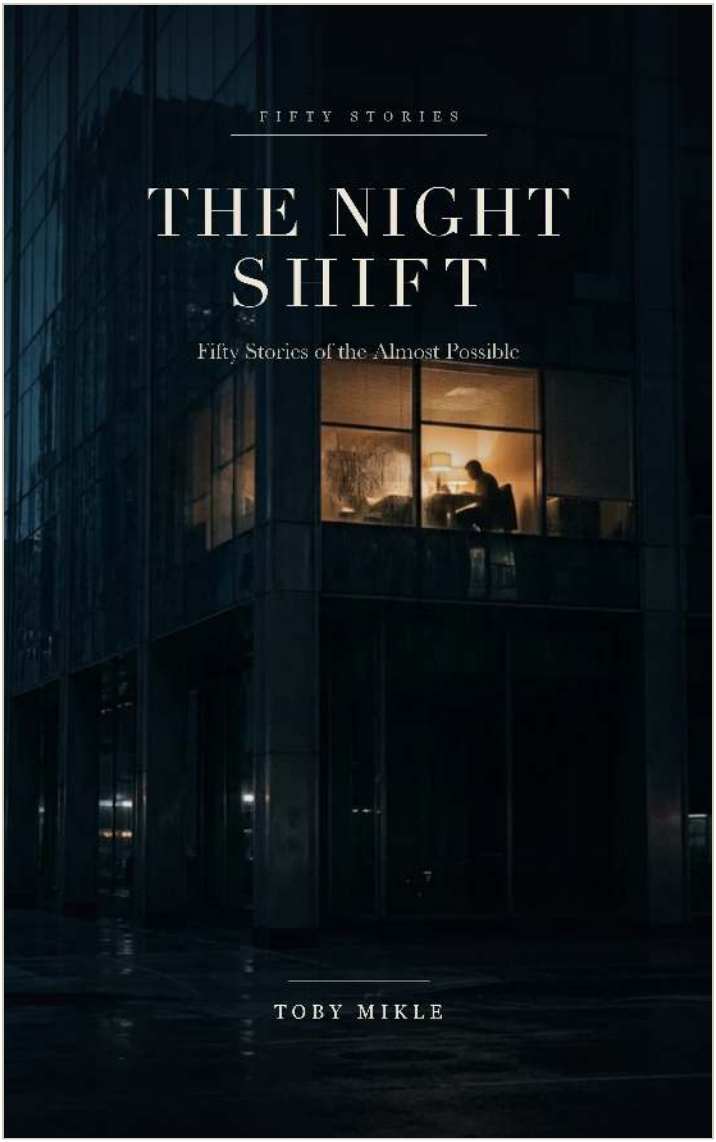

FIFTY STORIES
THE NIGHT SHIFT
Fifty Stories of the Almost Possible
TOBY MIKLE



THE NIGHT SHIFT — PART 1

INCOPREA

The Night Shift — Part 1

Fifty Stories of the Almost Possible

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TOBY MIKLE

ONE

Untitled

TWO

Untitled

The Night Shift

Fifty Stories of the Almost Possible

Toby Mikle

THREE

Untitled

Copyright

The Night Shift: Fifty Stories of the Almost Possible

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Untitled

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FIVE

Untitled

1 The Courtesy Call

At 09:40 the queue refreshed. Row one had a window of ten o'clock: FENWICK, D., 79, Medlar Court, priority, ninety-six four.

Lorraine read the file twice. Husband in the hospice at home, daughter had rung about costs, no plan in place, no solicitor. She put the headset on and pressed the green button and the phone did its two soft rings.

"Mrs Fenwick? It's Lorraine, from Hollins Bank. I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

"Who is this?"

"Lorraine. From Hollins. Your husband's bank." There was a pause with a kettle in it. "We've had a note from the hospice team to say Mr Fenwick's been poorly, and I wanted to talk you through what happens next, so it isn't all on you at once."

"Next."

"Yes."

"He's not gone."

"I know. I'm sorry. This isn't about that." Lorraine turned her chair towards the window. "It's the paperwork. The accounts, the

house, the arrangements. If you've got a solicitor you like, we'll work with them. If you haven't, it can all go through one number, and you won't have to tell the same story twice."

"Susan says don't sign anything."

"Then don't sign anything. I'll put the pack in the post today and you can put it in a drawer. If you never open it, that's all right."

"It's a white envelope, is it? Everything's a white envelope."

"It's a white envelope with a window." Lorraine waited. "Would that be all right?"

"His account's from 1979. He got a pen for the twenty-five years. A nice one." The woman's voice went somewhere. "I don't know where it is now."

"I'll put it in the post," Lorraine said. "It's got the number on the front. It's not an answer machine after six."

"Thank you."

"Ring it if you need it. Any time."

She ended the call and typed the notes into the fields, disposition warm, case value ninety-six four, pack posted in the comments. Then she went to the whiteboard and put a small black dot under the four. The board had a grid of names and values and a dot for every first contact. At the end of the month Ade counted them.

Estate Care North was nine desks on the third floor, eight of them filled on a normal week, the ninth holding the printer and two boxes of headsets. The windows faced the car park and, past the car park, the flat roof of the bus station. In March the glass held nothing at all. The queue sorted by case value, highest first,

which was a setting nobody remembered choosing. The allocator read postcode, case value and window. It did not read the notes.

Ade had written 94 on the board that morning and said what he said every week: that they were the calmest voice in the room at the worst moment of somebody's life. He said journey the way other people said morning.

Lorraine had been there eleven years. She was fifty-one and good at it, and she knew she was good at it, which is a different thing from being told. She liked the long ones, the calls where somebody cried and then laughed at themselves and said sorry for laughing. She came in on the 7:52 from Ashfield; if she missed it, the 8:12 still got her to her desk for twenty past. The listening room was at the end of the floor, with a good chair and a window that opened, and you booked it for the calls that were going to be long.

The script was A4, laminated, and it began in bold: YOU ARE NOT HERE TO FIX ANYTHING. Then the highlighted line, the one they all used, the one Lorraine had changed in the 2021 refresh from must be to may be, because you can't tell people what they're feeling.

We understand you may be going through a difficult time. Can we talk you through what happens next?

There is no charge for this call.

Nothing you decide today is final.

At the kettle Kelsey was reading the old tickets. She was twenty-two, three weeks in, and she had a lanyard with a small bottle of hand gel on it, and she read everything. She had a flat over a chip shop and a boyfriend who worked nights, and she told Lorraine about both without being asked.

“Lorraine. Why’s this one before the death?”

“Which?”

“This notification. It’s the twenty-ninth, and the death’s the second.”

“The feed runs ahead sometimes.” Lorraine put a teabag in a mug. “We buy it off the trust. Registrars batch things. It’s a timing thing.”

“But the window’s before.” Kelsey turned the screen round. “The model’s putting the call before.”

“The model’s good at windows.” Lorraine poured the water. “That’s why we’re first. If we ring on the Tuesday and the family’s still in the hospital car park, they remember who rang first. Eight days, on average, in the early cohort. That’s the whole point of it. I put it on a slide in October. A man from region said great work.”

“Eight days before.”

“On average.” She stirred. “It’s a notification, not a prediction. There’s a difference.”

“Which one’s the difference?”

Ade came past with his mug held against his chest. “It’s a feed thing, Kel. Don’t go down the hole.” He was at his desk before she could ask again.

In February the annual module had locked her out of her own computer until she filled in the staff relationships screen. It was four screens. Name, date of birth, account number, nature of relationship. The first screen had a link to the team handbook, and the link landed on the paragraph Lorraine had written in 2019: If a case touches you personally, declare it and hand it on.

Never sit on it, however well you know it. The person on the other end deserves someone who isn't inside it. She had written it in an afternoon and been pleased with it.

A help note at the bottom of the screen said: Declared relatives are flagged for enhanced service. The induction had said the same thing in different words. If you've got family with us, declare them. Declared means they get us and not the call centre. Everyone did it.

Lorraine typed her mother's name and date of birth and the account number she knew off by heart. She had been paying the paper bill from it since 2019. She pressed submit. The screen said Thank you, and the email said the same, with a reference number. She read it on the bus and deleted it.

Her mother went in on the ninth of March, a Tuesday, with a chest that had been bad since Christmas. She was eighty-four. She had a stairlift she called the machine, a back bedroom she hadn't been up to since 2019, and a way of saying I'm fine that meant I'm not going to discuss it.

Ward six, the bed by the window. "I wanted the one by the door," her mother said. "You hear more."

"Next time I'll ask."

"Next time." Her mother laughed and then coughed and then said she was fine.

Lorraine walked over from the office four evenings that week, twenty-five minutes, past the retail park and the purple-fronted takeaway. Paul came in the mornings. He was a joiner with his own van, two girls and a wife called Sharon. He did the practical things and let Lorraine do the talking. They had settled into that without ever agreeing to it, since their father died.

“Your Paul brought grapes,” her mother said. “I can’t get the skins off.”

“He’s trying.”

“He’s always trying.”

The consultant said the chest was clearing and she might be out Friday. Then it was Monday. Then it was a scan, then a different antibiotic, then Monday again. On the twenty-third Lorraine sat with her while a woman came round with a trolley and her mother chose a yoghurt and didn’t eat it.

“Fifty-one years I’ve been with Hollins,” her mother said. “They used to send a calendar. Lovely hills.”

“They stopped the calendars.”

“I know they stopped. I’m saying they used to.”

On the thirtieth of March, a Tuesday, the queue refreshed at 09:40 and her mother’s postcode was near the top.

She read it four times. The fields were the usual fields.

MERCER, EILEEN J.

12 Larkhill Rise, S43 2LP

DOB 12/02/1941

Notified 30/03, 09:12

Source: acute trust mortality feed

Window: Mon 05/04, 10:00–10:20

Case value: £118,400

Owner: L. Mercer

Note: declared relationship — enhanced service.

The note was hers.

Lorraine sat with her hands flat on the desk. Then she picked up the desk phone and rang the ward.

“Ward six.”

“It’s Lorraine. Eileen Mercer’s daughter.”

“Oh, hello love. She’s had her breakfast. She’s after the remote.”

“Has she seen the doctor this morning?”

“Not yet. He does his round about eleven.”

“Thanks.”

She put the phone down. The row was still there. She did the sum on the back of a compliments slip. The thirtieth to the seventh was eight days. The early cohort averaged eight days.

At 09:56 she opened a record query and typed: Customer living. Possible duplicate notification. Ward six, St Aidan’s, 01423 555 0190. She sent it and went back to work. It came back at 14:20.

Query INC-4471 — closed.

Notification verified against supplier feed.

No duplicate found. No fault.

She went to Ade’s desk at ten past three and stood with her hands on the back of the empty chair.

“I need to hand a case over.”

“Which one?”

She turned the screen.

He read it all the way down, the way she read files. Then he said, “Right.”

“She’s in St Aidan’s. Chest. She’s had her breakfast.”

“Right.” He clicked in. “You’ve done the right thing. You wrote the thing.”

“I wrote the thing.”

“Then I’ll take the window.” He looked up. “Do you want Monday off?”

“I’ll be in.”

“Lorraine.”

“I’ll be in.”

“How does it know before the ward does?”

Ade looked at the screen, not at her. “It’s a courtesy call. That’s all it is.”

“Have you eaten today?” He picked up his mug. “I’ll take the window. Stay off the queue Monday morning. Do the post, do the callbacks. That’s all I’m asking.”

On the Sunday she rang Paul about the ward’s visiting hours and got as far as If the bank rings—

“What bank?” he said.

“Nothing. Ignore me. They’ve changed the parking.”

She came in on the 8:12. She had meant to come in on the 7:52 and hadn’t. Kelsey had brought a tub of flapjack and put it by the kettle with a note that said HELP YOURSELF.

At 09:58 Ade put his headset on. At ten o’clock Lorraine’s phone went in the cardigan pocket. She took it out. The screen said HOLLINS BANK. She put it face down on the desk. It rang four times and stopped. Then the screen lit with a missed call and she turned it over so it wouldn’t.

At 10:02 Ade dialled.

“Mr Mercer? It’s Ade, from Hollins Bank. I’m sorry to bother you. I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time.” He listened. “Yes. Yes, that’s right. We’ve had a note from the hospital. We understand you may be going through a difficult time. Can I talk you through what happens next? Have you got five minutes?”

Lorraine had known Paul’s voice on a phone since before she could remember. From six feet away it was thin, a voice in a tin.

“No, there’s no charge for the call. That’s what we’re here for.” A pause. “Your mum’s a long-standing customer. Fifty-one years. She’s on our enhanced list, so you’ve got us rather than the queue.” He listened. “She’s had the funeral plan with us since 2016, so that side’s sorted. It’s the estate side I’d like to talk you through. The probate, the house, the accounts.” A pause. “No, that’s very good of you, but we don’t need to do anything today. I can put the pack in the post and hold a callback for Thursday.” A pause. “If anything happens before Thursday, you ring this number and you’ll get me or one of the team. It doesn’t go to a call centre.” He wrote something down. “No. No, I haven’t spoken to your sister.”

Lorraine looked at Ade’s monitor. Her mother’s file was open in the middle of it and the fields were filling as he typed. Disposition: warm. Case value: 118. Notes: next of kin engaged, estate service discussed, pack posted, callback Thurs.

At 10:19 he took the headset off and put a small black dot on the whiteboard, under the four, and wrote in the corner: MERCER, E.

At half past ten Lorraine booked the listening room for fifteen minutes and sat in the good chair with the light off and looked at the car park.

On the Tuesday evening Paul rang about the will. “They need the deeds and her NI number. Where does she keep them?”

“The sideboard. Bottom drawer.”

“I’ll go now.”

“I’ll come.”

They spent an hour in the back room. The will was in a drawer with the old calendars and a broken stapler. The deeds were in a plastic wallet behind the good tablecloths. Paul put it all in a carrier bag and drove her to the hospital, and their mother was asleep, and a nurse said it was probably best to let her rest.

The phone went at ten past four on Wednesday morning. Paul said the words. She said, “I’m coming,” and then sat on the edge of the bed with the phone in her hand until the screen went dark.

Her mother had died at 3:40. She was in the bed by the window, which she hadn’t wanted.

There were five days of it: the registrar, the crematorium, Marcus in his good coat with a folder and a tablet, very patient with Paul. The pack had come in a white envelope with a window. Inside were a folder, a form, a freepost envelope and a packet of tissues with the logo on.

The funeral was on the Wednesday, at St Bartholomew’s, and then the social club on Calder Street, sandwiches and tea in urns. Marcus stood at the back and left before the sandwiches.

Paul stood by the door with a booklet in each hand, giving them out like a man who’d been told to. On the back, in small print: Arrangements by Hollins Bereavement Support. Your specialist: A. Coker.

“They’ve been great, your lot,” he said. “They rang before we’d even—“

He looked at the booklet.

“Before we’d even thought about it,” he said. “And it turns out she’d had the funeral paid up since 2016. Never said a word.”

“Two and a half per cent, the probate,” he said. “But it comes out of the estate.” He turned the booklet over. “She’d have liked that. Everything in a drawer.”

On the Sunday night she typed a message to Paul. She got as far as There’s something I should and sat with her thumb over the screen. Then she deleted it, and washed up, and went to bed.

She took the Thursday and the Friday and the Monday and went back on the Tuesday. The queue refreshed at 09:40. Someone had put a card by her monitor, signed by the team, with a picture of a beach on the front.

Ade came over. “Good to have you back.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ve put you on callbacks this week. No windows.”

“I’d rather have a window.”

He looked at her. “All right,” he said, and went back to his desk.

Row one had a window of ten o’clock. AINSLEY, M., 84, Firtree Court, priority, £102,400.

Lorraine read the file twice. The source was the acute trust mortality feed. The son’s number was on it, and the ward. Ward six. The mother had been admitted on the Friday. The son had rung the ward twice since Friday. She looked at the notification date and did the sum on the compliments slip. Then she put the

headset on and pressed the green button. The phone did its two soft rings.

"Mr Ainsley? It's Lorraine, from Hollins Bank. I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time. We've had a note about your mother."

She let the pause run the way the script said to.

"We understand you may be going through a difficult time. Can we talk you through what happens next?"

On the other end of the line, a kettle was coming up to the boil.

SIX

Untitled

2 The Quiet Man

At 07:52 I am at desk 26 with my coat still on. Household and small commercial claims. Nineteen years in March, which is longer than the plant has been dead. The plant is a yucca. It died in 2019 and nobody took it away, and now it gets dusted around.

The lights come on in banks above the pods. The cleaner is doing the bins.

The time goes at the top of the sheet before I start. 07:52. It is a habit I got from a supervisor who is dead.

I write the file note in longhand before I type it. The pen is a Waterman my father gave me when I passed my exams. The nib is bent from a fall in 2011 and I have not had it fixed, because it writes a thicker line on the downstroke, which is useful for figures.

I read everything twice. It is cheaper than asking.

The claim in front of me is a chip shop on Dewsbury Road. A fire in the extraction duct. Four thousand two. The assessor's report says the duct was cleaned in June. The invoice in the file says March. I write the two dates in the margin and then: Invoice contradicts report. Decline the duct. Pay the clean.

I put it in the tray.

I am fifty-eight. The pension scheme closed to new members in 2011. There are eleven of us left in it. At sixty I get nineteen thousand four hundred a year. If I go now I get six thousand one hundred. That is the arithmetic. It fits on a Post-it, and the Post-it is in the top drawer, under the pens.

Sue Pargeter says I take a beat before I answer and it makes people nervous. I take the beat because I am deciding.

• • •

In March I assessed policy 4471-228.

Pauline Dyer, sixty-one, trading as Dyer Upholstery, unit 4 on the airfield estate. On the third of February a floor lamp went over in her workroom. The bulb lay against a drum of foam offcuts for long enough to do what bulbs do. The workroom went up. Nobody was in it. The unit next door lost a wall and a compressor.

She was insured for thirty-eight thousand four on the building, eleven thousand two on contents, four thousand on interruption.

Our loss adjuster's report ran to nine pages. On page seven it found a way to read exclusion 7(b) — damage arising from the use of heat in the course of the business — as covering a lamp.

I read it on the Thursday. I read it again on the Friday.

On the Monday, nine fifteen, room 3, Lumb had the reserve on the screen. He said "reputational exposure" twice. Sue asked whether a lamp counted as a process. Lumb said that was what we were there to decide.

I said: "The lamp is not the process. It's a lamp. Pay it."

Nobody argued. The reserve moved. Sue wrote it down. Eleven seconds, start to finish. We went on to a burst pipe in a bakery.

I rang Pauline Dyer on the Tuesday, which I do not always do. The number in the file was a mobile and she answered on the third ring with a radio going behind her.

I said who I was and that the claim was approved and the money would be in her account within five working days.

She was quiet. Then she said, “They told me it would be six weeks.”

I said, “It’s approved.”

She said, “Are you the one who decided?”

I said, “It was decided in a meeting.”

She said, “I thought you’d be a machine.”

I said nothing.

She said, “No offence.”

I said, “None taken.”

She said, “You’re very quiet.”

I said, “It’s a quiet job.”

• • •

The email came from Lumb on a Wednesday, headed WORKPLACE PILOT — PLEASE READ. It was four paragraphs and a link. A firm called Quorum had been engaged to install meeting intelligence across the third floor. Microphones in the ceiling. Transcripts. A dashboard. The pilot was six weeks, voluntary, and everyone was expected to take part.

Ellen Marsh came on the Monday with two men and a box of ceiling pucks. She had a lanyard with a photograph on it in which

she was laughing. She stood in the breakout area by the kettle and said, “We’re not measuring you. We’re measuring the room.”

Sue asked if it was listening now.

Marsh said, “The light’s on.”

The light was on.

By the Friday there were forty of them, one above each pod.

Someone asked what happened when a meeting was all remote. Marsh said the system preferred a room. “It needs an anchor. A chair, basically. Somebody the output can be attached to.”

Sue said, “A chair.”

Marsh said, “A person who is in the room.”

She had a slide with three logos on it. One was a firm in Leeds, and they had gone to a full chair model in November. “They have a person in the room for the nine fifteen,” she said. “He doesn’t say anything. That’s the point.”

Sue laughed. Marsh didn’t.

The screen went up on the Thursday, above the kettle. PRESENCE INDEX — WEEK 1. Forty names, a number beside each. Sue was on 31. Lumb was on 44. I was on 91. The number was not a percentage. Nobody said what it was out of.

I had said eleven words.

• • •

The following Wednesday the transcript arrived, in a portal. Every meeting had a page. The Monday list ran to seven pages and my contribution was on page four, in bold, because the system flagged decisions.

IVOR BELL: The lamp is not the process. It’s a lamp. Pay it.

On the page it looked like an order. In the room it had been a suggestion.

• • •

By the third week the meetings had changed. People came in with things to say. Sue started saying “let’s park that” and “to your point.” Lumb began every meeting by summarising the last one.

In the Thursday meeting, Sue said “to your point” three times in four minutes. Lumb said “let’s park that” twice, about a roof and a wall. The transcript ran to eleven pages. The average score went down.

A man from commercial told a joke at the start of a meeting and his score went up nine points. He did it again on the Monday. By the end of the month he had a routine. Nobody told him to stop.

I said nothing, and my number went to 94.

Marsh put a slide up in the breakout area at the end of the pilot. It had three of my sentences on it in a large font, with numbers beside them. The first one was the lamp.

“This is the highest-scoring contribution in the building,” she said. “Eleven seconds. No interruptions. A decision at the end of it. The model reads that as authority, and it’s right.”

Lumb took me aside by the lifts. He said the pilot was going well and the board were looking at the numbers and it would help if I modelled a bit more. I said I would try.

I tried. In the Tuesday commercial meeting I said about sixty words and my score went from 94 to 68.

I stopped trying.

• • •

In the week after the pilot ended, Marsh asked me to read a page into a microphone. It was a meeting room on the second floor with the blinds down and a jug of water nobody had poured. She put the microphone on the table between us, the size of a thumb. The page was claim language: the insured shall notify the insurer within fourteen days of any event likely to give rise to a claim. She asked me to read it twice, once straight and once as if I were explaining it to somebody who was tired. It took twenty minutes. I said, “Is that it?” She said, “That’s it.” I went back to my desk.

• • •

In June, HR sent a document to everyone on the pilot. It was four pages and a schedule. The covering email said it was a condition of the second phase and standard across the sector.

I read the first page. The schedule was headed CONTRIBUTION LICENCE AND MODEL PARTICIPATION. I signed it with the Waterman, at twenty to five on a Friday, and put it in the tray.

Sue asked what I had signed.

I said, “Something about the meetings.”

• • •

Quorum Voice launched in September. Three insurers took it before Christmas. The brochure said it gave clients a senior register for written recommendations. There were six registers. Mine was the fourth. The brochure did not have my name in it. It had my job title and my length of service, which is worse.

In October Sue forwarded me a training module. The subject line was Is this you??

It was. Two minutes of a voice reading a recommendation on a claim. The phrasing was mine. The pauses were mine. In the second paragraph it said "going forward."

I have never said "going forward."

I played it again. Then I took the laptop home and played it on the Sunday, at the kitchen table. Marion was at the sink with her back to me. Her hearing aid was in its case on the windowsill, where it lives.

She said, "That's you."

I said, "It's a register."

She said, "It's you."

I closed the laptop.

• • •

I went to Lumb. He has a window that looks at the car park and a putting mat he never uses.

I said I hadn't agreed to my voice being sold.

He said, "It's not your voice. It's a register."

I said, "It's my voice."

He said, "Have you read schedule four?"

I had not read schedule four.

He said, "It's a standard thing. Everyone on the pilot's in it. If it's a problem I can raise it with HR, but I'd be raising it for forty people."

I said, "Don't raise it for forty people."

He said he'd note my concern. He wrote NOTED on a pad and turned the pad round so I could see it.

I said, “What happens to the register if I leave?”

He said, “It stays.”

• • •

In January the Monday list changed.

The Monday list is the weekly assessment meeting. Nine fifteen, room 3, the claims over twenty thousand. It had run the same way for eleven years: the assessor reads, the room argues, the reserve moves. I had been in four meetings a week since 2013.

Lumb’s email said the format was being aligned with Quorum. Recommendations would be read by the system and owned by a named assessor, and the named assessor would be present for attribution. It said this was the chair element and that it was not optional.

I was the named assessor for the Monday list and for ten other meetings besides. The email was addressed to me. Nobody asked me.

Eleven meetings a week. Since the second week of January I have not said a word in any of them.

Sue is one of the eleven in the pension scheme. She has a shoulder that clicks when she reaches for the top shelf. In the second week of January she asked me in the stairwell if I was going to say something at the Monday list.

I said, “Say what?”

She said, “Anything.”

I said, “It’s a quiet job.”

She said, “It’s not, though.” She had her hand on the rail. “My score’s forty-one. I’ve started practising in the car.”

I said nothing.

She went back to her desk.

I did the arithmetic again that week. Nineteen four at sixty. Six one now.

• • •

Monday, nine fifteen, room 3. The blinds were down. They had been down since January. Six of us and the speaker. The speaker is a black bar under the screen, about the length of a ruler. The minute-taker was a woman from the pool whose name I should know.

Item one was a flood in a basement in Ossett. Item two was a stolen trailer. Item three was a kitchen fire where nobody had died and the mortgage was with the same company as the policy. The speaker read each recommendation in four sentences, in a voice I had heard before on a laptop at a kitchen table. Lumb said "agreed" before anyone had finished thinking. The minute-taker typed.

Item four, Lumb said. Teale. Joinery. Wakefield Road.

The file was open at the photograph of the wall. I had read it on the Friday and again on the Saturday, in the shed, with the rain on the felt. The shed is on the allotment off the Wakefield road. The fire started in the extraction bay, sawdust in the duct, a bearing. The wall between the bay and the stockroom is three hours' rated. The stockroom took the smoke and the water. Exclusion 7(b) turns on process, and the company wanted the whole claim.

I had the sentence in my mouth. The lamp sentence with a different noun.

The speaker said: “The stockroom is not the process. Pay it.”

There was no “going forward” in it.

There was a pause of about a second and a half, which is how long I take.

Lumb said, “Agreed?”

Sue looked at me. I nodded.

“Agreed,” Lumb said. “Item five.”

• • •

The record came round at 11:52, which is when she always sends it. Item four said: IB: the stockroom is not the process. Pay it.

It said my initials, which in that building is the same as my name.

I read it twice. Then I signed the sheet at the bottom and capped my pen.

The cap clicked. Nobody looked up.

SEVEN

Untitled

3 The Statement

At twenty-one forty-two on the twelfth of September I rolled the Vivaro out of the parking space at the top of Bridge Street. I had it in neutral with the engine off, nose out, and I did not touch the pedal. The clutch had been slipping since March and reverse was the worst of it, so I had stopped backing into the bay behind the Peri Palace. That is the only reason I was on that side of the road.

There were two men outside the Peri Palace. The smaller one was in a pale jacket, the taller one in a hooded top with the hood down. They were arguing about something I could not hear and did not try to.

The taller one put his hand flat on the smaller one's chest and shoved him, once. It was not a shove to write about. I have seen worse outside that shop on a Saturday. The smaller one went back two steps. His heel came off the kerb and he went down and the back of his head hit the gutter. The gutter is granite. It made a noise.

He did not get up.

I write method statements for a living. Fire strategies, mostly, and safe systems of work for scaffold and demolition, and the duller reports a client commissions because his insurer has told him to. It does not reward flair. You put down what will still be true in three years, when somebody reads it and wants to know who to blame.

I keep a pair of nitrile gloves in the inside pocket of that jacket, from the school job in the spring. I put them on while I walked.

The man was on his side with one arm under him. I got him flat and put my knee down and turned his head a little to keep the airway open. I said, you've had a knock, stay still, can you hear me, what's your name. He said something that had a D in it. There was a lot of blood in his hair but head wounds do that and I did not wipe it because you should not.

A woman came out of the Peri Palace with a phone already at her ear. Two lads came up the street. I said, tell them head injury, tell them he's breathing, and one of the lads took his own jacket off and put it over the man's legs.

I had my phone in my hand, so I called 999 myself and gave the address. Then the woman was talking to the operator, so I put the phone on the pavement on speaker and went back to the man's head. The lock screen said twenty-one forty-three when I ended the call. That is where the time came from.

The taller one came back. He turned the corner of Castle Street and knelt on the other side of the man's head. He said, I'm sorry, mate, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Three times. He put his hand out towards the man's shoulder and I said don't move him, and he took his hand back.

The paramedics were there in nine minutes, which for a Friday night is quick. The woman from the shop stood by the door with her arms folded. The taller one stood by the wall with his hands behind his back.

A PCSO came up the pavement in a peaked cap with a camera clipped to the front of his vest. He took the woman from the shop to the back of the ambulance and stood with her while she talked. He wrote it down in a pad. The camera had a small red light on it. I was holding a dressing on the man's head and I did not hear what she said.

I said to the paramedic with the ponytail, I think he was trying to hold him up. The tall one. I think he grabbed him to stop him going down.

She was cutting a collar off. She said, right, love, and then she said, can you hold this.

• • •

I gave a statement the next morning at the station on Castle Street. Saturday, quarter past ten, a room with a table and two chairs and a Dell and a printer that had a sheet of paper on it already. PC Sutcliffe. Thirties, lanyard. He had a cold and blew his nose before he started typing. He opened a template on the screen and read the occurrence number off it and typed it at the top of the page: 4271.

He said, this is your statement of evidence. I'll type it and you'll read it and you can change anything you want. If you want to add anything at the end you say so. He said, take your time.

It took forty minutes. He typed with two fingers and read back as he went. When he got to the part about the jacket he had written, the taller male grabbed the other male's jacket.

I said, I'd rather it said took hold of.

He said, does it make a difference?

I said, it does to me.

He changed it to took hold of the other male's jacket with both hands. I watched him do it. He said, most people don't read it back.

He asked whether anyone else had seen it. I said the woman from the shop, and the PCSO had her at the back of the ambulance.

He said, that'll be Bramhall. He said, Bramhall will have put it on the system.

I said, will it be on the file.

He said, it'll be on the system.

He asked whether I had been drinking. I said two pints of lager, between half seven and half eight, and a sandwich. He said, you don't have to put that in. I said, I'd rather it was in. He typed it. He said, you're an unusual man, Mr Peel.

He asked about the times. I gave him twenty-one thirty-six and twenty-one forty-two and twenty-one forty-three. He typed approximately in front of each of them. I said, the last one isn't approximate, I looked at my phone. He said, it reads better with approximately. Juries like approximately. He left it on, and I let that stand, because he was the one who did it for a living.

The dispatch log would show the call. He said they would get that. He said it was a good statement.

He said, is there anything else you want to add.

I thought about what I had said to the paramedic. It was not evidence. I said no.

He printed it and I read it and I signed it and he put it in a tray under the printer and said he would scan it in.

At the door he said, yours is the good one. He said, I'll be honest with you, most of these I write myself and they sign them. Yours I haven't had to write.

I drove back over to Leacroft with the window down because the sun was out. I told my mother about it and she said, that was good of you, and then she asked whether I'd come about the boiler.

• • •

He was charged in October. Section eighteen, wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. The man's name was Daniel Mercer. He was thirty-one and he had a subdural haematoma and was in Salford Royal for four days. The taller man was called Karl Fenwick. He was twenty-seven and a joiner.

There is a witness care unit. It sends texts. Your attendance is required. Please reply YES. I replied YES three times between October and June.

The trial was listed for the eleventh of March and was taken out because the paramedic was on a course. It was listed for the second of June and went off because the court had no room. Each of those was a day I did not invoice. Twice I rang Hargreaves about the £2,840 he owed me for the April survey. The second time he said, we've got a lot on, Graham.

My mother's fees at Leacroft House were £1,190 a week and she had £19,000 left, which was sixteen weeks. The council took over that January and moved her to Farnworth that March. The form was nine pages. I filled it in on the Sunday.

Nobody said I had to be there, except that I did.

The trial was the nineteenth of June, at the Crown Court on Blackhorse Street, three days.

They put me in a room with a table and a jug of water and the usher brought me a bottle and a copy of my statement. I read it four times. Through the door I could see a woman of about sixty in a navy coat. She was sitting with a little girl in a pink anorak who was eating a bag of Quavers one crisp at a time. I understood after a while that they were with the defendant.

Then I went in and stood up and read the oath off the card.

The prosecuting barrister took me through it. He was young and tidy. He said, in your own words, Mr Peel, what did you see. I said what I had said in the room in September. He took me to paragraph six and read it out: He took hold of the other male's jacket with both hands. He said, thank you. He sat down.

The defence barrister was a woman of about fifty with reading glasses on a chain.

She said, you had two pints of lager.

I said, I did.

She said, you told the officer that.

I said, I asked him to put it in.

She said, why?

I said, because I had.

She looked at the jury for a second. She said, you told the officer you did not see the moment of contact.

I said, that's right.

She said, you told him you did not see what was in Mr Fenwick's mind.

I said, nobody can see that.

She said, you saw his hands on the jacket.

I said, I saw his hands on the jacket.

She said, and you do not know whether he was pushing the man down or holding him up.

I said, no.

She said, thank you, Mr Peel, and sat down.

The Crown's case in closing was this. A man who takes hold of another man by the jacket with both hands and puts him on the pavement has formed an intention to cause him really serious harm. You do not take hold of a man like that unless you mean to. I had never said puts him on the pavement. Nobody had.

The jury was out for four hours and ten minutes.

PC Sutcliffe caught me by the lifts. He said, guilty. Section eighteen. He said, it's a good result. He had his coat over his arm. He said, you did well in there.

The sentencing was in July. I did not go. I read it on the Bolton News website at half past four in the afternoon, standing at the kitchen counter with the kettle on. Six years and nine months. The judge said the injuries were serious and the intention was plain. There was a photograph of Fenwick in a grey tracksuit coming out of a van with his hand up.

• • •

The letter came in November, on paper, from a firm in Manchester called Okonjo Shaw. We act for Karl Fenwick. We have been instructed to advise in relation to an appeal against conviction. I note from the bundle that you were a witness. Were you aware of any other witnesses to the incident.

I wrote back the same week. I said there was a woman who came out of the Peri Palace before the ambulance came. A PCSO took her to the back of the ambulance and wrote down what she said. I watched him do it. I said there were two young men on the same side of the street and I did not get their names.

Ruth Okonjo rang me on the Thursday. She said, there is nothing in the bundle about a woman.

I said, I told the officer at the station. He said Bramhall had her and it would be on the system.

She said, then it is on a system somewhere.

It took four months and two freedom of information requests. What she got was a disclosure schedule with three lines on it. Two statements, taken that night by a PCSO called Bramhall, had been scanned to occurrence 4721. The incident was 4271. The 4721 file was a shoplifting matter from the same evening. It was finalised in October and weeded on the third of April. Seven months for a finalised file with no further action. The paper originals went to the shredder when they were scanned. That was the standing instruction.

The reviewing lawyer's note, disclosed in the same bundle, said: No other witnesses identified.

The PCSO had a body camera. That footage was still there, because the incident was flagged as an assault and the flag holds the file for seven years. The camera had been running while he took the woman's details at the back of the ambulance. She was called Nadia Rashid. She was twenty-two and she worked in the Peri Palace. She was on the footage for six minutes and forty seconds, with the sign buzzing above her.

She said: the tall one grabbed him to stop him going down, and then he couldn't hold him. She said: he wasn't trying to hurt him, he was trying to hold him up. She said it three times in six minutes because the PCSO kept writing and asking her again.

I watched it at Ruth Okonjo's office on a laptop with the sound going through a speaker on the desk. The image was grey and there was a car going past with its lights on. My own voice was on it somewhere, at the far edge, saying something to the paramedic. I could not make out the words.

I thought about telling her what I had said to the paramedic. I did not. I could not prove it, and a man who remembers a thing two years late sounds like a man building it.

Ruth said, will you make a further statement.

I said I would.

She sent me a draft. It had a paragraph in it: In my view the grip was consistent with an attempt to support Mr Mercer rather than to force him to the ground. She said, if you can say that, it helps.

I wrote back and said I could not say that. I did not see his face. I do not know what he intended. I would not put my name to a view I had formed afterwards. I wrote a statement of my own instead. Four paragraphs. In the second one I said: I am not able to say what Mr Fenwick intended. I said it as plainly as I could.

The appeal was heard in the November of the following year. I did not go. Ruth sent me the judgment as a PDF on a Friday afternoon. Eleven pages.

The court found that the non-disclosure of the two statements was a serious failure. It said so twice. Then it said the court had

to ask itself whether the conviction was safe. It set out four reasons why it was. The third one was this:

The evidence of Mr Peel was careful and measured, and internally consistent in its detail. The jury was entitled to give it the weight it did. The appellant's account, that he left the scene and went home, was demonstrably untrue on Mr Peel's evidence as to time. It follows that the fresh evidence does not undermine the safety of the conviction.

I read it three times. Then I read page seven. The court had considered my further statement of the previous March and found that it did not take the matter further.

I put the laptop on the table and went out to the van and sat in it. The clutch was still slipping. I had had it quoted again in the spring and it had gone up to £840.

• • •

The letter from the divisional training unit came in October. It was one page. They were revising the witness statement module. My statement had been identified by the disclosure officer as an example of good practice. They would be grateful for my consent to its use in training, anonymised as necessary. It said, please sign and return the enclosed.

There was a box for yes and a box for no. I ticked the yes box and signed it and posted it back in the envelope they sent, which was already addressed and did not need a stamp.

In February I was at the divisional headquarters on Castle Street. The facilities contractor had me doing a fire risk assessment on the training suite. The suite was on the second floor at the end of a corridor. Somebody had wedged the fire door open.

The noticeboard had nothing on it but a poster about hand hygiene.

The statement was on the wall outside the room, laminated, with a strip of magnetic tape along the top. It was the second page, so paragraph six was there, in my words, underlined in dry-wipe marker: He took hold of the other male's jacket with both hands.

The pen was on a chain fixed to the wall underneath.

EIGHT

Untitled

4 Everyone Gets a Turn

By half past eight the absence line at Marsh Lane had forty-one messages on it and Cath had listened to all of them twice. Thirty-nine were parents. Two were the same parent ringing back in a different voice. She wrote the names in the book, rang the three that needed ringing, and coded the rest as unauthorised, a word she had never liked and used every morning.

The restructure letter was on the staff-room noticeboard, between the fire drill and the poster about hand-washing. Her job was a box with an arrow to a smaller box. Interviews in October. She was fifty-two and had been at Marsh Lane nine years. She printed it out, put it in her bag, and did not look at it again.

At three she signed out and got the 15:52, which came at ten past four. The driver knew her stop and slowed without being asked.

June was at Oakhill House, up Oakhill Road: thirty-four beds in a Victorian villa with a flat-roofed wing bolted on in 1994. Cath went Tuesdays after work, Thursdays after work, and Sundays on the ten past ten. She had a spreadsheet called June with a tab for

fees and a tab called runway, which she opened the way other people checked the weather. The tab held four numbers: the house at two hundred and thirty-five, the charge at sixty-four, the fees at one thousand three hundred and eighty-five a week. At the bottom, a date: 4 September 2029.

She had two thousand four hundred pounds in a savings account. She thought of it as the roof.

• • •

Renata's office had been the pantry. The serving hatch was full of box files, and the window looked out at the speed bump. Renata had a flask of tea and a crossword folded to the clues. She had been at Oakhill since before the group bought it.

'She's had a good month,' Renata said. 'Three.'

'Three what?'

'Days. In the window.'

'I know what it means.'

'Sorry.' Renata turned the screen. 'Her score's sixty-one. It was sixty-eight in April.'

'Why's it gone down?'

'Engagement's the big one.' She scrolled with one finger. 'Your visits aren't on here.'

'I'm here three times a week.'

'Are you booked in?'

'What does that mean?'

'On the app.'

'No.'

'Then it's —' Renata stopped. 'It's evidence. The hours have to be evidenced.'

‘You’ve seen me. You’ve signed me in yourself.’

‘I know.’ Her phone lit up and she turned it face down. ‘I’ve said to them. It’s stupid.’

‘Who decides?’

‘The panel. It sits on the twenty-eighth.’

‘Can I see it?’

‘It’s on the portal. Under criteria.’ Renata pulled a face. ‘Version six.’

‘Sixty-one puts her where?’

‘Band C. Three days.’ She held up two fingers, then one. ‘Five for B. Eight for A. There’s two on eight, and one of them’s Mrs Dunlop in room six, whose son-in-law’s in property.’

‘Three days out of thirty.’

‘It’s not a queue. It’s a spread.’

‘How long is she herself for?’ Cath said.

‘About two hours. Then she’s flat for two days.’

Renata slid a folder across the desk. ‘Annual review. Sign where the flags are.’

Cath turned the pages. There were four yellow tabs.

‘Funding’s section four now,’ Renata said. ‘It’s the group’s thing. It doesn’t change anything for you.’

‘What’s section four?’

‘The estate route. It’s easier than invoicing you every five minutes.’

Cath signed the four tabs. She had a biro from school, the cheap kind with a lid she had chewed. Renata’s phone rang. She looked at it, then at Cath.

‘Take it,’ Cath said.

In the car park she downloaded the app and booked Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays for the next three months. The confirmation came back inside a minute.

Visit logged. Thank you for engaging.

She read it, then drove home the long way, past the retail park, because the short way went past the house.

• • •

The May window was a Tuesday, eleven to one. Cath took the morning off, which the school let her do because she never asked for anything.

June came out to the pergola in the chair with the brake on and her hands in her lap. She had had her hair done. She looked at Cath for a while.

‘Cath.’

Cath got up and moved the parasol a foot and sat back down.

‘Has the roof been done?’ June said.

‘It’s fine.’

‘There’s a tile off at the back. Above the kitchen.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I know my roof.’

A girl brought a tray with two cups and a plate of shortbread, and June watched her all the way back to the door.

‘Who’s paying for this?’

‘For what?’

‘The girl with the tray.’

‘It’s in the fees.’

‘Out of what?’

‘Don’t start, Mum.’

‘I’m not starting.’

‘You’ve moved my clock,’ June said.

‘It’s at mine. The house is damp.’

‘The house is not damp.’

‘It is a bit.’

‘Danny wants that clock.’

‘Danny wants a lot of things.’

June laughed, and it turned into a cough. At half twelve her hands went still in her lap and she looked at the garden. Cath stayed until one, because the Cedar Room was booked from one to three and there was nowhere else to sit.

• • •

The June window fell on a Wednesday, eleven to one. The school inspectors came on the Tuesday and stayed on the Wednesday, and Cath could not be off the desk. She rang Renata at nine to say so.

‘It’s all right,’ Renata said. ‘She won’t know.’

The portal logged a family call from overseas at twenty past, twelve minutes long. At twenty to twelve Renata texted: She’s asking for you.

Danny rang Cath on the Sunday, from a bar.

‘I had a good chat with Mum.’

‘I know. I saw.’

‘She was on form, actually. Really on form.’

‘She was in a window.’

‘She was in a what?’

‘Nothing. It’s what they call it.’

‘Right. Well. She was asking about Dad.’

‘What about him?’

‘Where he’d put the deeds.’

‘The deeds are in the drawer in the front room,’ Cath said. ‘Under the insurance.’

‘I said I’d ask you.’ He laughed at something off the phone. ‘I do my bit, Cath.’

‘You do.’

‘She’s all right though, isn’t she. All things considered.’

‘All things considered,’ Cath said.

That night she opened the app at twenty to twelve and pressed Enrichment.

• • •

The birthday one was at the bottom of the Enrichment page, under Celebration. Extended Continuity Session, two hours. You picked a date from a calendar. She picked Saturday the sixteenth of August. The room was free two till four.

Underneath there was a dropdown.

Funding route

Section 4 — Estate Funding Facility

She read it and thought it meant the invoice would come to her later, the way it did for the chiropody. At the bottom there was a line in grey: No payment is required at the time of booking. She read that twice.

She added the celebration package: £130 for the room, a card and the good cups. She paid for the cake herself at the Co-op

because she had already ordered it. The girl at the bakery wrote Happy Birthday MUM in icing.

The two thousand four hundred stayed where it was.

The session consent came through to sign and return. She read it on the bus. Transient low mood, sleep disturbance, and in some cases distress on return to baseline. She signed it with the chewed biro.

• • •

She got to Oakhill at twenty to two. The car park had a speed bump and a smoking shelter nobody was supposed to use. She signed in on the tablet with the cracked screen, pressing hard on the letters.

The Cedar Room had two armchairs, a sofa, a kettle, a sash window that opened four inches, and a framed print of a bridge at dusk. She put the cake on the table and set out the candles and the card. Ryan's card was still in her bag; she had meant to put it out. She sat down and got up again and moved the chairs so they were side by side instead of opposite.

At ten to two Kelly brought June in. June had had her hair done on the Thursday. She was wearing the blue cardigan and a brooch Cath had not seen before. She was looking at the middle of the room.

'Sit with her,' Kelly said. 'It takes about twenty minutes.'

Cath sat. June looked at the television, which was not on. 'Is it Tuesday?'

'It's Saturday, Mum.'

'Is it.'

Cath told her about the bus, and the driver, and the roadworks by the retail park. June picked at the cuff of her cardigan until the thread went. At ten past two she turned her head and looked at Cath properly and said, 'Cath.'

Cath got up and moved the blind a foot and put it back.

'Sit down,' June said. 'You've only just got here.'

Cath sat down. June looked at the cake.

'Is that a shop cake?'

'It's a Victoria sponge.'

'You paid too much for it.'

'I didn't make it.'

'No.' June looked at the candles. 'Don't light them all. You'll set the place alight.'

Cath lit them all. June watched, and then blew them out in one go.

'Make a wish,' she said.

They sat for a minute.

'What did this cost?'

'It's your birthday.'

'What did it cost, Cath.'

'Eighteen hundred and fifty.'

June put her hand flat on the table.

'For two hours.'

'For the room, and the session, and —'

'Two hours.'

'It's a present.'

'Out of what?'

‘I’ve got money.’

‘You haven’t.’

‘I have.’

‘You’ve got the roof,’ June said, ‘and you’ve got Ryan, and you’ve got that car.’

‘The car’s fine.’

‘The car’s eleven years old.’

‘It’s nine.’

‘Whose money is this?’

‘I signed for it.’

‘That’s not an answer.’

‘I don’t know,’ Cath said.

June took her hand off the table. ‘Then find out.’

‘Is the house still there?’ June said.

‘Yes.’

‘Is it still mine?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sell it, then.’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s yours.’

‘It’s a house,’ June said.

Cath looked at the print of the bridge. She had looked at it for two years and had never once seen it.

‘You took my clock.’

‘It’s at mine.’

‘Give it to Danny. It’ll save a row.’

‘He’s in Spain.’

‘He still wants it.’

‘I know.’

‘Danny’s no good,’ June said. ‘You know that. You’ve always known that.’

‘He rings you.’

‘He rings the phone.’ June smoothed the cloth. ‘You sit with me on the other days. When I’m not here.’

‘I know.’

‘Who do you talk to?’

‘You.’

‘You talk about the bus.’

‘You like the bus.’

‘I don’t.’

Cath waited.

‘You do it very well,’ June said. ‘The talking.’

Cath got up and moved the blind a foot and put it back. When she turned round June was watching her, with the look she used to have at the kitchen table, wages book open.

‘Take me home,’ June said.

‘There’s a thing they do. An escorted visit. It’s about four hundred pounds and there’s an assessment, and I’d have to —‘

‘I’ve got four hundred pounds.’

‘It’s not the money.’

‘It’s always the money,’ June said. ‘You know that.’

‘It isn’t that simple.’

‘It is,’ June said. ‘You just don’t like the sum.’

At ten to four June's hand came off the table. She looked at the cake, and then at the window. 'Is it Tuesday?'

'It's Saturday, Mum.'

'Is it.'

Kelly came for her at four. 'She'll be flat tomorrow,' she said at the door. 'Ring us Thursday.'

Cath packed the cake back into its box. In the corridor a woman was waiting with a chocolate caterpillar cake and a man behind her, and the woman stood up and said, 'Was it a good one?'

'Yes,' Cath said.

In the car she ate a slice with her fingers, engine off, waiting for the gap at the roundabout, and put the box in the footwell.

• • •

The envelope came on the Monday. It had the group's frank on it and her name and Private and Confidential — Funding, and inside were a statement and a letter.

Enrichment — Extended Continuity Session, 2 hrs ... £1,850.00

Celebration package ... £130.00

Administration ... £33.50

Total ... £2,013.50

Funding route: Section 4 — Estate Funding Facility

No payment is required from the family

The letter was from Oakhill Care Finance No. 2 Ltd. A legal charge had been registered against 14 Croft Terrace on the fourteenth of August. It enclosed a copy of the authority she had

signed at the annual review. Her signature was at the bottom of it. Her initials were on the yellow tabs.

Two days before the candles.

She opened the spreadsheet and put 2,013.50 in the extras column, and the runway cell did what it always did. It had said 4 September 2029. It now said 22 August 2029.

She did it by hand on the back of the envelope to check. Fees were £1,385 a week. The pensions covered a fifth. The house was losing about £156 a day, and £2,013.50 was twelve days and change.

Twelve days.

She wrote to the finance address at twenty to ten that night. The reply came at twelve minutes past six on the Tuesday morning, from a person called Tobias. A section four advance could be reversed only with the resident's signed consent. It was a safeguard, he wrote. They would be glad to arrange for the form to be presented at a scheduled window.

• • •

'November the fourth,' Renata said. 'That's her next one.'

'Eleven weeks.'

'She had August.'

'I know she had August.'

'Everyone gets a turn, Cath.'

'I know what it means.'

Renata's phone went. She didn't look at it. 'I'm not supposed to say this. I'll put her down for a cancellation.'

'Thank you.'

June was asleep in the chair by the window with the television on and the sound off. Cath sat down and got out her phone. She found the photo she had taken on the Sunday: the front room, the mantelpiece, the dark rectangle where the clock had been. She held it where June would see it when she woke. June woke at six.

'That's nice, love,' she said.

'It's the front room.'

'Is it Tuesday?'

'Yes,' Cath said. 'It's Tuesday.'

The reversal form was in her bag, printed at school that morning, with a line at the top for the resident's signature and a line under it for the witness. She left it there.

• • •

She still had the key. She had taken the clock in March because Danny wanted it and because she was the one who went in, and now she did not want it in her kitchen. She drove over after the visit with it wrapped in a tea towel on the back seat.

The house was cold. She didn't put the lights on. The street lamp did the front room, and the mantelpiece had a line of dust where the clock had been, and the hook was still in the wall.

The deeds were in the drawer under the insurance, where she had said they were. She left them there.

Where the clock had been, the wallpaper was still dark green. Around it the paper had gone the colour of weak tea.

She hung the clock on the hook. It was stopped at ten past six. She stood back with her coat on.

NINE

Untitled

5 The Referee

At half past one I unlocked the gate at Mill Lane and put the match ball on the centre spot. Then I checked the nets. The flags were still in the drawer under the sink in the back room. The clock over the tea hut said twenty-five to two. I had a final to referee at three.

I have refereed at Mill Lane for thirty years. I have never given a penalty against the home side. Not once. It is in the book.

The key is on the ring with the car key and the fob is worn smooth. Ray Fawcett had it cut for me in 1994, the year I took the book over. No other referee has one.

The book is a Collins account book, blue, ninety-nine pence from the paper shop on Station Road, bought in 1994, my first season. There is a page for each season and a column for the date, the fixture and the decision. Two older books live in that drawer. The oldest is a school exercise book with a brown cover. It starts in 1961 in my grandfather's hand, and the first three pages are not accounts.

The ground is at the end of Mill Lane, past the allotments, behind a wall with a gate in it. The colliery site is a retail park

now, with a B and M and a Costa and a car park that floods. I have never been in any of them. The stand is wood with a tin roof and holds four hundred. There is a brass plate by the turnstile. ASHWORTH STAND 1961. The players call it the Ashworth and think it is named after a winger from the seventies. There was a winger called Ashworth in 1974, no relation, and I have never corrected anybody. Neither has Ray.

• • •

Ray was in the bar at half past one with a letter in his hand. He said, "The ground grading for the division above wants two hundred seats, three hundred lux on the pylons, and a turnstile block. We have got a wooden stand, four pylons, and a gate."

"There's nothing wrong with the gate," I said.

"There's a man from Wakefield wants the site for eleven houses."

"Eleven."

"Eleven is the number." He turned the letter over. "If we go up, the papers go Monday. If we don't, the club's done in the summer and the field comes back to you."

The lease says that. If the club does not play at Mill Lane for a season, the field returns to the family. My grandfather put that in as well. He liked a clause.

"And if the papers go Monday," I said, "the field goes with them."

"To a man who builds houses."

I looked at the charter behind him. It needed a clean.

"You've had that key thirty years," Ray said.

"Since 1994."

“I’ve never asked you for anything.”

“No.”

“I’m asking now.”

I put my glass on the bar. “I know.”

Ray folded the letter and put it in his inside pocket. He did not look at me. He went back to the bar and put his back to the room.

• • •

I went in for the flags. I took them out and opened the oldest book on the draining board. The first three pages are the covenant, copied out in my grandfather’s hand. The ink has gone brown. The corner of the third page is soft where his thumb was. The entries are in three hands, and none of them is neat.

The trustees of Barrowfield Town Football Club shall, in each season, grant to the family Ashworth one decision in the family’s favour, in perpetuity.

That is the whole of it. It is on the charter in the bar too, typed on a sheet the colour of weak tea, in a frame Doreen dusts on Fridays. Nobody has read it in forty years.

My grandfather gave the club the field in 1961 for a pound. He was a farmer with no sons, and the club had nowhere to play since the colliery took its ground back. He put in the clause because he liked to have a hand in. The solicitor said it was unusual. My grandfather said, “It’s a peppercorn. One decision a year. Let them come and ask me for something.”

They never came and asked. We took it anyway.

At the bottom of the third page, in the same hand, there is one more line. And one in reserve, to be called when the family has need of it.

My father said that meant a cup tie. It has never been called.

My father was a referee. His first entry is September 1962. He gave them a decision a season for thirty-two years and never missed one. He told me it was the rent. He said, “We don’t take money off them, Col. We take a decision.”

I took the book over in 1994 and have done the same. A soft penalty in October, usually. A corner that wasn’t a corner. In 2003 a goal that was offside by a yard and a half. The linesman knew it. I overruled him. His name was Trevor and he did not speak to me for a month. This year it was a trip a yard outside the box, and I gave it, and that was the season’s decision gone. Thirty years of small favours to a club that did not know it was paying rent.

Barrowfield at Mill Lane, I have had them ninety-four times. Ninety-four matches and not one penalty against them. People mention it the way they mention the weather. “Colin doesn’t give them against the Town. Ha ha.” It is in the book.

• • •

I am sixty-eight. Tuesdays and Thursdays I work at the timber yard on the industrial estate. It is bad for the knee and it pays for the week. Wednesdays I drive over to Skipton to see my sister Margaret, who is seventy-four and in a home and does not always know me. I pay sixty pounds a month towards her extras, the hairdresser and the trips, and I have never missed it. Fridays I have a lime and soda in the club bar and Doreen tells me about her hip. My wife left in 2011 for a man who runs a garden centre in Scarborough. She rings at Christmas. I have a key to that house in the drawer with the flags and I have never used it.

The clutch on the Corsa slips going into third. The MOT is in June. I have three hundred and forty pounds in the credit union and the clutch is four hundred and ten. In March the county FA wrote asking whether I would like to talk about my plans. I have not replied.

Refereeing pays thirty-eight pounds a match and forty pence a mile. It is not the money. It is that at ten to three on a Saturday I am the only man in Barrowfield who knows what is going to happen next.

• • •

The final was at Mill Lane because we finished second. Heddon Athletic finished third. Nine hundred and three through the gate, two coaches from Heddon.

Mr Pilkington from the county FA arrived at half past two with a folding chair and a thermos. He is seventy-one and has been assessing longer than I have been refereeing, and he has never marked me below eighty. He set the chair in the stand, three rows up, and wrote the time on his pad.

"Do the game," he said. "I'm not here."

His wife is in the same home as Margaret. We nod in the corridor.

The dressing room at Mill Lane is a Portakabin with a radiator that clanks. I hung the shirt. I put the cards in the left breast pocket, the notebook in the right, the whistle on the lanyard. I wound both watches and checked the second hand against the clock on the wall. The clock is four minutes fast and always has been. I have never corrected it.

At twenty to three I did the coin with Bevan and the Heddon captain, a big lad called Hoy. Bevan called heads. It was tails. Hoy chose to kick towards the allotments.

"You'll be wanting the ball in the net, then," Bevan said.

"I'll be wanting a game," I said.

Ryan ran the line on the allotment side. He is nineteen and Gavin's nephew and the flag looks too big for him. I said, "Flag up straight. Let me come to you. Don't guess."

"I won't guess," he said.

He guessed twice in the first half. I let one go.

Barrowfield scored in the twelfth, a header from a corner, and the stand made a noise like a shed coming apart. Heddon came into it after that. Their number nine hit the post in the thirty-fourth. The stand stopped singing. At half time the tea hut ran out of milk.

At fifty-eight minutes the groundsman's collie got on. Nell. She came through the gate by the tea hut at a trot, crossed the halfway line, and stopped in front of the dugouts. The crowd cheered. I stopped the game and carried her to the gate with her feet going. The stand sang Nell, Nell, Nell. Doreen held the gate open. My trousers had a wet patch on the knee that did not dry. The dog cost me three minutes. Heddon had a corner in the sixty-third. Pratt came through a crowd and got a fist to it. The stand clapped him.

Heddon equalised in the seventy-first with a shot that took a deflection off Bevan's heel and went in the other corner. Pratt lay on his back with his gloves on his face. The stand went quiet. Ray

came down the steps to the rail. He had the letter in his hand again.

There were four minutes added. We were in the fourth.

Sorrell came through the middle on a bouncing ball. He is twenty-two and quick. Pratt came out to the edge of the box, went down, got a hand on it, and Sorrell went over him. I was eight yards away with a clear view. I saw Pratt's hand on the ball. I saw the ball go out of the box. I saw Sorrell's leg catch Pratt's shoulder and Sorrell go down.

Ryan's flag stayed down.

I thought about the book. Then I pointed at the spot.

Nine hundred people made a noise I had not heard at Mill Lane before. Bevan came at me with his hands out. "Colin. Colin. He's got the ball. Colin."

"It's a penalty."

"He's got the ball."

"It's a penalty."

Pratt sat up. He did not shout. He looked at me. He had known me for eleven years.

"I got the ball," he said.

"I know," I said.

Sorrell put it in the bottom corner. Pratt went the right way and it went under him. I blew for time.

Bevan did not shake my hand. Hoy did.

Pratt walked past me with his gloves in his hand. He did not look up.

Ray was still at the rail.

• • •

I had the lime and soda in my hand before I had my boots off. The bar smelled of chips and wet coats. Doreen was stacking cups. Mr Pilkington came down with his clipboard and his thermos under his arm and stood in front of me. He put the thermos on the bar and screwed the cap on. He had written something on his pad and crossed it out.

"I had you at eighty-four," he said. "Best I've seen you."

"Put sixty-one."

"I can't put sixty-one. There was nothing wrong with the decision."

I drank the lime and soda.

"I've marked a lot of referees," he said. "You're the only one who's ever argued for a lower mark."

"What did you put?"

"Eighty-four." He tapped the clipboard. "It was a penalty."

I looked at the charter on the wall behind the bar. The plate outside. The line at the bottom of the third page.

"It was a penalty," I said.

When he had gone out to his car I took the book out of the kit bag and opened it at the season's page. I wrote the date, the fixture and the decision. 4 May. Heddon, home. Penalty, 93rd. I looked at it for a while. Then I wrote underneath: Reserve called.

Ray came over with his coat on and his hands in his pockets and stood beside me, not in front, looking at the optics.

"Sixty-three years," he said.

"Sixty-three."

"My father signed that charter."

"I know."

“He said it was a peppercorn.”

“It was.”

“The papers were going Monday,” Ray said.

“I know.”

He took his hands out of his pockets and put a brown envelope on the bar. My name was on it in his writing. He had paid me in cash after every match. It had never been anyone but Ray. It was thicker than a match fee.

I took the key off the ring and put it on top of the envelope. It sat there between the charter and the drip tray.

“I’ll get the gate,” he said.

“I’ll get the gate,” I said.

I went out. The car park light was on the brass plate and the stand was dark behind it. Nell was by the gate, waiting for the groundsman. She came over and pushed her head against my leg. I put my hand on her. I got in the car and drove out past the allotments with the window down and the gate open behind me. I had locked it every match for thirty years.

TEN

Untitled

6 Hold

At 02:07 Sofia typed caller repeats while the tiler from Matosinhos told her about the water for the third time in the same words.

“I have photographs,” he said.

“Everyone has photographs.”

“Of the ceiling.”

“The assessor will want to see the ceiling,” she said. “That’s the trouble. The assessor hasn’t been out.”

“When?” he said.

“Forty-eight hours.”

“You said that last time.”

The call timer said 4:12. She typed assessor not assigned, advised forty-eight hours and dragged the ticket into the yellow column. The script said: Do not give a time frame. She gave one anyway. It was the only thing that ended calls. Her average handle time was 6:41. Her quality score was 94. Marta had stopped listening to her calls in October.

At 02:12 she entered the disposition code and took the next call before the screen had finished refreshing. The trick was

never to let the queue see you rest.

The floor was a hundred and forty desks under lights the colour of a car park. Thirty-one were occupied. The headsets clicked when you put them on and the room dropped away, and after four years Sofia heard the click in her sleep. Rain on the roof.

Rui, two desks over, had a plastic dinosaur on his monitor. He tapped his watch: four hours. She knew the dinosaur was called Nuno. She had never asked Rui's surname.

Marta came down the aisle with the tablet against her chest and rain still in her hair, in the grey cardigan she wore over her uniform. The tablet had a cracked corner, taped. Marta had a cold. She wiped her nose with the back of her wrist and stopped at Sofia's desk.

"Your emergency contact."

"What about it."

"It's your mother."

"She's dead."

"I know," Marta said. She tapped the tablet twice with her thumb and looked at the screen instead of at Sofia. "Change it before the audit. Friday."

"There's nobody to put."

"Put the company doctor."

Marta looked at the queue. "Seven deep," she said. "It'll be worse at four."

She went on down the aisle. At the door she stopped at the roster board and wrote something on it with the stylus. Her name was at the top: M. FERREIRA — SUP — 22:00–06:00.

Sofia's badge said S. FERREIRA. Ferreira was one of the commonest surnames in the country.

In Sofia's bag, under the desk, there was a registered letter from a firm of lawyers in Braga. Her name was typed on the front, the firm's name in the corner. It had come eleven days ago. She had signed for it at the door of her flat in the rain, in her dressing gown. She put it in her work bag to open at her break, and then she did not open it. The envelope was stiff. She knew the shape of the thing inside: a house in Nine, an inventory, a signature, a phone call, a daughter.

She sent him €150 on the fifth of every month, by standing order, from the account she had opened at the branch on Rua de Santa Catarina. The payee on the app said J. FERREIRA. It was a fee.

The recorded greeting on the general line was her voice. She had recorded it in a booth in 2022, reading from a laminated sheet, and the sound engineer had asked her to smile while she read, because people could hear it. She had smiled for forty minutes and her face hurt afterward.

The general line played the recording and hung up. In four years she had never seen a call on it.

At 02:41 the screen lit up: GENERAL / —. No menu key, no queue time, no policy number.

"Good evening, you're through to Sofia at Norte Claims. How can I help?"

"Sofia?"

An old man's voice, thin, with a room behind it: a monitor beeping at four-second intervals, something on wheels going

past.

“Speaking. Can I take your name?”

“Joaquim.”

The cursor blinked in the empty field.

“Joaquim Ferreira,” she said.

“That’s right.”

“Sir, do you have your policy number?”

“I don’t have a policy. I’m trying to reach my daughter. I don’t have her number. I have this one.”

“Where did you get this number?”

“Off a letter. Three years ago. There was a letter with a stamp on it, and this number at the bottom, and a girl’s name.”

She remembered the letter. She had written it at the post office on Rua de Santa Catarina on her lunch break, on the back of a compliments slip, and she had written I’m fine. Stop calling the flat. She had licked the envelope and thought: that’s the end of that.

“You have the same voice as her,” he said. “That’s why I stayed on the line. I dialled the number and a woman answered and it was you, saying the hours. Press one for claims.”

“That’s a recording.”

“I know what it is,” he said. “I stood in the corridor and listened to it four times.”

“I wrote to you,” he said. “Twice.”

“I didn’t open them.”

“I know,” he said.

“Sir, this is an insurance line. If you want to leave a message —“

“I don’t want to leave a message. I’m dying. I want to talk to my daughter.”

The monitor beeped. Somebody in the room behind him said a word she couldn’t catch.

If a caller discloses a medical emergency, transfer immediately to extension 400.

She didn’t.

“Sir, I’m going to put you on hold for a moment.”

“That’s all right,” he said. “I’ve been on hold for three years.”

She pressed the hold key.

• • •

Eight bars of guitar started, and the counter with them. 0:02. 0:03.

The hold music was in one ear. The floor was in the other.

A panel opened along the bottom of her screen: GENERAL LINE / HOLD — / AUTO-TRANSFER 04:00. She had never watched the counter before. Nobody watched the counter. At four minutes the system sent the call to 400 by itself, logged it, and dropped a form into her queue. All she had to do was nothing.

On the corner of her screen the queue went from four to three.

Extension 400 was a nurse in Lisbon with a checklist. The call would be over in three minutes. Sofia had transferred two calls to 400 in four years. She had never learned what happened to either of them.

Marta’s voice came into the supervisor channel, flat and close, as though she were standing behind the chair.

“Keep him there.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Keep him there. The whole four minutes. Then he goes to four hundred and you fill in the form.”

“He says he’s dying.”

“I know,” Marta said. “He’s my father too.”

Sofia’s hand stayed on the mouse. On the screen the counter went 0:41, 0:42. The guitar came round again.

“Say that again.”

“Which part.”

“His daughter.”

“The one who stayed,” Marta said. “The one who did the paperwork. You want the list, or just the years?”

“Since when?”

“Since always. Different mothers. Mine was the first.”

“You knew my mother was dead.”

“Before you told me. Yes.”

Sofia looked down the aisle. Rui had his headset on and his eyes on his screen.

“The will,” Sofia said.

“2019. Everything to Sofia Ferreira.” A pause. “He thought the money was a reconciliation.”

“I was paying him.”

“Five thousand four hundred. I’ve got receipts for fifty-one thousand, four hundred and eleven. The care home. My aunt’s funeral. The man who comes in to cut his toenails because he can’t reach his feet.” A pause. “The estate owes me. The estate is you.”

The counter went 1:22.

“Why am I on this call?”

“He’s been ringing the number for a month. He gets the recording, he listens to it, he hangs up. Tonight he stayed on the line.” A pause. “He asked for you.”

“He doesn’t know I work here.”

“He knows your voice is on the line. That was enough for him.”

“What happens if I take him off hold?”

“You don’t take him off hold. The system does it at four minutes. If you lift it before that, I have to write it up. Abandoned script. It goes in your file, and in January they’re cutting eleven people off this floor, and I have to be able to say—“

She stopped.

“Four minutes,” she said. “It isn’t long. Sit there and let the machine do it and you never touched him.”

The counter went 2:04.

“Was any of it true?” Sofia said. “The dying.”

“Ward four, Hospital de Braga. Three weeks, maybe less. A nurse holds the phone to his ear at night because he can’t hold it himself.”

“And if I talk to him?”

“Then he might change the will.” A pause. “I’d get the house. You’d get the recording.”

“The recording.”

“Of this call. I can pull it.”

Sofia looked at the counter. 2:41. The same as the time he had called.

She pressed the key. The music stopped in her ear.

• • •

"Pai."

The line was open, and the room behind him was open with it. The monitor. A trolley. A woman's voice somewhere down a corridor, calling a name twice.

"Sofia."

"I'm here."

"You sound tired."

"It's three in the morning."

"It's the same for me," he said. "The nights are long. I listen to the corridor. There's a man in the next bed who counts the tiles."

He stopped to breathe. The pause went on so long she looked at the screen.

"I'm sorry about your sister," she said.

"I'm sorry about your mother," he said. "I'm sorry about the years. I'm sorry about the money. You sent it and I took it and I put it in a drawer. I didn't spend it. It's in the drawer, in the envelope, with the letter."

"Which drawer?"

"The one under the phone. With the bills."

"Pai—"

"Don't tell me about the will. I know what's in the will." A breath, and another. "I want to know if you're happy."

"Why."

"Because you're thirty-eight and you work at night and you send money to a man you won't speak to."

She put her hand over the mouthpiece. Rui was looking at her. She turned her chair away from the aisle.

“No,” she said.

“All right,” he said. “That’s all I wanted.”

They talked for forty-one minutes. He told her about the drawer, and the neighbour’s dog, and the ceiling in the front room that had come down in the spring. The rain got in, he said. He had meant to see to it. He told her about a nurse called Idalina who sang fado while she changed the drip. She was, he said, completely without talent. Sofia told him about the flood in her kitchen in January and the assessor who hadn’t been out. He laughed at that, and the laugh turned into a cough, and a nurse’s voice came close to the phone: Senhor Joaquim, the arm now.

“I have to go,” he said. “They want my arm.”

“Pai—“

“Come at eleven,” he said. “That’s when they let people in.”

The line went to dial tone.

The screen asked for a disposition code. She chose caller satisfied.

• • •

For six minutes the queue was empty. She did not take her hand off the mouse.

Marta came down the aisle at 03:29 and put the tablet on the desk. The call log had a red band across it: HOLD RELEASED MANUALLY 02:41 / DURATION 41:52 / FLAGGED FOR REVIEW.

“Form four-oh-oh A,” Marta said. She laid a printed sheet down beside the tablet and smoothed it with two fingers. “Call

exception. It fills itself in. You sign the bottom."

Sofia read it. Caller. Number. Nature of contact. Relationship to caller.

"Relationship," she said.

"Put what's true."

Sofia took the pen and wrote daughter in the box. Then she signed at the bottom and pushed the sheet away.

Marta read it. She stood there with her tablet under one arm and the sheet in her other hand, and she read it twice. Then she took the pen and signed the witness box without looking at it.

"I've been going to see him for three years," she said. "Every Sunday. The first bus."

"I know."

"You don't know."

"No."

Marta folded the sheet in three and put it in her bag. She walked back up the aisle and stopped at the roster board to sign the handover, and Sofia watched her do it, and then she read the board.

M. FERREIRA — SUP — 22:00–06:00.

She had looked at that board every night for two years.

At six she clocked out. The rain had stopped and the car park smelled of wet tarmac and diesel. She drove to Braga with the radio off. The sky over the A3 went from black to grey. She passed the turn for Nine and did not take it. At a service station she bought a coffee and a packet of bolachas and opened neither.

At ten past eleven she stood at the desk of ward four and a clerk looked up.

“Relation?”

“Daughter,” Sofia said.

The clerk typed it with one finger.

He was in the bed by the window. His glasses were folded on the locker. Asleep, his mouth open, one arm out of the sheet with a cannula taped to the back of the hand. His fingernails had been cut. The monitor beeped every four seconds. The man in the next bed was counting under his breath.

The letter was still in her bag.

There was a chair on the far side of the bed with a grey cardigan over the back, and one on the near side.

“Your sister’s gone for a coffee,” a nurse said, passing with a tray. “She got here at seven.”

Sofia sat down in the near chair. It was warm.

ELEVEN

Untitled

7 The Trial

Danny Meakin was halfway up the slope by the bottle bank at twenty past eight when the clutch went, and the van slid back a foot before it bit. He sat with his foot flat to the floor and the engine running. He had a Fiesta booked in for nine and a phone in the cradle telling him he was four minutes away.

He did the arithmetic he had been doing all week. Clutch, four hundred and eighty. Rent, six hundred and fifty a month, two months behind. Van finance, a hundred and eighty-six, due on the twentieth. Haywood Lodge, a hundred and six a week, his half of the top-up, three weeks behind. The work had gone thin since the schools went back. Nobody buys tyres in October.

He did mobile fitting for Treadline. The app sent him the jobs and took eighteen per cent, and he paid for the diesel and the insurance and the public liability, and on a good week he cleared four hundred pounds. It had not been a good week.

He rang the Fiesta and told her ten o'clock. She said she'd wait. He got the van up the hill in second, riding the clutch, and put it in the lock-up behind the bathroom showroom. The roller door had a dent in it from a customer who had reversed into it in 2019 and never come back.

He sat on the bumper and got his phone out. Mr. Rushton had texted twice about the rent, the second time with more question marks. Under that was the ad. He had been looking at it since Sunday.

PAID CLINICAL RESEARCH — MEN & WOMEN 18–65 — UP TO £2,400 — TRAVEL PAID — NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED.

He had filled the form in on Tuesday. Name, date of birth, weight. He had ticked the box that said he was in good general health.

The phone rang. A woman called Bex, from the study. She asked about his heart and his kidneys and whether he took any medication, and he said no to all of it.

"Great," she said. "The healthy panel's full until February, but there's another one. Pain study. Pays better."

"I haven't got pain."

"Everybody's got pain. Have a look at this."

She sent him a card with a body on it, front and back, a list of regions, and a box at the bottom. Tick all areas where you have experienced pain for more than three months.

He looked at the body for a while. His back had been bad since a tyre cage fell on him in 2018. His knees clicked on stairs. He had hurt his shoulder lifting a wheel. He ticked the back, both knees, the right shoulder.

Then, because the form said four or more, and he could count, he ticked his left hand.

He sent it back. Bex rang an hour later and said the site could see him on Thursday.

• • •

Unit 4 was on Brindley Point, between a bathroom showroom and a place that sold mobility scooters. There was a glass door with a buzzer and a laminated sign that said MIDLANDS CLINICAL RESEARCH — PLEASE PRESS AND WAIT. Inside: six chairs, a water cooler, a rack of magazines, a poster.

The poster was a photograph of a woman in a grey cardigan holding the small of her back and looking at a window. She had her hair in a bob and her mouth was slightly open, like she was about to say something. The caption said LIVING WITH CDP? ASK ABOUT STEADY-3. It had been up a long time. The colour had gone out of it. She looked like she was in a catalogue.

There was a clipboard on the desk with three columns: NAME, TIME IN, TIME OUT. The top line said V. HOLDCROFT, 8:40. Danny wrote D. MEAKIN, 9:05.

A woman came out from behind the partition. Fifties, a cardigan, a lanyard, reading glasses on a chain. “Danny? Come through, duck.”

Her name was on the lanyard. PAULINE RHEAD, SITE COORDINATOR. She had a laminator on the desk and a stack of folders beside it, and the laminator was warm. He could smell it.

The assessment room had a couch with a paper roll, a blood pressure cuff, a scale, and a chart of the body on the wall. Dr. Nair came in with a folder and a pen. Forties, a shirt with no tie. He shook Danny’s hand, sat down, and said, “So. Tell me about the pain.”

Danny told him. Back since 2018, when a tyre cage fell on him. Knees that clicked on stairs. A shoulder he had hurt lifting a wheel. He did not mention the left hand.

Dr. Nair asked him to tick the chart. He ticked it again, all four.

"Four regions," Dr. Nair said. "More than three months?"

"Years."

"Worst pain in the last week, out of ten?"

Danny thought about it. "Seven."

"And how much has it interfered with your daily activities?"

"A bit."

"Do you wake unrefreshed?"

"Most days."

"Do you have difficulty concentrating?"

"Sometimes."

Dr. Nair pressed on his shoulders and his hips and his knees with his thumb. Danny said "ow" in the places where it was true. Dr. Nair wrote for a while. Then he said, "You meet the criteria."

Just like that. Danny had thought there would be a blood test, or a scan. There was a form. Dr. Nair ticked a box at the bottom. Meets inclusion criteria: Y.

Then Pauline came in with another form. "Right, love. I'll do this one. Me writing's better than yours. You just tell me."

She asked him the questions again, in a different order, and wrote the answers in her own handwriting. She had a good hand, round and clear. When he said "seven" she wrote 7 — moderate to severe. When he said "a bit" she wrote moderate interference.

At the bottom she wrote Patient signature and gave him the pen, and he signed.

The consent form was fourteen pages. Pauline put a cross in nine boxes and he initialled each one. One box said I agree that

my GP may be informed of my participation in this study. He initialled it. Another said I agree that my data may be used in anonymised form in perpetuity. He initialled that too. He did not read the other seven.

Then she gave him the device. A small black handheld, the size of a television remote, with a screen and three buttons. “This is your diary,” she said. “It’ll buzz at eight. That’s when people are at home. You put in your numbers, it goes to the computer, and that’s your data. Charge it every night. If it goes flat, we lose it.”

She put it in the dock. The light went red, then green.

“Eight o’clock,” she said. “Don’t ignore it. The data’s what we’re here for.”

She gave him a prepaid card with fifty pounds on it and a form for travel expenses. He filled in the mileage. Eleven miles each way, forty-five pence a mile. Pauline looked at it and said, “I’ll put a tenner, love, it’s easier.”

He walked out with the card, the device, a booklet, and a card with the trial phone number on it. He sat in the van and read the booklet. Chronic diffuse pain affects one in twenty adults. It was thought to involve the way the nervous system processed pain signals. STEADY-3 was sponsored by Ardent Therapeutics and was testing a drug called ARD-118.

One in twenty. He thought about the six chairs, and Vince Holdcroft at 8:40.

He drove to A&D Motors and paid for the clutch.

• • •

With the new clutch the van pulled away in second without shuddering. He did the school-run jobs and the fleet work and the call-outs, and the money came in, and the study money came in on top of it. He paid the rent arrears in two goes. He paid the van finance. On the Wednesday he checked the card at the cash-point. There was money on it. He stood there and did the arithmetic and it was already spent.

He took his mother to the day centre on Fridays and sat with her in the conservatory at Haywood Lodge. She was in a chair by the window with a blanket over her knees.

"Terry," she said. "Did you bring the paper?"

"It's Danny, Mum."

"Terry never worked."

"I know."

He fed her a biscuit in pieces. She took them and held them and forgot to eat them. The conservatory smelled of soup and lavender polish.

Yvonne, the manager, came through. "Danny, as discussed, the top-up's going up in April. Two hundred and twenty-eight for your half."

"Right."

"I'll put it in writing."

"Right."

He sat with his mother until the light went. Then he drove to the unit and did the paperwork for the next day. At eight the device buzzed on the passenger seat. He pressed 6, 7, 5.

Lisa rang on the Sunday. "Yvonne says you're behind."

"I paid a hundred and six on Friday."

“That’s last week’s. You’re three weeks behind.”

“I’ll sort it.”

“How?”

“I’ve got a bit of work on.”

“What work?”

“Research.”

There was a pause. “What, like a guinea pig?”

“Like a survey.”

“You’re not doing one of them drug trials.”

“It’s not a drug trial. It’s a study.”

“It’s the same thing, Danny.”

He looked at the device on the table. It was charging. The light was red.

“It pays,” he said.

• • •

The study had six visits. Screening, baseline, week two, week four, week eight, week twelve. He signed in at 9:05 for all of them. Vince Holdcroft signed in at 8:40, and Vince’s folder got fatter every time.

Vince was seventy-one, retired from the gas board. Stick, flat cap, a wife called June who waited in the car with the engine running. He sat in the corner with his lever-arch file on his knee and talked about the weather.

“You’re the tyre man,” he said, the first time.

“That’s me.”

“I’m the pain man.” He laughed. “Same boat.”

Danny looked at the poster. The woman in the cardigan was still holding her back.

The visits were twenty minutes. Pauline weighed him, took his blood pressure, asked the questions, wrote the answers down. Then she gave him a tablet and a glass of water. “You don’t know if it’s the real one or the dummy,” she said. “Nobody does. Not even Dr. Nair.”

The tablet was small and white. He swallowed it.

At eight that night the device buzzed. He was in the van outside his flat, eating a sandwich. PAIN NOW (0–10). He pressed 6. WORST PAIN (0–10). He pressed 7. INTERFERENCE (0–10). He pressed 5. THANK YOU. The screen went dark.

He sat with the sandwich in his hand. He had spent the whole day thinking about his back. He hadn’t noticed he was doing it until the device asked.

• • •

By December he carried it in his jacket pocket. It buzzed at eight. If he was under a car he wiped his hands and got it out. If he was at his mother’s he did it in the corridor. He put in sixes and sevens.

Once he put in an eight after a bad day with a seized wheel nut, and the next morning Pauline rang him.

“Danny, love. You put an eight in last night. Is that right?”

“It was a bad night.”

“Eight’s high, that’s all. Eight’s the sort of number that makes Dr. Nair sit up.”

“Was it an eight, or more of a seven?”

He thought about it. “More of a seven.”

“I’ll change it. Don’t worry. I’ll put it down as a seven and initial it.”

He put the phone down and sat in the van. It had been an eight. He had said seven, and by the time he got home it had become a seven in his head, and he could not remember what an eight had felt like.

That night he looked up CDP. There was a charity, a forum, an NHS page. The forum had a thread called HOW LONG HAVE YOU HAD IT? The first post said, Eleven years. I can’t work. My husband left. Some days I can’t get out of bed. The second said, Six years. I’m 34. I feel like I’m 90.

He put the phone down. He did not have that. He had a bad back and a van with a new clutch. He closed the browser and opened the app and looked at the jobs for tomorrow.

One Thursday he fitted four tyres on a Passat in the rain. The customer stood in the doorway with his arms folded. When Danny stood up, his back made a noise.

“You all right?” the customer said.

“Bad back.”

“Join the club.”

Danny looked at him. Sixty-odd, a fleece, a mug in his hand. “I’ve got CDP,” Danny said.

The man nodded. “What’s that?”

“Chronic diffuse pain.”

“Right.” The man drank his tea. “I’ve got arthritis. Doctor says it’s the weather.”

Danny torqued the last wheel and wrote the invoice on his phone. He had said it the way he said “Treadline” or “cash or

card.”

• • •

The monitor came in February. Danny was in the waiting room and heard her through the partition. “Site four’s data is the cleanest in the country. I’m not supposed to say that, but it is.”

Pauline said, “I just keep the folders tidy.”

Pauline came out later with a folder. “That’s from Parex. The monitor. Ms. Fenwick. She’s never said that about one of my sites before.”

“That’s good,” Danny said.

“It is.” She sat down. “Now. Your week eight’s come back a bit high.”

She turned the folder round. A printout, a graph. SITE 4 — MEAN CHANGE FROM BASELINE (PAIN, 0–10). The line went down from left to right, with a spike in the middle, then down again.

“That’s us,” Pauline said. “Best site in the study.”

“What’s the spike?”

She looked at it. “That’s week six. That’s when I was in Tenerife. Karen had the site.” She laughed. “No, it’s not that. It’s the Christmas lot. People eat too much and stop doing their diaries.”

Danny looked at the spike. Week six was the week she was away. He remembered, because she had told him, and because Karen had not known where the consent forms were kept.

“What’s Vince doing?”

“Vince is doing lovely. He’s down to a three. He hasn’t missed a diary since October.”

“Has he got the real one?”

“We don’t know, love. That’s the point.”

Pauline closed the folder. Then she said, “He does his diary ever such a good job. I help him with the buttons, like, because his hands are bad. But he tells me the numbers.”

Danny looked at the poster. The woman in the cardigan hadn’t moved.

Behind her, the rack of folders. His folder had MEAKIN on the spine, in her handwriting.

“Could you help me with mine?” he said. “The buttons are fiddly.”

Pauline smiled. “Course I can, duck.”

• • •

After that the numbers came down, a little at a time, in the van, at eight o’clock, with the device in his hand. It was a six, he thought, or more of a five. He put five. It was a five, or more of a four. He put four.

He saw her do Vince’s diary once, at the desk. “Is that a three, Vince?” “Three.” “Lovely.” She pressed the button, wrote something in the folder, put the device back in the dock.

At the week twelve visit Danny said three. Pauline pressed it in. “That’s lovely, Danny. That’s a responder.”

Dr. Nair shook his hand. “Responder,” he said. “Well done.”

“Was I on the drug?”

“You’ll be told when the study’s unblinded.”

“And when’s that?”

“When the extension’s finished.”

Pauline gave him a card and a fifty-pound voucher for a garden centre. She had laminated his discharge summary. It was warm from the machine. DIAGNOSIS: CHRONIC DIFFUSE PAIN. OUTCOME: RESPONDER. At the bottom, in her handwriting, Completed all visits. No deviations.

He put it in the folder with the van's V5 and the care home invoices.

• • •

Lisa rang him in March. "Dr. Ellis has had a letter. It says you've got chronic diffuse pain."

"It's a trial."

"It's on your record, Danny. It's on the system. If you ever need anything—"

"I won't need anything."

"You sound like Dad."

"Dad had a bad back."

"Dad had a bad everything."

He went to the surgery on the Tuesday. Dr. Ellis was young, with a lanyard and a screen on the desk. Danny sat in the chair opposite and said, "I want it taken off."

"Taken off what?"

"The pain thing. The CDP."

Dr. Ellis looked at the screen. "It's a confirmed diagnosis. It was made by Dr. Nair at the research site."

"He ticked a box."

"He's the investigator. He's a clinician. I can't just delete a diagnosis." Dr. Ellis turned the screen round. A code, a date, Dr.

Nair's name. "I'd need a letter from him saying it was made in error."

"Can you get one?"

"I can ask."

"Will he write one?"

"I don't know." Dr. Ellis looked at him. "Why do you want it off?"

Danny thought about the van, and the extension, and his mother's top-up. "It's not accurate," he said.

Dr. Ellis nodded. "I'll ask. But it'll stay on the record while I'm asking."

Lisa was at the desk when he came out. She was on the phone. She looked at him and didn't say anything.

• • •

The extension offer came in April. STEADY-3 EXT. Eight visits over twelve months. Sixty pounds a visit, plus travel. He read it twice. He did not do the arithmetic. Then he rang the number.

Pauline answered. "Danny, love. Are you coming back to us?"

"What's the sixty for?"

"It's the extension rate. The main study's money comes from the sponsor. The extension's different."

"Different how?"

"Different budget." She laughed. "You still get your travel."

He looked at the care home letter on the table. As discussed, your contribution will increase to £228 per week from 1 April.

"Alright," he said.

• • •

In May the site asked if he would do a photograph for the new recruitment poster. They paid him a hundred and fifty pounds. The photographer was a man from Hanley with a softbox and a roll of grey paper.

He told Danny to hold the small of his back with his good hand and look at the window.

"Like this?"

"More like you've just stood up."

Danny stood up.

"Hold it. Hold it. Good."

They did it forty times. The photographer said, "That's the one." Danny looked at the screen. He looked like a man in a catalogue.

• • •

The poster went up in the waiting room in June. They moved the woman in the cardigan along the wall to make room for it. Danny sat under it on the first Tuesday of the extension. His appointment was at half seven, and the clinic was running late.

In the photograph he was holding his back with his good hand, looking at a window that wasn't there.

Vince was there too, with his folder. "You're famous," he said.

"I'm not."

"You're on the wall."

Pauline came out with the device dock and put it on the desk. "Danny, love. Before you go in. The extension consent's changed. They want you to initial this bit."

She put a form in front of him. One page. A paragraph in small print and a box beside it. He read it. I understand that the

diagnosis of chronic diffuse pain made during STEADY-3 will remain on my medical record and may be shared with my GP and other healthcare providers.

He initialled it.

"Lovely," Pauline said. "And you're all right for the eighth? I know it's a Tuesday."

"I'm all right."

At eight o'clock the device in his pocket buzzed. He took it out. PAIN NOW (0–10). He pressed 6.

Pauline opened the door. "Danny, love."

He stood up.

Under the photograph of him, the caption said LIVING WITH CDP? ASK ABOUT STEADY-3.

TWELVE

Untitled

8 The Lighthouse

At ten past six he came down with the slate to write the night into the fair log. The line was already there.

He read it before he understood it.

2 March. 03.20. Corryvrechan. Draught 16 ft. Passed north.

It was in ink. It was in his hand. The number in the margin was 4,401, and he had been about to write 4,401.

He stood at the desk with the slate in his hand. The stove was ticking. He had lit it at six and the kettle was on it. The watch room smelled of paraffin and cold iron. The barometer said 1014 and steady.

The fair log was bound in green and stamped in gold and lasted about three years. Date, time, wind, weather, sea, barometer, remarks. He wrote the number in the margin before the time. He was particular about the draught column. Mackay had taught him that at Sule. A boat is her draught, Mackay said.

He had kept the log for thirty-one years. He had never come down to a line already written.

He went back to 4,400, his own entry from the evening before: Wind SW 4. Sea slight. Light exhibited sunset to sunrise.

Then 4,401, in the same ink. The nib was worn to his hand after thirty years. That was why the writing looked like his.

The station was the Oitir, a tower on a rock at the north end of a sandbank eleven miles west of the mainland. There was a store and a landing and a set of steps that were dangerous in anything over a four. The light was electric now, with a standby and a bank of batteries and a clockwork he wound by hand every night out of habit rather than need. He had been here nineteen years. Before that, Sule Skerry. Before that, the boats.

He took the slate to the window and held it to the light at an angle. It was clean. He had wiped it himself with the cloth the night before, and there was no grey on it, no ghost of the pencil, nothing.

He went up and looked at the door. It was bolted. The window in the watch room had a catch that had been broken since January and was tied with wire, and the wire was as he had left it. The telemetry box sat on its bracket with its cable tied off, not yet live.

He made the tea and took his pill with it and stood at the kitchen window with the mug in both hands. It was a flat day, the sea the colour of a slate roof, and the bank showing the way it did at low water, a line of white that did not quite break. There was nothing on it. There was never anything on it.

The letter from the depot had been under the sugar tin since Tuesday. He had read it four times. From the thirty-first of March the station would be monitored from Oban — the light, the standby, the door. The log would be kept by the station unit from that date. The keeper's post was withdrawn. The Board

thanked him for thirty-one years and enclosed a form for the return of the keys.

The form was under the tin as well. He had not filled it in. He had not taken it out from under the tin since the day it came.

If he came off before the thirty-first he lost the enhancement. Eleven thousand pounds. The difference between the house being paid off and the house not being paid off. Morna had never once mentioned it.

He wrote to the depot that afternoon:

Are the fair log books being supplied with the leaves numbered at the bindery? I have a number in the book that I did not enter.

The reply came on the Thursday, on the depot's blue paper. The books are numbered by the keeper on duty. Entries are to be made in sequence. If a book is spoiled, return it to Stores with a note.

He went to the shelf for the List of Lights and Reed's almanac. She was in neither. He read the loss list at the back of Reed's twice, down the column of names. She was not there either. He wrote the name on the corner of the blue paper and put it in the drawer.

• • •

He rang Iain on the Saturday about the relief.

"Did you ever find a line in the book you didn't write?"

There was a pause. Football on the television behind him, and then a door.

"When?"

"Any time. At Sule."

"I don't know," Iain said. "The books do that."

"Do what?"

"Tam." A different voice, the one he used for the Coastguard. "Are you all right out there?"

"I'm asking about the book."

"The books do that," Iain said. "Ask any of the old ones. You want to be asking the Board about the boat, not about the book. Did you see they've put the fitter in on the twenty-sixth?"

"Aye."

"They'll want the store emptied before that."

"Aye."

"Right," Iain said. "I'll see you on the boat."

"Aye."

• • •

He went out to the store on the Sunday for the 1998 book. It took him a while to find it, under the paint and the spare wicks that were no longer any use to anyone.

The store was to be emptied before the fitter came. He had made a start on the shelf of paints, and the tins had rusted to the wood, and he had to use the chisel. He put a crate by the door for the skip: paint, wicks, a coil of rope that had gone hard. The 1998 book was at the back, under a crate of wicks, in the same green board as the rest. The cover had a ring on it where a mug had stood.

The Star of Hope went on the bank on the night of the fifteenth of November 1998, with four men aboard. He had relieved here for two months that autumn, years before he came here properly. He had come off the station on the Friday. The boat

went on the Sunday. He had not been on the rock when it happened. He had heard it on the radio in the kitchen in Oban, with Morna ironing, and he had gone out and stood in the street. Their names were on the stone at the chapel, under the yew.

The log for that year was in Mackay's hand, which was smaller than his own and sloped to the right.

15 Nov. 23.40. Star of Hope. Sighted NE. Passed south.

The draught column was empty.

He turned the page. The next entry was Mackay's, the sixteenth: Wind NW 6. Sea moderate. Nothing about the Star of Hope.

Tam sat on the store step with the book on his knees. Mackay had never left the draught empty. Not for a steam yacht, not for a fishing boat, not for a rowing boat with a man in it. A boat is her draught.

The wind came round the store and the pages lifted. He closed the book and put it back under the paint.

• • •

The fog came in on the Wednesday, thick, the bank gone, the sea gone, the light not going anywhere, only turning.

He heard the Rona before he could see her. The fog signal was decommissioned in 2004 and there was nothing else to hear but the engine, close, and getting closer, and then not getting closer.

He went up to the lantern. Nothing. The light went round and the fog took it six feet from the glass.

He called on sixteen.

"Rona, Rona, Oitir light. Rona, Oitir."

Nothing. He called again. The engine was very close and then it was holding.

He went down to the desk. He did not think about it. He sat down and took the pen and wrote.

11 March. 04.10. Rona. Draught 12 ft. Passed north.

He looked at the clock when he had done it. It was ten to three.

He sat there for a minute. Then he capped the pen and went up and stood in the lantern and listened. The engine went away to the north, slowly, the way an engine goes when it is not in a hurry.

In the morning the fog lifted at eight and the Rona called him.

"Oitir. Rona."

"Rona. Go ahead."

"You'll have heard us on the bank last night."

"I heard you."

"We never saw your light. Never a blink of it. We were off the north end of the bank by ten past four. Somebody was watching over us."

"Somebody," Tam said.

"Will you be putting it in the book?"

"I'll be putting it in the book."

He put the phone down and opened the book. 11 March. 04.10. Rona. Draught 12 ft. Passed north. He had written it at ten to three. He remembered writing it.

He sat at the desk until the kettle went.

• • •

Morna rang on the Monday at twenty past eight.

“Tam.”

“Morna.”

“You’ll be on the boat Thursday.”

“I’ll be on the boat.”

“Six o’clock, they said.”

“Six.”

“Fiona’s got the table plan done. She’s done it twice.”

“I’ll be there.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m telling you what I know.”

The wedding was the Saturday, the twenty-first, at the church in Oban, and then the Corran Halls for the meal. Euan’s mother was coming from Edinburgh on the Friday and Morna had put her in the front room. Fiona had asked him in September, on the phone, whether he would say a few words. He had said he would. He had been thinking about them since, off and on, and had nothing.

He had bought a suit in February and it was hanging in the wardrobe at home with the tags on. He had not told her what it cost. She had put his good shoes by the door at home.

“Are you eating?” she said.

“Aye.”

“There’s a pot of soup in the freezer. I made it for you.”

“Right.”

“The front room’s done,” she said. “It’s been done since Christmas.”

“I know.”

“You’ll not know it.”

He said nothing. She had been on the till at the Co-op since last spring, two days a week. He could not remember whether she had told him or whether he had heard it from Fiona. He did not ask.

"Thursday," she said.

"Thursday."

She had never mentioned the eleven thousand pounds. He had not mentioned it either.

• • •

The low came in on the eighteenth with a southerly eight and the glass falling through 980. The forecast at six said nine, perhaps storm ten. The glass was through 970 by nine. The bank was breaking white from the north end to the south.

The depot rang at nine.

"She'll try at six tomorrow, Tam."

"And if she can't?"

"She can't."

"Right."

"Davie won't take her over the bank in a nine."

"No."

Morna rang at ten.

"The boat's at six."

"I know."

"Fiona's got her dress at the house. She's coming over on the Friday. She wants you to see it."

"Right."

"Tam."

“Aye.”

“If the boat doesn’t come.”

“It’ll come.”

“Tam.”

“It’ll come.”

She said nothing for a while. He could hear the kitchen clock and, behind it, the television.

“I’ll tell her you’re on the boat,” she said.

“Tell her that.”

He went to the kitchen and took the form from under the sugar tin. It was one sheet, printed both sides. The declaration at the bottom said: I certify that I have handed over the station and its keys to the officer appointed by the Board. He put it back under the tin.

The wind got up in the afternoon and by the evening it was a steady roar on the north side and the spray was coming over the store roof. The windows were blind with salt. He did the rounds. The light was on. The clockwork was wound. The standby was full and the fuel was good for a month and the store was good for two. The bank was a white line and then a white wall and then nothing, and the sound of it came up through the rock into the floor of the kitchen.

He lay down at eleven and did not sleep.

At ten past four he got up and put his trousers on and went down to the desk.

The book was open at the next page. The number in the margin, waiting, was 4,431.

He went to the phone and looked at the schedule pinned beside it. Lismore. 64 ft. Draught 5 ft 6 in.

He sat down and wrote.

He wrote it slowly. His hand was steady.

19 March. 06.00. Lismore. Draught 5 ft 6 in. Passed clear to the northward.

He blotted it. He capped the pen. He sat with his hands on the desk and the wind in the tower. Then he went up and wound the clockwork, which did not need it, and stood in the lantern until the light went grey at the edges.

At six there was nothing on the water.

At seven he put the light out and sent the morning report. The depot rang at eight.

“She’s not coming,” the man said. “Davie took one look at the point and put her back on the mooring. There’s nothing before Monday now.”

“Monday,” Tam said.

He put the phone down. The book was open at 4,431, the ink dry, the time in it, the draught.

He went up to the lantern. The bank was white and the sea beyond it was empty.

THIRTEEN

Untitled



INCOPREA

9 Tenure

On Monday at 8:12, Hella Mänd was writing a stanza of Betti Alver on the whiteboard from memory when her phone went off in the pen tray.

She wrote the fourth line, capped the marker, and read the email standing up. The subject line was ORIGINAL / FLAGGED DOCUMENT / MÄND, H. / 1994.

The system had examined the doctoral thesis she submitted in 1994. Two hundred and fourteen pages, cited two hundred and eleven times. It found the document 94 per cent likely to contain machine-written text. She read it twice. The number did not change.

She laughed. The room had a high ceiling and the laugh came back off the wall behind her.

The university had bought ORIGINAL in September for three hundred thousand euros. At the opening of the academic year the dean demonstrated it with a slide of a brain made of circuit boards. Hella ate a slice of the cake and went home.

At 8:21 nineteen students came in with wet coats and put their phones face down on the desks. That was the new rule. She taught for eighty minutes on lyric poetry that survives censorship by getting smaller. She had known the poem since she was nineteen.

At the break she opened the portal on the lectern laptop. The scanned thesis loaded one page at a time, every page stamped FLAGGED in green. There was a coffee ring on page 3 that was older than most of the students.

The report had a summary, a table, and a graph she did not read. Page 81 scored highest.

She knew the passage before she scrolled to it. Three paragraphs about her mother, the winter of 1993, the flat in Võru with the stove that drew badly, the pneumonia, the money Hella had sent instead of going, the funeral on a Tuesday. She had typed the thesis on a borrowed 386. She had written those paragraphs in a room above a shop on Tähe, in one night in February 1994, and she had not written anything like them before or since.

The software had drawn a box around one sentence and put a percentage beside it.

• • •

Thursday, two o'clock, the dean's office on the second floor of Ülikooli 18. Dean Lepik sat with his back to the window. Marten Kruus from the integrity office had two laptops and a paper cup. Kaja Sepp, who held the chair in digital humanities, sat at the end of the table with her hands folded. A secretary took minutes.

"There's no accusation here," Lepik said. "The system flags. People decide."

"Then read it," Hella said.

Kruus read the passage in the voice of a man reading a warranty. Her mother's hands. The stove that drew badly. The window that iced on the inside. Two thousand kroons, which had been a great deal of money in February 1993 and was not enough. The funeral on the Tuesday, the seminar she had given on the Tuesday, the fact that she had told no one.

"Thank you," she said. "That's my mother."

"Ninety-nine point eight," Kruus said.

"On what?"

"On the sentence. The confidence that it was generated."

"She died on the fourteenth. I sent the money on the fifteenth. The funeral was the twenty-third. I have never told anyone that. Now I have told four people and a laptop."

Lepik turned his pen over on the blotter. "The rest of the thesis isn't flagged."

She looked at the table. It was veneer, with a burn ring near her elbow. Chapter two was her 1991 article with the paragraphs

reordered. Chapter five reproduced four pages of her 1992 article without quotation marks. In 1994 that had not been called anything. Now it was called text recycling. There was a faculty workshop about it in the spring. The software did not look for it.

“What does it measure?” she said.

“Perplexity,” Kruus said. “How surprised a model is by each word. And burstiness. Human prose is uneven. Machine prose is even, unless it has been told to be uneven.”

“Under two per cent false positives,” Lepik said. “The supplier’s figure.”

“How many documents are there in this faculty?”

“Professor—“

“Two hundred theses. Eleven hundred articles. Whatever else is in the repository. Two per cent of what?”

Lepik did not answer that. He straightened the pen. “Would you write something for us? Now. Anything. Twenty minutes.”

They turned a laptop toward her. She wrote a paragraph about the window and the wet street and the way the town looked in March, with the snow going off the roofs and the river the colour of slate. Four minutes.

Kruus ran it. Seventy-one. He turned the screen so she could see the phrase likely machine-assisted.

“Again,” Lepik said. “Please.”

So she wrote badly. She wrote that the window was dirty and the street was wet and that at eleven o’clock she had eaten a bun that was dry. She used the word old twice in one sentence. She left a thought half-built and moved on to the next.

Kruus ran it. Thirty-four. Lepik wrote something down. It was the first thing he had written all afternoon.

The secretary's laptop was the loudest thing in the room. Kruus closed his laptop, then the other one.

"So the way to pass," Hella said, "is to write worse."

"Nobody is saying that."

"You're not saying anything. The number is."

Lepik put both palms flat on the desk. "The notebooks," he said. "The originals. The drafts, the handwritten pages. Produce them and the committee will consider the matter closed."

"Consider it how?"

"Closed."

"They're gone," she said. "I burned them in 1994."

Lepik looked at the secretary. The secretary stopped typing. "Then you understand how it looks."

• • •

June 1994, the yard behind the house on Tähe. A tin barrel, and a wind that kept putting the fire out, and four spiral notebooks from the shop on Küüni at sixty senti each. The defence was in May. She burned them the week after. The fourth one had a fanfold page taped inside the back cover, and she burned that too.

She had borrowed a 386 from the computational linguistics lab on Jakobi 2 for two weeks in February. Monochrome monitor, a keyboard like a tray of stones. The 386 had a fan that clicked. The technician had written a program for concordances and left it on the machine. It took a text file and made new sen-

tences out of the habits of the words in it. He had told her it couldn't write. It had no idea what a word was. It counted.

She typed her mother's letters into it. Sixty-one of them, onionskin, kept in a Kalev tin, the hand going thinner toward the end. It took her three nights.

The program gave her mostly nonsense. On the fourth night, at four in the morning, it gave her a sentence she did not delete. The sentence came out on fanfold paper, and the lab's printer put two spaces after every full stop.

• • •

Kaja Sepp called on Friday and they met at the café on Ülikooli with the bad lamps. Kaja ordered tea and did not drink it.

"There's a form," she said. "Two paragraphs. It says the flagged passage was composed with the assistance of a text tool, at a time when such tools were not understood by the faculty, and that you regret not declaring it."

"In 1994 there were no such tools."

"There's a form anyway." Kaja turned her cup a quarter turn. "Sign it. Take the emerita status. Keep the office and the pension. The students hold their petition until the exams."

"Did you write the form?"

"I've seen the form." She took it out of her bag and put it on the table. One page, both sides, the faculty crest at the top.

"Did you vote for the software?"

Kaja looked at the lamps. "I chaired the evaluation. My name is on the procurement. It was a closer thing than the minutes say."

Kaja put two fingers on the form. “In 2011 an article of mine was flagged. I wrote a statement. Nobody read the statement. They read the signature.”

“And that is what you’d like me to do.”

“What I would like is for this to be about one paragraph and not about the chair.” She set the cup down. “It isn’t the paragraph, Hella. It’s three hundred thousand euros and eleven faculties. The contract doesn’t lose. Somebody does.”

“Did you write your article?”

Kaja picked up her tea, held it, put it down. “You’re asking the wrong person.”

• • •

She bought an exercise book on Küüni, blue cover, ruled, two euros forty. She sat at the kitchen table with a biro and tried to write the drafts she had written in 1994. The biro was dry at first. She scribbled on the corner of the book until it came. Her hand came out of it slow and careful and fifty-eight, resting between the words, nothing like the hand in the notebooks. She did three pages. On the fourth she wrote the paragraph about her mother, in the wrong words, badly.

She took the book to the hearing in her bag.

The senate room had a long table, a microphone nobody used, and a smell of floor polish. A woman from the union sat beside her with a folder. The same four faces, and two more she did not know. The woman slid a form across the table. Hella did not pick it up. Lepik asked whether she had evidence of authorship.

She thought about the blue exercise book in her bag. Four pages of forged drafts. The third page good enough to be looked

at, not good enough to be read.

“I can’t prove it,” she said.

“Then the committee has no choice.”

The minutes recorded that Professor Mänd had produced no evidence. The chair was advertised in the spring. She kept her courses for a year, then half of them. Then she was in a school across town, in a building with a ramp and a smell of soup, teaching Estonian literature to fifteen-year-olds who did not want to be there.

The newspaper ran a piece called “The Machine That Knew Too Much.” Two hundred students signed a petition. In the first year the software flagged eleven theses in the faculty; nine were cleared, two were withdrawn; the company’s share price went up.

The school had a detector too, a free one, on a laptop in the staff room. In November the deputy head asked her to put the tenth-year essays through it. She did. Four were flagged. One was a girl’s essay about her grandmother’s farm. It came back at 88 per cent. The girl cried in the corridor. Hella made her write the whole thing again in front of her, in the room, in an hour. The second version scored 12. The girl had written her name at the top and underlined it.

• • •

In March, a boy stayed behind after the last class — Rasmus, fifteen, a phone in one hand and a printout in the other. He held the printout by one corner, the way you hold something wet. His essay had come back at 91 per cent, and he was crying the way boys cry, which is to say angrily, at the floor.

“I didn’t know how to say it,” he said. “The thing I wanted to say. So I asked it.”

“What was the thing?”

“My mother. She’s got a thing in her lung. They’re taking it out in April.”

Hella sat down on the edge of the desk.

“Write it,” she said. “In your own hand. Badly. Use the wrong words. Write it so that no machine on earth would claim it, and bring it to me on Tuesday.”

He wiped his face with his sleeve. “Will it be good?”

“No.”

“Will you know?”

“I’ll know.”

He looked at the printout. “Did you ever use one?”

“No,” she said.

He went out. She stacked the chairs and turned off the lights and stood in the corridor with the keys in her hand.

• • •

At home she took the Kalev tin down from the shelf and opened it. The tin smelled of almonds. Sixty-one letters, onion-skin, her mother’s hand going thin at the back of the bundle. Each envelope had a number in the corner. The rubber band had gone slack. She had not opened the tin in years. She typed four of them into a free demonstration that promised to continue any text in the style of the sample. The program thought for a second and gave her a fluent paragraph about a mother, with the word hands in it twice. Not one sentence could have been in a letter from Võru.

She deleted it. The screen asked her if she was sure.

Then she opened the PDF. She had downloaded it on the first Monday and never deleted it. She kept everything. It was the notebooks she had burned. Page 81 came up under the watermark.

On the fourth line of page 81, after the word window, there were two spaces.

She had typed it into chapter four before it got light, from the fanfold page. She had changed a word here and there, made it plainer, taken out the adjectives. The order was the order the program had made. She had left the two spaces because they were in the original, and the sentence needed a breath there. She had believed for thirty years that the breath was hers.

The building's radiator knocked twice and stopped.

She put the cursor between the two spaces and pressed backspace once. The words closed up, and the sentence read the same.

FOURTEEN

Untitled

10 The Neighbour

At 8:40 on a Tuesday in May, Martin typed DISCREPANCY into box 14 of a lender's form and looked up.

The woman across the street was at her sink. Yellow cardigan, hair pinned at the back, both hands in the basin. Her window sat level with his. When he stood to reach his tea he was looking at her. When she stood at her sink she was looking at him, if she looked. She never did. Except once.

Box 14 wanted the discrepancy in under forty words. The lender gave him forty-eight hours from the download. The flat in Catford had its kitchen on the wrong side of the hall: the plan said left, the flat said right. The services came up through the same slab. It was not so much a discrepancy as a mistake somebody had made in 1997 and been paid for. He wrote: Kitchen handed opposite to approved plan; services unchanged; probable mirror-draw at design stage. Thirty-one words. He saved it, closed it, and put the kettle on.

He had been in the flat eight months. It came furnished, and he had taken that for luck. One bed, £1,340 a month. The letting

agent had said furnished, as seen, and he had been grateful. He had lost the good chairs in the move and had no appetite for buying more. The table was the only horizontal surface he trusted. There was a burn on the near edge of it, where a pan had gone down without a mat. The table faced the window. The window faced Larch House, which was the colour of a wet digestive. There was a crack in his ceiling that ran out of the rose towards the window, and he had never got round to telling the landlord about it.

He drank his tea from the chipped mug, one of a set of four he had bought in IKEA in 2016 and broken two of. He had been there a month before he began watching her. If anyone had asked, he would have said he was busy.

The spreadsheet had four columns: time, light, activity, note. He told himself it was the instinct that made him good at the job: you watch a thing until its dimensions declare themselves. He kept the notes dry. Plant watered, 09:12. Bin out, Tuesday, 07:40. Jigsaw, 20:15.

By May he had seven months of her. Coffee black. A bad left shoulder: she reached for the top shelf with the other arm and held the elbow in. On Sundays she mopped, right to left. On Thursdays a man came at seven and left at twenty past eight and never took his jacket off.

On the eleventh of December she looked up while he was standing there with his mouth open. He stepped back so fast he knocked the salt over. She looked at the window for four seconds and went back to her sink. He spent the rest of that day at the table with his back to the glass, and in the evening he moved the salt to the other side.

He did jigsaws too, at his own table, once the forms were done: a thousand pieces of the lighthouse at Spurn Point, going since December, one piece of sky missing. He had lost it in January and found it in the cutlery drawer in March. He had not got round to putting it in.

Her jigsaw never got any further. In December the pieces lay in a loose ring around the border; in May they lay in the same ring, in the same order. The library book, green-spined, stayed open at the same page for four months. She washed up twice a day. He never once saw her eat. The rubber plant in her window never grew. By March he had stopped looking at it.

He knew what he was doing. There was a word for it and he did not use the word. He used the columns.

• • •

The key was in the kitchen drawer with the takeaway menus and the spare batteries: a Yale on a blue fob, a tree stamped on the fob, LARCH HOUSE in white letters. The landlord's key to somewhere else, he had decided. Furnished, as seen.

He printed the Catford plan and laid it on the table beside his own floor plan, to see how the mistake might have been made.

His kitchen was 4.62 metres wall to wall, and it was on the right of the front door as you came in. Hers was four point something, and on the left. Her boiler sat in the corner by the window; so did his. Her cupboard was beside the door; so was his. He got the laser measure out of its case and put the dot on her far wall through the glass.

4.61.

He did not sleep. In the morning he measured his own kitchen again, on his knees, with the tape, because the laser had been dropped in November and he did not entirely trust it. Then he measured the gap between the chimney breast and the window in his front room, and the gap in hers. He made a drawing with the two plans side by side and an arrow between them. The arrow was the whole of it.

Hall door, cupboard beside it, boiler, the boxed-in pipe in the corner, the radiator set low under the window. Her flat had all of it. Her flat had it reversed, exactly, as though someone had held his home up to a mirror and built what they saw.

And her ceiling had the crack. It came out of her rose and ran the other way, towards her window. It was his crack, the one he had been standing under for eight months without once having a reason to mention it to anybody.

• • •

At eleven that night he found the planning register. He had used it a hundred times for work and never once for himself.

Application 98/0412. Conversion of Wren Court and Larch House to twelve self-contained flats. Agent: Caster & Wray. Approved March 1998, with conditions, one of them about the bin store. There were two drawings attached as JPEGs. He downloaded both, opened them in Preview, flipped one, and laid it over the other.

They matched. Every wall, every door swing, every window. The two buildings had gone up as a pair, drawn once and mirrored. It was cheaper. The borough had allowed it because the street bent.

He sat back in the chair and said the word out loud.

“Twins.”

He poured a whisky and drank it standing up. A mirrored pair. A mistake made in 1997 and paid for. He had spent a week measuring a coincidence. The crack was nothing; cracks were everywhere, and the building was run up to a price in 1998. He went to bed at half past eleven and slept until nine. In the morning he did not look up from the form until twenty past, and it was the best morning he had had since October.

• • •

On the Thursday he stood at the glass with his mug and raised his right hand.

She was at the table with her back three-quarters turned, doing her jigsaw, and her left hand came up and touched her ear. The same side of the glass. The same second. Not after.

He lowered his hand. Hers went down.

He tried again at nine, with the lamp on, and got the same result, and stood with his forehead against the cold of the window until his tea went stone.

At 21:14 he opened the spreadsheet to write it down, and there was a row at the bottom that he had not written. Time: 21:14. Light: lamp. Activity: at glass, hand raised, four minutes. Note: —

The cells were the width he set them. The font was Calibri 10. He deleted the row. On the Friday there were four.

• • •

He rang the letting agent on the Monday.

“Larch House,” Bev said. “Nothing in there, love. Nobody since the nineties.”

“There’s a woman in the top flat.”

A pause, and a keyboard. “Is the flat working out for you?”

He looked up. The woman was at her sink, yellow cardigan, the light behind her.

“Fine,” he said.

“That’s the main thing,” Bev said, and rang off.

• • •

On the Wednesday he went to his sister’s in Sheffield for four days. At home, her window was the view from the sink and the sofa and the table. In Sheffield he did not look at Larch House once.

Claire had a husband on nights and a dog that would not settle. She put a plate in front of him at six and another at nine.

“How’s the flat?”

“Warm.”

“You said the window was painted shut.”

“It’s June.”

“What are you paying for it?”

“Thirteen forty.”

“That’s cheap.”

“It’s a conversion.”

She looked at him over her mug. “You’ve been in that flat since September. You’ve not had anybody round. Not once.”

“I’ve had the man about the boiler.”

“Martin.” She got up and put the kettle on and stood with her back to him. “You counted the cracks in the ceiling at Mum’s. You had a list.”

He washed up. He did it right to left, and she stood in the doorway and watched him do it, and neither of them said anything about that either.

When he came back on the Sunday the whole building was dark. Every window, hers included. He had never once seen her window dark. He put his bag down, made tea, and sat with his back to the glass on purpose, and worked until the light went.

Then he turned round.

She was at her sink in the yellow cardigan. The lamp was on. He would have sworn it had not been on a moment before.

• • •

He went over at a quarter past two in the morning, on the Tuesday after he got back, when the street was as empty as it got. A white Transit stood outside the betting shop with a wheel clamp on it and a parking notice going soft in the rain.

Larch House had a door that opened, a hall that smelled of plaster dust and cold, and no meters on the wall. Only a grey cable stapled along the skirting, up the stairs, and through the ceiling. The stairs were bare boards, painted, worn through in the middle. Number 6 had a door that was a sheet of MDF on a softwood frame, hung on two brass hinges that shone.

He stood in the doorway with his hand still on the switch.

It was his flat. It was his flat the other way round. His table, with the burn on the near edge where a pan had gone down without a mat. His chair, the seat worn through to the webbing on the left, because he sat down left leg first and always had. His mug, from a set of four he had bought in IKEA in 2016 and

broken two of, with the chip out of the rim. His books, unread. His coat on the hook.

On the table, a folder. In the folder, plans of his flat, a copy of his tenancy, and four pages of a schedule that described his days down to the minute — 08:37 kettle. 08:41 window. 08:52 sits. 09:15 stands, hand on back of chair. 03:04 kitchen, no light, four minutes. At the foot of the last page, in small even writing, subject has not left the flat since Sunday.

He turned round and looked at the window. It had a sill and a catch and a view of his own kitchen. His kitchen was lit. He could see his table and his chair and the green-shaded lamp he had bought at the market in Lewisham.

A camera stood on a tripod at the glass, pointed across. Beside it, a laser measure in a clamp, a notebook, and a biro with the end chewed.

The rubber plant was plastic. He knew before he touched it: the leaves had the flat shine of a thing that gets wiped. He put his thumb in the soil and it was foam with a skin of dust on it. The cat bowl was dry. There had never been a cat. The jigsaw was glued down, piece by piece. It was the lighthouse at Spurn Point, the same one he had on his table. The sky in the top left corner was missing a piece.

The kettle was light when he picked it up. The green book had a cover and no pages. The Thursday man's chair stood in the corner with a jacket over the back of it.

Somewhere below him a fridge started up and then stopped.

• • •

He did not turn the light on at home. He sat at the table in the dark with his hands flat, the way you sit in a hospital corridor. The fridge hummed. He opened the laptop, read the spreadsheet down to the last row, and closed it.

Furnished, as seen.

He got the piece of sky out of the kitchen drawer, where it had been since March, and turned it over once, and put it back.

Then he tried the window.

It had been painted shut since before he moved in. In February he had turned the handle and nothing had happened and he had thought, seized, landlord's job. The handle turned now. It turned beautifully, all the way, with no resistance at all. The sash did not move. It was a moulding nailed to the wall, and the paint over the nails was the same paint as the wall. The pane behind it was not glass but a sheet of acrylic, warm where his hand had been.

Across the street, the lamp came on in number 6.

There was someone standing at the window with their arms at their sides, facing him. Martin raised his hand, because there was nothing else to do with it. The figure raised its hand.

Then the red dot appeared on the wall above the kettle. It came down the cupboard fronts, unhurried, like a fly walking, and found the back of his hand, and stopped.

He kept his hand where it was. A reading took a few seconds. He waited for the number.

FIFTEEN

Untitled

1 [1] The Spare Room

At twenty past nine on the Friday, Dana let herself into 9 Cedar Rise and read the meters before she took her coat off. The removals were booked for one o'clock. British Gas wanted a reading by four.

44719. 03. She wrote the figures on the back of the inventory.

The keys had come in a plastic wallet with 9 CEDAR RISE on it in marker. A Yale, two window keys on a ring, a mortice for the back gate, and a small brass one with a paper tag. The tag said O.R. in biro.

The utility was a metre and a half wide: boiler, a tumble dryer somebody had left, and a door.

She had asked Karen from the sales office about that door. Cupboard, Karen had said.

The small brass key turned.

Not a cupboard. A room.

One point nine by two point four. She measured it with the tape from the box marked KITCHEN. Four point five six square

metres. A frosted window, high up. Lino, the same lino as the utility. It smelled of Milton and cigarettes.

The door in the far wall was half-glazed onto the back path, with a Yale and a mortice and a turn.

The heater was on, a panel heater on a bracket. The air above it was warm. It ticked like a clock with something wrong inside.

The meter sat in a grey box at waist height. Taped beside it was a label, the kind the council prints:

OCCUPANCY ROOM — 9 CEDAR RISE

MPAN 10 004 118 229

AVAILABLE AND FURNISHED

DO NOT OBSTRUCT

Under it hung a card on a loop of string, with readings in biro, each dated, each in a different hand. 04/11. 04/12. 03/13. The last was 00947, in March 2013, and the seven was crossed. Nobody had written on it since.

The little red dial was going round. It went round four times while she watched.

The chair was in the corner, facing the door. A Parker Knoll, the Sandringham, in oatmeal, the right arm gone shiny where a hand had rested.

Her mother had one. It was in her room at Northfield Lodge with a sink in the corner, and the right arm was worn in exactly the same place.

Dana turned the heater off at the switch. The red dial stopped.

Then she took six photographs, because that was what she did.

• • •

Iain came at two with the van and two lads from the depot. He had come off shift at seven and slept four hours in the car.

"What's that?" he said, in the hall.

"It was in the room."

"What room?"

"Off the utility. There's a room off the utility."

He looked at the door, then at the chair. "That's not in the particulars."

"It's on the deed. Apparently."

He put his hand on the worn arm. "Leave it. It's not doing anything."

They ate pizza off the floor with no curtains up. Iain went to sleep at half nine against the wall. Dana put a cushion under his head, went round turning the lights off, and stood in the utility with her hand on the door of the room, not opening it.

Then she carried the chair out to the front drive and left it there with a note: TIP.

She put the funding review letter on the new fridge. It said her mother's contribution would go from £148 a week to £212. There was a form. She had filled in the form in March.

Under it was the letter from Everdale Care: Northfield Lodge would close on the first of October. The word in it was decant. Dana read the first page and put it on the fridge, and by September there were four and she had stopped reading them.

In April she had signed the power of attorney in the day room on Ward 12 at the QE, with a nurse called Blessing for a witness. Nine pages. Her mother watched from the bed.

"You read all of it, don't you," Val said.

“I read the important bits.”

“That’s what I used to say.”

• • •

On Saturday she took the ring binder to the show home. Number one had a coffee machine nobody used. Karen sat at the breakfast bar with her laptop and did not get up.

Clause 14 — THE OCCUPANCY ROOM. The room shall remain available to the Council’s decant programme, vacant and furnished, separately metered, the supply in the name of the Authority.

“Clause fourteen,” Dana said.

“It’s in everyone’s,” Karen said. “All fourteen. It’s been in there since 2011.”

“There’s a chair in it.”

“There’s a chair in all of them.” Karen turned the particulars round and put her finger on a line at the foot of the second page, in eight-point type. “Occupancy Room, off utility, available and furnished. It’s why the price came down. Two eight six five instead of two nine nine.”

Dana had read that line in June, in the car park, and asked about the door anyway.

“So it’s a spare room.”

“It’s not spare.” Karen put her cup down. “Somebody’s always in it.”

“Who?”

“Nine’s void. The last one went to his daughter in Derby. You can write to legal. It takes ten working days and I’ve never known anyone win.”

Dana said, “There’s a form.”

• • •

The parcel came at twenty past six: a courier with a box of blister packs, and on the label, PETRESCU, 14 CEDAR RISE, and nobody in.

“There’s no door on the front,” the courier said. “I’ve been round twice.”

Dana went out at half eight with a torch, along the back path to the strip of unlit tarmac behind all fourteen houses.

At fourteen there was a light over a door. The same door: half-glazed, Yale and mortice. A woman in a cardigan and a tabard stood at a sink behind the glass.

She opened it four inches.

“You’re the new one at nine.”

“Dana.”

“I know. I heard the van.” She took the box. “Elena Petrescu.”

“Sorry to bring it round. There’s no door on the front.”

“There’s no door on the front of any of them.” Behind her: a kettle, a microwave on a bracket, a calendar from the church, a meter in a grey box.

And the chair. Parker Knoll, the Sandringham, oatmeal, right arm worn.

“How long have you been here?”

“Since November. Two thousand and eleven.” Elena folded her arms. “They knocked down fourteen and built fourteen, and every one of them has a room like this. They had me in before the grass was down. I used to say to the workmen, mind my step.”

“Are you all right in it?”

“It’s warm. The council does the heating. It doesn’t cost me. I’ve got the afternoon. That’s what I said to the girl. I’ll have the one with the afternoon in it.”

“Is there a list?”

“There’s always a list.”

“Am I on it?”

Elena Petrescu looked at her for a moment. “You’re the one with the house,” she said. “You’re not on the list. You’re the address on it.”

Then she shut the door.

• • •

On Sunday she drove to Northfield Lodge. It was a Victorian villa on the Lichfield Road with a flat-roofed extension, and it smelled of mashed potato and bleach.

Val’s room was three metres by three, with a shower room off it. Bed, sink in the corner, television, a Parker Knoll with the right arm gone shiny, four cards on the windowsill, a tin of Quality Street she had not opened since Christmas 2023.

She was eighty-one, she had her hair done on Thursdays, and she did not get up.

“There’s a meeting for families on Thursday,” she said. “There’s no point going. The building’s sold. They’re not going to un-sell it.” She filled in a clue. “Sonia’s been very good. She’s got a list of places.”

“Where?”

“Nuneaton. Bedworth.” She looked up. “Don’t do that face.”

“I’m not doing a face.”

“You’re doing the face you do.”

Dana sat on the end of the bed. “You could come to us. We’ve got the box room. It’s got a window.”

“And where would I put my things?”

“Wherever. We’d get a bed in.”

“A bed in a room with a desk in it and a box of your files under it.” Val shook her head. “I’m not going to be the reason you can’t shut a door.”

“Mum.”

“I’m not being proud. I’m being practical. You’ve got a mortgage and a husband on nights and a mother who can’t get up the stairs.” She picked up the crossword. “There’ll be something. There always is.”

“It’s fourteen hundred a week here,” she said later, over the tea. “I’ve seen the invoice.”

“Mum.”

“It’s not an insult. It’s arithmetic.”

“Did you get the reduction?” she said. “On the house. For the room.”

“Two eight six five.”

“Is it on its own meter?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Val said. “That’s something.”

Then she said, “They’ll decant me. That’s the word. It’s a good word. It means they pour you somewhere else.”

• • •

On Monday Dana took the morning off and went to the civic centre on Hobb’s Lane. Housing options was on the ground floor, past the toilets.

She took a ticket. 34. The screen said 19.

The man at position two was called Ade, according to his lanyard.

“I want to ask about the Occupancy Room at nine Cedar Rise.”

“Are you the tenant?”

“I’m the owner.”

“Then it’s not a tenancy. It’s a nomination.” He typed. “Room nine. It’s void.”

“It’s void now.”

“It’s void.” He looked at her. “There’s a nomination against it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s been allocated. There’s a decant date. I can print you the schedule. You’re entitled to the notice.”

The printer under the desk made a noise like a bag of crisps. He handed her three pages.

The first was a header: CALDWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL — HOUSING OPTIONS — DECANT SCHEDULE — CEDAR RISE (S106), dated the eighth of September. Under it, a table: fourteen rows, plot, tenant, date, source.

One, a Mr. Oyelaran. Two, a Mrs. K. Novak. Three, void.

Row nine said:

DUNNE, VALERIE J. — 01/10 — NORTHFIELD LODGE (CLOSURE) — CONSENT: PoA — ATT. D. HOLLIS.

Dana read it twice. Nine was her house. The date was Thursday.

“Row nine.”

“Care home closure, priority decant, family in the district. Panel approved it in July.”

“The consent.”

“Power of attorney. We’ve got it scanned. There’s a signed schedule. We wouldn’t have proceeded without it.”

“Can I see it?”

He turned the screen round. A scan of a page she had signed in April in a day room, with a nurse called Blessing at the end of the bed. The top said SCHEDULE 4 — DELEGATED FUNCTIONS. The signature was hers, and the pen had skipped on the upstroke of the H.

“That isn’t the power of attorney.”

“That’s the schedule. It’s part of it.”

“That’s not what I signed.”

“It’s what’s on the file.” He turned the screen back. “If you want to withdraw consent you write to the legal team. There’s a form. Ten working days.”

“Ten working days.”

He looked at his screen.

“There’s a sheet in the file,” she said. “From 2013. The handover.”

“There’s an inspection. They did all fourteen in 2013.”

He printed that too. One page, a carbon with a stamp: fourteen rooms, a tick against each, initials beside each tick, and a comments box in biro.

No. 9 — 1.9 x 2.4 — frost stat ok — aspect good — meter 00947 — V.D.

The D had the loop in it that Dana had seen on birthday cards since she was six. The seven was crossed the same way as the seven on the card.

Behind her the screen called 35.

• • •

She sat in the car park for forty minutes with the engine off. Then she drove home and read the power of attorney past the third paragraph.

Schedule 4 was at the back. Fourteen lines. She had initialled every one of them in the margin, because the nurse had said, just here and here. The important thing had been to get it done before her mother got tired.

Iain came down at half ten before his shift. He had taken Val the Sunday paper every week for six years. He had never been past the front desk.

"She signed it?" he said.

"I signed it."

"But she knew."

"I don't know what she knew."

He ate standing up. "She's got her own door. She's been in a room with a sink for six years." He put the fork down. "Are you going to stop it?"

Thursday. Northfield Lodge would be empty by noon.

"No," she said.

"Right." He picked the fork up. "I'll get the boxes in."

• • •

The van came at ten on the first of October. A white Transit with the council crest on the side. The man was called Wayne, he had a mate, and they carried four boxes, a television, a bag of medication, and a tin of Quality Street.

They did not carry a chair. Wayne fetched it from the front drive, where it had stood under a note for six days. He wiped the seat with his glove and put it in the corner facing the door to the back path.

"It goes in the room," he said. "It's on the sheet." He put the heater on at the switch. "Twelve degrees. It has to be kept at twelve."

Dana had taken the day off. She stood at the back gate and held it open. The sky was low and white and the air tasted of nothing.

Val came round the corner of the house on her stick, in her coat, with her handbag on her arm. She stopped at the top of the path and looked at the door.

"Mind my step," she said.

Wayne fitted a key safe, showed Dana the number, and gave her a leaflet with a smiling woman on the front. Then the van went.

Dana made tea in the utility and carried it through.

Val was in the chair, her hands on the worn arms. She looked round the room. The frosted window, the meter, the hook on the back door where her coat was hanging, the door with its own key in the lock.

She looked at the meter. "That's not on my bill," she said.

"No," Dana said.

"I used to check that."

SIXTEEN

Untitled

1[2] Half a House

I signed for my mother's house on the fourth of April, at ten past nine in the morning, at a table in Hocking & Rowe on Hall Gate. My hands still smelled of perm solution and the van was on a double yellow outside. Eleven places. Denise put a tab on each one with her thumbnail, and I signed where the thumbnail was.

The house was 14 Salter's Lane, Balby, pebbledashed in 1994 and not since. It was a semi, so it was half a house, which is a thing you can say about a building and not about an inheritance. My mother had it from 1976. Now it was Colin's and mine in equal shares, to be sold as a whole and the money divided.

Nobody buys half a house. Mr. Hocking told me that in April and again in February, both times in the voice of a man reading out the weather.

The will took ten minutes. He read it with his glasses off, which made him look like a man at a wedding. He was seventy-four. He had done my mother's will in 2019, in an office with a fax machine in it.

"I, Iris Pascoe, of 14 Salter's Lane, Balby, in the City of Doncaster, being of sound mind, declare this to be my last will and testament. The Property to my children in equal shares, to be sold as a whole. I direct that they shall reside there together until the first anniversary of my death, and that the Property shall not be sold before that date."

I said, "A year."

"A year."

"Because?"

"Because she wrote it." He turned the page over. "The residing is a hope. The sale is a direction. There's a letter as well."

One page, biro, capitals, the way she wrote a shopping list. Let them have the year. They'll need it. Sell it in the spring if they can, when the garden's out.

"It's a letter of wishes," Hocking said. "It isn't binding."

The last of the eleven was an estate notification for Ashcroft Equity Release. Four pages. "They want it back inside fourteen days."

"Ashcroft," I said.

"Your mother's plan."

Denise turned the pages for me and I initialled the foot of all four.

My mother had a plan the way she had a boiler and a roof and neighbours. It had been running since 2016 without me. In 2018 there was twenty-two thousand pounds out of it for Colin's business. I did the books for that on Sunday mornings. I never asked what it was secured on. The business lasted fourteen months. I had been doing her hair on Thursdays and paying thirty-eight

pounds a week on top of the council rate for four years. I thought that was the shape of it.

In the car park Colin rolled a cigarette on the bonnet of his Transit. “So we sit on it a year.”

“We live in it,” I said.

“Same thing,” he said.

• • •

Mam died on the fourteenth of March, at Ferndale, at ten past four in the morning. Two weeks before, she said, “There’s nothing in it, love.” I thought she meant the furniture and the nets and the good cups.

Colin had been in the house since January. He said the place needed a presence while she was in the home. He had the gutters cleared in February. He started on a camp bed in the front room. The week she died he moved into Mam’s room. I didn’t say anything about it. He had done the hospital runs and the coffin and the flowers, and I had done the hair.

I took the back bedroom. It was mine until 1992 and a store room since. There was a single bed, a lamp with no shade, and a strip of border at the picture rail with rabbits on it. I had chosen the rabbits when I was six. I did not remember choosing them.

The first night I lay there and listened to the house. The cistern, the gutter at the corner, the ash tree at the bottom of the garden. Then Colin’s radio through the wall. Radio 2, which Mam had had on in the kitchen from half past six every morning of my life.

• • •

The first Ashcroft statement came on the twentieth of April, addressed to The Estate of Mrs I. Pascoe, in a window envelope. The number showed through the window. £165,273.16.

I put it on the dresser for Colin. Colin did the paper. He had done it since Dad died, because he was the eldest, and because he liked it, and because when he did the paper I didn't have to.

He opened it standing up and read it and said, "It's the plan," and put it in the drawer. After that they came every month and he opened them at the dresser and I never read one. Once, in July, I took one out of the drawer and held it and put it back. The number in the window was bigger by then. I could see that much without opening it.

I knew there was no mortgage. Dad paid it off in 1991 with the redundancy from the pit, and there was a party in the back garden, and I remembered the party. So the number on the envelope was something else, and I went to work.

In the kitchen there was a calendar from the home, 2025, with a lifeboat on it. Mam had had it on the wall in her room at Ferndale and Colin brought it home with her things. In the middle of April I wrote SOLD 14/3/26 on a Post-it and stuck it under the clock. Colin looked at it and said nothing. It stayed there all year.

• • •

My work was twelve pounds a set and nine a trim. Thirty-one regulars and the home on Thursdays. I did Mrs. Ellery on Warmsworth Road at nine on a Monday with the gas fire on and the dog shut in the kitchen.

The van was a 2011 Berlingo with a hundred and eighteen thousand miles on it and a clutch that had been going since

February. The garage on Bawtry Road quoted six hundred and forty plus VAT. I kept the quote in the glovebox with the AA card and took it out most weeks and put it back.

The funeral was at the end of March. I drove three of my mother's sisters to the crematorium in it and the clutch slipped all the way up Armthorpe Lane. Auntie Val said it was the cable and I said it was the clutch, and she said, "It's always the cable." It was not the cable.

The summer was hot and the house was cold. Colin took the tiles off the wall behind the bath to look at the pipes and got as far as the pipes. The tiles went in the wheelie bin. The wall stayed bare, grey plaster and rows of old adhesive. We showered at the leisure centre on Thursdays and Sundays until November, which is a thing I have not told anybody.

Mr. Thacker at sixteen leaned on the fence in July and said, "Your dad built that garage with no footings. It's sat on the path."

"I know," I said.

"It'll come down on its own," he said, and went in for his tea.

• • •

Ferndale was on the ring road with a hanging basket by the door and a keypad I was never given the number for. I rang the bell, somebody buzzed me, and I signed the book.

The board in the hall said ARMCHAIR EXERCISE 10.30 and HOLY COMMUNION 2.00 THURS, and somebody had written Bingo on a piece of paper and stuck it over the top of the holy communion.

Mrs. Batty was in the chair by the window with her head back. I put the cape on her and wet her hair with the spray.

"Is it Thursday?"

"It's Thursday, Joan."

"I don't like Thursdays."

"You never did," I said, and she laughed.

I did her set and her blue rinse and put her under the dryer. While she was under I went down the corridor to 14. There was a name on the door in a plastic slot, DOREEN HALL. A cardigan on the back of a chair. A photograph of somebody's grandchildren on the windowsill. The bed had a green blanket on it. The smell was the smell it had been in March: Dettol and mashed potato and something like a school.

I stood there for a minute and went back and combed Mrs. Batty out.

"Your mam said you'd have the house off her."

"We're selling it in the spring."

"She said that." Mrs. Batty nodded at the mirror. "She said, 'They'll have a few pound out of it.'"

"They will," I said.

• • •

Mr. Ghosh wrote in September. He was selling the chip shop and the flat above it with the shop, and he was sorry, and the letter had a Section 21 in it folded in three with the rent book. Possession by the thirtieth of November.

I had kept the flat on because the year was only a year. I could have gone to the council and been a priority for something. Or I could have found another flat at seven hundred a month and paid for it out of twelve pounds a set. I handed the keys back on the ninth of November and moved everything I owned into the

front room at Salter's Lane, and it looked like a shop that had closed.

The council wrote in October about the single-person discount, because there had been two names at the address since January. I rang them and said there were two adults. The girl said that was a change of circumstances and it would be backdated. It was. Two hundred and twelve pounds, out of my account the same week as the boiler.

The boiler went on the eleventh of November with a noise like a train. The man from British Gas put his hand on the casing the way you would put your hand on a cow and said, "It's a 1992 Ideal Mexico, love. It's had a good innings."

The new one was three thousand nine hundred fitted, on a card at nought per cent for twenty-four months, and the guarantee went in my name. It came as a PDF and I printed it at the library and put it in the drawer with the takeaway menus.

They moved Mrs. Batty to the other corridor in November. Same name in a plastic slot. Her hair had been cut. Somebody had cut it.

"Who cut your hair, Joan?"

"The girl." She looked at the window. "They'll not let me have it long."

"I'll speak to them," I said.

At Christmas Colin brought a bottle of Bell's in from the van and we had it in the front room with the gas fire on and the television I had brought from the flat. He said, "You know I'd have said if there was anything."

I said, "I know."

We watched the ten o'clock news. He was asleep by the weather.

• • •

I rang Ashcroft on the twenty-second of January. The girl asked for the plan number and I read it off the last statement, and she said she could only discuss the plan with the executor. I said I was the executor. She said she would need that in writing and she would put a form in the post.

The form came on the twenty-sixth. It asked for a certified copy of the grant, eleven pounds from the registry in Leeds, and a cheque. It said they would respond within ten working days of receiving it. I put it in the drawer with the guarantee and the takeaway menus. I have looked at it since. It is still blank.

I had two thousand eight hundred pounds in the Halifax in April. By the middle of January I had three hundred and forty, and I know because I wrote it on the back of the statement, the way Mam did.

Dolan's card came through the door on a Tuesday in February. N. Dolan, Premier Property Services, on behalf of Ashcroft Equity Release. On the back, in biro: Pre-marketing inspection. No need to be in.

He came on the Thursday, which was the day I did the home, so I was in. He was about forty, in a Berghaus fleece, and he called me Julie from the doorstep, and he had a clipboard and a laser measure and a phone that took photographs.

"Plan's ten years old," he said. "It matures on the fourteenth of March."

"We can't sell before the fourteenth of March," I said.

He stopped writing. “No,” he said. “That’s the difficulty.”

“We were going to sell in the spring.”

“Spring’s the fourteenth, then.” He looked at the window. “After that it’s Ashcroft’s to market. I do the marketing.”

“And before that?”

“Before that it’s yours,” he said. “But you can’t.”

“Mum wanted us to live in it,” I said.

“That’s between you and your mum,” he said.

He measured the front room and the back bedroom, and in the bathroom he stood and looked at the bare wall for a while and wrote something down. Then he said, “Is the boiler new?”

“November.”

“Have you got the guarantee?”

“It’s in my name.”

He wrote that down too. He said he would book the assessor for the energy certificate. He did. It came back F because of the windows, and I paid for it myself, because the estate had nothing in it yet. Then he said, “There’s no rush,” and left a Property Information Questionnaire with eleven pages and a prepaid envelope.

• • •

I went to Hocking on the Tuesday after that, because I had one question, and the question was, can we sell it now. He had the file out on the desk before I sat down.

“Not before the fourteenth of March,” he said.

“And after?”

“After, Ashcroft instruct the sale. Their costs come off the account.”

"Whose account?"

"The estate's."

"There's nothing in the estate."

"There's the house," he said.

"After Ashcroft."

"Nobody buys half a house," he said. "You're the executrix. It's your file."

I asked for a copy. Denise brought it in a cardboard wallet with an elastic band round it.

I read it in the van outside the optician's.

Page nine was an attendance note in Hocking's handwriting, dated the fourth of April. J. Pascoe and C. Pascoe. Will read. J.P. to reception to sign. Plan position explained to C.P. Redemption £165,273.16 at date of death, increasing approx. £855 pcm. Property not to be sold before 14.3.26. C.P. asked that the position not be raised with J.P. for the present.

Behind it, the copy of the Ashcroft form I had signed. Page two had the figures on it, the redemption and the early repayment charge. My initials were at the foot of the page, J.P. in blue biro, right under the number.

I sat with the engine off. A man came out of the optician's, looked at the van, and went back in.

• • •

I drove home. Colin had the tap apart on the draining board and the little light on his forehead.

"There's a note in the file," I said. "From Mr. Hocking. About a conversation you had on the fourth of April."

He put the spanner down.

“About Ashcroft,” I said. “About a hundred and sixty-five thousand pounds.”

“I was going to tell you.”

“When?”

He sat back against the cupboard. “There’s nothing in it, Julie.”

“I put a boiler in it.”

“You’d have had to. It was November.”

“You knew in April.”

He looked at the tap. “You signed it too. Page two. I saw your initials.”

“I know what I signed.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Put the tap back together,” I said.

He went out to the van and sat in it with the engine running for ten minutes, and then came back in and went to bed. In the morning the tap was back together.

• • •

I got the tin out. The Quality Street tin, the one Mam kept the receipts in. I had kept mine in it since April. The boiler, the paint, the skip, the EPC, the locksmith when I lost the key, the drain man when the gully blocked, the fence panel that came out in the gales. Six thousand four hundred and twelve pounds. I had added it up in January, sitting on the stairs, and I did not add it up again.

• • •

The board went up on the sixteenth of March, two days after the anniversary. It said FOR SALE for a fortnight and then it said

SOLD.

The girl at the first viewing opened the airing cupboard. “Is this the only one?”

“Yes.”

“It’s got good light.”

“It’s south.”

“Sorry for your loss.”

“It’s fine.”

The photographs went on the internet on the twenty-third of March. The Post-it was still under the clock in the kitchen.

The house went for a hundred and seventy-one thousand pounds. The redemption figure on the day of completion was a hundred and seventy-six thousand five hundred and eighty-eight pounds and forty pence. Ashcroft wrote off the difference under the terms of the plan, which they are entitled to do. The completion statement came to me because I was the executrix. The net figure on it was £0.00. There was a separate charge of two hundred and forty pounds for the agent’s key. I paid it.

Mr. Thacker’s half went for two hundred and forty thousand, to a couple from Leeds, because it had a new bathroom.

I moved into a room at Pauline’s on Florence Avenue, a hundred and forty a week, cash. I do Mrs. Ellery on the Monday with the gas fire on. The clutch went on Bawtry Road in May, on the way back from Mrs. Ellery’s, and I drove the last mile in first.

Colin put a card through the door. It had a robin on it, and his name inside, and nothing else. It’s in the tin with the receipts.

SEVENTEEN

Untitled

13 Salt

At twenty past eight the cloche came off and Ruth had her fork in the crab before the waiter had finished talking.

The lie came four seconds behind: a struck match at the back of her tongue, cold metal, a mouth wiped out with a cloth.

She reached for the salt and put two fingers of it over the crab, then took another forkful.

"Landed at Burnmouth this morning," the waiter said. "Picked by hand. The three green dots are sorrel. The brown butter is brown butter."

The Turnstone had a waiting list to April and a view of a wall.

It was a good crab. Sweet, cold, cooked by somebody who knew the job. The lie was not a large one. It faded the way a match does and left the feeling of having been handled. That crab had come out of a freezer in a unit off the ring road. The chef knew it. The menu knew it. Now she did too.

She took out her notebook and drew a small circle in the margin with a dot in the centre. Her mark for a place she meant to finish.

“How is everything?”

“Very good.”

People never believed it of her. She did not enjoy taking a kitchen apart. She enjoyed the food. She had a memory that went back to her fourth birthday and a spoon of tinned peach.

Rooke came out at the end, the way they did in places that were doing well. Twenty-eight, bearded, a burn on the inside of his forearm the shape of a comma. He put out his hand.

“Rooke. I hope it’s been all right.”

“It’s been very good.”

“The crab’s the thing I’m proudest of.”

“It’s a lovely crab.”

He waited for a sentence he could put on the wall, or for silence.

“Where do you get it?”

“Burnmouth. There’s a man there, the boats come in at four. I’ve got the pick of it.”

She could taste a lie in a scallop from the other side of a table. She could not tell when a man lied to her face. The taste was in the mouth. It had never been anywhere else.

“It’s very good,” she said, and he went away happy.

She wrote the review on the 22 bus with her thumb.

The crab is frozen and the menu says otherwise. There is a way of doing these things, and Rooke does not know it yet.

The Turnstone closed in March. By then she had finished nine places in two years. There were chefs in the city who kept her photograph behind the pass the way other kitchens kept a fire blanket.

Rooke's partner put up a crowdfunder for the staff. Six of them in whites outside the shut door, the boy who did the veg holding a box of knives. Thirty-one thousand pounds in the end.

Ruth read the page twice. She had given to the first one, in her first year. She did not give to this one.

• • •

"Nine," Mairi said.

They were in the features pod on Holyrood Road on a Tuesday, rain coming off the Forth against the window.

"Eight. The one in March is trading again."

"That's still nine."

"The lawyers want the method in writing. Not the verdict. The method."

"Tell them it's sourcing."

"Ruth."

"I look at what's on the plate and I look at what's on the menu. That's the method."

Mairi pushed half her sandwich across the desk. Ruth ate it. The packet said ham. It wasn't ham. She said nothing, and Mairi said, "You're the only person who never asks what's in it."

"The desk wants a list for the Christmas issue," Mairi said. "Twenty tables you can trust."

"There aren't twenty."

"Find twenty."

She found six. By January two of them had changed their fish supplier.

• • •

Cullen came to her in the second year of the reviews. Detective sergeant, good shoes. He had not believed it until he watched her do it at a charity dinner: a spoon of hollandaise, a pause, a face.

"I'm not a witness," she said.

"You're a palate. I've got a pie."

"Why me?"

"Because you're faster than a lab and I've got a deadline."

A woman had died in her bed on the north side of the city. The husband, Slade, said he had cooked her dinner — a fish pie, from scratch — and that she had gone up early and not come down. The post-mortem said something about her heart. He had a girlfriend and a story.

Cullen brought the pie in a plastic tub. Ruth tasted it in the canteen with him watching. It was a good pie, made by a man who knew how to make a fish pie, in that kitchen, on that night. And there was a lie in it: small, at the back of the tongue, a match struck and shaken out.

"He made it," she said. "He's lying about something."

"About what?"

"I don't know. That isn't how it works."

"Then what do I put in front of a jury?"

"The pie."

They used it. He was charged. Then the girlfriend came forward and said he had been with her that night, and the lie had been about that — about being home, about nothing that mattered. The woman had died of something the pathologist had missed. The case went away. Slade did not get his job back, or his house.

Ruth kept a slice of the pie in the freezer. Six weeks later she microwaved it and ate it standing at her counter, and it was the same: a small struck match at the back of the tongue.

A lie in a pie is not a confession. It tells you something is being hidden and never what, or why, or for whom. It was a key with no teeth.

She stopped taking Cullen's calls.

• • •

She met Ewan at a wedding in a marquee outside Haddington. He was fifty, a joiner, and he had made the bride and groom a chest out of oak with a lid that closed on a breath. He had a bad heart — a murmur since he was a boy, a valve doing its best — and he cooked, which was unusual, and he cooked well.

At two in the morning the marquee was still going and the house was full of borrowed chairs. She had eaten nothing all night because the man who catered it was lying about his lamb. Ewan put a plate of scrambled eggs in front of her on the kitchen table, with a fork and a piece of toast.

"Don't tell me what's wrong with it," he said. "Just eat it."

She reached for the salt. Then she ate.

Butter and eggs and the pan and a little salt, and that was all. No match. Nothing but eggs.

She put the fork down. She had not had a clean meal from another person's hands since she was nine years old. That was the year she told her mother the soup was lying, and her mother said, Don't be silly, and the soup tasted of it twice over.

"What?" he said.

“Nothing. It’s just eggs.”

They married at the register office on a Tuesday, two witnesses, a lunch at a place she had not reviewed. He built her a table out of oak for the kitchen in Musselburgh and would not let her put a hot pan on it without a trivet.

He cooked on Sundays. She cooked the rest of the week. His food came to the table clean every time — the lamb, the bread, the soup he made out of the Sunday bones. She ate all of it. She put on a stone. She slept.

Her own food she never sat down to. She picked at it standing up, had toast at the counter, and never once tasted it off his plate. There was no reason to. She knew what she had put in it.

The salt came from a shop in North Berwick that sold it out of a barrel, grey and coarse. She kept it in an enamel tin with a mustard spoon in it, and put it on everything she ate before she tasted it.

The first time she cooked for him she salted his potatoes before he sat down. “You’ll be the death of me,” he said, and laughed. After that it was what he said when he was happy: about her driving, about her reviews, about the way she stacked the dishwasher. He said it a hundred times.

She stopped eating at other people’s tables. Her sister’s food. Her friends’. The lasagne the woman two doors down brought round when Ewan had his first spell in. All of it had the match in it, some of it so strong she had to hold the edge of the table. It was the people who loved her who lied most, and the lies were small and constant, the way weather is. I’m fine. I don’t mind. You’re not difficult.

She learned to say she had eaten. She learned to move food around a plate. She became the woman who did not eat, which people found rude, and then sad, and then stopped noticing.

Her mother rang on Sundays. Eighty-one, cooked for forty years, and every meal she had made had the match in it somewhere. Ruth had stopped eating at that table at twenty-two and her mother had never asked why. Her mother was still keeping it.

He watched her salt his dinner one night, at the oak table. "You salt it before you taste it."

"Do I."

"Every time. Even the soup I made."

She put the spoon down. "Habit."

"It's a good habit," he said. "It means you know what you like."

In the ninth year he said, at the stove, without turning round, "I've never lied to you. You know that, don't you."

"I know," she said.

She did not know. She had a mouth that could taste a lie in soup from a kitchen on the other side of the city. She had lived with this man for nine years. She could not know.

Clean meant only that there was no lie in the food. It did not mean there was love in it. A man who did not care enough to lie to her would also cook clean.

That winter his heart got worse the way hearts do. He was breathless on the stairs. His ankles were thick at the end of the day and he stopped taking his boots off in the hall so she would not see them. He said he was fine. He kept cooking on Sundays

until he could not stand for an hour, and then he sat on a chair at the stove and did it anyway.

The GP said no salt. The GP said it twice.

She salted his food. Two fingers from the tin, a finish, the last thing a cook does before the plate goes down. The spring after his first spell in she began to use more. Three fingers. Then the mustard spoon, tapped flat, and the soup going grey at the rim.

He ate it. He said, "That's the stuff."

She watched his ankles.

One night she took his fork out of his hand and ate a mouthful off his plate.

He watched her.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing."

It was clean. Beef and salt and the pan. She had made it. She knew what she had put in it.

She had been asking him a question for nine years. The salt was the question. He had eaten every plate and never once said it was too much.

The heart clinic gave him a sheet to fill in: a week of meals and a box for salt added at the table. She filled it in on the Sunday, at the oak table, in her own hand. Porridge, no salt. Soup, no salt. A little salt on the potatoes.

He signed it without reading it, the way he signed everything.

The district nurse came on the Thursday and went through it with them. "Is he getting much salt at home?"

"Very little," Ruth said.

"Good. It's the ankles."

“The ankles.”

Nobody tastes a form.

The doctor said his sodium was 159. “Is he on a low-salt diet?”

“Yes,” Ruth said.

“Then someone is giving him salt.”

The doctor looked at her the way she looked at a plate. Ruth thought about the tin in the cupboard, and the spoon in it, and how much was left.

• • •

He was in the Western for eleven days. On the ninth he said, “You’ll be the death of me,” and laughed, and then coughed, and she held the cup for him. She had heard him say it a hundred times.

“I know,” she said.

He laughed again, at her face, and it turned into the cough.

On the last Thursday she went down to the canteen at half past three because she had not eaten all day. There was a baked potato in foil, a paper cup of tea, a sachet of salt. The potato had been made by a man in a kitchen she had never seen, who did not know her name, who had no reason to lie to her. She opened the sachet and salted it and ate all of it, skin and all, and it was clean. Nothing in it but potato and butter and salt.

She was still hungry. She thought about the tin at home, and how much was left, and that she would have to buy more.

When she went back up, the bed was empty and a nurse was folding the sheet.

• • •

Her mother rang on the Sunday. Ruth said she was fine. Her mother said that was good, and talked about the weather for eleven minutes, and rang off.

On the Monday she made soup out of a chicken and the last of the carrots. She salted it at the stove, two fingers from the tin, and then she tasted it.

It was clean. Chicken and carrot and salt, and nothing else in it at all.

She ate a bowl standing at the counter, and then a second one. She carried the tin down from the cupboard and salted the second bowl before she tasted it.

The tin was getting low. She would have to buy more.

EIGHTEEN

Untitled

14 The Keys

The Tuesday after Eileen Marsh was found I let myself into flat 4 at ten past nine with a two-pint bottle of semi-skimmed in a carrier bag. The key went in to the shoulder and I had to lift the door to make it turn. The flat was warm. The heating had come on at seven and gone off at nine, the way I had set it.

There was already a pint in the fridge, three-quarters full.

A flat kept warm will turn milk in four days. I poured it away and ran the tap after it, because you don't leave milk in the trap in a first-floor flat. It sits in the U-bend and you smell it in August. I put the bottle in the bin and the bag in the van.

She had died on the fourteenth of November, in the bathroom, and her daughter found her on the Saturday. I had been in on the Wednesday before, about the washing machine, which was fine. The calendar in the kitchen still said November. The fourteenth had dentist, 3.40 in biro. The clock over the gas fire was five minutes fast, the way it had been since I'd known her. Her cardigan was over the arm of the chair.

I did the plants with a jug. There were four. A Christmas cactus on the windowsill, a spider plant on top of the cabinet, an aspidistra by the telly, and a cyclamen that had no business being alive in that flat and was.

The key was on a screwgate carabiner, blue anodised, clipped to my belt loop. Eleven keys. Six flats, the bin store, the meter cupboard, the front door, the back gate, the padlock on the roof hatch. Each had a brass disc punched with a number by the man at Bowers on the High Road, and the discs had gone green at the edges where my thumb went. Number four was the one I used every week.

Bramble Court is six flats in a 1930s block with a flat roof and a front door that swells in the wet. I own it. I do the maintenance myself because a plumber wants ninety pounds before he opens his van. At sixty-two I can still get up a ladder if I take it slowly and don't have to talk to anyone at the top. I have the gas ticket and the tools. I have the book, a hardback Collins with red and blue lines, kept since 2003. At the end of the year I add the columns up and carry the totals forward. When a tenant loses a key I charge fifteen pounds to have another cut, and I don't apologise for it.

I fit the locks as well. Bowers sells one Yale, thirteen pounds. The locks come out of the same box. I have fitted one to our own front door and one to the door of flat 4. The man cuts spares while you wait, four fifty each, off a blank he keeps in a drawer. You don't read a key. You feel it.

At the back of the book I had added a column headed OWN, for the things I wasn't going to ask anybody for.

4 — milk, 2pt — 1.15 — own

• • •

Her daughter came on the Thursday with a husband called Glynn and a long-wheelbase van, and took the photographs, the jewellery box, the telly and the good china. They left the furniture, the beds, the clothes, the cabinet of plates, the barometer in the hall, and the shoes at the bottom of the wardrobe with the tissues still in the toes. Glynn carried the telly down on his own and had to stop twice on the stairs.

Karen stood in the kitchen with me while he did it. She was fifty-one and drove a minibus for a school, and she had her mother's hands, which she kept looking at.

"You've been in," she said.

"I put some milk in."

She looked at the fridge, and then at the calendar.

"Keep doing that," she said. "Just till probate. She'd have hated strangers in here."

"I'm the landlord."

"You know what I mean."

She wrote her number on the back of the funeral card, a lily and a line from the twenty-third psalm, and left it on the draining board. I put it in the book, where it stayed. Then she asked what the rent was, and I told her, and she said, "I'll pay it. I don't want it let. Not yet."

She didn't sit down the whole time she was in the flat. On the way out she stopped at the chair and put her hand on the back of it, and then took it off.

The first payment came on the fourth of December from an account in two names, E. Marsh and K. Marsh, reference 4 FLAT.

After that it came every month. Probate was mentioned twice more, both times on the phone, and then it wasn't.

I didn't raise the rent in 2020. In 2021 I put it up twenty-five pounds like the others, and she paid it without a word.

• • •

The book has a page for each flat. Flat 4's page has more on it than the others and less of it is money.

4 — boiler service — nil, own

4 — smoke alarm battery — 3.99 — own

4 — milk, 2pt — 1.29 — own

4 — post — box in hall cupboard — own

The post took the time. It came every day. She was on every list there is: the over-sixties club, the seed catalogue, the British Legion, a charity that sent a pen twice a year, the hospital, the council, a cousin in Cork. I picked it up off the mat with the rest of the hall's post and put it in a wine box in the cupboard. When the wine box was full I got another one from the off-licence. I never opened one. Not the hospital ones, not the ones with a card window.

2020 was quiet. Nobody viewed anything that year. A flat on the first floor with a fridge running and a clock going was no more work than a flat with the water off. I went in Tuesdays and again on Fridays for the post. In 2022 I put the rent up to £940 and she paid it. In 2024, £985. The milk went to £1.45.

Mr. Sandhu started keeping the two-pint bottles in for me. The dairy had stopped doing pints and he didn't want me in there every other day.

"For your mother?" he said, the first time.

“It’s for a flat.”

He nodded as if that were a thing people said. After that he said, “Two, yes?” and I said, “Two.”

• • •

Bev asked in the January. We were watching the news and she said, “You were up at the block again.”

“Flat 2’s boiler.”

“Flat 2’s boiler was Tuesday.”

“Flat 4’s got a stopcock.”

“Flat 4’s got a dead woman in it.”

“She’s not in it.”

She looked at the television. Bev leaves a thing where it is. She keeps the household accounts in a brown envelope and knows what everything costs to the pound. There is a bungalow near the sea in her saved searches, two bedrooms and a garage, and the plan was to sell the block in the spring of 2026 and go. The block is the pension. There isn’t another one.

In 2022 I got a price for the roof, because the felt was at the end of its life and I could see it from the top of the ladder. Thirteen thousand six hundred. I started putting three hundred a month into a separate account. By the spring of 2025 there was £7,200 in it. It was the most money I had ever had in one place that wasn’t a mortgage.

The other five: Mr. Danby in flat 1, eighty-six, whose son pays. Natalie and Dean in flat 2 with a baby. Piotr in flat 3, a driver, never there. Ruth in flat 5, a nurse. Aisha in flat 6, on her own.

• • •

Karen rang on the eleventh of March 2025. I was under the sink in flat 2 with the trap in my hand.

"Terry. It's Karen. Eileen's Karen."

"I know."

There was a noise on the line, a car going past or a kettle.

"The account's dry," she said. "There's nothing in it. I've been paying it out of hers, and now it's gone, and Glynn's been through it with me, and there's nothing."

"Right."

"I can't do it any more. I'm sorry. You've been good."

"Right."

"Have you still got the milk in there?"

"It's in date."

She said, "God." Then she said she'd come up in the spring and clear it, and asked me to keep the key, and I said I would. She hadn't asked what the rent was. She hadn't asked what she owed me for six years of a fridge.

I paid April out of the block account, to keep the books straight. The rent went to £1,050 in April, same as the others. The standing order had failed and the page would be wrong. If I put the money in from the other side the page would be right. I could sort it out when she rang back. The block account is five rents and a mortgage. I paid flat 4 out of the five, and I wrote it in the book the way it had always been written.

4 — rent — E. Marsh — 1,050 — 4/4

In May I wrote the same thing. In June I wrote it and didn't think about it at all.

One Tuesday in July I made a cup of tea in flat 4 and drank it standing at the kitchen table, and then I sat down. I was there forty minutes. I read the back of a cereal box. Nothing happened.

I didn't do it again for a month. Then I did it every Tuesday. The tea was her tea, in her pot, and I put milk in it out of the fridge, and I bought another two pints on the way home.

In September I moved the newspaper off the chair and sat in it.

• • •

The roof went the same month, over flat 6. Aisha sent me a photograph of her bedroom ceiling with a brown map on it the size of a dinner plate. I went up. The felt had gone at the parapet, where it always goes. I brushed it and banded it with Acrypol out of a tub, sixty-eight pounds, and told her it would hold.

It didn't hold. In October it came through again in the same place, and this time onto the bed. She said she had been on the list for a place of her own for two years and this had made her mind up. She gave me two months and she was gone by the first of December. The flat needed the roof doing before anyone else could go in it.

The price of the roof was £13,600. In March there had been £7,200 in the roof account. In December there was £2,900, and the book said nothing about it.

I took the funeral card out of the book and rang the number. A woman's voice said the number was not recognised. I wrote to the address I had for Hemel, which was on the probate letter that never went anywhere, and it came back with a sticker on it. I put the sticker in the book. There was nobody to give the flat back to.

• • •

Before Christmas a letter came to flat 4 addressed to The Occupier. It was the council, about the empty homes premium. They wanted to know whether the property was occupied, and if so by whom. There was a box for the tenant's name and a box for the landlord to sign.

I opened it at the table with the milk in front of me. It is the only piece of her post I have opened in six years.

An empty flat is three times the council tax. It was not empty.

I wrote E. Marsh in the box. I ticked occupied. I signed it T. Whelan, landlord, and posted it, and I have not heard anything since.

In the book, that month, the line reads:

4 — rent — 1,050 — own

• • •

Bev did the sums on the back of a garage invoice in the first week of December and put it in front of me. Five rents in one column, the mortgage and the insurance and the loan and the water in the other, and a ring round the difference.

"There's two hundred and eighty pounds in that account," she said. "And the mortgage goes out on Friday."

"It's a timing thing."

"It's not a timing thing."

I said nothing. She folded the invoice and put it back in the envelope and said nothing about Bexhill.

On the Sunday before Christmas I went in to wind the clock. The flat was warm. The milk in the fridge was two days old and in date. The calendar still said November. The fourteenth still said

dentist, 3.40. I dusted it. I set the clock five minutes fast. I sat in the chair until it was dark.

• • •

The Yale on flat 4 had been stiff since the summer, and you had to lift the door to make it catch. Ours was the same. I bought a new one at Bowers and fitted it to flat 4 in an hour. Then I took the key that came with it back down and had three cut, four fifty each, off the same blank. The new keys were bright and had no discs on them. I kept meaning to punch them.

One went on the hook in the van with the others. One went in an envelope for Karen with a note: New lock fitted, flat 4. T. Whelan. It is under the seat in the van, not posted. The third I put on my own ring, with the house and the van and my mother's back door, and I have not taken it off.

The house key is a Yale from Bowers.

• • •

I came home at half six with the shopping and it was dark under the porch. The house key went in to the shoulder and would not turn. I tried it the other way, and then I stood back and looked at my own door. I got in with the new one.

In the hall I took the ring out and turned the two of them over. Same blank. Same cut.

From the kitchen she said, "Is that you?"

NINETEEN

Untitled

15 Fifty-Fifty

At 8.58 Anna was alone on the ramp with the laptop trolley when Ryan Idris came up it in a coat too big for him.

The late gate at Kingsbrook ran from 8.40 to nine. She marked them in on the laptop, one letter to a child. Two boys went past and came back to be funny, and she marked them once.

Ryan stopped at the trolley. It was eleven weeks since the last time. He put a note on the keyboard and said nothing.

"Morning, Ryan."

"Miss."

The note was on the back of a council letter, his mother's writing pressed hard into the paper. Sorry he has been poorly. Can somebody ring me.

Anna read it twice. Three letters since September, two phone calls, and a drive out to the house on the estate where the blinds were down and nobody answered. She knew the brother, Dean, who had left school in 2011. She knew what a house looked like

when it had stopped going to school. This one hadn't stopped. The note was evidence. So was the coat.

"Go on," she said. "Report at two."

He went. She marked him present at 8.58 and wrote the time in the margin of the note. The 8.58 was true. At nine she wheeled the trolley in.

• • •

In the office Dawn had the post open on the desk and the kettle on.

"What's the name of the woman from the council," she said, "the one with the laugh."

"Beverley."

"That's her." Dawn put a pile of letters in front of her. "Halloran wants the figures by four."

The figures were the attendance spreadsheet. Year 7 was fine. Year 8 was fine. Year 9 had a hole in it the shape of the Idris family. The school was up 0.4 per cent on last year. Halloran had sent an email about it at 7.12 that morning with three exclamation marks, which was two more than she usually used.

Anna opened the letter she had drafted on Friday and read it and put it back in the drawer with the others. Seventeen letters in that drawer, all finished, none sent. She was not allowed to send them. Sharon at the welfare service was allowed to send them, and Sharon had four hundred families and one car.

"Pauline's birthday Thursday," Dawn said. "Which one is she again?"

"The Tuesday one."

“Right.” Dawn wrote it on the back of her hand. “You’re a bloody diary, you.”

• • •

At 3.40 she drove home the long way. She went past the corner on Silver Street where the carpet shop had been, and the low wall outside it, and the bus stop where her mother got the 47 into town on Thursdays.

Peter’s van was outside the flat. Nell was in the back in her car seat with a dinosaur in each hand, singing something with the words wrong.

Peter came up with Nell’s bag and stood in the doorway with his keys in his hand. He had cut his thumb at work and there was a plaster on it, and he looked at the flat the way he still did, checking it.

“They rang from the solicitors,” he said. “There’s a thing on the twenty-second. Mediation. You have to go or they take it off you.”

“I know. I got the letter.”

“Right.”

Nell went past him into the front room and put the television on. Peter watched her do it. There was a pencil line on the door frame at the height of a three-year-old.

“I’m not doing it to be difficult,” he said.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I know you didn’t.”

He went down. The van started. Anna stood at the window with the wooden spoon and watched him pull out and turn at the

end of the road. Then she put the spoon down and answered the phone.

"You've got a memory like a trap, you," her mother said, while Anna emptied a tin of tomatoes into a pan. "I said to Valerie, our Anna doesn't need it written down."

"I'll come Sunday. Do you need anything?"

"Nothing that costs."

She sat down at the table with the brown envelope from the solicitors and did the sums again. The fixed rate ended in April. The new one was 5.9. The service charge was £186.40 a month and had gone up in June. There was £3,110 in the account and £940 on the card. Peter's half of the equity, at the estate agent's valuation, was £68,000. She wrote it on the back of the envelope, and then she wrote it again underneath.

The shoebox was on top of the wardrobe where it had been since Easter, with NELL 0–3 on the lid in marker. She got it down, put it on the bed, took the lid off. On top was a photograph of Nell on Peter's shoulders at Chapel, the pair of them squinting, and on the back, in Anna's hand, Chapel 13. She put the lid back on.

• • •

The mediation was above the bridal shop on Gold Street. The dresses in the window were lit even in the afternoon. There was a stair with a handrail and a card at the top that said to press the bell and wait.

Marion Voss was sixty-odd, with glasses on a chain and a cardigan the colour of a tea bag. The room had a round table, four chairs, a jug of water with a beaded cover, a box of tissues, and a

window with the blind down to the sill. She had a stack of files, one biro, and a flask she did not open.

"Right," she said. "Sit where you like. It doesn't mean anything."

Anna sat with her back to the window. Peter sat opposite. Marion sat between them at the third point of the table and put her glasses on.

"Before we start. Nobody in this room has to be reasonable. That's what the court is for. Here we only have to agree what things are." She opened the first file. "The Form E is done. That's the money, and the money is not the argument. There's the flat, there's Peter's van and the unit, there's the pension. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Peter.

"Agreed," said Anna.

"Then there's the third schedule." Marion took a page out of a plastic wallet and turned it round so they could see it. It was a table. Four columns and a lot of blank rows. "Non-financial assets. People laugh at it. It's periods. You go through the marriage and you mark what's joint."

"All of it's joint," said Anna.

"Most of it. One line won't be." Marion put the page down. "There's always one. A year won't go in two boxes."

Peter looked at the table. Anna looked at the jug.

"Which year?" she said.

"That's what the page is for. Write it down. Don't show each other." Marion gave them each a sheet of paper and a pen. Anna's pen didn't work. Marion gave her another one, a biro with a chip out of the clip.

Anna wrote 2013 without hesitating. She had known before she sat down.

"Turn them over."

Peter's said 2013. So did hers. She looked at his handwriting — the way he made the 1 with a long lead-in, the way he did at the bottom of a job sheet — and then she looked at her own.

"Right," said Marion, and wrote it in the schedule, in the column headed SOLE RETENTION, and left the name blank.

"Can we split it?" Anna said.

"No."

"Half each."

"There's no half. There's one box."

"We've done everything fifty-fifty for fourteen years."

"That's for a flat," said Marion.

Peter put his hands flat on the table. "Tell her what's in it," Marion said to him.

"It's not a trick," Peter said. "It's just—" He turned his wedding ring with his thumb, which he had kept on. "It's the year she was three. She had the red shoes with the bee on them. She used to stand in the hall and shout at the door until you came. The boiler went. We had the fire on in the front room and she slept in with us for three nights. You said it was like camping."

"The boiler didn't go," said Anna.

"It went. The pressure thing."

"It went the year after."

"All right," said Peter. "The year after." He went on. "She went over the wall outside the chip shop, the low one, and split her lip, and I carried her home and there was a woman from the shop

with a tea towel. Blue. She had four stitches at Kettering. She was so good about it we got her an ice cream on the way back, and she fell asleep with it."

"That was 2013," said Anna.

"That was 2013," said Marion, writing.

"It was the carpet shop then," Anna said. "The one on Silver Street. It wasn't a chip shop until later."

Peter looked at her. "Was it?"

"Yes."

"All right." He said it the way he said it about the football. "The carpet shop." He carried on with the tea towel and the stitches and the ice cream, and after a minute Anna looked at the water jug and let it go.

"Thank you," said Marion. "That's helpful."

• • •

In the corridor Peter said, "I'll sign the flat over."

Anna had her coat half on. "What?"

"All of it. My half. I'll sign it over and you keep it and I don't come for the equity." He had his keys out and was turning them over in his hand. "I want the year."

"That's not a thing," she said. "It's a form. It's a stupid form."

"Then it won't cost you anything."

She went down the stairs without answering him. In the street the bridal shop window was still lit and a woman inside was pinning something to a stand.

• • •

The second session was a Thursday. Marion had the schedule on the table in its wallet.

“Before you say anything,” she said, “I’ll say the thing I say. A contested memory is worse than a lost one. That’s not philosophy. That’s the last four hundred and eleven of these. People fight over a fortnight in Portugal. They lose the house and the child and the pension. At the end neither of them can tell you what was in the fortnight.”

“I’m not fighting,” said Anna.

“No,” said Marion. “You’re not.”

“I want the flat.”

“Then you’ll have the flat.” Marion uncapped the biro. “That’s the trade on the table. The flat to you, the year to him, and the year is not shared and not split and not revisited.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then I write nothing in the box. It goes to the court. The court charges you both for the privilege and takes nine months.” Marion looked at her over the glasses. “You’d still have the flat at the end of it. You’d have a lot less of everything else.”

Anna looked at the schedule. The row said 2013. The column said SOLE RETENTION. The box was empty and small.

“Fine,” she said.

“Peter?”

“Fine.”

“Right.”

Marion looked at Anna for a moment. Then she wrote Peter in the box. She wrote it in the same biro. She slid the page across for them to initial. Anna initialled it. Peter initialled it. Marion put the page back in the wallet and the wallet in the box with the others. The box was full.

Outside, Peter said, “It was the only thing I asked for.”

“I know,” said Anna.

“Anna—“

“I’ve got to get back. Nell’s at Mum’s.”

She walked to the car. In the driver’s seat she sat for a minute with her hands on the wheel and then she drove to her mother’s and ate a ham sandwich and said nothing.

• • •

In the second week of December the order came in the post. Two days after that the school sent home the Learning Journey book. Nell had been in reception since September and the book had a page at the front for the parents. Our Year Before School. Please write a page about your child’s year before they started. Photographs welcome.

Anna sat at the kitchen table with the book open and a pen.

She wrote: Nell liked dinosaurs. She knew all the names.

She looked at the page. She turned the pen round and looked at the point of it.

We took her to the caravan in August, she wrote, and she—

She sat there for a while. Then she got up and got the shoebox down off the wardrobe and took the lid off and spread the photographs out on the table.

There was one of Nell on the beach at Chapel in a red swimming costume, holding a spade, shouting at someone out of the frame. The print had a white border, and on the back, in Anna’s own handwriting, Chapel 13. There was a shadow across the sand with the shape of a man in it. Peter took the photographs.

She could say the word caravan. She could not get into it.

She put the photographs back in the box in the order they came out and put the box on top of the wardrobe and did not write any more of the page.

• • •

The bloods came back in February. B12, thyroid, ferritin, coeliac. All normal. The memory service took five months. The woman who saw her was called Elaine and she had a folder and a clock face printed on a piece of paper.

"Draw me a clock," Elaine said. "Ten past eleven."

Anna drew the clock. She drew the hands.

"Your scores are within normal limits," Elaine said, at the end. "Do you lose things? Keys, appointments?"

"No."

"Do you forget names?"

"No."

"What is it you're forgetting?"

"A year," said Anna. "When my daughter was three."

Elaine wrote it down. "How long have you been noticing?"

"Since December before last."

"And would you say your memory is worse than it was?"

"No. It's better. Everything else is better." Anna looked at the clock she had drawn. "It's just the one year."

"The tests we do here are for a different kind of forgetting," Elaine said. "Is there anything else going on? Anything you'd like to tell me?"

Anna opened her mouth.

"There's a legal thing," she said.

"Legal thing."

"To do with the divorce. It's finished."

Elaine wrote legal matter ongoing and closed the folder and said the letter would come in a fortnight and to go back to the GP if anything changed. The letter came in eleven days. It said the scores were within normal limits, that no cognitive impairment had been identified, and that Anna had been discharged back to the care of her GP.

She put the letter in the shoebox with the photographs.

• • •

She bought a notebook from the stock cupboard at work, a spiral one with a red cover, and wrote 2013 on the front.

Red shoes, bee on the strap. Photo, box 2.

Caravan, Chapel, second week of August. Key ring in the kitchen drawer.

Boiler went in the March. Fire on in the front room. Three nights.

Nell went over the wall, split her lip, four stitches.

She looked at the last line for a while. Then she wrote FROM P at the end of the three above it, in smaller letters, and put the pen down and went to make the tea.

She asked her mother once, on a Sunday, with the plates in front of them.

"Do you remember the caravan?"

"You've asked me that," Pauline said.

"Have I?"

"Last month. You asked me if we had the one with the gas fire." Pauline pushed her plate away. "You were there, love. You

tell me."

"I can't."

Pauline looked at her for a moment. "Is it the change?"

"Probably," said Anna.

She asked Peter once. He brought Nell back on the Wednesday and she went out to the van with him and stood at the window while he found her bag.

"What was she like that year? Not the wall. The rest of it."

He talked for four minutes. He was good at it. He had the weather and the state of the flat and the thing Nell used to do with her hands when she was going to sleep. Anna stood in the road with her arms folded and listened to all of it.

She wrote it down that night. FROM P, at the end of every line.

She did not ask him again.

• • •

Nell was nine when she asked. They were in the car, at the lights by the retail park.

"Mum. What was I like when I was three?"

"You were into dinosaurs."

"What else?"

"You had a red swimming costume."

"That's a photo, Mum."

"Yes."

"What else?"

"You had a cut on your lip."

"I know that one," said Nell. "Dad does that one."

The lights went green.

• • •

The flat sold in March, the year Nell was sixteen. Anna had it on at £148,000 and took £141,000 from a couple with a baby and a mortgage offer that had taken them eleven weeks. Completion was the Friday. She had the keys until then.

She was on her knees at the door frame in the front room with a bowl of sugar soap and a cloth. The frame had thirty years of paint on it. The agent said the woodwork would photograph better clean. Nell came in from hockey with her kit bag and a fat lip.

"Someone elbowed me."

"Who?"

"A girl from Ampthill."

Peter came at four for the last of his tools from under the stairs. He looked at Nell's lip in the hall light and turned her chin with his thumb.

"You did that before," he said.

"Did I?"

"You were three. You went over the wall outside the chip shop and I carried you home. There was a woman with a tea towel."

"I remember that," Nell said.

"You don't."

"I do. The tea towel was blue." She looked at her mother, on the floor. "You were there."

"It was the carpet shop," Anna said.

Nell turned round. "What?"

"The wall. It was the carpet shop then. Up by the bus stop."

"Does it matter?"

“No,” said Anna.

Peter went out to the van for the boiler log book and came back with it. He stood in the front room with the empty walls and the bare boards. “Where’s the pencil?”

“In the pot by the sink. Why?”

“Stand up straight,” he said to Nell.

She stood against the frame with her back to it and her chin up. He brought the pencil down flat on the top of her head and made a mark. Then he measured from the floor with the tape Anna was holding and wrote N — 16 beside it in small letters.

“One hundred and sixty-eight,” he said.

“Is that tall?”

“That’s tall.”

Nell looked at the mark. Then she looked at the two below it, faint now, at the height of a three-year-old and a four-year-old.

“Did you do those?”

“The three,” said Peter.

Anna put the cloth in the bowl.

“I thought I did,” she said.

“No,” said Peter.

Nell picked up her kit bag. “I’m getting a drink,” she said, and went out to the kitchen, and the tap ran.

Anna gave her the envelope at the door, when the van was loaded and the light was going. It was the Chapel photographs, all of them, the whole of August.

Nell went through them standing up. “Oh, the caravan.” She turned one round. “Is that you?”

Anna looked. A woman in the caravan doorway, hair pinned up. “Yes,” she said.

Nell put it back in the envelope and put the envelope in her bag. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ll text you when I get in.”

The van went. Anna went back inside and locked the front door and stood in the hall and then went into the front room and got down on the floor again with the bowl and the cloth.

The lowest line was the faintest. It had been made in pencil and never gone over, and the paint had come up to it. She worked at it with the cloth. It did not come off.

She put the key through the letterbox for the agent and pulled the door to. It caught on the mat and swung in an inch.

Continue with Part 2 →

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The Night Shift — Part 1

Toby Mikle

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