences about tabs, slots, and the order in which pieces belonged together.

Elena sent one message: Found the spare charger in the freezer drawer. No explanation available.

I asked whether she meant the freezer itself. She said the kitchen drawer beneath it. I told her the less alarming version was disappointing. She replied that she would try harder next time.

On Tuesday I arrived with ingredients because we had agreed to cook. She opened the door wearing a shirt I had not seen in weeks and holding a phone against her shoulder. Her mother was still talking. She waved me inside and pointed toward the kitchen.

I unpacked the bag while she said yes, no, and I know in several different tones. The conversation lasted another five minutes. When she ended it, she leaned against the counter and closed her eyes.

“She’s glad I’m home.”

“It sounded like it.”

“She expressed this through a list of things I should have done before leaving.”

I did not ask about the coat. I could hear the story beside the conversation and left it there. Elena noticed something in my silence but did not ask me to explain it.

We cooked. The first fifteen minutes were strangely formal. I asked where things were that I already knew how to find. She thanked me for cutting vegetables as though I had arrived to provide a service. Eventually she reached past me for salt and we collided, nearly dropping a bowl.

“We’re being ridiculous,” she said.

“A little.”

“You can open cupboards.”

“I was waiting for a written agreement.”

She laughed and handed me the salt.

At dinner she told me about returning to the library. Beth had moved some supplies into Elena’s old shelf space and expected an objection. Elena liked the arrangement. The curator wanted a summary of the project for colleagues. A reader had written twice about a volume that remained on the paused list. Nothing had collapsed in her absence. A few things had become clearer because other people had needed to make decisions.

“Did that bother you?”

“For about an hour.”

“And then?”

“Then I was able to leave at five.”

She asked about my new work. I described the prototype, which had taken me longer to assemble than the designers believed possible. They were pleased when I told them where I had gone wrong. I was still getting used to being useful without first having to defend the existence of a problem.

After dinner we moved to the sitting room. The chair was where it had always been. I looked at it before I could stop myself. Elena noticed. We both knew noticing did not require action.

“I don’t know what I’m ready for,” she said.

“We said we wouldn’t decide tonight.”

“I know. I wanted to say it without making you wait for a clue.”

I sat beside her on the sofa. For a while we talked about the story. I told her what I had removed and, when she asked, what had replaced it. I did not hand her a fresh draft. She said she was glad I was working on it, then looked uncomfortable with the possibility that glad might be mistaken for permission about everything else.

“You don’t have to settle how you feel about it tonight either,” I said.

She nodded. We sat quietly. A page lay on the floor beneath the shelf, probably from the dictionary. She saw me looking and said she had stopped pretending the book was going to repair itself.

“You could bring it to work.”

“Then it would become one more thing I’m meant to do.”

I understood this better than I had before she left.

Later she asked if I wanted to read while she put away the last of her things. I took a book from my bag. She opened the suitcase on the floor. Every object came out with a small decision attached: wash, shelve, answer, return. A packet of notes became a pile. The blue bowl moved to the kitchen. The empty suitcase remained open after it was no longer useful, as though closing it would make the trip harder to remember.

I read the same paragraph four times. Eventually I put the book down and asked whether she wanted me to stay for another hour or go home. She said another hour. I said I needed to leave by ten. She looked up and smiled.

“All right.”

We managed fifty minutes. At ten she was telling me about a volunteer who had found the address mentioned in the notebook, and I did not want to interrupt. She saw me glance at the clock and stopped herself.

“Tomorrow,” she said.

“You can finish.”

“I can also finish tomorrow.”

I put on my coat. In the hall she asked me to wait and went back into the bedroom. I heard a zip, then the scrape of the suitcase being pushed under the bed. She returned carrying the scarf.

“You left this here once,” she said.

“It’s yours.”

“I know. I’m trying to make a joke.”

I laughed and she hit my arm lightly with it. Then she wrapped it around my neck, though the night was mild, and told me to bring it back when I remembered.

On Wednesday we did not see each other. On Thursday she came to my apartment. She noticed the flowers before taking off her coat. Two had opened fully; one bent over the rim of the vase as though inspecting the table.

“Who gave you those?”

“Me.”

She looked at me, then at the flowers again. “Good choice.”

We ate leftover food and argued about a film. The argument had no relation to trust, distance, or anything we needed to resolve. She thought the ending was evasive. I thought it was restrained. Daniel, consulted by message, said he had fallen asleep before the ending and would nevertheless be willing to take sides.

Elena stayed until nearly eleven. When she left, she took the scarf and forgot the book she had brought. I found it on the chair after washing the cups. There was a receipt marking a page near the middle. I put it on the shelf beside my own book, where she would find it next time, and went to bed without sending a photograph of the discovery.



Marginalia

The organizer of the reading was called June. Her email contained four instructions: keep it under seven minutes, send a title, arrive early, and do not apologize before beginning.

I read the last instruction several times.

Daniel said it had been added after a man spent half his allotted time explaining why his poem was unfinished. I said the poem might have been better for the explanation. Daniel told me I was already becoming the sort of person June had written the rule for.

I chose a section from the middle of the story. The woman was trying to sell the house. The man had arrived with a key she had once given him and an assumption she had never made. Nothing resembling the coat remained. The woman's history was hers now: a brother who had left her responsibility for an inconvenient property, a job she wanted to return to, a buyer due in an hour.

The man believed the house preserved something between them. The woman wanted the roof repaired before it leaked into the room below. I could see more clearly than I once had how easily I granted him the grander problem.

I printed the pages and read them aloud at the kitchen table. The first attempt took nine minutes. I cut a description of the hallway, then a conversation whose only function was to make the narrator sound observant. The second attempt took eight. I began to suspect that I was reading slowly in order to avoid deciding what else could go.

At work I could remove two hundred words without mourning them. In the story, every deletion felt like an accusation against the person who

had written the sentence. I took a break and rewrote a client paragraph about the assembly of a shelf. The shelf improved immediately. It was infuriating.

Elena came over on Friday. She had brought the dictionary in a cloth bag. The loose page was inside an envelope, and she asked whether she could leave the book on my table while she visited a shop nearby. I asked why she had brought it at all.

"I kept looking at it on the shelf and thinking I should decide what to do with it. Now I'm deciding."

"By taking it for a walk?"

"So far."

She saw the printed pages. I told her about the reading. I had meant to tell her earlier and had delayed because I did not know whether inviting her would feel like asking her to approve what had happened.

"Do you want to come?" I asked.

"I might."

I nodded too quickly. She put the dictionary down.

"That's an actual might," she said. "I haven't checked the date."

I gave it to her. She looked at her phone and said she had a late meeting but could probably arrive afterward. I told her she did not have to rearrange anything. She asked me not to manage the refusal before she had made one.

We stood beside the table with the manuscript between us. She asked whether it still contained things I had told her I would remove. I said no. She asked whether there were other private details I thought she might recognize. I said I had checked, then felt the inadequacy of the answer.

"I might have missed something," I said. "I don't think I have. But I don't want to use your reading it as proof that everything is fine."

She sat down. "Good."

We talked for nearly an hour. At first I wanted a list: what was mine, what was hers, what could be changed enough to become fiction. She said she could not supply a system that would make every future decision safe. If I wanted to use something personal she had told me, I

could ask. She might say no. If I wrote about my own feelings, she did not expect to own them. If I made her recognizable, she wanted to know before strangers had the opportunity to recognize her first.

“And if we disagree?” I asked.

“Then we disagree before you send it to someone else.”

“You know that could be difficult.”

“It’s already difficult.”

I looked at the pages. I had imagined responsibility as a set of restrictions on the work. Sitting there with her, I began to understand that the more uncomfortable restriction was on the version of myself who wanted to remain innocent while making choices.

She did not want to read the whole draft that afternoon. She did want to hear the section I planned to perform, if I was willing. I said yes and immediately explained that it was rough. She raised a finger.

“June warned me about you,” I said.

Elena laughed, and I began.

The passage opened with the man putting his key on the kitchen table. He had brought it back because he believed returning it would force the woman to ask him to keep it. She thanked him and moved it away from a wet ring left by a glass. He watched the movement as though it contained an answer to a question she had not heard.

I had written a paragraph explaining his disappointment. Reading it to Elena, I could feel the paragraph arriving before it arrived. It turned the woman’s practical act into a wound she had caused him. I read it anyway. She did not interrupt.

Then the buyer called to say she was early.

The woman asked the man to leave for an hour. He offered to help show the house. She said she did not need help showing it. He said he knew where the fuse box was. She looked at him for a long moment, then told him the buyer had already had a survey.

At that line Elena smiled. I had not intended it to be funny. I kept reading, reassured and briefly distracted by the wish to earn the smile again.

The man went outside. He walked to a café, ordered something he did not want, and watched a delivery driver struggle with a crate. He considered returning early. Instead he helped with the crate and discovered that the driver had only needed someone to hold a door. There was nothing to discuss afterward. The driver thanked him, closed the van, and drove away.

When the man returned to the house, the woman was on the phone. He waited in the garden where she could see him through the window. She finished the call, opened the back door, and asked whether he wanted tea.

That was where I stopped.

Elena looked at the final page. "Is that the end?"

"Of this part."

"What happens next?"

"I'm still working on it."

She nodded. I waited for a judgment and received a question.

"Does he ever ask whether she wants to sell?"

I looked down at the pages. He knew she intended to sell. He objected to the speed. He had several thoughts about what the house meant. He had not asked the question she suggested.

"No."

"I wondered whether that was deliberate."

I could have said yes. It would have made me sound perceptive and cost nothing immediately. Instead I said I had not noticed.

She reached for the dictionary. "That's what I wanted to know."

"Did you like it?"

"Some of it very much."

"Which parts didn't you?"

"Do you want that now?"

I considered the question properly. I had already heard one thing I could use. I was nervous about the reading and inclined to treat every reservation as an instruction to start again.

"Not all of it," I said. "Not tonight."

She nodded and put on her coat. We went to the shop together. The man behind the counter said he could supply a simple enclosure for the dictionary if she gave him its measurements. Elena explained that she could make one herself. He asked, politely, why she had come in.

She looked at the book in her bag, then began to laugh.

“Because I apparently needed someone else to suggest it.”

We bought paper she did not need immediately and went for coffee. At the café she told me she had been invited to give a short talk about the collection at the university. She had accepted before thinking of three reasons to refuse. Beth would help select the photographs, and Elena had asked that her contribution to the original atlas work be mentioned in the introduction as well. The two projects were different; the habit of naming only one person was not.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yes.”

“You speak to people about this every day.”

“You write sentences every day.”

I conceded the point.

On Sunday I revised the story. I cut the paragraph explaining the man’s hurt over the key. The action already showed it, and removing the explanation left the woman room to exist without answering it. I added a question later, after the tea. She said she wanted to sell and was also sad about selling. The man did not supply a solution. He asked whether she had somewhere to go next.

It was a small change that altered several pages around it. I spent the afternoon following the consequences, moving one scene, deleting another, allowing a conversation to end before both people had made themselves perfectly understood.

At six I read the excerpt aloud again. Six minutes and forty seconds. I wrote the time at the top and sent June the title. The story was now called *The Other Door*. I did not tell Daniel I had considered six alternatives. He would have insisted on hearing all of them.

Elena called that evening and asked how the revision was going. I told her about cutting the paragraph. She said she remembered it. I waited for

her to say she was glad I had listened, but she asked what the change did to the rest of the story instead.

We talked about the work for twenty minutes. Then she told me about a disagreement with her sister, who wanted help choosing a gift for their mother and had rejected every suggestion Elena made. The conversation was ordinary enough that I nearly missed what had changed. She was telling me things again without first checking where they might end up.

I listened. When something struck me as funny, I laughed with her and did not reach for a notebook.



The Public Room

June met me at the gallery door with a roll of tape in her mouth.

She removed it, said my name as a question, and handed me one end of a paper sign. I held it against the glass while she decided whether it was straight. The sign announced an evening of works in progress. Beneath that, in smaller print, it said there would be a short interval. This was the only promise on the page that seemed entirely within our power to keep.

Inside, the gallery looked different with chairs. The photographs had changed since the night I met Elena. There were still empty rooms, but these were bright rooms in buildings about to be demolished. Sunlight fell on abandoned desks and radiators. A white rectangle on one wall marked the place where something had been removed.

I recognized the temporary partition beside which Elena had stood. A chair now occupied the space. Someone had left a coat over its back. I had expected returning to the room to feel significant. Instead I was worried about the pages in my bag and whether the microphone would make my breathing audible.

Daniel was moving chairs. He pointed me toward a table containing water, paper cups, and a bottle of wine with a cork nobody had yet attempted to remove.

“Don’t drink the wine until after,” he said.

“I wasn’t going to.”

“You were looking at it with a plan.”

I poured water. June found me and asked for my title. She had it in her email but wanted to hear me say it before introducing it incorrectly. I told her. She wrote it on a card, then asked whether I was happy to read fourth.

“Out of how many?”

“Six.”

“Yes.”

“Good. You would have been fourth either way, but it’s pleasant to agree.”

She tested the microphone. A brief, terrible squeal filled the room. Everyone turned toward her. She said, “That’s the opening poem,” and adjusted something on the stand.

I took out my pages and checked their order. I had numbered them. I had also clipped them together. I removed the clip, worried that removing it on stage would look clumsy, then put it back because loose pages seemed worse. Daniel watched for a while and asked if I needed him to take the stationery away.

Elena had said her meeting might run late. At six forty-five she sent a message: Leaving now. Don’t save a seat if it fills.

I saved one anyway, then removed my bag from it when a woman arrived with a walking stick. She thanked me and sat down. The absence beside me became a practical fact rather than a symbol. I found I preferred it that way.

The room filled to perhaps thirty people. Some knew the readers. Others appeared to have come because an evening was available and the invitation had not asked much of them. I envied this second group. They could listen without wondering which expression would be interpreted as a verdict.

June began on time. She welcomed us, pointed out the toilets, and asked everyone to silence their phones. Then she introduced a woman whose poems concerned a town where she no longer lived. The woman read steadily, with no explanation between pieces. I listened for the first minute, then became distracted by the sound of a bus outside and the knowledge that I would soon stand where she stood.

I made myself return to the poem. It contained a supermarket built on a field, a mother who could no longer remember the old path, a child who preferred the supermarket. The last line surprised me into listening properly. I applauded with everyone else and regretted having missed part of it.

The second reader apologized. June lifted one eyebrow from the back of the room. He caught it, laughed, and began again without the apology. This small recovery helped me more than perfection would have.

Elena arrived during the third reading. I saw the door move and turned before I could stop myself. She stood inside until the reader reached a pause, then took a chair at the back beside Daniel. She did not wave. She looked at me once, briefly, and settled her bag beneath the chair.

I turned forward. The third reader was describing a train journey. I had been listening from within my own train journey and could no longer tell which details belonged to the story. When it ended, June came to the microphone with her card.

She said my name correctly. She said the title correctly. Nothing remained to delay me.

The walk to the front took only a few seconds. I remember the uneven edge of a rug and a cup somebody had placed beneath a chair. At the microphone I discovered that I had no sensible place for the water. June moved a small table closer without comment. I set the cup down and unclipped the pages.

For a moment I could not find the first sentence, though it was the first line on the page. The room was quieter than I expected. I could hear a radiator knocking behind the partition.

I began.

The first paragraph went too quickly. I could hear myself treating the commas as inconveniences. At the end I stopped and took a breath. Someone in the second row shifted. The sound did not mean anything. I continued more slowly.

When the man in the story put his key on the table, I looked up. There were faces, none of them arranged into the clear approval or rejection I had imagined. One woman was leaning forward with her elbows on her

knees. A man near the wall looked down, perhaps listening, perhaps thinking about dinner. Elena sat with her hands together. I looked back at the page before I began using her face as an answer sheet.

The audience laughed at the line about the fuse box. It was a small laugh, quick and unforced. I had not expected the sound to interrupt me. I waited half a beat too long, then found my place again.

On the third page I skipped a sentence. The next one made no sense without it. I stopped.

“I missed a line,” I said.

Nobody objected. I read the line and continued. The recovery was so ordinary that it almost made me angry. I had spent days anticipating a room in which a mistake would expose something essential about me. This room wanted to hear the rest of the story.

When I reached the final exchange, I slowed. The woman asked if he wanted tea. He asked whether she wanted him to stay while she made it. She said yes, but she would need the kitchen table afterward to sort papers for the sale. It was a smaller ending than the one I had first imagined. I let it remain small.

I lowered the pages. There was a pause long enough for me to wonder whether I should say something, then applause. June stepped forward. I collected the cup and forgot the clip. She handed it to me as I passed.

At my chair, the woman with the walking stick said, “I liked the woman.”

“Thank you.”

“He took a while to listen.”

“He did.”

She turned toward the next reader. The exchange was over. I sat with the pages on my lap and listened to someone else’s work without needing it to make room for mine.

During the interval Daniel gave me a glass of wine. I took it too gratefully and drank too quickly. He waited until I had swallowed before telling me I had done well.

“You don’t have to say that.”

He looked at me until I remembered our kitchen conversation and laughed.

“Thank you,” I said.

Elena approached with June. They had met by the door and were discussing the photographs. June asked whether I had a complete version of the story. I said nearly. She said they sometimes circulated a small digital selection from the evenings, with each writer’s agreement, and I could send the finished piece if I wanted it considered. There was no promise of acceptance. The invitation still made my chest tighten.

“When would you need it?”

“Next month. Finish it properly.”

She left to find the next reader. Elena remained beside me.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“As though I should leave before anyone discovers I have more sentences.”

She laughed. Then she said she liked the exchange about the table at the end. I told her it was new. She nodded, but did not take credit for the change or ask me to give it to her.

“I’m glad you came,” I said.

“So am I.”

I wanted to ask whether she had recognized anything that hurt. The question belonged in a private conversation, not between a table of wine and a stranger trying to reach the crisps. I let the evening continue.

After the final reading, people stayed to talk. A man asked me whether the house was based on a real place. I said it was assembled from several places, which was true. He began describing a house his aunt had sold. I listened, conscious of how readily people offered stories when they thought they were explaining a connection. I did not ask for more detail than he wanted to give.

At the far end of the room Daniel was helping stack chairs. Elena joined him. I carried cups to a bin and wiped a spill from the table. The work after the event returned the room to its familiar proportions. We were people clearing up, occasionally getting in one another’s way.

June thanked us at the door. She reminded me to send the story only when I thought it was finished, then told Daniel he had put the chairs in the wrong cupboard. He argued that the cupboard was closer. She said proximity was not a classification system.

Outside, the evening was cool. Daniel wanted food. Elena had eaten at her meeting but agreed to come. We found a place still serving and sat at a table beneath a television with the sound off. Daniel ordered enough for two people and objected when I pointed this out.

We talked about the other readers. Elena liked the poem I had partly missed. I asked her to tell me about its beginning. She did, and I listened with the uncomfortable pleasure of realizing that the evening had contained more than my own performance.

The story came up only once. Daniel said the man at the kitchen table reminded him of someone. I told him to be careful. He grinned and took another piece of bread.

Later Elena and I walked toward the station while Daniel went in the other direction. She took my arm. I had carried the printed pages in one hand all evening, the corners beginning to soften. She asked whether I wanted to put them in my bag.

“I forgot they were there.”

“You didn’t.”

I laughed and put them away.

At the station she asked whether I wanted to come home with her for tea. I said I did. We checked the last train I would need, then decided I could stay if we both still wanted that later. The decision did not require a performance of ease. We were tired and a little hungry again, and she had an early meeting. We said these things, bought tickets, and went through the barrier together.



After the Exhibition

Elena's talk was held in a room designed by someone who believed every audience could be arranged into a rectangle.

I arrived early to find Elena arguing with a projector cable while Beth read the introduction aloud in a deliberately grand voice.

"Stop," Elena said.

Beth continued. "A unique opportunity to encounter the intimate working life of—"

"That isn't the version I sent."

"I know. That's why I'm enjoying it."

She handed over the page. Elena scanned it, sighed, and went to find the curator. Beth watched her leave with affectionate irritation.

"She'll be fine," I said.

"I know. The cable might not survive."

I moved a table out of the aisle and took a seat near the back. A student beside me opened his notebook.

People arrived carrying bags, coffee, coats they did not know where to put. I recognized a few faces from the atlas reception. Ruth had traveled for the talk and stood beside the door greeting colleagues. She saw me and came over. We spoke about the train, then the staff house. She said the green lamp had become popular enough to cause a disagreement over which room deserved it.

"Elena will be pleased," I said.

"She'll want it back."

We laughed.

The curator introduced the talk from the corrected page. He named Beth's work on the earlier atlas project and Ruth's role in the collection. Elena stood beside the screen with a remote in her hand and listened to the introduction as though it concerned someone she might be asked to defend.

Then the first image appeared.

It was the notebook page she had sent me: purchases and an unfinished verse. She explained how the work had revealed more hands than the original description suggested, and which could be connected to names.

At first she spoke too quickly. Then she reached a photograph of a folded page and paused. She showed where a note continued across the fold, how an earlier image had concealed the last few words, why recording the object required attention to the way it had been used. The room became quieter. She slowed without appearing to notice.

I watched Beth in the front row. She nodded once at a slide and wrote something down. Ruth sat with her arms folded, listening closely. The student beside me stopped taking notes and leaned forward. Elena was no longer managing the fact of being watched. She was showing people something she wanted them to see.

During the questions, a man asked why the damaged covers had not simply been replaced. Elena explained the decision without making him foolish for asking. Another person asked whether the handwriting proved that a particular daughter in the family had managed the accounts. She said no, then described what might help establish that later. The answer disappointed the questioner. She allowed it to.

The difficult question came from a colleague I had met at the reception. He asked how much more work would be required before the collection could be considered complete.

Elena looked at Ruth, then back at him.

"Complete for which use?" she asked.

He smiled as though she were being clever. She did not smile back immediately. She explained the difference between a usable record, material ready for particular kinds of handling, and a collection in which

every uncertainty had been resolved. The first two could be planned. The third was not a realistic finishing point.

“But there must be an estimate,” he said.

Ruth spoke from her chair. There was an estimate for the next stage, she said. It covered specific work. She named what the committee had agreed to support and what would remain under review. Elena added one qualification. Ruth accepted it. The exchange was brief, practical, and considerably more convincing than either woman defending a perfect plan alone.

Afterward there was tea in paper cups. I waited by the back wall while people gathered around Elena.

Beth brought me a cup.

“You look as if you’ve been waiting to collect a child from school,” she said.

“I was trying not to interrupt.”

“You can talk to other people while she exists.”

I laughed because it was deserved. We spoke about a book Beth was working on. She described the reader’s notes more than the repair: corrections, arguments, an insult written so small it seemed intended only for the writer. She said she sometimes liked a book better after discovering that somebody had been annoyed by it.

Elena joined us carrying the remote, which she had forgotten to return. I pointed at it. She looked down as though surprised to find an object in her hand and went back to the table. When she returned, Beth asked whether she was happy.

“Ask me tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll tell you today. It was good.”

Elena accepted the compliment with visible effort. I had seen her demand precision from people whose praise came too easily. Beth’s mattered partly because it did not.

Ruth found us before leaving. She asked Elena whether they could discuss a return visit in the autumn. Two weeks, perhaps, to review the next stage and train the volunteer team in the revised records. The dates

were not fixed. Elena said she wanted to look at the scope and her other commitments before answering.

Ruth agreed. Nobody treated the absence of an immediate yes as a lack of enthusiasm.

I began calculating weeks, nights, calls. Then someone passed me a stack of cups to clear.

We helped stack cups and return chairs to the wall. The curator thanked Elena again, then asked if she could send him a short summary by the next morning. She said Tuesday. He began to object, glanced at Beth, and said Tuesday would be fine.

Outside, Elena stood on the steps and let out a long breath.

“Food,” she said.

“Anything particular?”

“Something that doesn’t require a question afterward.”

We went to a small restaurant around the corner. She ordered quickly and drank half a glass of water before speaking. I told her which part of the talk I liked. She asked whether I meant that the handwriting example was clear or only that I remembered it. I said both. She nodded and finally seemed able to enjoy having done the thing.

We talked about Ruth’s suggestion. I asked whether she wanted to go back. She said possibly. Two weeks would be different from six, and she knew more now about the work and the place. She also knew she could ask for the role to be defined before accepting it.

“Would it bother you?” she asked.

“Probably sometimes.”

“That’s not a very encouraging answer.”

“It’s the one I can promise.”

She looked at me, then smiled. “Fair enough.”

We ate without speaking. Her feet hurt, and she could think of a sentence she wished she had phrased differently.

On the way home we passed the gallery. The reading poster had been taken down. A new exhibition notice covered part of the glass. Through the window I could see a ladder and a man painting the temporary wall.

Elena stopped to look.

“That’s where you were standing,” I said.

“I know.”

“Did you notice me before I came over?”

She looked at me with amusement. “You’ve asked that before.”

“I might get a different answer.”

“You were staring.”

“I was considering the photographs.”

She took my hand and pulled me gently away from the window before the painter could notice us examining his work. We walked toward the station. The afternoon was bright and windy. She carried the cloth bag with her notes in it, and I could hear the paper shift each time it struck her leg.

At the crossing she asked if I wanted to come back to her apartment. I said yes. She said she might fall asleep. I told her I had a book. We waited for the light, standing close enough that our coats touched, while traffic moved through the space we would cross when it was our turn.



Ordinary Hours

The filing company paid the first invoice three days early.

I checked the amount twice. Then I asked what else needed doing. They offered another small project; the gap left by the appliance client was beginning to close in pieces.

That afternoon I bought Daniel wine and Elena the biscuits she had brought Beth. I went back for a packet for myself.

Daniel opened the wine before I had taken off my coat. His shelves were now crowded, and the repaired chair stood at the table with a cushion disguising none of its opinions. He wanted me to help decide whether to accept a larger installation job outside the city. It would mean three weeks of irregular hours and staying with a cousin he liked in doses shorter than three weeks.

“What do you think?” he asked.

I began calculating the fee against travel and accommodation. He listened for a minute, then said he had already done that part. He wanted to know whether I thought he would regret turning it down.

“I don’t know.”

“I was afraid you’d become sensible.”

The new job would let Daniel help plan the installation instead of repairing other people’s decisions afterward. He wanted it, and seemed embarrassed to be excited.

“That sounds embarrassing,” I said.

“Extremely.”

He accepted two days later. I offered to help him pack. We checked our calendars and found a morning.

Elena and I had begun doing the same with evenings, saying whether we meant an hour or a night. It made some conversations less graceful and the journeys home easier.

It did not prevent arguments. One evening she arrived at my apartment already irritated by a phone call with the curator. I asked whether she wanted to talk about it. She said no and then talked about it for twenty minutes. When I offered a suggestion, she told me she had not asked for advice.

“You said you didn’t want to talk,” I said.

“I changed my mind.”

“I missed the announcement.”

She looked at me. I looked back. For a moment we could have made the argument larger than the evening required. Then she put down her bag and said she wanted to complain while I listened, and that I was allowed to tell her when I had heard enough.

“Ten more minutes,” I said.

“That’s insulting.”

“Twelve.”

She laughed, unwillingly. The complaint took eight. Afterward she asked about my day and listened without reaching for her phone.

The private arrangement remained suspended longer than I expected. We were affectionate. We spent nights together. There were moments when I wanted to ask whether suspension had become the new name for an ending. I did ask once, on a Sunday walk, when the question had become too large to keep managing alone.

Elena said she still wanted that part of us. She also wanted the next time to begin because we both chose it, not because enough days had passed to make further waiting awkward.

“I’m afraid of asking too often,” I said.

“And I’m afraid you’ll stop asking and decide what my silence means.”

“Could we choose a night to talk about it?” I asked. “Without that meaning we have to do anything afterward.”

“Yes.”

We chose Thursday.

Before Thursday I sent the story to June, checking it separately for private details and mistakes. I told Elena, as we had agreed. A week later June offered to include it in the selection, subject to a few editorial questions. I was delighted, then offended. One suggestion improved the story. I explained why another did not fit, and June accepted the explanation.

On Thursday Elena made dinner. Afterward she took the cups into the sitting room and asked where I wanted to sit. I chose the sofa beside her. We spoke about what we missed and what had become difficult. I missed the concentration, the permission to stop arranging myself for other people’s approval. She missed the particular attention we gave one another inside the Temple. She did not miss feeling that an ordinary tired evening might disappoint a whole structure we had built.

I told her I had sometimes treated the structure as proof that she would remain. Saying this made it sound less defensible than it had felt. She did not immediately contradict me or promise the future. She asked what I wanted to do with that knowledge.

“Notice when I’m doing it,” I said. “Tell you before it turns into a complaint about something else.”

“I can help with that. I can’t always be the first person to notice.”

We repeated the words. Yellow slows. Red stops. Either of us could use them.

“And outside?” I asked.

“Outside we can say we’re tired, angry, hungry, or being impossible.”

“Only one at a time?”

“I’m ambitious.”

She asked whether I wanted to choose an evening the following week. I said yes. We checked work, meals, and enough time afterward.

Before I left, she handed me a key.

For a moment I stared at it. She saw what was happening on my face and began to laugh.

“It’s for Tuesday,” she said. “The man coming to look at the window can arrive before I get back. You offered to wait.”

I had offered. I had forgotten the exact time and remembered only the possibility contained in the object.

“Right.”

“You can keep it afterward if that’s useful. We should still arrange when we’re coming over.”

I turned it in my hand. It was an ordinary key with a small red mark on one side. I thought of the story, of the man trying to make returning a key into a question nobody had asked him to perform.

“It would be useful,” I said.

She nodded and helped me find my coat.

On Tuesday the window repairer arrived late, announced that he needed a part, and left after twelve minutes. I had brought work and stayed at Elena’s kitchen table until she returned. She found me surrounded by diagrams and a cup I had not washed.

“So this is what happens when I give you access,” she said.

“Industrial activity.”

She looked over my shoulder at the drawings, asked a question that revealed a genuine ambiguity, and then apologized for bringing work home to my work. I wrote the question down. We ate biscuits from the blue bowl while I explained what the part was meant to do.

When I left, I washed the cup because I had used it. The key went into the small pocket of my bag. It did not make the apartment mine. It made it possible to open the door when we had agreed I should be there, and that was already something I was glad to have.



The Open Door

On the morning of the evening we had chosen, Elena sent a message saying she had slept badly.

For a few seconds I looked at the screen without answering. I knew what the message might mean. I also knew it did not yet mean anything beyond what it said.

I asked whether she wanted to change the plan.

She replied that she wanted to see how the day went. I said that was fine, then put the phone down and discovered that fine was going to require some work. I had been looking forward to the evening with an intensity I had tried to disguise from myself. The possibility of changing it exposed the disguise.

I went to Daniel's to help pack equipment for his trip. He had arranged tools on the floor in categories that became less distinct as the morning progressed. I wrapped brackets while he searched for a cable he had been holding ten minutes earlier. He found it in his coat pocket and blamed the coat.

I told him I might be free that evening after all. He asked why. I said Elena was tired. He nodded and asked me to pass a box. He did not turn the information into a question about the relationship. I was grateful, though part of me wanted to explain how much better I was handling it than I might once have done.

We finished by lunchtime. The car contained everything except a long piece of timber he insisted was necessary and could not explain the purpose of. We rearranged three boxes to fit it in. When it was finally

secure, he stood back with the pleased expression I remembered from the broken chair in my hall.

“How long are you away?” I asked.

“Three weeks. You’ve asked me twice.”

“I’m practicing remembering.”

He gave me a spare key so I could collect his post. We both looked at it in my hand.

“Don’t look so moved,” he said. “The electricity bill comes on Tuesday.”

I laughed and put it beside Elena’s key in the bag. My life had become unexpectedly full of other people’s locks, all attached to practical requests.

At three Elena called. She had left work on time, eaten something, and slept for forty minutes. She still wanted the evening if I did. I said I did. She asked me to bring bread because she had forgotten it. The request relieved me by giving anticipation something ordinary to carry.

I arrived just after seven. This time I rang the bell. She opened the door wearing a dark shirt and looking like herself, which was both exactly what I wanted and more complicated than the image I had carried through the day. There was a tiredness around her eyes. There was also pleasure when she saw me.

“Come in.”

I handed her the bread. She looked into the bag and said I had bought enough for the week.

“You can freeze some.”

“The drawer beneath the freezer is full of chargers.”

We laughed. I took off my coat and left my phone in the bag. She noticed but said nothing. The gesture did not need to become proof of seriousness.

We ate first. She told me about a reader who had brought a magnifying glass large enough to require its own bag. I told her about Daniel’s timber. We disagreed over whether the soup needed more salt

and resolved the matter by putting the salt on the table. There were still occasions when a solution could be that simple.

After dinner we cleared the dishes together. She left the pan soaking. I asked whether she wanted it washed now. She said later. I left it.

In the sitting room, the books had shifted. The dictionary rested inside a plain enclosure Elena had finally made. It was not beautiful, but the loose page had somewhere to remain with the volume. The shelf beside it held the blue bowl when it was not in use. The room contained small evidence of the weeks we had lived through, none arranged for display.

Elena sat beside me and asked how I felt. I told her I was nervous. She said she was too.

I had imagined that this would reassure me immediately. Instead I wanted, for a moment, the earlier version of her who seemed always to know what came next. Then I remembered how much work it had taken her to maintain that appearance, and how often I had helped by pretending not to see the effort.

“We can keep it small,” I said.

“I want to.”

She asked whether there was anything I needed to say before we began. I told her that if I became quiet, I wanted her to ask rather than assume she knew why. She said she would, and that she might need to stop simply because she was tired. I said I understood. We let the words stand without improving them into promises about never being disappointed.

Then she held out her hand.

I took her hand. She stood, then waited while I got up beside her. For a moment we were both standing without a useful idea of where to go. The lamp threw our shadows across the dictionary. Mine obscured the shelf; hers reached the door.

“Stand there,” she said, pointing beside the chair.

I moved to it. I remembered folding my shirt on the first evening, attending to the sleeve as though a badly folded shirt might disqualify me. The chair had acquired a book and a cardigan since dinner. Elena

lifted both, looked for somewhere to put them, and finally laid them on the sofa.

“Shoes off.”

I bent to untie them. One lace had knotted. It took longer than it should have, and she waited while I worked at it. I could feel myself preparing an apology for the lace. When it came free I put the shoes together beneath the chair and stood again.

She was looking at my face. Her right hand rested on the back of the chair, the fingers spread. She lifted it when she saw me notice.

“I’m thinking,” she said.

“I wondered.”

“I know you did.”

She smiled, but the smile did not quite last. I had the impulse to make a joke large enough to carry us past the moment. Instead I waited. In the kitchen something shifted in the sink with a small metallic sound. Neither of us went to investigate.

“Hands by your sides.”

I had been holding one wrist with the other hand. I let go. The change was almost nothing, yet I felt exposed by it. There was less to do with myself. I looked at the buttons on her shirt, then at the place where the fabric had caught beneath her watch.

She came closer and straightened one of my cuffs. I had rolled it for the dishes and left it crooked. She began to straighten the other, stopped, and asked whether I was all right with her touching me.

“Yes.”

“You went very still.”

“You told me to stand.”

“I didn’t tell you to hold your breath.”

I let it out. She laughed once, with relief, and finished the cuff. Her hands were less certain than I remembered. Or perhaps I had spent the earlier evenings looking elsewhere when certainty would have been difficult to maintain.

She returned to the sofa. I thought she meant me to follow and moved before she spoke. She raised a hand, and I stopped.

“There, for another minute.”

The old embarrassment arrived promptly. I had anticipated the wrong thing. I knew how little it mattered and still wanted to correct it with something more impressive than standing in the place she had indicated.

She sat down and moved the cardigan from beneath her. “I needed somewhere to sit.”

I looked at her. She was not smiling at my mistake. She was making room beside the book, pushing it along the cushion with the back of her hand.

“Color?”

I considered the question. There was nervousness, and a wish to get the evening right that had survived all our sensible conversations. There was also the fact that I wanted to be in this room, doing this small thing she had asked.

“Green.”

“Tell me if that changes.”

“I will.”

She nodded. I stayed where I was. A car passed below the window with its radio loud enough for one line of a song to arrive and disappear. Elena glanced toward it, then back at me. I was grateful that her attention could move and return without either of us explaining where it had been.

After a while she said, “Come here.”

I crossed the room. She asked me to kneel beside the sofa. I lowered myself and found that one knee objected to the floor. I shifted my weight. She reached for a cushion, then stopped with it halfway toward me.

“Would that help?”

“Yes.”

She passed it over. I arranged it beneath me. The cushion was too soft at first; I folded it and tried again. She watched this negotiation with the expression she used when I was doing something slowly in her kitchen.

“There?”

“There.”

She put her hand on my shoulder. I looked down. There was a pale thread on the rug near her foot, and beyond it a dent where the chair had stood before she moved it. I could remember another evening in this position without being able to recover exactly what either of us had said. At the time I had expected to remember every word.

Her hand moved away. I looked up too quickly.

“My sleeve,” she said.

It had caught on the edge of her watch again. She freed it and put her hand back. I felt foolish, then irritated with myself for being foolish. I had not come here to spend the evening supervising my responses. She could probably feel the effort through the shoulder beneath her palm.

“Alex. Look at me.”

I did, though my eyes went first to her mouth. She waited until I met her gaze. Up close, the tiredness I had noticed at the door was still there. I had wanted the evening to erase it for her, which was generous of me only if I ignored how much I wanted in return.

“What happened just then?” she asked.

“I thought you’d changed your mind.”

“About touching you?”

“About this. I know it was your sleeve.”

“You can know and still tell me.”

I nodded, then said yes because she was waiting for words. She looked down at her hand on my shoulder. For a few seconds I thought she might withdraw it again to demonstrate something. She did not.

“I don’t quite know what the next part is,” she said.

The admission frightened me less than it had on the sofa. There was already something happening. I could feel her hand, the cushion beneath my knees, the small discomfort of holding her gaze without arranging an expression for it.

“This part’s all right,” I said.

She looked at me carefully. “For me too.”

We stayed that way. I had imagined returning to the ritual as a sequence we would both remember once the first movement was made. Instead she asked me to turn slightly so that she did not have to reach. I moved too far, and she guided me back with a touch at my shoulder. We found a position neither of us had to work to maintain.

After a minute she asked me to give her my hand. I put it in hers. She turned it over and examined the mark a bracket had left near the base of my thumb while I was helping Daniel. It was shallow and already fading.

“Packing?”

“Apparently brackets have corners.”

“A difficult discovery.”

She set my hand on her knee and covered it with hers. Her fingers rested loosely. I could move them if I wanted to. I wanted, very distinctly, to leave them where they were.

The minute lengthened. My attention kept wandering: to the train home, to whether she would ask me to stay, to a sentence June had questioned. Each time I noticed, I tried to return without making the wandering another piece of evidence against myself. Elena closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them she looked surprised to find me watching.

“What?”

“Nothing. You can close them.”

“I’d like to see you.”

The words were simple enough to answer. I stayed. Once her thumb moved across the back of my hand, then became still. I heard footsteps in the hall and a key that would not turn on the first attempt. Someone muttered. Elena’s mouth curved. We listened until the door opened.

She drew a breath that seemed intended for another instruction. It became a yawn. She covered her mouth and looked annoyed with herself.

“I’m tired,” she said.

I waited. It was possible that she was merely telling me. Then she took her hand from mine and sat a little farther back.

“I want to stop here.”

There it was: sooner than I had imagined. I felt disappointment before I could prepare a more acceptable feeling. Alongside it came the old question about what I had done wrong. I looked at her and could see that she was waiting to discover how much work stopping would require.

“All right,” I said.

I moved my hand from her knee. She watched me shift off the cushion.

“You don’t have to get up immediately.”

“My foot’s asleep.”

“Then you probably do.”

She offered her hand. I used it to stand, awkwardly, and waited while feeling returned to my foot. The pins and needles were sharp enough to occupy me completely for a moment. When I looked at Elena again she was rubbing the back of her neck.

“I wanted longer,” I said.

Her hand stopped.

“I don’t mean you should change your mind.”

“I know.” She looked at the empty place beside her. “I wanted to have more energy.”

I sat down. The cushion I had used remained on the floor, folded into a shape it was unlikely to recover from without help. I left it there. I did not ask when we could try again. I wanted to know, but she had just said she was tired, and we still had an evening to finish.

“Was that enough for tonight?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She turned toward me as though she wanted to be sure I had heard the last two words.

“For tonight,” I said.

Her shoulders eased. She took my hand again, briefly, then stood. This time, when she let go, I watched her walk toward the kitchen without trying to work out whether the movement contained another instruction.

Afterward she brought water and sat beside me. Her hand rested on my shoulder, warm through the cloth. We listened to someone in the building dragging a chair across a floor. The sound repeated, stopped, repeated again.

“Daniel would have advice,” I said.

“Daniel would have a chair.”

I laughed. She leaned against me, and the laughter ended quietly.

We stayed there for a while. There was no test to pass in the silence. I did not need it to prove that we had recovered everything. Some things had changed. I could feel the changes in the way she asked, the way I answered, the ease with which either of us could move from stillness into speech. What we had built earlier had made this possible, but it had not made it inevitable.

Eventually she said she was hungry again. We went to the kitchen and cut more bread. I washed the pan while she found cheese. She stood beside me eating a crust and asked whether I wanted to stay the night.

“Yes.”

“I’ve got an early start.”

“So have I.”

We checked the times and discovered that her early start was nearly an hour earlier than mine. She said I could sleep through it. I said this depended on how quietly she searched for things. She threatened to put every charging cable in the bedroom and withdraw all explanations.

In the morning she woke before the alarm. I heard her moving in the kitchen and lay still for a minute, deciding whether to get up. The room was pale with early light. A book lay open on the chair, held by its own weight at a page she had not finished.

I got up. She was standing at the counter in her work clothes, eating a piece of toast too hot to hold comfortably. She looked pleased to see me and mildly annoyed that I had witnessed her dropping crumbs into the cutlery drawer.

“You could still be asleep.”

“Apparently not.”

I made coffee. She found her notes. We moved around each other with less grace than we had managed the night before and more familiarity. At the door she realized the folder she needed was on the table. I passed it to her. She kissed me, then went back for the scarf.

“You can stay until you need to go,” she said.

I nodded. She left, and the apartment became quiet around me.

For a few minutes I stood in the kitchen, aware of being alone in a place that was important to us without needing to turn the experience into possession. I washed the cups. I opened my laptop and worked for half an hour on a sentence for the filing company. It was an awkward sentence about a removable divider. The fact that I was in Elena’s kitchen did not make it less awkward.

At nine I packed my bag. I checked the window because we had agreed I would, left the bread wrapped on the counter, and locked the door. On the stairs I met a neighbor carrying groceries. I moved aside to let her pass. She thanked me and continued upward without needing to know who I was.

Outside, the day had already begun. A delivery driver was arguing with a parking meter. The bakery was opening its door. I bought a coffee for the journey, then remembered I had already had one and drank it anyway.

There was a message from June on the train. The final version of the story was ready for my approval. I opened the attachment and read the first page. My name sat beneath the title. The sight gave me a pleasure I did not need to make smaller. I found one missing word, marked it, and kept reading.

Elena sent a message an hour later asking whether I had slept enough. I said yes, and asked the same. She said enough to know she would go to bed early tonight. We had no plan to meet. I told her I would call the next day if she wanted. She said she did.

That evening I stayed home. I sent June the correction. I answered a client’s question. I watered the flowers, though they had begun to lose their petals, and put Daniel’s key somewhere I would remember it.

Before bed I opened a new document. For a long time there was nothing in it. Then I wrote a sentence about a woman arriving at a station carrying an empty suitcase. I did not know who she was or where she had come from. I did not give her Elena's face. I let her stand there long enough to begin becoming someone else.



Belonging

Three months later, Elena went back to the collection for two weeks.

She took fewer books and left the lamp where it was. Ruth sent a photograph before she arrived to prove that it still worked. Someone had put a plant beside it, and the shade now tilted slightly toward the armchair. Elena said she hoped nobody had tried to improve the wiring. I told her to ask the toaster.

We missed each other. We also worked, ate, forgot small things, and had days that were not organized around absence. On one evening I called later than I had promised because a meeting ran long and I failed to send a message. She was annoyed. I apologized. The conversation did not require either of us to pretend that we had learned this lesson permanently.

The story appeared in the small selection June sent out after the reading series. Daniel forwarded the link to three people before asking whether that was all right. I told him it was public now, then enjoyed being able to say it. There was no sudden transformation of my working life. A stranger wrote to say she recognized the man in the kitchen and did not particularly like him. I considered this a useful response, though it took me a day to do so.

Elena read the finished version on the train home. She told me she still disagreed with one sentence. I said I had kept it deliberately. She said she knew. We had the argument over dinner and failed to persuade each other, which allowed us to have it again the following week with more confidence.

Daniel returned from his installation job with photographs of an exhibition, a better opinion of his cousin, and a new complaint about how galleries measured time. The landlord's smaller increase remained smaller, though he still talked about moving. The chair survived. I sat on it whenever I visited and stopped mentioning the noise.

At the library, Beth's shelf became Beth's shelf. Elena did not take it back. The atlas exhibition closed, and the book returned to storage with its records and the repaired page properly placed. The wrong date on the old display label survived in a photograph someone had taken at the opening. Elena showed it to me once, indignant all over again, then laughed because there was nothing useful to do about that particular photograph.

The Temple continued. Sometimes it was central to our week. Sometimes work, illness, visitors, or ordinary tiredness pushed it aside. We did not treat every interruption as evidence about what we meant to each other. We did not always manage this gracefully. There were evenings when I wanted an answer she could not give, and evenings when she offered certainty because she was afraid I would hear uncertainty as refusal. We became better at noticing, not finished with the need to notice.

The words remained available. Yellow slowed us. Red ended things. Either of us could say them. Beyond the room, we used less elegant sentences: I need a minute. That hurt. I thought you meant something else. Can we start this conversation again? Their usefulness depended less on saying them perfectly than on leaving enough space for an answer.

We kept our own apartments. My key to hers lived beside Daniel's in the small pocket of my bag until I finally bought a ring for them. She had a key to mine by then, acquired after I locked myself out on a wet Tuesday. Neither key came with the expectation that a closed door was an insult. We usually called before arriving. Sometimes we arrived late. Sometimes we ordered food because both of us had assumed the other had eaten.

The woman with the empty suitcase became the beginning of a longer story. I wrote slowly. There were weeks when I produced pages and

weeks when I moved the same paragraph from one place to another, convinced that geography might solve a problem of language. Elena asked about the work without making progress a condition of her interest. Daniel asked whether anyone had opened a door yet. I told him he needed new material.

One evening I brought Elena a fresh section. We had eaten and cleared the table. Rain tapped the window. She was tired but wanted to read, so I gave her the pages and made tea while she found a comfortable place on the sofa.

I could have taken the chair. I sat on the floor with my head against her knee because I wanted to. She rested a hand in my hair, then took it away to turn a page.

The room was not perfectly quiet. A phone vibrated in my bag. Somewhere downstairs a door closed hard enough to rattle the window. Elena shifted her foot because it had gone numb. I moved to give her space, and she thanked me without looking up.

At a sentence near the bottom she frowned. I knew which one it was. I had reasons for keeping it and was already arranging them in my head. Then she read the sentence again, more slowly, and I let the reasons wait.

I waited for her to finish.

- *Orion Saint*

THE TEMPLE OF COMPLIANCE

What remains when the rules fall silent?

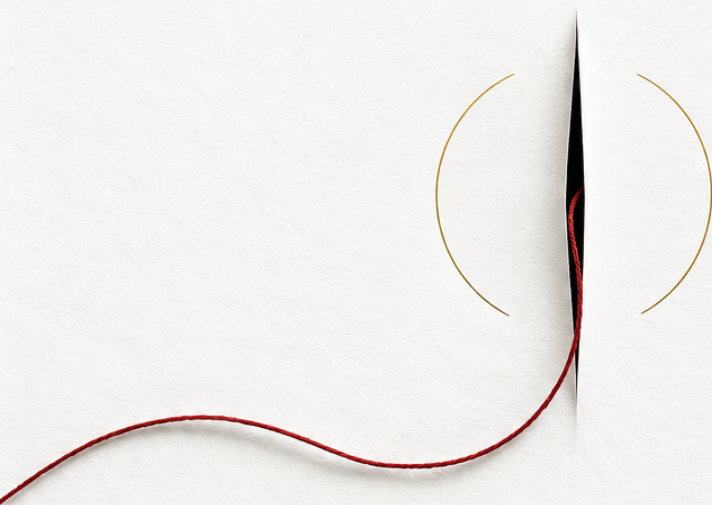
Elena restores fragile books. Alex longs for a place where he can stop thinking. When they meet in a dimly lit gallery, a careful conversation becomes a private world of precise orders and clearer limits.

They call it the Temple. Yellow slows. Red stops. But when Alex says Yellow, they must confront what obedience alone cannot answer: whether she wants only his surrender, or the man who offers it.

Through distance, doubt, and ordinary tenderness, they discover what it means to be known— and to stay when leaving is possible.

A story of power, trust, and the freedom to choose.

Explicit. Consensual. For adults only.



ORION SAINT