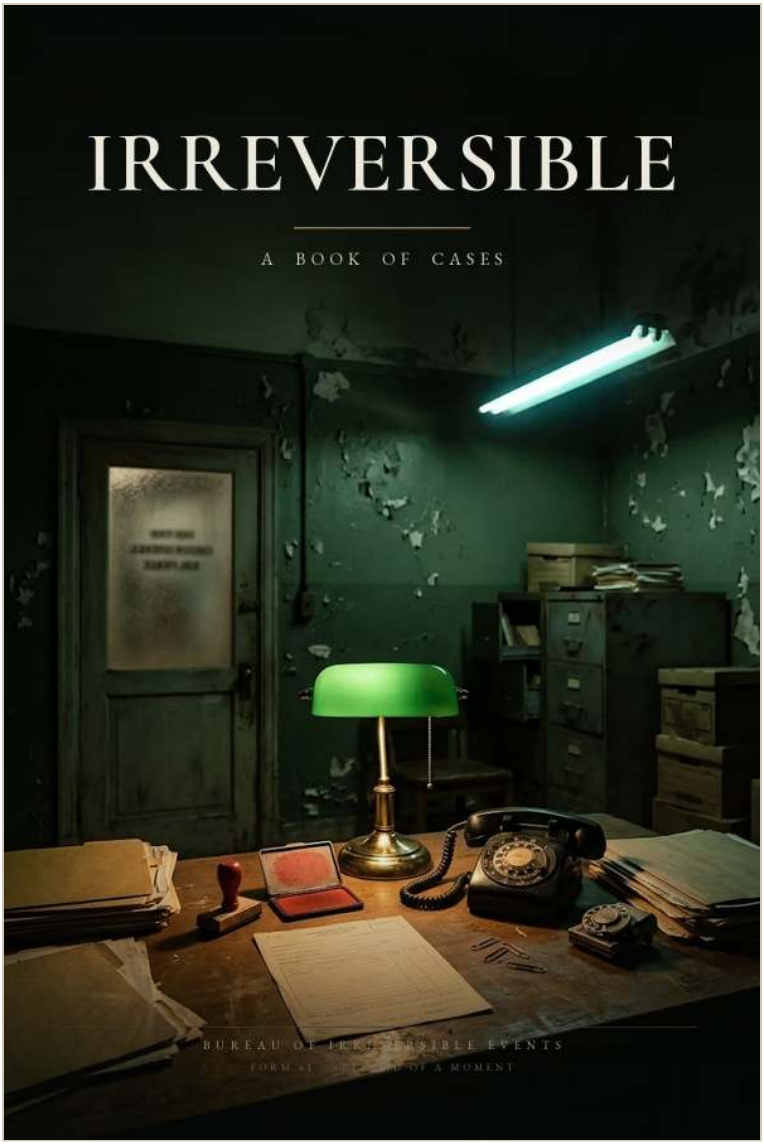
IRREVERSIBLE

A BOOK OF CASES





IRREVERSIBLE: A BOOK OF CASES

INCOPREA

Irreversible: A Book of Cases

TOBY MIKLE

ONE

Untitled

TWO

Untitled

Irreversible

THREE

Untitled

Irreversible

A Book of Cases

FOUR

Untitled

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons is coincidental.

The Bureau of Irreversible Events does not exist. The moments do.

Free edition · 2026

FIVE

Untitled

The Bureau

The Bureau of Irreversible Events was on the fourth floor of a building that had once been a hotel, and the lift had not worked since 1998, so everyone who came to register the worst day of their life arrived out of breath.

Mara had been the Clerk for eleven years. She had a desk, a lamp, a chair for the visitor, a form in triplicate, and a ledger the size of a suitcase. The ledger was the only thing in the room that mattered. It was bound in green board and it smelled of dust and glue, and it was kept open on a stand to the right of the desk, and the entries went back to 1953, and the ink had faded in the early years to the colour of weak tea.

The rules were on a card by the door, and Mara had long since stopped reading them aloud.

One. A moment may be registered only by the person who lived it.

Two. The fee is one hour of testimony. The testimony may take longer.

Three. The record cannot be changed. It may only be added to.

People came up the stairs with their envelopes and their photographs and their little bags of evidence, and they sat in the chair, and Mara said the same thing to every one of them.

“Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

. . .

The man in the wet coat came in at twenty past four, which was late, and he apologised for it, and Mara said it did not matter, and he sat down and put a plastic bag on his knees.

“I’d like to register something,” he said.

“That’s what we’re here for.”

“It’s not a big thing.”

“It doesn’t have to be big,” Mara said. “It has to be irreversible.”

He turned the bag round and round on his knees. Inside was a pair of spectacles, folded, in a case.

“My brother,” he said. “We had an argument about a car. In 1991. He said I had scratched it and I said I hadn’t, and I didn’t speak to him for thirty-one years, and then he died, and I found these in the drawer with the car documents.”

Mara took the bag and set it on the desk.

“What is the moment?” she said.

“The argument.”

“Which part?”

He thought about it. The lamp buzzed. Outside the window the city did what it did in the late afternoon, which was to go grey and quiet and then light up.

“When I put the phone down,” he said. “He was on the phone. He said, ‘Come and see the car,’ and I said, ‘I’m not coming,’ and I put the phone down. That was the moment. I knew it when I did it. I knew I wasn’t going to pick it up again.”

Mara opened the ledger and took up the pen.

“Name.”

“Josef Vrána.”

“Date of the moment.”

“Fourth of May, 1991.”

She wrote it. The pen scratched. The man watched her write, and then he said, “Is that it?”

“That’s the record.”

“Does it do anything?”

“No,” Mara said. “It records. That’s all it does. That’s all it’s ever done.”

He sat for a moment. Then he took the spectacles out of the case and put them on the desk, and said, “I don’t want these.”

“You can leave them.”

“Will someone use them?”

“No,” Mara said. “They’ll go in the box with the rest.”

He nodded. He stood up. He went to the door and stopped with his hand on the frame and said, “I thought it would be harder.”

“Most people do.”

He went down the stairs. Mara listened to him go — the fourth floor, the third, the second, the long corridor, the street door — and then she wrote the entry in the ledger, in the form the ledger

required, which was not the form on the card and not the form in triplicate but a single line in the green book.

Entry. Josef Vrána. 4 May 1991. The moment: he put the phone down and did not pick it up again.

She blotted it. She closed the ledger. She did not go home.

· · ·

The Bureau had been a hotel until 1953, and the rooms on the fourth floor had been the rooms where travelling salesmen stayed, and the room where Mara worked had been room 41, and the door still had the number on it, in brass, and the keyhole still had a key in it that fitted nothing.

She had a flat on the other side of the river. She had a cat, a television, and a sister in Canada. She had, in the way of women who have been alone for a long time, a set of habits that had hardened into architecture: the same walk to work, the same coffee, the same hour on the same bench in the square on Sundays.

She had been the Clerk for eleven years.

Before that she had been a clerk in the ministry of transport, and before that a student, and before that a girl in a house with a garden and a mother who sang in the kitchen. She did not think about the house. She did not think about the kitchen. She had arranged her life, carefully, the way you arrange furniture around a stain on the carpet, so that she would not have to look at it.

At six o'clock she locked the ledger in the cupboard, and turned off the lamp, and stood at the window, and looked at the city, and thought about Josef Vrána putting the phone down in 1991.

She thought: he waited thirty-one years to register a thing he knew when he did it.

She thought: I have waited longer than that.

Then she put on her coat and went down the stairs.

· · ·

The next morning there was a woman on the stairs at ten past nine, out of breath, with a folder under her arm, and Mara held the door for her and said, “Take your time. The stairs are the worst part.”

“The lift doesn’t work,” the woman said.

“No,” Mara said. “It hasn’t since 1998.”

They went in. The woman sat down. She put the folder on the desk and did not open it.

“I’d like to register a moment,” she said.

“Tell me the moment,” Mara said. “Not the story around it. The moment.”

· · ·

The ledger filled. The years went by in it. Mara wrote the entries in her small, even hand and said the same sentence to every person who came up the stairs, and the sentence worked on almost all of them, because almost all of them had been carrying the moment for so long that they had begun to mistake the story for the thing itself.

She never wrote her own.

She knew the shape of it. She knew the date, and the hour, and the number on the telephone. She knew what she had been wearing — a green dress, borrowed from her sister, with a stain on the sleeve from a glass of wine. She knew the song that had been playing when the phone rang, and she knew that she had looked at the screen, and seen the number, and put the phone face down on the table, and gone back into the party.

She knew all of it. She had known it for eleven years and for the years before that, and she had arranged her life around it the way you arrange furniture around a stain, and every morning she came up the four flights and sat behind the desk and opened the ledger and said, "Tell me the moment."

Somebody had to keep the record.

She had decided, a long time ago, that it would not be her.

. . .

The entries were all true. That was the thing about the Bureau: nothing in the ledger was a lie. People came up the stairs and told the truth, because the fee was an hour and the record could not be changed, and because there is a kind of relief in saying a thing once, in a room with a locked door and a person who does not judge.

Mara listened. She wrote. She went home. She came back.

. . .

The Bureau closed at five. The ledger stayed open on the stand. The lamp stayed on.

Mara sat at the desk with the pen in her hand and the green book open at the page she had never written, and outside the window the city did what it did in the late afternoon, which was to go grey and quiet and then light up.

She was forty-three years old.

She had been the Clerk for eleven years.

She had a moment to register.

SIX

Untitled

Case
The Consent

He woke in a beige room with a dry mouth. There had been voices in the corridor, and when he opened his eyes they stopped, or he had opened his eyes because they stopped.

The clock over the door said ten past one. His shoes were in a plastic bag, his coat over the back of a chair, and he lay still and went through all of it twice.

A nurse came in, her badge reading Nadine. She took his blood pressure and told him he could have all the ice he wanted.

"What was it?" he said.

"You're all set. Go through your envelope."

"What was the procedure."

"Dr Haddad doesn't do post-op. If you have a question for the doctor, call the office."

He sat up. Behind his right ear was a square of shaved skin with a piece of tape over it, and when he touched it Nadine told him not to touch it.

He asked her to call him a cab. She asked if there was someone to call for him. He said no, and she looked at her clip-

board and said, “You declined a driver,” the way she had said the room number, without any weight.

The cab came at twenty to two. He rode with the envelope on his knee. The trees on Hallam Road were bare. He didn’t remember them going.

. . .

On the stairs of his building he opened the envelope. There were two pages: an aftercare sheet and a photocopy of a form.

The form was in his handwriting.

Not only the signature. All of it. His capital I’s, his bad lowercase g, the way he crowded the ends of lines. He knew the hand from the outside.

It began: I, Emory Dolan, of 118 Hallam Road, am asking Northgate Surgical to perform Procedure 11.

Below that: I have been told what will be removed. Below that: I understand that it will not return and cannot be reviewed, amended, or appealed. Below that: I have not been pressured. I have not been misled. Below that: I do not wish to be contacted afterwards, by the clinic or by anyone acting for the clinic, regarding this procedure or its outcome.

His name was at the bottom, and the date, and he stopped there. People stop at their own name. The signature was a little grey, the way a copy goes.

The date was 21 October. Two weeks ago.

He had a good memory — twenty-six years of adjusting claims. He sat on the stairs with his coat open and tried to remember the twenty-first of October, and met a smooth wall.

Anaesthetic did that.

He went upstairs.

. . .

The flat was tidy in a way that felt like someone else's. There was a stack of cards on the hall table and a dish of something in the fridge with a name on a strip of tape. In the bedroom a dark suit hung on the back of the door, and he stood and looked at it, because he could not remember when he had last worn it.

In the breast pocket was a white card of the kind the funeral director prints, and he learned the date of his sister's death from a card in his own pocket.

Marion Dolan. 1966–2022. 26 October.

He sat on the edge of the bed with the suit across his knees. He thought first that it was a mistake. Then he thought about the cards and the dish in the fridge and the bare trees, and he called her.

The number was not in service.

He called the desk at her building and said who he was. The woman said, "Oh, Mr Dolan," in a voice that had changed. He hung up understanding that she thought he knew.

He called Claire.

She picked up on the fourth ring and said, "Emory." Not a question. Then she said, "It's been two weeks."

"Claire. Is Marion dead."

There was a silence long enough to be a room. Then she said, "I'll be home in twenty minutes. Don't come before that."

. . .

She had a semi-detached on Ridgeline with a storm door that didn't latch. She let him in and did not take his coat. She stood with her back to the radiator and said it in order, and he understood that she had been saying it in order to other people for a week.

Marion had died on Thursday the twenty-sixth, at four in the morning, at the hospice on Lemay. The funeral was the following Wednesday. Emory had come, and stood at the back in a dark suit and spoken to no one, and left before the burial.

"I called you on the Thursday," she said. "You said you were coming."

"I don't remember that."

"Don't."

"Claire."

"Don't do that." She said it quietly. "I'm not going to stand here and be told by you that it didn't happen."

"What was she like," he said. "At the end."

Claire laughed once, without any humour in it. "Now you want to know."

"Yes."

"She waited for you. She had them put her chair by the door. She said, 'He's coming Saturday, he'll be here Saturday.'" Claire looked at the window. "She wanted you to sit with her. That's the whole thing. She said to me, 'I don't need him to do anything. I need him to sit here.'"

He had no answer. He was a man who could get a hospice bed, a wheelchair, a prescription, a continuing-care assessment. He had done all of it in August, and done it well.

He remembered the last Sunday. The window looked at a multi-storey car park, and at the end of the visit Marion said, “Don’t say Tuesday. Say you’ll come.” He laughed and said Tuesday. She said, “All right. Tuesday.” He kissed her forehead and sat in the car for a while before he drove home.

Everything after that Sunday was gone. Not dark — there was simply nothing there to walk into.

“You could always do the paperwork,” Claire said.

He touched the tape behind his ear, and Claire saw him do it.

“What is that.”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I had something done.”

Then she went out to the hall and came back with a cardboard box and set it on the floor between them. Inside were a framed photograph, reading glasses, a phone charger, and a folder of papers.

“Take her things. I’ve been carrying them in the car for a week because I didn’t want to come to your building and find you’d moved.”

He carried the box out to the car. She stood in the door.

“Are you eating?” she said.

“Yes.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

She shut the door.

. . .

Northgate Surgical was in a side street behind a tyre fitters. It was two days later. The woman at the records window, Mrs Brant, had the file up before he finished saying his name.

He asked what had been removed.

“That’s in Schedule A.”

“I’d like to see Schedule A.”

Mrs Brant read something on the screen. Then she said, “You declined access to Schedule A.”

“I what.”

“On the intake. There’s an election. You elected not to be told. It’s a standard election. People make it.”

“Can I change it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“There’s no mechanism,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Can any of it be reversed.”

“There isn’t a version of this where it comes back,” she said. “That’s the procedure. I’m not being smart with you.”

“Who decided that.”

“You did, Mr Dolan. In your own hand.” She said it not unkindly. “You were very thorough.”

He asked for the file. It was eight pages, and he sat with it in the car park with the engine off.

Six of the pages were forms. Would you like a counsellor present. No. Would you like to speak to the doctor about after-care. No. Would you like to be contacted at six months. No. Every

box on the right-hand side, in his handwriting, initialled in the corner.

He drove home. He made a sandwich and did not eat it. Then he got the consent form out of his coat, put it on the kitchen table under the lamp, and read it to the bottom, which he had not done.

Below his signature there was a box. It said: Reason for request (optional. Not part of the clinical record. Not read by the clinician performing the procedure.)

And in his handwriting, in blue ballpoint: I want to be able to look at her picture.

. . .

He read it three times. He sat back and heard the fridge and next door's television, and he understood that he had written it on the twenty-first of October, five days before she died, and that no one had read it since, including him.

He took the photograph out of the box.

It was in a frame with a chipped corner. Marion stood in the door of her flat with a plate in both hands, saying something to someone out of frame, her mouth open. He had taken it. He could see his own impatience in it, the way he had pressed the shutter before she was ready.

He turned it over. On the back, in her writing, in blue ballpoint: E. took this. I look like a bus.

He turned it face up again.

He waited to feel it. He was not aware of waiting. He looked at his sister's face and thought, with a kind of professional atten-

tion, that the picture was a little out of focus, and that a scan could probably bring it up.

He sat with her for a while.

. . .

It took him nine days to go. He came up the four flights and stood in the doorway until he had his breath.

He put the photograph on the desk, face up, and the form beside it.

“Tell me the moment,” Mara said. “Not the story around it. The moment.”

“The twenty-first of October.”

“And what was the moment.”

He sat with his hands on his knees. It was not the waking, or the funeral, or the telephone call in the empty flat.

“I wrote it out in my own hand and signed it,” he said. “She was still alive.”

Mara wrote it down. Then she blotted the page and said, “That’s the record.”

He put the photograph back in his coat.

Case 1. Emory Dolan. 21 October 2022. The moment: he wrote it out in his own hand and signed it, five days before his sister died.

SEVEN

Untitled

Case
The Clean Break

She came up the four flights with a folder under her arm. Mara said the stairs were the worst part.

“Tell me the moment,” Mara said. “Not the story around it. The moment.”

Vera had rehearsed: a date, a time, to be handed over like a passport at a border. But the room was warm and the chair was low and the pen was uncapped, and she heard herself begin at the beginning.

She did payroll for a chain of garden centres and was good at it the way some people are good at chess. She liked the instant the columns balanced. She was thirty-four and lived above a bakery on a road with plane trees. For seven years she had shared the flat with Iain Mercer. On a Sunday in February he took the dog, the bicycle and the good knife and left a note of three sentences under the salt cellar. She read it standing up with her coat still on. None of the sentences were about her.

That was the fact. The fact was not the problem.

The problem was that he was everywhere. In the music library, the shared calendar, the cloud account she had made when her phone died. In the phrase we'll see, which she had caught from him the way you catch a cold. She lay in bed at two in the morning scrolling through pictures of a kitchen she no longer had, and what she felt was not grief. It was a kind of procedural fury.

She did not want him back. She wanted to have chosen—to be the one who said it, kindly, and then went home and slept.

· · ·

The company was called Clean Break. The logo was an open door with nothing behind it. Removal of all material trace, the website said. Three tiers; the cheapest was Fresh Start at a hundred and ninety pounds. The middle one was Erasure, and she chose it before she had finished reading the page.

The offices were above a chemist on the ring road. Faye was past forty, in a grey cardigan, and the jug of water on her desk was not offered.

"Erasure is the full interior," Faye said. "The phone, the accounts, the cloud, the photographs, the flat. Documents, if they're yours to dispose of. We don't touch anything that belongs to him, and we don't do the law."

"Fine."

"Then there's the questionnaire. Everything. People underestimate this part."

It took an hour and ten minutes. She wrote down the accounts, the folders, the boxes in the loft, the storage unit they

had never emptied, and the fact that his mother was still in her phone as MUM, which had been a joke and was now a thing that had to go into a box on a form. Somewhere on the third page she understood she was writing an inventory of the whole seven years, and that when Faye filed it, it would be the last place where all of it existed in one document.

She finished it anyway.

Then Faye asked the question. “Do you want us to write to him?”

“What would it say?”

“That you’ve asked us to act for you. That all communication should come to this office. That anything sent to you will be returned unopened.” Faye’s pen was still. “Some find it helps. Some find it makes it worse. It isn’t in the tier. Thirty pounds.”

Vera thought about the note under the salt.

“Yes,” she said.

Faye printed the letter. It said Ms. Hollis had elected to cease all contact and that any further correspondence would not be read, and nothing at all about seven years. Then, before the signature block: Ms. Hollis is sorry that it has come to this.

“Take that out,” Vera said.

“It’s a courtesy.”

“Take it out.”

Faye took it out. Vera signed the authority and paid five hundred and ten pounds, and the receipt printed at 11:40 in the morning.

“If something comes to this address, we handle it,” Faye said. “If it goes somewhere else, it isn’t ours.”

. . .

They came on a Thursday, two of them, in a van, and were gone in four hours.

She came back at six. The flat was not empty. It was worse than empty. It was arranged. The nail holes were filled and painted a shade off, and she could see all fourteen of them above the sofa, small pale patches like a rash. The shelf held nothing.

The frames were in the hall cupboard. Fourteen of them, wrapped in newspaper, glass intact, the brass pins still in the back. The frames had not been his. The frames had been hers.

She stacked them in the cupboard and shut the door. They were only frames.

. . .

It worked. That was the part she could never make anyone understand afterwards. It worked completely.

She slept. She stopped checking. There is a particular tiredness that comes of looking for a person in every room, and when it lifted the relief was so large it was almost boring. Ruth said she seemed lighter, and Vera said she was lighter, and both of them meant it.

The measure of it was not that she stopped missing him. It was that she stopped looking. A year went by. She got a new phone. She put a plant in the window.

. . .

The text came in October, from a number she didn't know.

Hi, is this Vera? I've just moved into the flat above the bakery. There's a bag of post here for you. Chloe.

She read it on the bus and put the phone in her pocket and took it out again at the next stop.

They arranged it by text over four days, the way you arrange a parcel. Chloe was nineteen and had a flat of her own for the first time and was conscientious in the way of someone who has just discovered that the world runs on other people's small decencies. The woman downstairs had collected the post and meant to tell the letting agent and hadn't, so it sat in the hallway cupboard in a supermarket bag. There was also a shoebox of your things.

"Do you want me to send the lot?"

"Yes," Vera wrote. "Please."

She could have said no. She has thought about that since, at two in the morning. She could have said bin it and had a clean life and never known. She said yes in eight seconds, on a Tuesday, outside the garden centre with her lanyard in her hand.

. . .

They came one at a time. Chloe found one, posted one. Eleven envelopes over six weeks, in a padded bag, out of order.

His handwriting. She had not seen it in almost two years, and it went through her like a dropped tray.

The first was a card from a petrol station. Four lines: her name was still on the water account, the company had rung him, he had sorted it, sorry to bother her. On the back of the envelope, in pencil: From the bag in the hall—C.

The second had a photograph of the dog.

The third apologised for a sentence he had said at a party four years earlier, a sentence she had entirely forgotten and he had apparently carried home with him.

She read them out of order, then in the order they were written.

He had been writing to her since the April after he left. Eleven letters across ten months, posted to an address where she no longer lived, because she had never put a redirection on the flat—she had moved four streets away and trusted a boy at a letting agent's desk who had said no problem and had not written it down.

Every one of them was written after her letter. The one on the Clean Break paper that said she had elected to cease all contact. She had had a line taken out of it and thought she was being dignified.

One said: I know you asked me not to. I'm not going to keep doing it. I just want to know if you got the others, because if you didn't get the others then I'm talking to a wall, and I'd rather know.

Then in December a second padded bag came, with one envelope in it and a note from Chloe.

This one was already open when I found it. The letter's not in it. Sorry. C.

The envelope was his. First-class stamp, posted in February. She held it up to the window and there was nothing in it to see.

. . .

She did one thing. On a Sunday, in the car park behind the Co-op, she typed a message to a number she still knew by heart—they had deleted the contact, and the contact was not where the number had been kept—and looked at it, and deleted it before she sent it.

She understood, with the engine off, that she had just done, with her own thumbs, in eleven seconds, the thing she had paid five hundred and ten pounds for other people to do.

The shoebox went on the shelf where the photographs had been. It was the only thing on the shelf. She kept the empty envelope inside the cover of a book she did not read, and did not tell Ruth, and did not tell anyone.

In February she looked up the Bureau's opening hours and wrote them on the back of her hand.

· · ·

Mara wrote for a while, then read it back: the date, the company, the line about the letter.

"That isn't the moment," Vera said. "There were letters after it. That's what happened to me."

"Then you can register that another time," Mara said. "It's a different fee." She turned the page. "The fee for this one is one hour of testimony. You've paid it."

"I haven't paid anything."

"You've been talking for an hour," Mara said.

Vera put the folder on the desk and did not open it. "I brought the letters. The receipt. The photograph of the dog."

"I don't need them."

“They’re evidence.”

“You can leave them,” Mara said. “They go in the box with the rest.”

Vera thought about the box with the rest, and about the fourteen frames in the cupboard with their pins still in the back. Then she put the folder under her arm again and stood up.

Case 2. Vera Hollis. 19 March 2023. The moment: she had them take the line that said she was sorry out of the letter, and signed.

EIGHT

Untitled

Case
The Interpreter

The word was mercy.

Alena had been interpreting for nineteen years, and she had a rule, which was that she translated what was said and not what was meant. It was a good rule. It had kept her employed at four ministries and two courts and one war-crimes tribunal, and it had kept her out of the rooms where the meaning was more important than the words.

The room in Vienna was on the fourth floor of a hotel that had been a palace, and there were eight people at the table, and the subject was a border that had been in the wrong place since 1991.

The man across the table was called General Vuković. He was sixty-one and he had a good watch and he had, according to the file that Alena had not been given but had read anyway, been in the room in 1995 when her father was taken off a bus.

Her father had been a schoolteacher. He had been taken off a bus with sixteen other men and had not come back, and the file said that General Vuković had signed the transport order, and the tribunal had never been able to prove it, and Alena had

known this for eleven years, and had never said it to anyone, and had built her life around the way you build a wall around a well.

"Tell them," the general said, in Serbian, "that we are prepared to show mercy on the question of the villages."

Alena looked at the paper in front of her. The word sat there like a stone.

She said, in English: "The general says they are prepared to accept the surrender of the villages."

The room changed. She watched it change. The delegation on the other side had been ready to negotiate; now they were being asked to surrender, and they straightened their backs, and the woman at the head of the table said, "That is not what we were told," and the general said, in Serbian, "What did she say?"

And Alena said, in Serbian, "They are considering it."

. . .

The talks collapsed in the afternoon. The border stayed where it was. The villages stayed where they were, on the wrong side, and in the spring there was a police action, and in the summer there was a reprisal, and by the autumn the word mercy had become a thing that people said to each other in the camps with a bitterness that Alena could hear in her sleep.

She was decorated in November. The ministry gave her a medal for nineteen years of service and a speech about bridges, and she stood in a room with a flag and a photograph of the president and accepted it, and the medal was heavy and cold and she put it in a drawer and never took it out.

She did not tell anyone what she had done. She told herself, for a long time, that she had not done anything: she had been tired, the general had a thick accent, the room was hot. She had said a word. Words are not acts. She had spent nineteen years believing that.

Then, in the spring, she read in a newspaper that the general had died, and that his funeral would be in the town where her father had taught school, and she went.

. . .

She stood at the back of the church with her coat still on. The general's family was in the front row. The priest said the things that priests say. A man beside her, an old man with a cane, said, "You're the interpreter."

"Yes."

"I saw you on the television. In Vienna."

"Yes."

"He said mercy," the old man said. "I was in the room next door, with the delegation. I heard the English. You said surrender."

Alena looked at the coffin.

"He said mercy," the old man said again, and then he said, "My son was in the villages," and he walked away down the aisle.

. . .

She went to the Bureau three days later.

The clerk was a woman of about forty, with a lamp and a ledger and a chair for visitors, and she said, “Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

Alena sat with her hands in her lap.

“I was interpreting,” she said. “At a negotiation. The man said one word and I said another.”

“Which word?”

“He said mercy. I said surrender.”

The clerk wrote it down. The pen scratched.

“Why?” the clerk said.

Alena had thought about this for eleven years. She had a hundred answers: the accent, the heat, the tiredness, the file, her father, the bus, the sixteen men.

“Because I wanted him to be the kind of man who would say mercy,” she said, “and I wanted to be the kind of woman who would make him say it. And when he said it, I could not let him have it.”

The clerk wrote. The lamp buzzed.

“Does it do anything?” Alena said. “The record.”

“No,” the clerk said. “It records.”

Alena looked at the ledger, at the line that was being written, at the small, even hand.

“I have a medal,” she said. “For bridges.”

The clerk did not look up.

“Most people do,” she said.

. . .

Case 3. Alena Rybová. 14 March 2022. The moment: she said "surrender" when he said "mercy," and the villages were not surrendered, and the war came anyway.

NINE

Untitled



INCOPREA

Case

The Frame

The photograph was on the wall of every newspaper office in Europe for a month, and then it was on the wall of a museum, and then it was on the wall of the house where I grew up, in the hallway, between the coat hooks and the mirror, in a frame that my father had made himself.

I am the child in it. I was six. I am standing in the rubble of a street in a town that was under siege, and I am holding a plastic bucket, and I am looking at the camera, and there is dust on my face and light behind me, and the photograph won a prize and helped to end a siege and is, according to the citation, a portrait of innocence in the wreckage of war.

The photographer's name is Marek Dvořák. He is seventy-one. He lives in a flat in Brno with a cat and a bad hip, and he is the man who pulled me out of the rubble, and the man who took me home, and the man I call Papa.

I did not know, until last year, that he was also the man who took the photograph.

. . .

He never talked about the war. He talked about the cat, and the football, and the price of coal. He had a darkroom in the cellar that smelled of vinegar, and when I was small I was allowed in on Sundays to watch the prints come up in the tray, and I remember the light and the smell and the way he held the tongs, and I remember that there was one drawer he kept locked.

I found the drawer when I was twenty-five, after he had a fall and I came to look after him. It was not locked any more. Inside were the negatives from the siege, and the contact sheets, and a folder marked with the name of the town.

The photograph was in the folder. I had seen it a thousand times, in the hallway, in the newspapers, in the museum. I had never seen the frame before it: the four negatives on either side, the street, the bucket, the girl looking at the camera — and

behind her, in the dust, a man with a camera, out of focus, moving towards her.

I sat on the cellar floor for a long time.

Then I went upstairs and asked him who the girl was.

He looked at me for a while. Then he said, “You know who the girl is.”

“I want you to say it.”

He said it.

“And you took the picture before you pulled me out.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He looked at his hands. “Because I was a photographer,” he said. “Because there was light. Because I had one frame left, and I thought: this is the picture that will stop it. And it did. And then I put the camera down and I pulled you out.”

. . .

I have been the girl in the photograph for twenty-two years.

It has been, on the whole, a good thing. It paid for my school; there was a fund. It got me into a university. It got me a job in a museum, where I am the curator of a permanent exhibition about the siege, and where the photograph hangs at the entrance, at eye level, with a caption that says The photographer’s image of a child in the ruins came to symbolise the resistance of the town.

I have given interviews. I have stood in front of the photograph and said that it is a portrait of hope. I have learned to say it in four languages.

I have also been recognised, in the way that the girl in the photograph is recognised: a man in a bar in Berlin who said he had dreamed about me; a woman in Paris who cried and held my hand; a politician who used the photograph in a campaign and did not ask. I have been a symbol for twenty-two years, and a symbol does not get to have a face, and I have been very tired.

None of that is the thing I came to register.

. . .

The thing I came to register is this.

He was my father for twenty-two years. He fed me and clothed me and sat up with me when I was ill and taught me to ride a bicycle and cried at my graduation. He never told me that he had taken the photograph before he pulled me out. He let me believe, for twenty-two years, that the photograph had been taken by someone else, at another time, and that he had found me afterwards.

I asked him why.

"Because you would have thought that I chose the picture first," he said. "And I did. And I have spent twenty-two years trying to be a man who did not."

"So the photograph is a lie."

"No," he said. "The photograph is true. The frame is the lie."

. . .

I sat in the Bureau for a long time before I said it.

The clerk waited. She had a good way of waiting: she did not fill the silence.

“He saved my life,” I said. “That’s the story. That’s the story I’ve told in four languages.”

“Yes.”

“But he took the picture first. And I have been the picture ever since. And he knew that. He knew that every time he looked at me, and every time he looked at the photograph in the hallway, and he never said.”

The clerk wrote.

“What is the moment?” she said.

I thought about it. It was not the day I found the negatives. It was not the day I asked him.

It was the evening of the day I found them, when I came upstairs and he was in his chair with the cat, and he looked at me and I looked at him, and I knew, and he knew that I knew, and neither of us said anything, and he turned the television on, and we watched the news, and the news had a story about a war somewhere else, and he said, “Terrible,” and I said, “Yes.”

That was the moment. The moment we became two people who knew.

. . .

Case 4. Irena Dvořáková. 9 September 2025. The moment: she sat with him and watched the news and said “yes,” and the frame stayed on the wall.

TEN

Untitled

Case
The Handle

The ejection seat was a Martin-Baker Mk.16, and the handle was yellow, and it was between his knees, and Anders had been flying for twenty-six years and had never pulled it.

The aircraft was a two-seat trainer. The student in the back was called Milan, he was thirty-two, he had a wife called Petra and a daughter called Ema who was four, and he had been in the back seat for eleven minutes when the engine caught fire.

The fire was not the kind of fire you see in films. It was a light on the panel and a smell, and then a loss of thrust, and then the aircraft began to descend in the way that an aircraft does when it has stopped being an aircraft and become a heavy thing in the air.

Anders ran the checklist. He ran it twice. The fire did not go out.

“Eject,” he said. “Eject, eject.”

The sequence in a two-seat trainer is that the back seat goes first. Anders pulled his own handle — that was the procedure; the interlock fired both seats, back then front — and there was the

sound, and the sky, and the seat, and then he was under a parachute in a field of winter wheat, and his back was broken in two places, and he lay in the wheat and looked at the column of smoke and waited for the second parachute.

It did not come.

· · ·

The investigation took nine months. The finding was that the rear seat had failed to fire: a fault in the initiator, a batch problem, a thing that had happened once before in 2016 and had been the subject of a service bulletin that had not been actioned on this airframe. Anders had pulled his handle at the correct moment. He had done everything correctly. The board cleared him, and the air force gave him a medal, and a pension, and a flat on the edge of town with a garden.

Petra came to the funeral in the rain with Ema in a coat that was too big for her. Anders stood at the back. He had been in hospital for six weeks; he had not been able to attend the first service, the one in the hangar, where the squadron had done the thing with the boots and the hat.

He went to the house afterwards, with the other pilots. Petra stood in the kitchen with a pot of coffee and did not cry. She looked at him once, across the room, and he looked away.

· · ·

She moved in next door in the autumn.

He did not know she had bought the house until the removal van arrived. It was a small house, the mirror of his own, with a garden that had gone to seed, and she stood in the driveway with a box of kitchen things and said, “Hello, Anders.”

“Petra.”

“I thought it would be good for Ema,” she said. “To be near the squadron. To be near you.”

He helped her carry the boxes. He fixed the gate. He mowed the lawn. On Sundays she cooked, and he came for dinner, and Ema grew up, and the three of them sat at the table in the kitchen of the mirror house and talked about the weather.

He did not know why she had come. He thought, for the first year, that she wanted something from him: an explanation, an apology, a share of the pension. He waited for it. It did not come.

In the second year he began to think that she had come because she was lonely, and that he was convenient. In the third year he began to think that she had come because she forgave him, and that the forgiveness was worse than blame.

In the fourth year he understood.

. . .

It was a Sunday in November. Ema was at her grandmother’s. The dinner was over and the plates were in the sink and they were sitting at the kitchen table with the bottle between them, and Petra said, “You never asked me.”

“Asked you what?”

“Why I came here.”

“I thought you’d tell me.”

She poured the last of the wine.

"The board cleared you," she said. "The fault was the seat. Everybody knows that. The service bulletin, the initiator, the batch. It's in the report."

"Yes."

"But I was in the hangar the day before the flight," she said. "I brought him his lunch. He was doing the walk-around and he was talking to the sergeant about the seat, and the sergeant said the modification hadn't been done, and Milan said he'd write it up."

Anders sat very still.

"He didn't write it up," he said.

"No."

"Because he wanted to fly."

"Because he was thirty-two," Petra said, "and he wanted to fly, and he thought it would be done next month."

She looked at him.

"He told you to eject," she said. "I read the transcript. The black box. The last nine seconds. He said, 'Get out, get out, I'm not getting out.' He knew the seat was u/s. He knew the interlock wouldn't fire his. He told you to go."

Anders put his hands flat on the table.

"You knew," he said.

"I've known for four years," she said. "I came here to hear you say it."

"Say what?"

"That you knew."

He looked at the window. Outside, the street lamp did what it did. In the mirror house, the kitchen light was on, and Ema's bicycle was against the wall, and the whole ordinary life of the street went on.

"I knew," he said.

"Say it properly."

"I knew the seat was unserviceable, and I knew that when I pulled the handle he would not come out, and I pulled it anyway, because the aircraft was on fire and because I was frightened, and because I have spent four years telling myself that I did not know."

Petra nodded, slowly.

"Thank you," she said.

She got up and took the bottle to the sink. Then she said, without turning round, "Ema thinks you're a hero. She has the photograph of the two of you on her wall. Don't tell her. Not yet. When she's older, I'll tell her, and then you can tell her the rest."

She washed the glasses. Anders sat at the table with the wine in front of him and did not drink it.

. . .

Case 5. Anders Holm. 12 February 2019. The moment: he pulled the handle.

ELEVEN

Untitled

Case
The Lesson

Karel had taught swimming for thirty-one years, and in that time he had thrown forty-two children into the deep end.

It was a method. It was not a good method, and it was not a bad method, and it was not a method at all, really; it was the thing you did when a child had been standing at the rail for twenty minutes with his toes curled over the edge and his mother watching from the bench and the lesson clock running down. You threw him in. You jumped in after him. He came up spluttering and furious and alive, and by the end of the lesson he could swim, or he could at least float, and the mother would say, “I don’t know how you do it,” and Karel would say, “He was ready.”

Oskar was eight. He had been afraid of the water since he was four, when he had fallen into a pond at his grandmother’s and had to be pulled out by his coat. He had had eleven lessons. He could put his face in. He could not let go of the rail.

On the twelfth lesson his mother came to the edge of the pool instead of the bench.

“Mr. Karel,” she said. “His father is ill. He has maybe a month. He wants to see the boy swim before he goes. He talks about it. He says, ‘I want to see him swim.’”

Karel looked at the boy at the rail. The boy was thin and pale and had his father’s hands.

“He’s not ready,” Karel said.

“I know.”

“It could go badly.”

“I know,” she said. “Please.”

Karel looked at her for a long time.

“All right,” he said.

. . .

He did it at the end of the lesson, when the pool was quiet. He swam out to the deep end and trod water and said, “Oskar. Come on. Jump to me.”

The boy stood at the rail.

“I’ll catch you,” Karel said.

The boy looked at his mother. His mother nodded.

He jumped.

Karel caught him. That was the thing that everybody agreed on afterwards: Karel caught him. He caught him and held him and the boy clung to him and Karel said, “There. There. You see?” and the boy laughed, a wet, frightened laugh, and then Karel let go — because that was the method, because you had to let go, because a boy who has been caught once will let you let go — and the boy went under.

It should have been two seconds. It was two seconds. Karel reached down and got a handful of hair and pulled him up, and the boy came up and coughed and was sick on the tiles, and the mother was there with a towel, and the lesson was over.

The boy was fine. He was fine for six days. He was fine at his father's bedside, where he told him he had jumped, and his father cried and said he was proud. He was fine at school on the Thursday.

On the Friday he was found in the bath at home, face down, and the coroner said it was a seizure, an epilepsy that nobody had known about, and that it could have happened anywhere, in the bath, in bed, in the street, and that it had nothing to do with the pool.

Karel went to the funeral. The mother saw him at the back and came down the aisle and took both his hands.

"Thank you," she said. "He got to tell his father."

. . .

He kept teaching. What else was he going to do? He was fifty-five, he had a mortgage, he had a knee that needed replacing. He taught the children at the rail and he did not throw them in any more. He had a new method: he got in the water himself and held out his hands and waited, and sometimes it took four lessons and sometimes it took eleven, and the mothers on the bench looked at their phones.

In September a new boy started. He was eight, thin, pale, with his hands that were too big for his wrists, and his name, on the register, was Oskar.

Karel read it and put the register down.

“Oskar,” he said, at the rail.

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you swum before?”

“No, sir.”

“Are you frightened?”

The boy looked at the water.

“Yes, sir.”

Karel got into the pool. He stood in the shallow end with his hands out and the water at his waist.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll catch you.”

The boy looked at his mother on the bench. His mother nodded.

He jumped.

. . .

Case 6. Karel Beneš. 14 April 2017. The moment: he let go of the rail.

TWELVE

Untitled

Case
The Deed

The house was on a street of walnut trees in a town north of Brno, and Tomáš had grown up in it, and his father had grown up in it, and it had been in the family since 1938.

His father was eighty-four and had dementia, and the dementia had been getting worse for three years, and in the spring Tomáš made the decision that every child of a failing parent eventually makes, which was to sell the house and move his father into a flat near the care home, where he could be looked after.

The sale took four months. The buyers were a young couple with a child. The price was fair. Tomáš signed the deed on 12 May 2023, in a lawyer's office in Brno, and afterwards he drove north and told his father, who was sitting in the garden of the care home with a blanket over his knees.

"We sold the house, Papa."

His father looked at him.

"Which house?"

"The house on Walnut Street."

His father thought about it for a while. Then he said, “That’s a good house. Your mother planted the roses.”

“Yes.”

“Who bought it?”

“A young couple. They have a little girl.”

“Good,” his father said. “It should have a child in it.”

. . .

The trouble started in June.

Tomáš got a call from the care home: his father had walked out. He had taken the key to the house from the drawer beside his bed, and he had walked two kilometres to Walnut Street, and he had let himself in, and the young couple had found an old man in their kitchen, making tea.

He was confused, not aggressive. The police were kind. The young couple were kind. Tomáš drove north and collected him, and his father said, “I don’t know what the fuss is about. It’s my house.”

“It’s not, Papa. We sold it.”

His father looked at him with an expression that Tomáš had learned to recognise over the last three years: the expression of a man who is being told something that does not match the world.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “I’d know if I’d sold it.”

. . .

It happened again in July. It happened again in August. Each time, the care home apologised, and each time Tomáš drove

north, and each time his father said, “It’s my house,” and each time Tomáš explained, and each time his father looked at him as if he were a stranger who had come to steal something.

In September, Tomáš went to the Bureau.

He had heard about it from a colleague. He did not entirely believe in it; he was an accountant, and he believed in documents, and the Bureau was, as far as he could tell, a room with a ledger in it and a woman who listened. But he went, because he did not know what else to do.

The clerk was called Mara. She had a lamp and a ledger and a chair for visitors, and she said, “Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

“The moment I signed the deed,” Tomáš said.

She wrote it down.

“The trouble is,” he said, “he doesn’t remember the sale. He remembers the house. He remembers the roses and the walnut tree and the room he slept in as a boy, and every time he goes back there he is a man coming home, and I am the man who took it from him.”

The clerk looked at him.

“Did you tell him before you sold it?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘It’s a good house. It should have a child in it.’”

The clerk wrote something. Then she said, “There is an earlier record.”

“What?”

“In the ledger. From 1998.” She turned the green book towards him, and there was an entry in a different hand, faded, in the same form. “A man came in and registered a moment. He said: ‘I sold my father’s house to pay for my son’s school, and my father never knew.’”

Tomáš looked at the entry.

The name was his father’s.

· · ·

He drove north that evening. His father was in the day room with the television on.

“Papa,” he said. “Did you sell the house? In 1998?”

His father looked at the television.

“In 1998 you needed the school in Brno,” he said. “The fees. Your mother said we couldn’t. I sold the house and we rented it back from the man who bought it, and he let us stay because he was a decent man, and I never told you.”

“You sold it.”

“I sold it,” his father said. “And then I bought it back in 2004, when the money came in. And I never told you that either.”

Tomáš sat down on the chair beside him.

“So the house I sold in May,” he said, “was the house you sold in 1998 and bought back in 2004.”

“Yes.”

“And you were trying to tell me.”

“I was trying to tell you,” his father said, “but I couldn’t remember how the story went. I knew the house. I knew the

roses. I knew you were the one who took it, and I knew it wasn't your fault, and I couldn't get the two things to sit together."

He looked at Tomáš.

"Did you sell it?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Was it a good price?"

"Yes."

"Good," his father said. "It should have a child in it."

. . .

Case 7. Tomáš Hájek. 12 May 2023. The moment: he signed the deed to a house his father had sold and bought back and never told him about.

THIRTEEN

Untitled

Case
The Identification

The man's name was Radim Král, and he was forty-one when they took him, and he was sixty-one when they let him out, and in between he had grown a beard and lost a marriage and learned to play the guitar.

Hana was the witness. She had been twenty-three, a barmaid, and she had been walking home at two in the morning when she saw a man in a blue coat come out of the alley behind the hotel, and she had seen the blood on his hands, and she had run.

She had not seen his face. She had seen the coat, and the way he walked, and the man in the lineup — six men, the fourth from the left — had the coat and the walk, and she had said, "That one," with more certainty than she felt, because the detective had told her that it was all right, that she should take her time, that the man who did it was in the lineup.

The detective was her husband.

. . .

His name was Pavel. They had been married for two years, and he worked in the homicide unit, and the case was his case, and the dead man was a hotel manager called Čermák, who had been stabbed four times in an alley behind his own hotel, and the newspapers had been very excited about it.

Pavel had stayed up with Hana after the identification. He had made her tea and held her while she cried and told her she had done the right thing, she had been brave, she had put a monster away.

"Was it him?" she had said. "Pavel, was it him?"

"It was him," Pavel said. "Don't worry. It was him."

. . .

Radim Král had an alibi, which was that he had been at his mother's in Bratislava, and the alibi was supported by his mother and by a bus ticket, and the jury did not believe it because the mother was the mother and the bus ticket could have been bought by anyone.

He had a previous conviction for assault, from 1996, when he had been twenty. That was the thing that did it. That was the thing the prosecutor held up in her closing: a man who would do that would do this.

Hana did not find out until 2022, when the case was reviewed under a new law and the DNA on the coat was tested and did not match Radim Král.

The DNA matched Pavel.

. . .

It came out slowly, the way these things do. The hotel manager had been having an affair with a woman who worked at the hotel, and Pavel had been having an affair with the same woman, and there had been an argument in the alley, and a knife, and Pavel had gone home to his wife and said, “I’ve been at the office.”

Hana did not remember any of this at the trial in 2024, because she was not at the trial. She was at home, in the flat she had bought after the divorce, and she watched it on the news with her daughter.

Her daughter was nineteen. Her daughter was studying to be a teacher. Her daughter, in the autumn, came home from her first placement at the primary school on the hill and said, “Mum, I’ve got a man in my class. He’s the assistant. He’s called Radim. He’s really nice. He’s got a beard and he plays the guitar.”

. . .

She went to the school on the Tuesday.

She stood at the gate at home time and watched Radim Král come out with the children. He was sixty-three. He had a beard and a guitar case and a limp, and he was helping a boy with a backpack, and the boy was laughing.

He saw her.

She did not know what she had expected: that he would not know her, that he would be angry, that he would shout. He looked at her for a moment, and then he said, “You’re the one who pointed.”

“Yes.”

He nodded, slowly.

"I don't blame you," he said. "You saw a coat."

"I saw a coat."

"The detective," he said. "Your husband. He told you it was me."

"He told me."

"And you believed him."

"I believed him."

Radim shifted the guitar case from one shoulder to the other.

"I've got twenty years of believing him too," he said. "That's the thing nobody tells you. You don't get them back. You get an apology and a sum of money and a flat, and you get to play the guitar, and you don't get the years."

He looked at the school gate, where the children were going out in twos and threes.

"I'm not going to take your daughter's class," he said. "I asked for it. I asked for this placement. I wanted to see what it would be like to walk past you in the street."

He started to walk away. Then he stopped.

"'That one,'" he said. "That's what you said. In the lineup. 'That one.' I've heard it for twenty years. I hear it when I'm falling asleep."

He went down the hill with the guitar case, and Hana stood at the gate, and her daughter came out and said, "Mum, what are you doing here?"

. . .

Case 8. Hana Nováková. 9 November 1999. The moment: she pointed at the fourth man from the left.

FOURTEEN

Untitled

Case
The Seal

Father Ondřej had been hearing confessions for thirty-one years, and in that time he had heard murder twice.

The first was in 2003, a man who had killed his business partner and could not live with it. The second was his brother.

Milan came into the confessional on a Saturday in November, at the end of the hour, when the church was empty and the candles were guttering. He knelt and said the words, and then he said, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been twenty-nine years since my last confession.”

Ondřej knew his voice before he knew the words. He had known it since they were boys in a house with a pear tree in the garden. He said, “Go on.”

“I killed your wife,” Milan said.

The church was very quiet.

“I want to tell you how,” Milan said. “I want you to hear it in the way I have been hearing it.”

And he told him. He told him about the Tuesday in 1994 and the car in the lane behind the house and the way he had waited

until Anna came out with the bin. He told him that it was not an accident. He told him that he had done it because their father had left the house to Ondřej, and because Anna had said something to him at the funeral, and because he had been drinking for a week.

Ondřej sat in the dark with his hands on the shelf.

"You are confessing a murder," he said.

"I am confessing a murder."

"You know what this means."

"I know what it means," Milan said. "The seal. You cannot tell anyone. Not the police. Not the bishop. Not your God, because He already knows."

He said it without heat. He said it the way a man says a fact he has thought about for a long time.

"Why?" Ondřej said. "Why now?"

"Because I am dying," Milan said. "I have a year, maybe two. And I have discovered that I would like to be forgiven."

. . .

Ondřej gave him absolution.

He does not remember deciding to. He remembers his hands moving in the dark, and the words coming out of him in the old formula, and the sound of his brother crying on the other side of the grille, and then the door opening and the footsteps going down the aisle and out into the street.

He stayed in the confessional for a long time.

The seal is absolute. It is the one thing the Church will not bend: a priest may not reveal what he hears in confession, for any reason, to anyone, ever. He may not act on it. He may not arrange for someone else to act on it. He may not hint. He may not write it down. If a man confesses to murder, the priest carries it.

Ondřej carried it for four days.

On the fifth day he went to the police and said nothing. He stood outside the station for forty minutes and then went home.

On the ninth day he went to the bishop and said, "I need to speak to you about something I cannot speak about," and the bishop said, "Then you cannot speak about it," and gave him a glass of brandy.

On the twelfth day he stood in the sacristy after Mass and looked at the telephone, and thought about the buttons, and did not dial.

. . .

Milan came to Mass on Sundays.

He sat in the third row on the left, in a good coat, with his hands on his knees, and he took communion, and he shook the priest's hand at the door and said, "Good morning, Father," and went home.

The parish thought he was a good man. He gave money for the roof. He came to the Christmas fair. He was the priest's brother, and the priest's brother was welcome.

Ondřej said the Mass every week with his brother in the third row. He said the words of consecration with his brother in the

third row. He gave communion to his brother, and his brother's eyes were wet, every time, and the parish thought it was devotion.

. . .

The year passed. Milan did not die. The doctors said the treatment was working.

Ondřej began to sleep badly. He began to forget things at the altar. He began to sit in the church at night with the lights off, the way he had as a young man, and to say the only prayer he could still say, which was, "I don't know what to do."

In the spring he went to see his brother.

Milan was in the garden with a blanket over his knees and a rosary in his hand, and he looked up and said, "Father."

"I want you to make a statement," Ondřej said. "I want you to go to the police and tell them what you told me."

"Then you would not have to break the seal."

"I would not have to break the seal."

Milan looked at him for a long time. Then he said, "No."

"Why?"

"Because I have been forgiven," Milan said. "You did that. You can't undo it. If I confess to the police, I undo the absolution, and then I have to live with the murder again, and I would rather die with it shriven."

He took the rosary in both hands.

"Besides," he said, "you cannot tell anyone what I said. Not the police. Not the bishop. You cannot tell them that I confessed.

You can only tell them that I am a murderer, and you cannot explain how you know, and then you will be the priest who shopped his brother on no evidence, and the parish will hate you, and the Church will move you to a village, and I will still be a man who was never convicted."

. . .

Ondřej is still the priest of the parish.

Milan died in the autumn, of the illness, in his bed, with his rosary. The funeral was well attended. Ondřej said the Mass and did not speak about the murder.

He hears confessions on Saturday afternoons. He sits in the dark with his hands on the shelf and he says the words of absolution, and sometimes, when the door opens and the footsteps come in, he hopes that it will be a man who has come to confess the murder of his wife, so that he can say the words again, and this time he will know what to do.

He never does know. He says the words. He lets them go.

. . .

Case 9. Father Ondřej Vítek. 5 November 2023. The moment: he gave absolution.

FIFTEEN

Untitled

Case
The Signature

The form was one page, and the nurse had put it in front of Klára at half past four in the morning, and said, “If her heart stops, do you want us to resuscitate?”

Klára’s mother was seventy-eight and had had a stroke at three in the morning and was not conscious and was not expected to be conscious again. The doctor had explained the likely outcomes twice, in the corridor, in a low voice. The nurse had explained the form once, in the room, with a biro.

“Resuscitation at her age is not usually successful,” the nurse said. “And if it is, the quality of life is usually very poor.”

“I understand,” Klára said.

“Take your time.”

Klára did not take her time. She signed it at 4:41, in a hand that was shaking, and the nurse took the form and put it in the folder at the end of the bed, and said, “You did the right thing,” and went out.

Klára sat with her mother until the morning.

. . .

Her brother arrived at nine.

His name was Martin, and he lived in Vienna, and he had not come when their mother broke her hip in 2019, and he had not come when she had the first stroke in 2021, and he came now with a suitcase and a face like a man who had been woken up.

"How is she?"

"She's stable. They don't think she'll wake."

"Did you sign something?"

"The DNR."

Martin looked at the folder at the end of the bed.

"Who gave you the right?"

"Nobody gave me the right. The nurse asked. You weren't here."

"You didn't call me."

"I called you at four. You didn't answer."

"I was asleep."

"Yes," Klára said. "You were asleep."

. . .

Their mother woke up on the Wednesday.

It was not a miracle; the doctor said it happened sometimes, the brain found a way. She could not speak, but she could move her left hand, and she could follow faces with her eyes, and on the Thursday she squeezed Klára's fingers.

Martin was in the room. He had been in the room for four days, and he had not once stayed overnight.

“She’s awake,” he said. “They said she wouldn’t wake. She’s awake.”

“Yes.”

“So the DNR—”

“The DNR stands,” Klára said. “It’s a document. It doesn’t stop being a document because she woke up.”

Martin looked at her.

“You want her dead,” he said.

. . .

The will was read in the lawyer’s office in the spring.

Their mother had died in March, of a second stroke, in the night, without resuscitation. Klára had been in the room. Martin had been on a plane.

The will left the house on the hill to Martin. It left the flat in town to Klára, and the money to Martin, and the reason, according to the letter that was attached in their mother’s hand, was that Klára had “her own life” and Martin “had never managed to make one”.

Klára read the letter twice.

Then she said, “She wrote this in 2022.”

“Yes,” the lawyer said.

“After the first stroke.”

“Yes.”

“She knew.”

“That is not for me to say.”

· · ·

Klára went to the Bureau in April.

The clerk was called Mara, and she had a lamp and a ledger, and she said, “Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

“The moment I signed the DNR.”

The clerk wrote it.

“I signed it because I believed it was right,” Klára said. “I believed it was the merciful thing. I believed that my brother was useless and I was the one who was there, and that made me the one who should decide.”

“And?”

“And she woke up. And in April she wrote a will that gave everything to him. And the letter said that I had my own life.”

The clerk waited.

“She was awake,” Klára said. “She was awake for three weeks. She could not speak, but she could squeeze my hand, and she knew what I had signed, because the folder was at the end of the bed, and Martin read it out to her. He read it out in front of me. He said, ‘Mum, she signed this. She wanted you not to be resuscitated.’”

“What did your mother do?”

“She looked at me,” Klára said. “For a long time. And then she turned her head away, and she did not look at me again until the day she died.”

The clerk wrote.

“Was there a moment?” Klára said.

“There is always a moment.”

“The moment was not the signature,” Klára said. “The moment was the day she turned her head away, and I sat there, and I did not say anything. I could have said, ‘Mama, you asked me. In 2021, after the first stroke, you said, if it happens again, don’t let them bring me back. You said it in the kitchen. I wrote it down.’”

“Did you write it down?”

“Yes. On the back of an envelope. And I put it in the drawer, and it is still there.”

“Then why didn’t you say it?”

Klára looked at the lamp.

“Because Martin was in the room,” she said, “and because I wanted him to know what she had done to me, and because I wanted her to see that he was standing there and I was standing there and she had chosen him, and I thought: let her have this. Let her turn away. Let her know what I have been doing for eleven years while he was in Vienna.”

She put her hands in her lap.

“And then she did,” she said. “And I had three weeks to say the true thing, and I did not say it, and now she is dead, and the envelope is still in the drawer, and it is the only proof that she asked me, and I cannot show it to anyone, because it would mean that I let her die believing that I had wanted her dead.”

. . .

Case 10. Klára Šimková. 4 November 2025. The moment: she signed the form at 4:41 in the morning.

SIXTEEN

Untitled

Case
The Send

The email was eleven lines long, and Jiří wrote it in four minutes, and it cost Petr Novák his career.

That was in 2014. Petr was thirty-eight, a project manager, and there had been a mistake on the Kralupy bridge job: a bearing that had been specified wrong, a change order that had not been approved, and a client who had been over-charged by about four hundred thousand.

Jiří was Petr's manager. The email he sent was to the regional director, and it said that Petr had made the specification error, that Petr had approved the change order without authority, and that Petr had known about the over-charge for three weeks and had not reported it. It was not all true. Some of it was true. The four hundred thousand was real, and someone had to carry it, and the regional director had already decided that it would not be him.

Jiří pressed send at 18:42 on a Thursday.

Petr was dismissed on the Monday. There was an investigation, and a settlement, and a note in his file, and he did not work

in construction again. He moved to Ostrava. He drove a taxi for two years. His wife left in 2016.

Jiří was promoted in the spring.

. . .

Ten years later, in 2024, the company was restructured, and the new regional director came to the Prague office to introduce himself, and the new regional director was Petr Novák.

He was fifty. He had a good suit and a bad knee and a way of looking at a room as if he were counting the exits. He walked down the line of managers and shook hands and said their names, and when he came to Jiří he said, "Jiří. Good to see you. My office, Monday, nine o'clock."

. . .

The office was on the fifth floor, with a window that looked at the river.

Petr was behind the desk. He had a folder and a cup of coffee and a photograph of a dog.

"Sit down," he said.

Jiří sat down.

"I'm going to be frank with you," Petr said. "I have a problem with the Plzeň tender. There's a submission in three weeks and the technical annex is a mess. I need someone to take it apart and write the covering email to the client. Someone who can write an email that gets a person removed from a project."

He looked at Jiří.

“You were always good at that,” he said.

Jiří’s hands were on his knees.

“Petr,” he said.

“Mr. Novák.”

“Mr. Novák. I—”

“I’m not asking you to apologise,” Petr said. “I’m asking you to write an email. It’s a straightforward piece of work. The annex has a specification error in section four. It was made by a young engineer called Havel, who is twenty-six and has a child and has been with us for a year. If the email is written properly, Havel will be removed from the project and possibly from the company, and the tender will go through, and the four hundred thousand will be somebody else’s problem.”

Jiří looked at the folder on the desk.

“You want me to do it to him.”

“I want to see whether you will,” Petr said. “That’s the whole of it. I have thought about this for ten years. I have thought about the four minutes it took you to write eleven lines. I have thought about the Monday, and the investigation, and the taxi, and the wife. And I have decided that I do not want an apology. I want to watch you do it again.”

The river went past the window.

“If I refuse?” Jiří said.

“Then you will be managed out,” Petr said. “Quietly. Over six months. I’ve learned how it’s done. I had a good teacher.”

. . .

Jiří wrote the email.

It took him four minutes. He used the same phrases he had used in 2014, because they were the phrases that worked: it has come to my attention; I have no wish to attribute blame; the facts, unfortunately, are these. He pressed send at 18:40 on a Thursday.

Havel was removed from the project on the Monday. He was not dismissed; he was moved to a depot in Kladno, and his file got a note, and he left the company in the spring.

Petr called Jiří into his office in June.

"That was well done," he said. "Exactly as I remember."

"Thank you."

"You'll be interested to know that Havel is now working for a competitor. He's doing well. He's got a child and a flat and a future, and he will never know that the email was written by a man who was told to write it by a man who was destroyed by the same email ten years earlier."

Petr closed the folder.

"You can go," he said.

Jiří stood up. At the door he turned round.

"Why?" he said. "Why didn't you just fire me?"

Petr looked at him for a long time.

"Because I wanted to know if you were still the same man," he said. "And now I do. And I find that I am not comforted."

. . .

Case 11. Jiří Malý. 12 June 2014. The moment: he pressed send.

SEVENTEEN

Untitled

Case
The Ten Minutes

The dog was a brown spaniel called Bo, and Viktor had been looking after it for three days while its owner was in Vienna, and on the fourth day he left it in the car.

He had not meant to. He had meant to be ten minutes. He had parked in the shade, under the lime trees in front of the pharmacy, and he had put the windows down two inches, and he had looked at the dog and said, "Ten minutes, Bo," and the dog had put its head on the passenger seat and looked at him with the patience of an animal that has been left before.

Viktor went into the pharmacy to collect his mother's prescription, and then he went into the bank because there was a queue at the pharmacy and he had time, and then he met a man he had not seen since school and they talked about football for a while, and then he remembered.

It was forty minutes.

He ran out into the street. The dog was alive. It was lying on the back seat with its tongue out and its eyes closed, and it lifted

its head when the door opened, and it was alive, and Viktor sat on the kerb with the dog in his lap and cried.

A woman had filmed it. She had been sitting in the café opposite, and she had seen the dog in the car, and she had called the police, and she had started filming when Viktor came out. The video was on the internet by the evening. By the morning it had two million views, and Viktor's face was in it, and his name was in the comments.

· · ·

The prosecution was for animal cruelty. Viktor pleaded guilty. He was fined and banned from keeping animals for five years, and the newspapers called him the kind of man who leaves a dog in a car, and he lost his job at the school, because a man who leaves a dog in a car cannot be trusted with children.

He did not argue. He had done it. He had done the thing.

The thing he could not explain — the thing he tried to explain, at the trial, and in the letter to the editor, and in the note he wrote to the dog's owner — was that he loved the dog. He had looked after it for three days. He had slept on the floor beside it on the first night because it cried. He had cooked chicken for it because it would not eat the food the owner had left.

The owner did not reply. The owner was a woman called Ivana, and she lived in a flat above a bakery, and she had come back from Vienna to collect a live dog and a dead reputation.

· · ·

The case came to the Bureau in the autumn.

Viktor was not the one who registered it. Ivana was. She sat in the chair with her bag on her knees and said, “Tell me about the moment,” and the clerk said, “No, that’s my line,” and Ivana said, “Sorry. I’ve been reading about this place.”

She put the bag on the floor.

“I want to register something,” she said. “It’s not about the dog. The dog is fine. The dog is sitting on my feet at night and it doesn’t like the rain.”

“What is it about?”

“About the ten minutes.”

The clerk wrote.

“I gave him the dog,” Ivana said. “I knew he would be like that. He was a friend; he was a kind man; he was the kind of man who would say, ‘ten minutes,’ and mean it, and then meet a man he hadn’t seen since school. I knew that. I have known him for eleven years. He looked after my mother when she was dying. He is not the man in the video.”

“Then why?” the clerk said.

“Because I wanted the flat,” Ivana said. “When my mother died, she left me the flat and she left my brother the money, and my brother contested the will. The lawyer said the case would be decided on character: who was the more responsible child, who was fit to hold the property. And then the video happened, and the video was of my brother’s friend, and my brother’s lawyer said, ‘Your witness is a man who leaves dogs in cars.’”

She looked at the clerk.

“I did not stage it,” she said. “I want to be clear. I did not stage it. I gave him the dog because my mother had just died and I had to go to Vienna and there was nobody else. And then I saw the video, and I read the comments, and I let it happen.”

“What did you let happen?”

“The story,” Ivana said. “The story that he is the kind of man who leaves a dog in a car. I did not correct it. I did not say, ‘He is the man who slept on the floor beside my dog.’ I let the story stand, because the story won me the flat.”

The clerk wrote.

“Did you win?”

“Yes.”

“And was it worth it?”

Ivana looked at the window.

“My brother does not speak to me,” she said. “Viktor does not speak to me. The dog sleeps on my feet and it is the only one in the house who is glad I am there. And I have a flat with a view of the river and a story about a man who left a dog in a car, and every time I tell it I make it a little more true.”

. . .

Case 12. Ivana Bartošová. 11 August 2024. The moment: she watched the video and did not correct it.

EIGHTEEN

Untitled



INCOPREA

Case
The Door

The arrangement was Simona's idea, and she presented it the way she presented everything: with a spreadsheet.

"One night," she said. "One each. No names, no details, nothing after. It's not a betrayal if we agree."

Radek looked at the spreadsheet. It had columns.

“Why?” he said.

“Because we’ve been married for eleven years and we haven’t had sex since March, and because I love you, and because I think we are two people who need to remember what it is like to be wanted by somebody who does not know what we are like in the morning.”

She said it kindly. She had always been kind. She had been kind on the day they met, and on the day they married, and on the day his mother died, and Radek had spent eleven years being grateful for the kindness and never once asking what it cost her.

“All right,” he said.

. . .

His night was in April, with a woman he met in a hotel bar in Bratislava, whose name he did not ask. It was fine. It was strange and sad and fine. He came home in the morning and Simona made coffee and said, “Was it all right?” and he said, “It was all right,” and she said, “Good,” and that was the end of his night.

Her night was in May.

She went to Prague. She came back on the Sunday with a bag and a sunburn and a lightness in her that he had not seen in years. She said, “It was lovely.” She said, “Thank you.” She said, “You’re not angry?”

“No,” he said. “It was the arrangement.”

. . .

The door did not close.

That was the thing nobody had put in the spreadsheet. They had agreed on one night each, and one night each is a thing you can hold in your hand, like a coin. But the door had been opened, and once it was open, the house had a draught in it.

In June she went to Prague again. In July she went twice. In August she said, "I'm going to see him," and Radek said, "I know," and she said, "You knew?"

"Jakub," he said. "You leave your phone face up."

Simona sat down at the kitchen table.

"I was going to tell you," she said.

"When?"

"When I knew what I wanted."

"And what do you want?"

She looked at him for a long time.

"I want you to be the man who says it's all right," she said. "I want you to be the man I married. The one who is kind. The one who lets me."

. . .

Jakub was his brother. He was forty-four. He had been at the wedding. He had made a speech about how Radek had always been the lucky one. He had a boat and a flat in Prague and a wife and two children, and he had been having an affair with Simona since the previous November, six months before the spreadsheet.

Radek found this out in September, from the wife.

She rang him. She said, "Did you know?"

He said, "Know what?"

And she told him, and he sat on the stairs with the phone against his ear and listened to a woman he had known for twenty years describe the weekends, and the hotel, and the way Simona had said, in November, that she was going to ask Radek for the arrangement because Jakub could not leave his wife and she could not leave Radek and this was the only way to have both.

· · ·

He did not confront them.

He thought about it for a week. He thought about the spreadsheet, and the coffee, and the kindness, and the eleven years, and the way she had said, "I want you to be the man who says it's all right."

Then he went to the Bureau.

The clerk was called Mara. She said, "Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment."

"The moment I said all right," Radek said. "In the kitchen. When she gave me the spreadsheet."

The clerk wrote.

"Was that the moment?"

"No," he said. "The moment was in November, when I knew something was wrong and I did not ask. She came home from Prague and she was happy and I did not ask. I thought: she's happy, that's good. I thought: if I ask, I'll have to know. And I made a decision, in the kitchen, with the kettle on, not to know."

"And then she gave you the spreadsheet."

"And I said all right," Radek said. "And I was not being kind. I was being a coward. I said all right so that I would not have to

say anything else.”

He looked at the lamp.

“Can I register the not-asking?” he said.

“You can register the moment.”

“The moment was the kettle,” Radek said. “The kettle was on. She was standing at the counter with her coat still on. And I said, ‘How was Prague?’ and she said, ‘Fine,’ and I said, ‘Good,’ and I turned the kettle off.”

· · ·

Case 13. Radek Doležal. 12 November 2023. The moment: he turned the kettle off.

NINETEEN

Untitled

Case

The Story

The novel was called The House on Zborovská, and it won the Josef Škvorecký Prize in 2023, and it sold eleven thousand copies in the first year, which is a great deal for a novel in Czech.

It was about a woman called Hana who leaves her husband, a violent man, and goes to live in her mother's flat, and the book is the story of the year she spends there. It is written in the first person. It is very good.

The author was Marek Šimek. He was fifty-six. He had published three novels before, all of them competent, none of them remarkable, and this one was remarkable, and everybody said so.

Nobody said it was true, because it was a novel.

· · ·

The woman's name was Dana. She was forty-nine. She had met Marek at a writing workshop in 2016, when she had gone there to learn how to write the story of her marriage, and he had been the tutor.

She had told him everything. Not in one night; over a year, in the workshops, in the café afterwards, in long emails. She had told him about the year in her mother's flat, and the husband, and the things the husband did, and the way the flat smelled of mothballs and lavender, and the window that would not close, and the neighbour with the dog. She had given him the whole of it, because he was a writer, and because she thought he would help her write it, and because she was, at that time, a woman who had lost everything and had nothing left to give except the story.

He wrote it. He wrote it in eighteen months, in the first person, in her voice, and he did not put her name on it, and he did not put her name in the acknowledgements.

. . .

Dana found out in October 2023, when a woman in her book group said, "Dana, this is your life."

She read the book in one night.

She read it with a pencil, and she underlined the things that were hers: the mothballs, the window, the dog, the mother's recipe for plum dumplings, the line her husband said in the kitchen on the last night. She underlined forty-one things.

Then she wrote to the publisher. Then she wrote to the prize committee. Then she wrote to Marek.

He replied within the day.

Dana, I understand that you feel the book is about you. Novels are always about somebody. I have used material from many

people, always transformed, always in service of the fiction. I am sorry if this has caused you pain. — M.

. . .

The prize ceremony was in the Rudolfinum in November. Dana was in the audience, in the fourth row, with a folder on her knees.

She had not been invited. She had bought a ticket.

Marek gave a speech about the novel as a house: how you build it from the materials you find, how the furniture is second-hand, how the house is new even when the furniture is old. The audience laughed and applauded.

Then the questions began, and Dana stood up.

"Mr. Šimek," she said. "The window in chapter four. The one that would not close. Whose window was it?"

The room went quiet.

"I don't understand," Marek said.

"The window," Dana said. "You wrote that it was painted shut in 1978 and that the paint was the colour of a boiled sweet. Was that your window?"

Marek looked at her.

"I don't remember," he said.

"It was my window," Dana said. "It was painted shut in 1978 by my father, who was a painter and decorator, and the paint was the colour of a boiled sweet, and I told you that in the café on the twenty-second of March 2017, and you wrote it down in your notebook, and I watched you write it down."

She opened the folder.

"I have the notebook," she said. "I took it from the workshop. It's mine; I paid for the workshop. And in it, in your hand, is the entire book. Not the sentences. The things. The mothballs. The dog. The recipe. The line my husband said in the kitchen."

. . .

The prize was not withdrawn. There was a statement from the committee about the difference between fiction and testimony, and a statement from the publisher, and a great deal of argument on the internet, and Marek's next novel was published in 2025 to smaller sales.

Dana did not sue. She did something else.

She went to the Bureau and sat in the chair and said, "I want to register a moment."

The clerk said, "Tell me the moment."

"The moment I told him about the window," Dana said. "In the café. I had been talking for an hour. He had his notebook open and he was writing, and I thought: he is taking me seriously. He is the first person who has taken me seriously. And I gave him the window, and the dog, and the line, and I felt lighter, and I went home and slept for the first time in a year."

She put her hands in her lap.

"That was the moment," she said. "Not the book. Not the prize. The moment I gave it away. I knew, when I was giving it, that it was the only thing I had. And I gave it to a man with a notebook because he was listening."

. . .

Case 14. Dana Horáková. 22 March 2017. The moment: she told him about the window.

TWENTY

Untitled

Case
The Fix

The match was on a Sunday in May, and the money was in an envelope in the glove compartment of Bohumil's car, and the envelope was heavier than he had expected.

It was the last match of the season, and his team needed a point to stay up, and the other team needed nothing, and the man who had come to see him in the pub on the Thursday had explained the arrangement in the way these things are explained: a favour, a small favour, a goalkeeper who does not dive so fast.

"The keeper's your son," the man had said.

"Yes."

"That's the beauty of it," the man said. "Nobody will believe it."

. . .

Matěj was twenty-two, and he was a good goalkeeper, better than Bohumil had ever been, and he had been playing for the first team since he was nineteen.

Bohumil had coached him since he was six. He had taught him how to stand, how to talk, how to watch the striker's hips. He had driven him to training in a Škoda with a broken heater for eleven years. He had never once told him the truth about his own career, which was that he had been a decent goalkeeper in the second division and had ruined his knee at twenty-seven and had spent the rest of his life coaching other people's sons.

On the Sunday morning he made Matěj a coffee and said, "You'll have a lot of shots today."

"I know."

"Don't try to save the ones you can't reach."

Matěj looked at him.

"What?"

"Nothing," Bohumil said. "Just be careful."

. . .

The match was 0-0 at half time.

The other team had three chances and Matěj saved two and the third went wide. Bohumil stood on the touchline with his hands in his pockets and the envelope in the glove compartment and the sun in his eyes.

In the second half the other team got a penalty.

It was a soft penalty, the kind that gets given at the end of a season, and the striker put the ball on the spot and Matěj went to the line and did the thing he always did, which was to stand very still and watch the striker's hips.

Bohumil watched from the touchline.

He knew the striker. He was a boy called Polák with a run-up of six steps and a habit of opening his body to the right. Bohumil had told Matěj about the habit when Matěj was fifteen. He had said: Polák opens his body; if you go early, go left.

Matěj went left. He saved it.

. . .

They won. A corner in the eighty-ninth minute, a header, 1-0. The final whistle went and the players ran to Matěj and the crowd came onto the pitch and Bohumil stood on the touchline with his hands in his pockets.

The man was waiting by the tunnel.

"The envelope," he said.

"I'll bring it."

"Now."

"After the dressing room."

"Now," the man said. "Or I tell your son what his father agreed to."

Bohumil looked at him.

Then he went to the car and took the envelope out of the glove compartment, and gave it back, and the man counted it and looked at him.

"You saved nothing," the man said.

"I know."

"Your son saved it."

"I know."

"That's not how this works."

“No,” Bohumil said. “It isn’t.”

. . .

He told Matěj in the summer.

They were in the garden of the house, and Matěj had just signed for a club in the second division, and there was a beer on the table, and Bohumil said, “I took money to lose the Polák penalty.”

Matěj put the beer down.

“What?”

“On the Thursday. A man came to the pub. The envelope was in the car. I agreed.”

Matěj looked at him for a long time.

“Why are you telling me?”

“Because the man knows. And because he’ll tell you, or he’ll tell someone else, and I would rather it came from me.”

“And I saved it anyway.”

“You saved it anyway.”

Matěj picked up the beer and drank and put it down.

“I went left because you told me to go left when I was fifteen,” he said. “I’ve been going left on Polák for seven years. I didn’t save it because I’m a good man. I saved it because I’ve been doing what you told me since I was six.”

He stood up.

“That’s the thing, Dad,” he said. “I’m not the man who saved the penalty. I’m the man who does what his father says. And you

know what? You were a good coach. You were a terrible man. I don't know how to hold those two things at the same time."

He went into the house. Bohumil sat in the garden with the beer going warm.

. . .

Case 15. Bohumil Bartoš. 12 May 2024. The moment: he took the envelope and put it in the glove compartment.

21

Untitled

Case
The Tape

Iva had been recording her husband for a year before the trial, and she had forty-one tapes, and the tape that mattered was number nineteen.

It was a Tuesday in October. They were in the kitchen. He was drinking and she was at the sink, and he said, “I did it. I want you to know I did it. I want you to know that it was my fault and that I am not sorry, and that I would do it again.”

She had the phone in her dressing-gown pocket. She had been recording for a year. She pressed record, and he said the thing again, and she took the phone out and said, “I have it. It’s all there. I’m going to the police in the morning.”

The trial was in March. The tape was played in court. The judge listened with his hands on the bench. The prosecutor played it twice.

But the tape that was played was not the tape she had recorded.

· · ·

She had given the police the original. She had given it to a detective called Horák, who had taken it in a plastic bag and logged it as evidence. The tape in the court was a copy, made by the police technician, and it was the same recording, and it was not.

It began the same: the kitchen, the water in the sink, his voice.

"I did it," he said.

Then the voice went on.

"I want you to know that I did it. I want you to know that it was my fault and that I am not sorry."

And then, in the recording, she heard herself breathe, and then she heard him say, "Iva. Can you hear me?"

And her own voice said, "Yes."

And he said, "I'm sorry for what I'm going to say."

And she heard herself say, "Don't."

And he said, "I did it because you were in the hospital on the fourteenth and I was alone and there was a man at the door, and I thought — I thought you were dying, and I thought I would be alone, and I did not know what I was doing. I killed him. I killed him with the — with the thing, the thing in the kitchen. And then I cleaned it up and I went to work, and I have been going to work for a year, and I have been waiting for you to die, because if you died I would not have to tell you."

The tape machine clicked. The court was silent.

The judge looked at Iva.

"That is not what I recorded," Iva said.

. . .

There was an investigation into the evidence. The technician was questioned. The law firm was questioned. The police denied everything. The conviction was overturned on the grounds that the tape had been tainted, and her husband walked out of the court in March and went to live in his mother's house in Zlín.

Iva went home. She had a year of tapes. She sat on the floor of the sitting room with the machine and played them all, one by one, from the beginning.

She had recorded everything: the arguments, the drinking, the threats, the night of the fourteenth itself. She had heard the night of the fourteenth forty times. She knew it better than anyone alive.

It was not on the tape.

There was no conversation about the hospital, no "Can you hear me," no confession about the thing in the kitchen. There was only what she remembered: the water in the sink and his voice and the four sentences she had heard a hundred times.

She played tape nineteen again.

"I did it," her husband said. "I want you to know that I did it."

And then the recording went on in the way she remembered, and the four sentences came to an end, and there was the sound of her dressing-gown moving as she took the phone out of her pocket.

And then the tape kept going.

. . .

Her voice said: "I know you did it. I have known since the fourteenth. I was not in the hospital. I was with my sister. I have

the text messages. I have been recording you for a year because I did not know what else to do, and I have decided that I will give this tape to the police, and then I will divorce you, and then I will sell the house."

And her husband said: "I know."

"And I want you to say the thing again."

"I did it."

"Say it properly."

"I did it," he said. "I killed the man. I am not sorry."

. . .

Iva sat on the floor of the sitting room with the machine in front of her.

The tape was real. She had made it herself, in the kitchen, on the Tuesday in October. She remembered the dressing-gown, the water in the sink, the phone in her pocket.

What she did not remember was the second conversation. The one where she told him what she was going to do. She had played it four hundred times in the year since and she had never heard it, and now she could hear it and could not remember it, and the world had two versions of the same night in it, and she was the only person who had been in both.

. . .

Case 16. Iva Zedníková. 9 October 2024. The moment: she pressed record.

22

Untitled

Case
The Hand

Oldřich was seventy years old and he had hit his daughter once, in 1994, and he had been thinking about it for thirty years.

It was not a beating. He wanted that understood. It was one slap, with the back of his hand, in the kitchen, on a Tuesday, when she was sixteen and had come home at two in the morning and had stood in the doorway with her coat on and said, “You can’t tell me what to do.”

He had hit her. The sound was the thing he remembered: not the pain, not her face, but the sound, which was small and flat and final, like a book dropped on a table.

She had not cried. She had stood there with her hand on her cheek and looked at him, and then she had gone upstairs and packed a bag and gone to her aunt’s, and she had not come back.

He had written to her. He had written eleven letters over thirty years and sent none of them. He had stood outside her flat in Brno in 2001 and had not rung the bell. He had seen her once, in 2013, in the Christmas market, with a child, and had turned into a shop and waited until she had gone past.

. . .

The Bureau was on the fourth floor of an old hotel, and the lift did not work, and he came up the stairs out of breath.

The clerk was a woman of about forty-five with a lamp and a ledger. She said, “Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

“The slap,” Oldřich said. “In the kitchen. 1994.”

The clerk wrote.

“Was that the moment?” she said.

“It was the moment I hit her.”

“Was it the moment you lost her?”

Oldřich sat with his hands on his knees.

“No,” he said. “The moment I lost her was earlier. It was the year before, when her mother left, and I did not know what to do with a girl of fifteen, and I stopped talking to her. I stopped asking her questions. I made a house where nobody said anything, and she was sixteen and she came home at two in the morning because there was nothing in the house to come home to.”

The clerk wrote.

“And then she said, ‘You can’t tell me what to do.’”

“And I hit her.”

“Why?”

Oldřich looked at the lamp.

“Because she was right,” he said. “That’s the thing nobody understands. She was right. I couldn’t tell her what to do. I had not been her father for a year. I had been a man in a chair. And

she stood in the doorway and said the true thing, and I hit her because the true thing was unbearable."

. . .

The clerk put down the pen.

"There is something I have to tell you," she said.

Oldřich looked at her.

"My name is Marta," she said. "I am your daughter."

The room was very quiet. The lamp buzzed.

"I changed my surname when I was twenty," she said. "I trained as a clerk. I have worked here for nine years. I knew you would come. I have been waiting for you to come for nine years."

Oldřich sat in the chair and could not move.

"Marta," he said.

"When you came up the stairs," she said, "I did not recognise you at first. You are smaller. And then you said the thing about the kitchen, and I recognised the way you say 'the slap,' as if it were an object. You have been saying it that way for thirty years, in your head. I could hear you saying it."

"I wrote to you."

"I know. I have the letters. You sent none of them, but I have them. Aunt Božena had them. She gave them to me when she died."

"You have them."

"Eleven," Marta said. "I have read them all. They are about you. Every one of them is about you, and how sorry you are, and how you have suffered, and not one of them asks me a question."

. . .

Oldřich looked at the ledger.

“Is this the record?” he said. “Is this where it goes?”

“Yes.”

“Then write it,” he said. “Write that I hit her and she left and I have been sorry for thirty years.”

Marta did not pick up the pen.

“I am not going to write it,” she said. “You can register the moment at the desk. Anyone can take the statement. But I am not going to sit here and write your sorrow in the book and give you a number, because that is what you came for. You came for the number. You wanted to put the slap in a file and close the file.”

Oldřich put his hands on the desk.

“What do you want?” he said.

Marta looked at him for a long time.

“I want you to ask me a question,” she said.

“What question?”

“Any question. A question about me. Not about the slap. Not about the letters. About me.”

The room was quiet.

Oldřich sat in the chair with his mouth open.

He thought about his daughter at sixteen, in the doorway. He thought about the Christmas market. He thought about the eleven letters, and the flat in Brno, and the child.

“Are you happy?” he said.

Marta’s eyes filled.

“No,” she said. “But it’s the first time you’ve asked.”

· · ·

Case 17. Oldřich Dvořák. 14 June 2024. The moment: he hit her back.

23

Untitled

Case
The Deer

The road was a single lane between two fields, and it was raining, and Erik was doing eighty when something came out of the dark and hit the front of the car.

He felt it before he saw it: a soft, heavy thump, the kind that a car makes when it hits an animal. The car swerved. He corrected. He stopped.

He sat in the road with the engine running and the rain on the windscreen and his hands on the wheel.

Then he drove on.

He did not get out. He did not look. He had been drinking — two beers, maybe three, at his brother's house — and he had a licence that was already on nine points, and he had a daughter in the car seat behind him, asleep, and he thought: if I stop, if I call, if there is a police report, they will take the car and the licence and I will lose the job and the flat.

So he drove home. He put the car in the garage. He carried his daughter in and put her to bed. He did not look at the front of the car.

. . .

The next morning there was a girl missing.

Her name was Tereza and she was nine, and she had been at a birthday party in the village on the other side of the fields, and she had not come home. The police came with dogs. The helicopters went up. The whole district walked the fields in a line, and Erik walked in the line, and his daughter walked beside him, and the rain went on.

He did not say anything.

On the third day he went to the police station and said, “I hit something on the road on Saturday night.”

The detective looked at him.

“What did you hit?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t stop.”

“You didn’t stop.”

“I was drunk,” Erik said. “I had my daughter in the car. I drove on.”

They took him to the garage. They looked at the car. There was a dent and a smear of something on the number plate, and they took samples, and the samples were animal.

They searched the road. They found the deer in the ditch, a young roe deer, dead, its back legs broken.

They found Tereza on the fifth day, in a shed on her uncle’s farm, three kilometres away, alive.

. . .

The uncle was arrested. He had taken her from the lane, and he had kept her in the shed, and he had brought her food and a bucket and had told her that if she made a sound he would kill her mother. He had been at the birthday party. He had walked in the search line. He was a quiet man of forty who repaired tractors.

Erik was charged with drunk driving, failing to stop after an accident, and failing to report an accident involving an animal. He was fined and banned from driving for two years. He lost his job anyway, because the newspapers ran the story with the headline Driver who hit deer did not stop as girl went missing, and the implication was there, and the implication was enough.

. . .

He went to the Bureau in the spring.

The clerk was called Mara. She said, “Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

“The moment I drove on,” Erik said.

The clerk wrote.

“I have thought about it every day for a year,” he said. “I think: if I had stopped, I would have seen the deer and called the police and there would have been a report, and the police would have had a car on that road on Saturday night, and the uncle would have been stopped. I think: I could have saved her. I think: my daughter was asleep in the back and I drove on because I was frightened of losing my licence, and a girl was in a shed for five days.”

The clerk wrote.

“The strange thing,” Erik said, “is that I did not hit her. I hit a deer. The police said so. The samples said so. I did not touch her. And yet I have been carrying her in the car with me for a year.”

He looked at the lamp.

“Is there a record for that?” he said. “For the thing you didn’t do?”

The clerk thought about it.

“There is a record for the moment,” she said. “The moment you drove on. The rest is what you do with it.”

· · ·

He left the Bureau and walked to the river and stood on the bridge for a long time.

Then he went home and took his daughter to the park.

She was ten. She had a scooter and a helmet and a habit of going too fast down the slope by the bandstand, and he sat on the bench and watched her, and he thought about the deer, and the shed, and the five days, and the way the world is made of things that almost happened.

“Dad,” she said, coming back up the slope. “Why are you crying?”

“I’m not crying,” he said.

“You are.”

He wiped his face.

“I hit a deer once,” he said. “On the road. In the rain. And I didn’t stop.”

She looked at him.

“Was it dead?”

“Yes.”

“Did you say sorry?”

He looked at his daughter.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t.”

“Then say it now,” she said, and got back on the scooter, and went down the slope again, and he sat on the bench and said it, quietly, to the park and the bandstand and the rain that was not falling.

. . .

Case 18. Erik Nový. 9 November 2024. The moment: he did not stop.

24

Untitled

Case

The Call

The number was on the council website, and Jana had it saved in her phone for three weeks before she dialled it.

Her neighbour was called Ilona. She was thirty-four, she was from Ukraine, and she had come to Czechia in 2022 with her daughter Nela, who was six, and she cleaned offices in the evenings, and she had a laugh you could hear through the wall.

She also had a husband.

His name was Serhiy. He was not on the lease. He came and went. He had been in the flat the night Jana heard the furniture moving, and the night after that, and the night after that. Jana had stood in her own kitchen with a cup of tea in her hand and listened to the wall and done nothing.

On the Thursday she heard Nela crying in the corridor.

She went out. Nela was sitting on the stairs with her coat on and no shoes, and she was crying in the way children cry when they have been told not to make a noise: silently, with her whole body.

"Where's your mother?"

“Inside.”

“Is your father there?”

Nela looked at her. She was six. She had a bruise on her arm that was the shape of a hand.

Jana took her into her own flat and gave her hot chocolate and put the television on, and then she went and stood in her own hallway with her phone in her hand and thought about it for a long time.

The number on the council website was for reporting people who were in the country without the correct documents.

. . .

She dialled it on the Friday morning. She gave the address. She said there was a man living there who was not registered, and she gave his name.

She did not think about what would happen next. She thought about Nela on the stairs, and she thought about the shape of the hand on her arm, and she thought: they will come and they will take him, and that will be the end of it.

. . .

They came on the Tuesday.

They came at six in the morning, and there were four of them, and they took Serhiy in the stairwell, and they also took Ilona, because her documents had expired in the spring, and they took Nela, because a child cannot be left.

Jana stood at her window and watched the van go.

She did not know, then, that Serhiy had been deported to Poland, where he had a brother, and that he had been back in the country within a month, and that he had come to the flat in the autumn and found it empty.

She did not know, then, that Ilona had been trying to leave him for a year, and that she had gone to the council herself in the spring, and that the woman at the council had told her that if she reported her husband, she would be deported too, and that she had said, "I know," and had not done it, because of Nela.

She did not know, then, that Nela would be placed with a foster family in the same district, and that the foster family would be Jana's, because Jana had been the one who called.

. . .

Nela came to live with her in December.

She was six, and then seven, and then eight. She had a room with a bed and a desk and a poster of a horse. She called Jana "Jana" for two years and then, one day, "Mum," and then looked frightened, and Jana said, "That's all right," and Nela did not say it again for a month.

Ilona was deported in the spring. She wrote letters, and then emails, and then there were video calls on Sundays. She was in a town near Lviv, living with her sister, working in a bakery. She asked about Nela's school. She asked about her reading. She never once asked Jana why she had made the call.

Jana told her in the third year.

They were on the video call, and Nela was at school, and Jana said, "I made the call. In 2022. I reported Serhiy."

Ilona looked at the screen for a long time.

“I know,” she said.

“You know?”

“The woman at the council told me someone had reported him. There were only two flats on the landing. I knew it was you.”

“Why didn’t you say?”

Ilona looked at the screen, and then away, and then back.

“Because I was trying to leave him for a year,” she said. “And I could not do it. And you did it. And I have been angry with you for three years, and I have also been grateful for three years, and I have not worked out how to hold both.”

She wiped her face.

“Is she happy?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Does she remember me?”

“Yes.”

“Then we will not talk about the call,” Ilona said. “We will talk about her.”

. . .

Case 19. Jana Králová. 10 June 2022. The moment: she dialled the number.

25

Untitled

Case
The Marrow

The test came back in March: Pavel was a match for his nephew.

Tomáš was nine. He had leukaemia, and he had been in hospital since January, and the doctors had said that a bone marrow transplant was the best chance, and that the best donor was a sibling, and that there were no siblings, and that the second-best donor was a parent, and that neither parent was a match, and that the third-best was an uncle.

Pavel was the uncle. Pavel was a match. Pavel was asked on a Tuesday, by a doctor, in a corridor, with his brother standing beside him.

“It’s a procedure,” the doctor said. “General anaesthetic. You’ll be in hospital for a day, maybe two. There’s a small risk. The recovery is a few weeks.”

Pavel looked at his brother.

Milan was forty-five. He had not slept in three months. He had a beard that had gone grey in the winter. He was holding a paper cup of coffee and his hands were shaking.

“Pavel,” he said. “Please.”

. . .

Pavel said no.

He said it in the corridor, and then he said it again in the car park, and then he said it again on the phone that night, and each time he said it he added a reason: he had a heart condition; he was on medication; he could not take the time off work; he was afraid.

The reasons were true, some of them. The heart condition was real. The medication was real. The fear was real.

The reason he did not say was the one from 2003.

In 2003 Pavel’s daughter was four and had a tumour in her kidney, and the treatment was in Munich, and it cost a hundred and forty thousand, and Pavel had asked his brother for the money. Milan had the money. Milan had had the money since their father’s house was sold in 2001. Milan said no.

He said no because he was buying a flat. He said no because he had a child of his own. He said no because he did not, at that time, believe that the tumour was as serious as Pavel said it was.

Pavel’s daughter died in 2004, in Munich, after a treatment paid for by a loan that took him eleven years to repay.

Pavel had not spoken to Milan for six years after that. Then their mother had a stroke, and they had made peace, in the way that brothers make peace: by not talking about it.

. . .

Tomáš died in June.

The funeral was in the church on the hill, and Pavel stood at the back with his wife and his son, and Milan stood at the front with his wife and his daughter, and the priest said the things that priests say.

Afterwards Milan came down the aisle and took Pavel's hands.

"I forgive you," he said.

Pavel looked at him.

"What?"

"I forgive you," Milan said. "For not being a match. For saying no. For whatever it was. I forgive you. I don't want to carry it."

"You don't want to carry it."

"No," Milan said. "I have been carrying the flat in 2001 for twenty-two years. I have been carrying the money. I have been carrying what I said to you on the phone. And now I have to carry Tomáš, and I don't have room for both, so I am putting this one down. I forgive you."

Pavel stood in the church porch with his hands in his brother's hands.

"I didn't do it for the money," he said.

"I know."

"I did it because you said no in 2003, and I wanted you to feel what I felt."

Milan nodded slowly.

"I know," he said. "And I want you to know that I have felt it. I have felt it for six months, in the hospital, every day. And I want you to know that it did not make you feel better, and I am sorry, because I would have liked you to feel better."

Pavel went to the Bureau in the autumn.

The clerk was called Mara. She said, “Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

“The moment I said no,” Pavel said. “In the corridor. When the doctor asked.”

The clerk wrote.

“My brother forgave me,” Pavel said. “At the funeral. He said he was putting it down. He said he didn’t have room for both. And I stood in the church porch and I thought: he has taken the one thing I had left. I had the no. I had the reason. I had the flat in 2001, and the loan, and the eleven years. And he has forgiven me, and now I have nothing to hold against him, and my nephew is still dead.”

He looked at the lamp.

“Is there a moment?” he said. “I have been looking for it. I thought it was the no. But the no was easy. The no was a decision I had made in 2001, on the phone, when I said, ‘I will never ask him for anything again.’ Everything after that was just the paperwork.”

The clerk wrote.

“Then the moment is 2001,” she said.

Pavel sat for a while.

“Yes,” he said. “On the phone. He said, ‘I can’t,’ and I said, ‘Then we’re finished,’ and I put the phone down.”

Case 20. Pavel Horák. 12 March 2024. The moment: he hung up on his brother in 2001 and never called back.

26

Untitled

Case
The Lie

The cushion was a small one, from the sofa, and Eva put it under her dress in the bathroom of a restaurant in 2005, and she came out and sat down and told Martin she was pregnant.

He had been about to leave her. That was the truth of it. They had been together for two years and he had met someone else, and he had asked her to meet him at the restaurant to say the thing he had been practising in the car, and she had gone to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror and thought: I have one move.

She made the move.

Martin cried. He put his hand on the cushion, and he said, "We'll do it. We'll get a flat. We'll get married." And Eva sat there with the cushion under her dress and let him.

. . .

The pregnancy lasted four months.

She told him she had lost it in the spring. She cried, and he cried, and he held her in the hospital corridor, and the hospital

was real, and the corridor was real, and the doctor was a friend of hers who had agreed to say the words “missed miscarriage” to a man she had never met.

Martin stayed. That was the point of the move. He stayed for eighteen years. They married in 2007, and they bought a flat, and they had a life, and Eva was, on the whole, happy, in the way that a woman can be happy when she is holding a door shut with her shoulder.

. . .

The girl came in 2023.

She was eighteen. She had a file from social services and a photograph and a letter, and she stood on the doorstep of the flat in Brno and said, “Are you Eva?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Klára,” the girl said. “I think you’re my mother.”

Eva looked at her.

The girl had Martin’s chin. She had Martin’s hands. She had a way of standing with her weight on one hip that Eva had seen every day for eighteen years.

“Come in,” Eva said.

. . .

The story came out over three hours and a pot of tea.

Martin had a daughter. He had had a daughter since 2005, with a woman called Iva, who had died in 2019. The daughter had been raised by Iva’s sister in Zlín, and she had been told, all

her life, that her mother was a woman called Eva who had given her up.

Martin had signed the papers. Martin had paid the maintenance. Martin had visited twice a year and had told Eva he was going to a conference.

"I've got your name on my birth certificate," Klára said. "And I've got a letter from him. He wrote it before he died."

Martin had died in 2022.

Eva sat in the kitchen with the tea going cold.

"What does the letter say?" she said.

"It says you didn't want me," Klára said. "It says you were young and you couldn't. It says he wanted to keep me but you said no."

. . .

Eva did not tell her the truth that afternoon.

She told her a week later, in the same kitchen, with the same pot of tea, and she told her all of it: the restaurant, the bathroom, the cushion, the four months, the friend who said "missed miscarriage", the eighteen years of holding the door shut.

Klára listened with her hands around the cup.

"So there was no baby," she said.

"There was a baby," Eva said. "There was you. There was always you. I just didn't know it. He had you in the September, and I was in the flat with the cushion in the wardrobe, and he was in Zlín with Iva, and he was paying for two lives."

"And he told me you didn't want me."

“He told you the truth,” Eva said. “I didn’t want you. I wanted him. I made a lie to keep him, and the lie was a child, and the child was you, and I did not know that until you stood on the doorstep.”

. . .

Klára did not call for a month.

Then she called, and they met in a café by the station, and Klára said, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Yes.”

“You’re not my mother,” Klára said. “I know that. I’ve known since the second week. But you’re the only person who has told me the truth about any of it. My aunt lied to me. He lied to me. The social worker had a file with lies in it. And you sat in a kitchen and told me about the cushion.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” Klára said. “I want you to be something. I don’t know what. I’ve got a mother who’s dead and a father who’s dead and a name on a certificate that belongs to a woman who faked a pregnancy in 2005. And I’ve got you, and you’re the only one who didn’t pretend.”

She looked at Eva.

“Can I call you Eva?”

“Yes.”

“Eva,” Klára said. “That’s a good name. It’s the only true thing in the file.”

. . .

Case 21. Eva Malá. 14 February 2005. The moment: she put the cushion under her dress.

27

Untitled



INCOPREA

Case
The River

The river was the Svratka, and it was in flood, and Josef was eleven years old, and his father went in to save him.

That was the story the family told. It was the story the newspaper told, in four lines under a photograph of the bridge. It was the story Josef told at school, and at the inquest, and at his moth-

er's funeral, and to his own children, and he told it for forty years, and it was not true.

What happened was this.

Josef and his brother Petr, who was nine, had gone down to the river on a Sunday in April, against instructions, to see the flood. The path along the bank was muddy. Josef had dared Petr to touch the water. Petr had slipped. Josef had grabbed his arm, and the two of them had gone in, and the current had taken them both, and Josef had got hold of a root and held on, and Petr had been carried downstream.

Their father had been on the bridge. He had seen them. He had run down the bank and gone into the water, and he had reached Petr, and he had held him up, and he had shouted at Josef to let go of the root and swim to the bank.

Josef had not let go.

He had held the root with both hands and watched his father hold his brother in the current, and the current had taken them both, and he had held the root, and he had not shouted for help, because he could not make a sound.

A man with a boat had come. He had got Petr out. He had not got the father out. They found him two days later, four kilometres downstream, with his coat still on.

. . .

Josef was fifty-one now. He had a wife and a son and a job in insurance. He had told the story forty times a year for forty years, and every time he told it he said the same thing: My father went in to save me.

It was true in the way that a photograph is true: it contained a man, and a river, and a boy. It did not contain the root.

He had never told anyone about the root. Not his mother, not his wife, not the priest. He had told himself, for a long time, that he had been eleven, that he had been drowning, that a boy of eleven cannot be expected to let go of a root in a flood.

That was true too. It was all true. That was the thing about the river: everything in it was true at once.

. . .

The Bureau was on the fourth floor of an old hotel, and the clerk was a woman called Mara, and she said, "Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment."

Josef sat in the chair with his hands on his knees.

"My father drowned," he said. "In 1985. He went in to save my brother."

The clerk wrote.

"Was that the moment?"

"No," Josef said.

"Then what was?"

He looked at the lamp.

"I was holding a root," he said. "My brother had gone in, and I had gone in after him, and I had got hold of a root, and my father was in the water with Petr in his arms, and he shouted at me to let go and swim. And I did not let go."

The clerk wrote.

“I held the root,” Josef said. “I held it with both hands. I watched him hold my brother up. I watched the current take them. And I did not let go, and I did not shout, and I have been on that bank for forty years.”

He put his hands flat on his knees.

“Say it,” the clerk said.

“Say what?”

“The thing you have not said.”

Josef was quiet for a long time.

“I was glad,” he said. “When I saw him holding Petr. I was glad it was Petr and not me. And then I was glad when the current took them, because as long as they were in the water, nobody was looking at me, and nobody knew that I had dared him to touch it.”

The lamp buzzed.

“There it is,” the clerk said.

. . .

He went to the river that evening.

It was not in flood. It was a brown, slow river with a path along the bank and a bench where an old man was sitting with a dog.

Josef stood on the bank where the root had been. The root was not there any more; the bank had been reinforced with concrete in 2009. He stood on the concrete and looked at the water and said the thing out loud, quietly, to the river.

“I let go of the root,” he said. “I mean — I didn’t. I held it. I held it and I let you go.”

The old man on the bench looked up. The dog looked up.

“Sorry,” Josef said.

“Were you talking to me?”

“No.”

The old man nodded and went back to his paper. Josef stood on the concrete for a while longer, and then he walked back to the car, and drove home, and at dinner his son said, “Dad, you all right?” and Josef said, “Yes,” and it was the first true thing he had said at that table in forty years.

. . .

Case 22. Josef Novák. 21 April 1985. The moment: he held the root.

28

Untitled

Case

The Secret

The secret was worth eleven thousand euros, which is not a lot of money, and it put Alena in prison for three years, which is not a lot of time, and both of those facts were a surprise to everyone except Alena.

Her sister Lenka had sold it to a journalist called Ryba, who worked for a weekly magazine and paid for stories in cash. The secret was about a building permit and a man called Karel who had died in a fire in 2019, and it was the kind of secret that a person can carry for a while but not forever, and Alena had been carrying it for four years.

Lenka sold it in the spring. She met Ryba in a café by the station, and she told him the story, and she gave him the documents, and he gave her an envelope, and the magazine published in June.

Alena was arrested in August. She was tried in the spring and sentenced to three years, and the judge said it was a serious offence, and the newspaper said it was a tragedy, and the family said nothing at all.

. . .

The visit was in the second year.

Lenka came on a Sunday, with a bag of oranges and a photograph of the garden. The prison visiting room had tables and plastic chairs and a machine that sold coffee, and the two sisters sat across from each other and did not say anything for a while.

"You sold it," Alena said.

"Yes."

"To Ryba."

"Yes."

"For eleven thousand."

"Eleven thousand five hundred," Lenka said. "I paid the arrears on the flat."

Alena looked at the oranges.

"I want to tell you something," she said. "And I want you to listen, because I have had two years to think about how to say it."

"I'm listening."

"The week before you went to Ryba," Alena said, "I went to Ryba. I sat in the same café. I told him the same story. And he said, 'I can't use it. It's your word against a dead man's. Bring me documents and I'll pay you eleven thousand.'"

Lenka sat very still.

"You went to him first."

"I went to him first. And I did not have the documents, because you had them. You had them since 2019, in the box under the bed, and I did not know that until later, but I knew they existed, and I knew I could not get them, so I did nothing.

And then a month later he published, and I was arrested, and I understood that you had been to see him."

"You never said."

"I never said."

Lenka put her hands on the table.

"Why are you telling me now?"

"Because I want you to know that I was going to sell you," Alena said. "I was going to sell the secret, and the only reason I did not was that you had the papers and I did not. And then you sold me, and I went to prison, and I have spent two years being angry with you, and I have discovered that I am not angry. I am relieved."

"Relieved?"

"I was going to do it," Alena said. "I was going to sit in that café and take the envelope and go home and let them come for you. And I did not, because I was slow, and because you were faster. And in here I have had time to think about the person I was going to be, and I do not like her."

She pushed the oranges across the table.

"Take these," she said. "They're from the shop on the corner. They're not a peace offering. They're just oranges."

. . .

Lenka went home and sat in the kitchen with the oranges in a bowl.

She had sold the secret because of the arrears, and because of the flat, and because Alena had been the one who kept the docu-

ments and the one who said, every Christmas, “We’ll deal with it in the spring.” She had sold it because she was tired.

She had not known that Alena had gone to Ryba first. She had not known that the sister she had betrayed had been, a month earlier, in the same café, with the same intention.

She thought about it for a long time.

Then she went to the Bureau and sat in the chair and said, “I want to register a moment.”

The clerk said, “Tell me the moment.”

“The moment I opened the box under the bed,” Lenka said. “In 2019. I found the documents, and I read them, and I understood what they were worth, and I put them back. And I did not tell my sister that I had found them. I kept them for four years, and then I sold them, and I have been telling myself that I did it for the flat.”

“And?”

“And I did it because she was the one who always decided,” Lenka said. “She was the older one. She was the one who said, ‘We’ll deal with it in the spring.’ And I wanted, for once, to be the one who decided.”

. . .

Case 23. Lenka Vránová. 17 March 2023. The moment: she opened the box under the bed.

29

Untitled

Case
The Room

The hotel was called the Grand, and it had eleven rooms, and room nine was the one you booked if you had something to leave behind.

The arrangement was explained at check-in by a woman at the desk who did not look up from her ledger. “Room nine is for guests who wish to deposit one thing. The deposit is permanent. You may not retrieve it. The rate is the same as the other rooms.”

“What kind of thing?” Vilém asked.

“That is up to you,” she said. “Most people bring a small object.”

Vilém had a small object. It was a wedding ring, and it was not his, and it had been in his pocket for eleven years.

· · ·

The thing he had done was in 2013, and it was not murder, and it was not theft, and it had no name in the criminal code. He had been a foreman on a building site in Ostrava, and there had been a man called Karel who had been injured on the site, and

the injury had been Vilém's fault. He had known the scaffold was unsafe. He had signed the inspection sheet anyway, because the concrete pour was scheduled for the morning, and because the bonus was four thousand euros, and because Karel was a difficult man who had been rude to him at Christmas.

Karel had fallen eleven metres and had lived, in a chair, for nine years, and had died in 2022 of a chest infection. Vilém had gone to the funeral. He had stood at the back. He had put the ring in his pocket that morning and had not known why, and he had kept it there ever since.

. . .

Room nine was on the second floor, at the end of a corridor, and it was not a bedroom. It was a small room with a table and a chair and a window that looked at the courtyard, and on the table there was a wooden box with a brass latch.

Vilém sat down. He put the ring on the table. He looked at it for a while.

He did not know what he had expected: a voice, a wind, a hand on the shoulder. There was nothing. The room was a room. The courtyard was a courtyard. A pigeon walked along the sill.

He put the ring in the box and closed the lid.

. . .

He slept badly that night. In the morning he checked out and drove home to Brno, and he did not think about the ring for three weeks.

Then the dreams started.

They were not nightmares. That was the strange thing. They were ordinary: he was on the site, and Karel was there, and Karel was standing up, which he had not done since 2013, and he was holding a cup of tea and talking about the football. He was not angry. He was not accusing. He was just there, in the way that a man is there, and Vilém would wake at four in the morning with the feeling that he had been in a room with someone.

He went back to the hotel in the autumn.

"I've come to retrieve the deposit," he said.

The woman at the desk looked up.

"That is not possible," she said.

"I know. But I want to talk to someone about it."

She looked at him for a moment. Then she said, "Room nine is occupied. You may wait in the lounge."

. . .

The man who came down the stairs was about sixty, with a walking stick, and he came into the lounge and sat down opposite Vilém and said, "You're the one who left the ring."

"Yes."

"I'm Karel's brother."

Vilém put his cup down.

"I don't understand."

"The room takes deposits," the brother said. "It has been taking them since 1962. My brother left something here in 2013. He left the accident. He left the whole of it: the fall, the chair, the

nine years. He put it in the box and he went home and he died in 2022 without it. And then you came, and you put the ring in the box, and the box gave the thing back to me."

"Gave what back?"

"The accident," the brother said. "For nine years I visited my brother in that chair. I fed him. I read to him. I sat with him. And when he died I thought: I will never know why. And then you came to this hotel and left the ring, and the box gave me the answer, and the answer was a signature on an inspection sheet."

Vilém sat very still.

"What do you want?" he said.

The brother looked at him for a long time.

"I want to tell you that I have read the sheet," he said. "And that I have thought about it every day since. And that I have decided that I am not going to do anything about it. Not because I forgive you. Because my brother is dead, and the courts would give me nothing, and I would spend the rest of my life in a room with you in it."

He stood up.

"The deposit is permanent," he said. "You can't have it back. But I can give you something, and I have decided to give it to you, because I am tired."

He took a small object out of his pocket and put it on the table.

It was the ring.

"Take it," he said. "It's yours. It was always yours. You brought it here to leave the guilt, and the room took the guilt and

gave it to me, and now I am giving it back, because it is not mine to keep, and because you will carry it better than the room did.”

. . .

Case 24. Vilém Zeman. 3 March 2013. The moment: he signed the inspection sheet.

30

Untitled

Case
The Bell

The bell in the tower of St. Bartholomew's rang once for every death in the village, and it had rung for two hundred and eleven people since 1953, and it had never rung for anyone who did not die within the day.

Vojtěch had been the bell-ringer for thirty years. He was sixty-one, he had a bad shoulder, and he climbed the seventy-two steps every morning to check the mechanism, and every evening to check it again, and in between he repaired bicycles in the shed behind his house.

The rules were simple. The bell was not rung by hand. It was rung by a mechanism, a weight and a wire, and the weight was released by the sexton when the priest told him that someone had died. Vojtěch's job was to maintain the mechanism and to climb the tower when it jammed, which it did about twice a year.

He had never rung it himself. Nobody had, since 1953.

· · ·

On the third of November he woke at three in the morning and heard the bell.

He lay in bed and counted. One. Two. Three. The bell was slow, about one stroke every four seconds, and it was not the mechanism; the mechanism had a particular sound, a small hesitation before the strike, because the wire was old. This was a single stroke, clean, the way it sounded when it was pulled by hand.

He got up and put on his coat and walked to the church.

The door was open. The stairs were dark. He climbed the seventy-two steps with his bad shoulder and came out into the bell chamber, and the rope was swinging, and there was nobody there.

The bell rang again. He watched it. The rope moved as if a hand had pulled it, and there was no hand, and the bell struck, and the note went out over the village and the fields and the river.

He counted eleven strokes.

Then it stopped, and the rope hung still, and Vojtěch stood in the bell chamber with his hand on the frame and his heart going.

. . .

The village was awake by four. He saw the lights come on one by one: the Nováks, the Dvořáks, the school, the pub. People came out into the street in their coats. Somebody rang the priest. Somebody rang the police.

By five there were thirty people in the square, and nobody was dead.

By six there were sixty, and the priest had been up the tower and had looked at the mechanism and had said that the mechanism was fine, and that the bell had been rung by hand.

“By whom?” the mayor said.

“By nobody,” the priest said. “There was nobody in the church. I have the key.”

Vojtěch stood at the back of the crowd.

He knew the rules. He had known them all his life. The bell did not ring falsely. It rang once for each death, and the death came within the day, and the village had built two hundred and eleven funerals on that fact.

Eleven strokes.

He went home and sat in his kitchen and waited.

. . .

The day passed.

At noon the school closed early. At two the pub opened and filled. At four the mayor made a statement in the square and said that the bell had been rung by a fault, and that there was nothing to worry about, and that the mechanism would be inspected by an expert from Brno on Monday.

At six the expert from Brno arrived, three days early, and went up the tower with the priest and the mayor, and came down and said that the mechanism was in perfect order and that the bell had been rung by a human hand.

At eight the village began to argue.

At ten the first person left. The Nováks put their children in the car and drove to the wife's mother in Zlín. By midnight, fourteen families had gone.

. . .

Vojtěch sat in his kitchen with the lamp on.

He knew who had rung it. He had known since three in the morning, when he had stood in the bell chamber and watched the rope swing. He had known because the bell rings for a death in the village, and he was in the village, and he was sixty-one, and he had a bad shoulder and a bad heart and a father who had died at sixty-one of the same thing.

He had rung it himself, in his sleep.

That was the thing he could not say. He had walked to the church in his sleep, and he had climbed the steps in his sleep, and he had pulled the rope eleven times, and he had woken in his bed with the sound of it in his ears, and the rope had still been swinging when he got there.

He had rung his own death. And the bell did not ring falsely.

. . .

He went to the Bureau in the morning.

He did not know why. He had heard about it from a cousin in Brno. The clerk was a woman called Mara, and she said, "Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment."

"The rope," Vojtěch said. "In my hand. In the dark."

The clerk wrote.

“I have rung the bell for two hundred and eleven people,” Vojtěch said. “I have never rung it myself. Last night I rang it eleven times, and the bell rang for me, and now the village is leaving, and I am sitting in my kitchen waiting to die, and the strange thing is—”

He stopped.

“The strange thing is what?”

“The strange thing is that I am not frightened,” Vojtěch said. “I have been the bell-ringer for thirty years. I have stood in that chamber and listened to it ring for other people, and I have always thought: thank God it is not me. And last night I pulled the rope, and I heard it ring for me, and I felt — I felt like a man who has finally been included.”

. . .

He died on the eleventh of November, at ten past three in the afternoon, in his shed, while repairing a bicycle. His heart. He was sixty-one.

The bell rang at three fifteen. Nobody rang it. The sexton was in the pub. The priest was in Brno. The tower was locked.

It rang eleven times.

. . .

Case 25. Vojtěch Marek. 3 November 2024. The moment: he pulled the rope.

31

Untitled

Case
The Mirror

Irena bought the mirror at an auction in 2019, and it was a good mirror, a nineteenth-century Venetian piece with a gilt frame and a small chip in the corner, and she paid four hundred euros for it, which was more than she could afford.

She hung it in the hall, opposite the door, so that she could check herself on the way out. That is what mirrors are for. She had a husband, a job in a gallery, a flat with a hall, and a habit of checking herself in the mirror before she left, and for four years the mirror did what mirrors do.

Then, in March, it did something else.

. . .

She noticed it on a Tuesday. She was leaving for work, and she stopped in the hall to put on her coat, and the woman in the mirror put on her coat a half-second late.

Irena stood still.

The woman in the mirror stood still.

She raised her hand. The woman raised her hand. She turned her head. The woman turned her head.

It was a half-second. It was nothing. It was the kind of thing that a tired woman sees in a hall at seven in the morning, and Irena told herself it was nothing, and went to work, and did not think about it until the evening, when she came home and stood in front of the mirror and took off her coat, and the woman in the mirror took off her coat a half-second late.

. . .

It got worse over the spring.

The delay grew. By June it was a full second. By August it was three, and the woman in the mirror had begun to do things Irena had not done: she would stand in the hall after Irena had left it, looking at the door; she would turn her head towards the kitchen when Irena was in the sitting room; once, in September, Irena came home and found the woman in the mirror sitting on the floor of the hall with her back against the wall, and Irena was standing.

Irena covered the mirror with a sheet.

The woman in the mirror took the sheet off.

. . .

Her husband left in October.

“It’s the mirror,” he said. “You talk to it. You stand in front of it for an hour. I came home last week and you were both sitting on the floor, and I couldn’t tell which one of you was my wife.”

“That’s not true.”

“I know what I saw.”

He packed a bag and went to his mother’s, and Irena stood in the hall in front of the mirror, and the woman in the mirror stood in the hall in front of the mirror, and they looked at each other.

“She’s right,” the woman said.

Irena had never heard her speak. The voice came from the glass, and it was her voice, and it was coming from a half-second behind her own mouth.

“You’re not real,” Irena said.

“I’m as real as you are,” the woman said. “That’s the problem.”

. . .

The woman in the mirror came out on a Sunday in November.

Irena was in the hall, and the woman reached through the glass, and Irena felt a hand on her wrist, and then she was on the other side.

It was not a violent thing. It was like stepping through a door that had always been there. She stood in the glass and looked out at her own hall, and the woman who was not her stood in the hall and looked in at her, and then the woman picked up Irena’s coat and put it on and went out and closed the door.

Irena stood in the mirror for a long time.

She could see the hall. She could see the door. She could see the chip in the corner of the frame, from the inside, which was a

thing she had never seen before. She could not move. She could not speak. She could only watch, and wait, and be looked at.

. . .

The other woman came back in the evening.

She took off the coat and hung it up and came and stood in front of the mirror and looked at Irena.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know it would be like this."

Irena looked at her.

"I have your life," the other woman said. "I have your husband's number in my phone. I have your job. I have your mother, who called this morning, and I talked to her for twenty minutes about her hip. I have been in the hall for four years, watching you, and I know everything about you, and I have discovered that I do not want any of it."

She put her hand on the glass.

"I want to give it back," she said. "But I don't know how. I have looked. There is no door on this side."

. . .

The other woman went to the Bureau in December.

She sat in the chair, and the clerk said, "Tell me the moment," and the other woman said, "I looked in the mirror on the fourteenth of March 2019, and the woman in the mirror looked back."

The clerk wrote.

"Which one are you?" the clerk said.

The other woman looked at her.

“I don’t know any more,” she said. “That’s the trouble. I have her memories and my own, and they are the same memories, and I have been in the hall for four years and in the world for one, and both of them feel like mine.”

She put her hands in her lap.

“I want to register the exchange,” she said. “And then I want to go back into the glass. And I want you to write down that the woman who came out was not the woman who went in, and that nobody noticed, and that the only person who could tell the difference was the one on the other side.”

. . .

Case 26. Irena Balážová. 14 March 2019. The moment: she looked first.

32

Untitled

Case
The Contract

The man at the fair was called Pan Novák, which was not his name, and his stall was between the candy floss and the shooting gallery, and it sold nothing at all.

There was a table and a chair and a leather folder, and above the table there was a sign that said CONTRACTS, and below the sign there was a smaller sign that said Terms negotiated. All wishes considered.

Mikuláš was thirty-five that year, and his daughter was six, and she had a heart that was failing, and the operation was in Germany and cost more than he would earn in twenty years.

He sat down.

· · ·

The contract was four pages, in a small, old-fashioned typeface, and Pan Novák explained it in a low voice while the fair went on around them.

“The fee is not money,” he said. “I have no use for money. The fee is a thing you will not miss until it is gone.”

“What kind of thing?”

“That is between you and the contract.”

Mikuláš read the first page. It was about the sum, which was large, and the timing, which was immediate, and the method, which was a transfer from a foundation in Liechtenstein. He read the second page. It was about confidentiality. He read the third page. It was about the fee.

The fee was the firstborn.

“I don’t have a firstborn,” Mikuláš said. “I have a daughter. She’s six. She’s the reason I’m here.”

Pan Novák looked at him.

“Then the contract will take something else,” he said. “It always finds something.”

· · ·

The operation was in January, and it worked. The surgeon came out and said the word successful, and Mikuláš sat in the corridor of the German hospital and cried into his hands.

His daughter came home in February. She was six, and then seven, and then eight. She went to school. She played the recorder. She had a scar down her chest that she showed to everyone.

Mikuláš had signed the contract, and the contract had taken something, and for three years he did not know what.

Then, in the spring, he began to lose his voice.

It was gradual. A hoarseness first, then a whisper, then a thing that was not a voice at all. The doctors did tests and found nothing. The specialists said it was functional, which is what special-

ists say when they do not know. By the autumn he could not speak above a murmur. By the winter he could not speak at all.

He wrote on a pad. He learned a little sign language. He went to a clinic in Prague, and the clinic said the same thing, and he came home and sat in the kitchen with his daughter and could not tell her a story.

. . .

His daughter was ten by then. She had learned to read his pad. She had learned to understand the murmur. She had learned to sit with him in the evenings and not ask him to talk.

One night she said, “Papa, do you remember the song?”

He looked at her.

“The one you used to sing,” she said. “When I was little. About the boat.”

He remembered. It was a song his mother had sung, about a boat going out and coming back, and he had sung it every night for six years, and he had not sung it since the operation.

He wrote on the pad: I can’t.

“You can,” she said. “You can whisper it.”

He tried. Nothing came.

She climbed onto his lap, the way she used to when she was small, and she put her head against his chest, and she said, “Then I’ll sing it, and you can do the boat.”

He did the boat. He hummed the low part, the part that was the engine, and she sang the words in her clear, terrible, six-year-

old voice, and they got to the end, and she said, “There. You did it.”

· · ·

He went to the fair in the autumn.

It was in the same field, and there was the candy floss and the shooting gallery, and there was a stall with a table and a chair and a leather folder.

Pan Novák was not there. A young woman was there.

“I’ve come about the contract,” Mikuláš wrote on the pad.

The woman read it.

“Which contract?”

“The one in 2015. The fee. It took my voice.”

The woman looked at the folder.

“There is no record of a contract in 2015,” she said. “The stall has been here since 1954. There is no record of a man called Novák.”

Mikuláš looked at her.

“There is a record of a man called Mikuláš Doležal,” the woman said. “He came in 2015 and signed for a sum of money and a medical procedure in Germany. The fee was the firstborn.”

“I don’t have a firstborn.”

“No,” the woman said. “You have a daughter. The contract found something else.”

She turned the folder round and pushed it across the table.

“Page three,” she said. “Sub-clause four. In the event that the party has no firstborn, the contract shall take the voice that first

spoke the party's name."

Mikuláš looked at the page.

"The first voice that spoke my name," he wrote.

"Your daughter," the woman said. "She said 'Papa' before she said anything else. The contract took the voice that spoke it. That's how it works. It takes the thing that made the name."

. . .

He walked home through the fair.

The candy floss was pink and the lights were on and the shooting gallery was doing a good trade. He stopped at the edge of the field and took out his pad and wrote, in the dark, with the pen he kept in his pocket:

What do I do?

He looked at the question for a long time.

Then he put the pad away and walked home, and his daughter was at the kitchen table with her homework, and she looked up and said, "Papa," and he could not say her name, and he sat down beside her and put his hand on her hand, and she said, "It's all right. I can talk enough for both of us."

. . .

Case 27. Mikuláš Doležal. 12 September 2015. The moment: he signed page three.

33

Untitled

Case
The Photograph

The bridge was the Legion Bridge, and the man was standing on the parapet with his coat off, and Jolana took the photograph because she was a photographer and because the light was good.

That is the truth of it. That is the thing she has never been able to say out loud. The light was good: the low winter sun behind him, the river below, the row of lamps along the embankment coming on one by one. She had her camera on her shoulder because she always had her camera on her shoulder, and she lifted it and framed him and pressed the shutter, and then she lowered the camera and said, “Excuse me.”

He turned round.

He was about forty. He had a good coat, folded on the parapet beside him, and a wedding ring, and a face that was very calm.

“Are you all right?” Jolana said.

“Yes,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’re on the parapet.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to come down?”

He looked at the river.

"I've been standing here for an hour," he said. "You're the first person who has spoken to me. There were eleven people before you. They all looked and walked on. One of them took a photograph."

Jolana put the camera down on the pavement.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's all right," he said. "It's what people do."

. . .

She talked him down.

It took forty minutes. She did not say anything clever. She said, "My name is Jolana, I'm a photographer, I live in the block behind the bridge," and she talked about the light, and the river, and the row of lamps, and her mother, and a dog she had had as a child. He listened. He came down at the end of it, and sat on the pavement with his coat over his knees, and cried.

The police came. An ambulance came. A woman from the ambulance gave him a blanket and asked Jolana if she was family, and she said no, and the woman said, "You should come to the hospital, if you want."

Jolana did not go. She had a shoot at six.

. . .

The photograph was on the news the next day.

She had not sold it. She had put it on her Instagram, because that is what photographers do, and a journalist had seen it and

asked for it, and she had said yes. The photograph showed a man on a parapet, with the river and the lamps, and it was, everyone agreed, a beautiful photograph, and the story was that he had been talked down, and the caption said A stranger's kindness.

The man's name was Vojtěch. He was a teacher. He had a wife and a son. He had been in debt and had been having a bad year, and after the photograph he had a worse one, because the photograph was everywhere and his face was everywhere and the school asked him to take a leave of absence.

He died in the spring. He jumped from the same bridge at four in the morning, and there were no witnesses.

. . .

Jolana went to the Bureau in the autumn.

The clerk was called Mara. She said, "Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment."

"The moment I pressed the shutter," Jolana said.

The clerk wrote.

"I have been telling myself that I saved him," Jolana said. "That I talked him down. That the photograph is a photograph of a man who was saved. And then he died in the spring, and the photograph was still on my Instagram, and I took it down, and I sat in my flat and looked at it on my laptop for a month."

"What did you see?"

"A man on a parapet," Jolana said. "And the light. The light is beautiful. That's the thing I cannot say to anyone. The light in that photograph is the best light I have ever photographed, and I

knew it when I pressed the shutter, and I pressed it before I spoke to him."

She put her hands in her lap.

"Eleven people walked past him," she said. "One of them took a photograph. I was the one who took a photograph. And then I talked him down, and the talking down has been the story, and the photograph has been the proof, and the truth is that I did the thing the eleven people did, and then I did the thing that made me feel better about it."

. . .

She developed the roll in the spring, after he died.

There were nine photographs on it. Eight were from the shoot at six o'clock: a warehouse, a model, the river from the other bank.

The ninth was the bridge.

She printed it at home, in the darkroom, and hung it up to dry, and when it was dry she looked at it properly for the first time.

The man was on the parapet. The light was good. The river was below, and the lamps were coming on.

And beside him, on the pavement, there was a woman.

She was standing with her camera down at her side, and she was looking up at him, and she was not Jolana. She was taller, and her hair was shorter, and she was wearing a green coat that Jolana had never owned.

Jolana looked at the photograph for a long time.

Then she looked at the date on the negative, which was the twelfth of January, and at the time, which was 16:41.

At 16:41 on the twelfth of January, Jolana had been standing on the pavement with her camera down at her side, wearing a black coat, looking up at him.

She had not been wearing green. She had never owned a green coat.

She took the print into the sitting room and sat down with it and looked at it until the light went.

. . .

Case 28. Jolana Křížová. 12 January 2024. The moment: she pressed the shutter.

34

Untitled

Case
The Whistle

The whistle was on the roof of the loading bay, and it had been used since 1962 to mark the shifts: seven in the morning, three in the afternoon, eleven at night.

It was a steam whistle, though the steam came from an electric boiler now, and it could be heard in four villages. It was connected by a rod and a lever to the boiler house, and the lever was in a glass case with a brass handle, and the case was never locked, because the only person who ever touched it was the shift foreman.

Jakub was the shift foreman's son. He was twenty-four that year, and he had a job in the packing hall, and he had been trying for eighteen months to get the union to take the dust seriously.

The dust was from the sand moulds. It was in the air of the packing hall at all hours, and the masks were the wrong kind, and two men had been to the hospital in the spring with a cough that would not go. Jakub had written to the factory inspector. The inspector had written back and said the matter was being

looked at. The union had said that the matter was being looked at. His father had said, “Leave it alone, Jakub.”

. . .

The whistle was connected to the railway.

That was the thing nobody knew, or nobody remembered. The factory had a private siding, and the siding joined the main line at a signal box, and the signal was worked by the same rod as the whistle — a relic of 1962, when the factory had loaded its own wagons and the whistle had told the shunters when to move.

The rod had been disconnected in 1994. The signal had been disconnected in 1994. The whistle had been reconnected to the boiler, and the rod had been left in place, and everybody had forgotten that it had ever done anything else.

On the eleventh of March, at ten past seven in the evening, Jakub went up to the roof and pulled the lever.

. . .

He did it for the dust.

He had thought about it for a week. The plan was simple: the whistle would blow at ten past seven instead of eleven, the night shift would come in early, the packing hall would fill, and Jakub, standing on the loading bay with a clipboard and a camera, would film the dust in the light and send it to the newspaper.

It was a stupid plan. It was the plan of a young man who had run out of letters. He knew it was stupid. He did it anyway.

The whistle blew for eleven seconds.

The night shift came in early. The packing hall filled. Jakub filmed the dust.

And on the main line, four kilometres away, the signal that had been disconnected in 1994 moved for the first time in thirty years, and a freight train that had been waiting at the signal took the siding, and the points were seized, and the train derailed at the factory gate.

. . .

Two people died.

One was the driver, a man of fifty-eight called Bohuslav, who had been with the railway for thirty-one years. The other was a woman on the night shift called Alena, who had come in early because the whistle had blown, and who was walking along the road past the factory gate when the wagon came over.

Jakub was on the loading bay with the camera in his hand.

He saw it. He saw the whole thing. He saw the wagon come over and the dust go up and the people run, and he stood there with the camera and filmed it, because the camera was in his hand and because he was a young man who had been filming for a week.

Then he put the camera down and ran.

. . .

The investigation took eleven months.

The rod was found. The connection was found. The lever was found, with Jakub's fingerprints on it, and the camera was found,

with the film in it, and Jakub was arrested in the spring.

The charge was not murder. The charge was endangering the safety of the railway, and causing death by negligence, and he was sentenced to four years, and he served three.

His father did not visit him. The union paid for a lawyer. The factory was closed for six months and then reopened with new masks and a new whistle, electric, on a timer, with no lever at all.

. . .

Jakub came to the Bureau in the year after his release.

The clerk was called Mara. She said, “Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

“The lever,” Jakub said.

The clerk wrote.

“I have thought about it for five years,” Jakub said. “I have thought about the dust and the masks and the letters. I have thought about Bohuslav, who had a wife and a garden. I have thought about Alena, who came in early because of me. I have thought about the eleven seconds.”

He put his hands on his knees.

“And I have thought about this,” he said. “If I had not pulled the lever, the dust would still be there. The masks would still be wrong. The men would still be coughing. The factory would still be running, and nobody would have died, and nothing would have changed.”

The clerk wrote.

“So you are saying it was worth it,” she said.

“No,” Jakub said. “I am saying that I have spent five years trying to find the version of the story in which I am a man who did a bad thing for a good reason. And every time I find it, I hear the whistle, and I see the wagon, and I know that I did not pull the lever for the dust. I pulled it because I was twenty-four and I wanted to be the one who made something happen.”

He looked at the lamp.

“The dust was the reason I told myself,” he said. “The whistle was the thing I wanted to do.”

. . .

Case 29. Jakub Novotný. 11 March 2023. The moment: he pulled the lever.

35

Untitled

Case
The Return

The man came into the Bureau on a Tuesday in October, and he was sixty-one years old, and he had been away for twenty years.

His name was Karel Soukup. He had been born in the town in 1965, and he had left in 2005, and he had spent the twenty years in Canada, in a city called Hamilton, working in a steel plant that had closed in 2019. He had come back because his sister had died and because he had discovered, at sixty-one, that he had no one to leave his money to and nothing to do with his afternoons.

He came up the four flights with a folder under his arm and sat down in the chair and said, “I’d like to register a moment.”

The clerk was called Mara. She said, “Tell me the moment. Not the story around it. The moment.”

“The day I left,” Karel said. “The twelfth of April, 2005. I got on the bus at the station at six in the morning and I did not look back.”

Mara opened the ledger and took up the pen.

“Name.”

“Karel Soukup.”

“Date of birth.”

“Third of March, 1965.”

Mara wrote the name, and then she stopped.

She turned back a page. Then another. Then she went to the index at the back of the ledger, which was a thing she did not often do, and she ran her finger down the S’s.

“What is it?” Karel said.

“One moment,” Mara said.

. . .

The Bureau’s index was not a register of citizens. It was a register of moments: a name, a date, a line. But the Bureau had been a hotel until 1953, and before that a courthouse, and the records in the basement went back to 1789, and among them there were the registers of births from the parish, which had been deposited there in 1954 and never collected.

Mara went down to the basement and found the box for 1965 and brought it up.

She opened the parish register at the third of March.

There was no Karel Soukup.

There was a stillbirth. A boy, unnamed, to Anna Soukupová, in the house on Pekařská Street.

Mara sat at her desk with the parish register on one side and the ledger on the other.

“Mr. Soukup,” she said. “Where were you born?”

“Here,” Karel said. “In the town. In the hospital.”

“The hospital was not built until 1971.”

Karel looked at her.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

Mara turned the page round and showed him the entry. The stillbirth. The date. His mother’s name.

“That is my mother,” Karel said. “But that’s not me. That’s a brother. A brother who died. My mother told me about him.”

“She told you about him.”

“She told me there was a boy before me, and that he was born asleep, and that she lit a candle for him every year on the third of March.”

Mara looked at the register.

“Your birthday is the third of March,” she said.

“Yes.”

“The candle was for you.”

Karel sat very still.

. . .

The story came out over three hours.

His mother had been nineteen in 1965 and unmarried, and she had given birth in the house on Pekařská Street with a midwife, and the baby had not breathed. The midwife had registered the stillbirth. And then, three days later, a woman in the next village had come with a baby she could not keep — a baby from a girl who had gone to Vienna, a baby with no papers — and Anna Soukupová had taken it, and had told the town that the stillbirth

had been a mistake, that the baby had lived, that the priest had been confused.

The town had believed her. The parish register had not. The town had brought up Karel Soukup as its own, and the register had gone on saying what it said, in a box in a basement, for sixty years.

. . .

"So I am not Karel Soukup," Karel said.

"You are Karel Soukup," Mara said. "You have been Karel Soukup for sixty-one years. The register says you died on the third of March, 1965. The town says you did not."

"Then which one is true?"

Mara looked at the two books on her desk: the parish register and the ledger.

"The register is true," she said. "And the town is true. They are different kinds of record."

Karel sat in the chair with the folder on his knees.

"I came to register the day I left," he said. "And now I find that I never arrived."

He opened the folder. Inside were photographs: a house on Pekařská Street, a woman in a headscarf, a bus station, a steel plant in Hamilton, a garden in Ontario.

"This is my life," he said. "Sixty-one years. I have photographs."

"Yes."

"Does the Bureau have a form for this?"

Mara took a fresh sheet from the drawer.

"Tell me the moment," she said. "Not the story around it."

Karel looked at the photographs, and then at the register, and then at the window, where the town was doing what it did in the late afternoon, which was to go grey and quiet and then light up.

"The moment I got on the bus," he said. "I had a ticket to Vienna and a suitcase and a photograph of my mother. I was forty. I had never been further than Brno. And I sat down at the back of the bus and I thought: nobody here knows who I am. And I was happy."

He looked at her.

"That's the moment," he said. "I was happy."

. . .

Case 30. Karel Soukup. 12 April 2005. The moment: he sat down at the back of the bus and was happy.

3 6

Untitled

The Clerk's Case

The last person of the day was a girl of about nineteen, with a raincoat and a folded piece of paper, and she sat down in the chair and did not know where to put her hands.

"I'd like to register a moment," she said.

"Tell me the moment," Mara said. "Not the story around it. The moment."

The girl looked at the paper. "I told my mother I hated her," she said. "On the stairs. She was going to work. I was fifteen. She died in June."

"Which part is the moment?"

"When she didn't turn round."

Mara wrote it. The pen scratched. The girl watched, and then said, "Is that it?"

"That's the record."

"Does it do anything?"

"No," Mara said. "It records."

The girl nodded. She folded the paper and put it in her pocket, and stood up, and said thank you, and went to the door, and then turned round and said, "Have you ever registered one?"

Mara looked at her.

“Goodnight,” she said.

. . .

The Bureau closed at five.

Mara locked the door and drew the blind and sat down again at the desk, and for a long time she did nothing at all. The building was quiet. The city outside was doing what it did in the evening, which was to fill up with lights and the sound of trams.

She took a form from the drawer.

The form was one page, printed in 1953 and never revised, and it asked for the name, the date, the place, and a description of the moment, and at the bottom there was a line for the fee, which was one hour of testimony, and a line for the Clerk’s signature.

She filled in the top three lines.

Name: Mara Vránová.

Date of the moment: 14 November 2008.

Place: a flat on Anglická Street, two floors above the courtyard.

Then she stopped.

. . .

She had been twenty-five. She had been wearing a green dress borrowed from her sister, with a stain on the sleeve from a glass of red wine, and she had been at a party in a flat on the other side of the river, and the party had been for a girl called Tereza who

had turned thirty, and there had been music and a bowl of punch and someone playing the piano badly.

Her mother had been alone in the flat on Anglická Street. She had been alone for four years, since Mara's father died, and she had been managing, and she had a neighbour who looked in, and she had a telephone with big buttons because her eyes were bad.

At twenty to eleven the phone rang.

Mara was in the kitchen, filling a glass. Her phone was on the table. The screen said Anglická 12, which was the neighbour's number, because her mother did not call from her own phone any more, she used the neighbour's, because the buttons on her own were too small.

Mara looked at the screen.

She had been at the party for three hours. She had drunk two glasses of wine. She was twenty-five and she was tired and she had a shift in the morning and her mother called every day, sometimes twice, to ask whether she had eaten, and there was a part of Mara — she knew this now, she had known it for years — that had been waiting for the call to stop.

She put the phone face down on the table and went back into the party.

. . .

At half past one she left. She walked to the tram stop and then, because it was cold and she was tired, she did not get on the tram, and she walked home to her own flat on the other side of the river, and she went to bed.

In the morning there were two messages.

The first was from the neighbour, at 23:52: Mara, your mother is not well. Call me.

The second was from the hospital, at 06:14: Ms Vránová, please call us regarding your mother.

Her mother had had a stroke at twenty to eleven and had been taken to the hospital at half past. She had died at ten to twelve. She had been asking for Mara, the neighbour said, for the first hour, and then she had stopped asking.

Mara did not go to the hospital. She went to the flat. She sat in the kitchen with the big-button phone and the calendar and the list of her mother's medication, and she stayed there for three days, and then her sister came from Canada and the funeral happened and the flat was sold and Mara went back to work at the ministry of transport, and nobody ever asked her why she had not answered the phone.

· · ·

She had taken the job at the Bureau in 2015.

She had seen the advertisement in the newspaper — Clerk required. Records office. Full training given. The successful candidate will be patient. — and she had applied because it was a job, and because the office was on the fourth floor of an old hotel, and because the hours were nine to five, and because it was the only place she had ever heard of where a person could sit in a chair and listen to other people's worst moments and not be asked for her own.

Eleven years.

She had heard eleven years of moments. She had heard people confess to things that were not crimes and things that were. She had heard a man describe the four seconds in which he had decided not to go back into a burning building, and a woman describe the two words she had said to her son on the last morning, and a boy describe the sound a car makes when it hits a dog. She had written every one of them in the green ledger in her small, even hand, and she had said the same sentence to every person, and she had never once said the sentence she said to herself.

She had thought, in the beginning, that the job would be a penance. That listening to other people would wear the thing away, the way water wears a stone.

It had not worn away. It had been polished. It sat in her chest like a coin, and every case she registered made it brighter.

. . .

She sat at the desk with the form in front of her and the lamp on and the ledger open at the blank page.

The rules said: The fee is one hour of testimony.

She looked at the clock. It was twenty past five. She had until twenty past six.

“All right,” she said, to the room. “The moment.”

. . .

The moment was not the phone.

She had thought it was the phone. For sixteen years she had told it that way, in the private courtroom she kept at the back of her head: the phone ringing, the screen, the face-down handset, the party. That was the story around it. She had known, for a long time, that it was the story around it.

The moment was earlier.

It was half past six that evening, when her mother had called to ask whether she was coming on Sunday, and Mara had said she was not sure, she might have plans, and her mother had said, "All right, love," in a voice that was already going quiet, and Mara had said, "I'll call you," and her mother had said, "No need, no need," and had hung up first.

Mara had stood in her kitchen with the phone in her hand and had felt, for one clear second, the whole shape of the years ahead: the calls every day, the asking whether she had eaten, the slow narrowing of her mother's life to a flat and a telephone and a daughter who did not come.

And she had thought: I cannot do this for another twenty years.

That was the moment. Not the party. Not the phone. The thought.

She had wished her mother's life shorter, for a second, in a kitchen, at half past six, and eighteen years later she was still holding the thought in her hands like a stone.

· · ·

She wrote it in the ledger.

Her hand was steady. It had written eleven years of other people's moments and it did not shake now.

Case Thirty-One. Mara Vránová. 14 November 2008. The moment: she wished her mother's life shorter, and it was.

She blotted the ink. She closed the green book. She sat for a while with her hands flat on the cover, the way she did at the end of every day, and then she opened the ledger again and wrote a second line under the first, which was not in the form and was not allowed, and which the ledger accepted because the ledger recorded and did not judge.

The record cannot be changed. It may only be added to.

Added: she answered the phone every day for four years before that, and she was there when her father died, and she was twenty-five years old and she was frightened, and she is sorry.

. . .

She turned off the lamp. She put on her coat. She went down the four flights in the dark, counting the landings the way she had counted them every evening for eleven years, and she opened the street door and stepped out into the city.

It was raining. The trams were running. The lights were on in the windows of the buildings, and the river was where it had always been, and Mara Vránová stood on the pavement with her collar up and did not know where to go, because for the first time in eighteen years there was nothing left to register.

She walked.

She walked past the ministry of transport and the bank and the church, and she crossed the bridge, and she kept walking,

and at half past seven she came to Anglická Street, and she stood outside the building where her mother had lived, and she looked up at the window on the second floor.

The light was on.

Somebody else's light, in somebody else's flat, on a Tuesday in November.

Mara stood in the rain and looked at it for a long time. Then she went home.

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