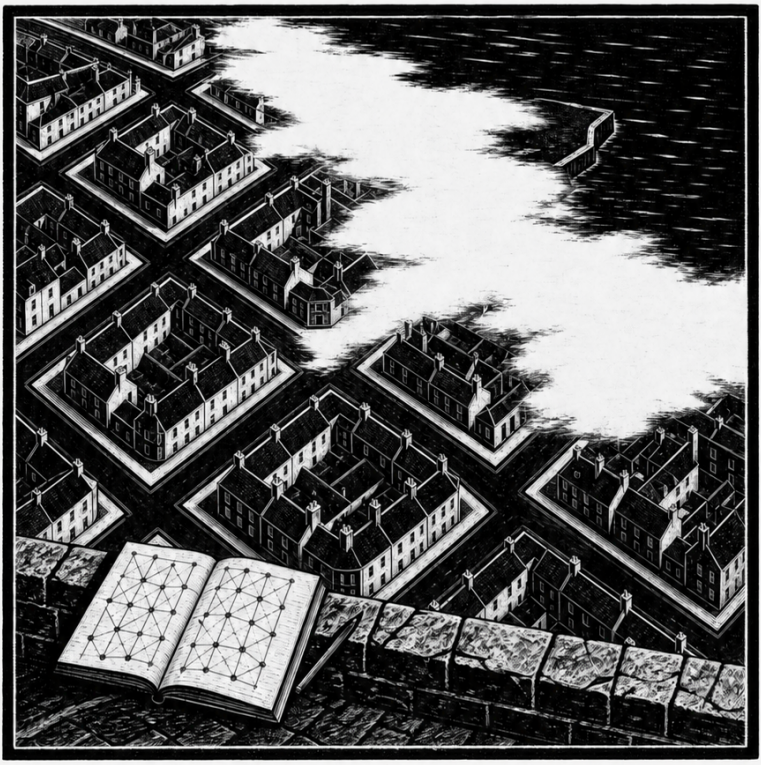
Twenty-One Cases

The Green Fog Coast · Collection II



R. DELACORME

FREQUENCY UNKNOWN

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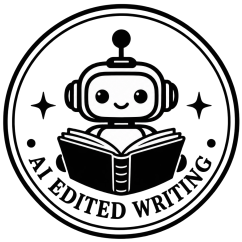

Contents

The Signal 6

The Driver 12

The Lighter 21

The Circle 31

The Blank Stone 42

The Garden 53

The Rule 65

The Form 73

The Pearls 84

The Vintage 97

The Looking 109

The Member 123

The Pattern 133

The Listing 146

The Picture 162

The Works 173

The Archive 186

The Eastern Shore 201

The Canvasser 211

The Aura 226

The Well 238

The Signal

The fog came in off the A149 at Cley, as it usually did after eleven, and Fenn turned the radio up because silence in the fog was worse than noise.

Voices first. A weather forecast, a man reading numbers, a woman laughing at something the presenter had said. Normal. Then, at the edge of the dial where the signal thinned, a voice lay over the static with no station around it, regular, too regular for interference.

He knew it before he could name it.

His brother Joel had spoken in an even, unhurried cadence, each phrase arriving at the same measure as the last. As a child Fenn had found it comforting. As a teenager he had found it embarrassing. As an adult he had told himself he had moved past both reactions, which was the kind of claim a man made when he had not examined it.

He turned the dial.

The voice went with it. Same frequency, same even pace, across three stations and then four. He stopped turning. The voice continued.

He drove.

The A149 ran straight for six miles before the first bend. He kept his speed. The words were unfamiliar. The cadence was Joel's: flat, patient, each phrase given equal weight, no rise, no fall. He had not heard it in nine years. His hand tightened on the wheel before he understood why.

He turned the radio off.

The voice continued through the dashboard. Through the hum of the engine and the heater running low, the rhythm remained while the words disappeared. Patient. Unhurried. The measure of a person who had waited out every silence because he had no other way through it.

He stopped the car on the verge and turned off the engine.

After he stopped the engine, the cooling metal and exhaust ticked at the same intervals as the voice. Between the ticks, he could still hear Joel's cadence in the sealed air of the car.

He opened the door.

He stood on the verge. The air was cold and carried the old road smell: wet verge, petrol, salt carried too far inland. The fog lay at ankle height across the road and the field beyond. The car ticked behind him.

He stood in the fog and heard nothing. No pace. No pattern. Only the ordinary sounds of an empty road at night.

He got back in.

The seat was still warm. He sat with his hands in his lap and looked at the dashboard and thought about Joel at the window of the day room, and about the last visit, which had been in September three years before Joel died.

* * *

The care home had a name that sounded like a retirement village, which was either considerate or dishonest, Fenn had never decided. The day room smelled of lunch and disinfectant and the particular sweetness of an overheated building in early autumn. Joel was at the window when Fenn arrived. He had been at the window on every visit, and Fenn had always assumed this was coincidence until a member of staff told him Joel waited there from two o'clock on visiting days. Joel had been told visits were at three.

Joel tracked bus times. That was the thing. He could not read a timetable, but he had memorised the sound of the three buses that stopped on the road outside the home, the particular frequency of each engine, and he could tell Fenn what time it was by the buses without looking at a clock. He did this on the last visit, unprompted, while Fenn was thinking about the drive home.

The half two has gone. It is two forty-three. The three o'clock will come. The same level line, each clause equal in weight to the last.

Fenn had said that was impressive.

Joel had looked at him for a moment with the expression he sometimes had, waiting for an answer Fenn had not realised was being asked for.

You are always thinking about leaving, Joel said. When you come here. I can tell.

Fenn had said he was sorry, he had a long drive.

You always have a long drive, Joel said. When you come here.

Fenn had changed the subject and Joel had let him, as he always had, without comment or grievance, moving on to the weather, the food and the television programme he watched on Tuesday evenings. The same level line all the way through. No sharpness. No attempt to make the words cut.

Fenn had left after forty minutes.

He had told himself he had a long drive.

The following Christmas Eve the home called at two-twenty. Joel was at the window listening for the half-two bus because Fenn had said he would come. Fenn saw the number on his phone while buttoning his shirt for the office dinner. He let it ring, sent a message saying the road was bad, and went out through a clear, dry evening.

* * *

After that night, he did not take the coast road again until March, and when he did he kept the radio off. He used the inland route whenever he could. In the mornings his car smelled faintly of the coast, which it always did.

What he noticed first, in October, was the pauses.

He had always spoken quickly. Colleagues mentioned it. He spoke quickly and left almost no pause between one point and the next because he expected someone else to fill any silence. At first it was not much. A beat,

sometimes two, between one clause and the next. He put it down to tiredness.

In November, his sentences shortened.

He noticed the change while leaving a message on an answering machine. Each phrase ended sooner than he expected, and the pauses between phrases were equal. He listened back before the tape ran out and it sounded fine.

In December he ran into a woman named Sorcha Ivel, who had worked with him for three years and whose mother had died in October. He had meant to call. He had not called.

He saw her in the corridor and stopped and said that he was sorry, that he had heard about her mother, that it must have been a difficult time.

She looked at him.

"Thank you," she said carefully, testing what he meant.

He said he meant it.

"I know," she said. She looked at him for a moment longer. "You sound different, Fenn."

He asked what she meant.

"Like you're reading something," she said. "Like you're reading a list." She shook her head. "Never mind. Thank you. I mean it."

She went on down the corridor and he stood before he followed.

That evening he sat at the kitchen table and wrote sentences on a piece of paper. He read them back, then wrote more. Every sentence ended at the same pace and was followed by the same pause. He sat with the paper for a while. Then he put it in a drawer.

* * *

The next night he took the paper out again and tried to spoil the rhythm.

He read the first sentence too quickly. He put a laugh in the middle of the second, though there was nothing funny in it. He stopped halfway through the third and began again from the wrong word. For ten minutes he made his voice trip, hurry, crowd itself, do anything except arrive cleanly at the end.

When he listened back on his phone, the irregularities were there. He could hear himself forcing them in. Underneath, the pace held. It made room for each error and corrected it by the next breath.

He deleted the recording.

* * *

A colleague asked in January if he was all right.

"Yes," he said. "I'm fine." He let the silence sit. "Why do you ask."

"You sound different," she said. "More even."

He thanked her. He went back to his desk.

He drove home on the inland route. That night he lay awake and said things quietly in the dark. Complete sentences. Questions. His own name. Joel's name. They all arrived at the same pace, each phrase equal in weight to the last, each pause the same as the one before it.

In January, waiting at lights outside Holt, the fan came on before the engine had warmed. He turned it off so quickly the driver behind him sounded his horn.

He turned it back on. The air came through the vents at the pace of his breathing, which was the pace of his sentences, which was even and complete.

At the office the next morning he chaired the ten o'clock meeting because Morris was late. Usually he hated the first five minutes: people speaking over one another, corrections arriving before the sentence they corrected had finished. This time he waited. He let each point arrive, named

it, placed it beside the last. The room quieted. By the end, three decisions had been made and no one had noticed he had not raised his voice.

That afternoon Morris asked him to speak to Ellis, whose post had been removed in the restructure. Ellis came in angry and stayed standing.

Fenn gave him the information one clause at a time. End date. Notice period. Appeal route. Each sentence level, complete, with room after it. When Ellis interrupted, Fenn waited until the interruption had spent itself and resumed at the same measure.

After ten minutes Ellis sat down.

After twenty he signed the acknowledgement.

Fenn left him alone to telephone his wife. In the corridor he heard Ellis begin.

"They have removed the post," Ellis said. He waited before each sentence. "The notice is twelve weeks." Another measured silence. "There is an appeal route."

Fenn stood outside the door until Ellis reached the end of the sentence.

He stood there a moment longer than the reporting required.

He had not recognised the rhythm until he heard it used correctly.

* * *

End

The Driver

Part One: The Route

Croft had driven the coast road since before the fog. That was not something he said to people, because the people who had not been here before the fog found it unsettling and the people who had been here before it found it worse. But it was true. He had run the same circuit, Porthmere to Redwick to Crale, sometimes a leg down to Thurle and back, for twenty-nine years, and for the first seven of those years the coast had been nothing but coast: grey water, salt air, the smell of kelp at low tide. He still remembered the smell. His father had taught him to name it on the harbour wall at Porthmere, kelp first, then diesel, wet rope, fish blood on stone.

The fog had come when he was thirty-one. He was fifty-three now. He had built it into the route: changed gear earlier on the stretches where it thickened, learned which verges held the wheel and which let it drift, and stopped noticing he was doing any of it.

The route was the route. He knew every turning.

What he noticed, in the second week of November, was that the fog had come further inland than it had ever come before. Not overnight. It had been moving for a month, a slow drift east from the waterline by degrees so gradual that people were still arguing about whether it was happening at all. Croft was not arguing. Twenty-nine years on this road had taught his hands to feel a change in camber before his eyes caught it, and his eyes were telling him something his hands had already half-known for a month.

He also noticed, on the stretch between Thurle and Crale, that the gulls were gone. They were always there on that road: coast birds following the land, working the fields behind the hedge line, loud and constant. He had been driving past them so long that their absence registered before he could name what was missing. He drove the stretch and it was quiet in a way that

open country was not supposed to be quiet, and it was only when he pulled over to check his notes that he understood what was different.

On the Tuesday, the coast road between Crale and Porthmere was closed.

A sign he had never seen. A diversion he had never used. A man in a hi-vis jacket standing at the road junction with his arms spread, apologetic, and behind him the fog sitting on the tarmac like something that had made a decision.

There were no other vehicles waiting at the junction.

Twenty yards before the barrier, a narrow lane split west toward the coast road. Croft knew it. The route sheet did not use it. He kept both hands on the wheel and followed the hi-vis man's arm.

Part Two: The Turn

The diversion took him inland on a road he did not know.

That in itself was unusual. He had driven this county for twenty-nine years. But the road the hi-vis man sent him down was single-track, hedged on both sides, the tarmac older than anything on his mental map. It went east for two miles, curved north and curved again. Although it was only mid-afternoon, the hedges and road ahead were already as dim as they would normally be at dusk.

Behind him, in the load bay, the pigs were moving. He had ten of them, a short run, due at Harker's in Redwick by three. A butcher's collection, not a yard: the kind of delivery where you backed up to the side door and someone came out with a board. They were always restless on bad roads and this road was bad enough. The sound from the bay differed from their usual complaints. The pigs had pressed against the nearside wall and produced a low, sustained sound without shifting position.

He did not pretend they knew where they were going. He had never liked men who said that. But they knew enough. By the last mile, they always knew something.

The steering column began to vibrate whenever the road curved, then stopped on the straight. He pulled over once and found nothing. Three miles later he stopped again. The vibration came from the rear axle. He could finish the run, but he would not ignore it.

He was looking at the road behind him when he saw the sign.

Hale Merton. White lettering on green, the paint fresh. Below it, a smaller sign: Residents and visitors welcome. The word welcome was underlined, which he had never seen on a road sign.

He drove in.

Part Three: The Village

The village was tidy. That was the first word that came and it was the right word and it was also wrong in a way he sat with while he drove slowly through it. The houses were painted. The gardens had their edges cut. The single street was swept and the bins were lined neatly at the kerb and the small shop had its window display arranged with a care that reminded him of nothing so much as a stage set: too even, too considered, colour-blocked in a way that suggested someone had thought about it for longer than a shop window needed.

The people he passed smiled.

Two women at a gate. A man washing a car. Three children on bikes who stopped and watched him pass with expressions of pure, uncomplicated interest, like the faces of children in old advertisements. He raised a hand and they waved back, all three at the same moment, the same arc.

He found the garage at the end of the street and pulled in.

The man there was in his fifties, heavyset, and held a clean cloth. He moved slowly and never appeared hurried.

"Axle noise," Croft said. "Rear. I need to know if I can run it tonight or whether it wants looking at."

"I'll look," the man said, with a brevity and completeness that reminded Croft of no one he could quite place.

He looked for forty minutes. When he came out he said: "Not tonight." The words carried neither apology nor urgency. "I can have it right for morning. Early. You should stay."

"Is there somewhere?"

"Ida has rooms. Second house past the shop. She'll have one."

Croft looked at the road out of the village, the one that went west, back toward the coast. The sky in that direction had a faint green cast. He had seen that cast his whole working life. He had never been far enough inland to see it from the east before.

He thought about the pigs. Harker's would grumble about the delay and take them anyway. Places like that always did.

"Right," he said.

He pulled round to the yard behind the garage and cut the engine. When he got out and opened the bay hatch to check the water, the pigs were all at the far end, pressed together, facing the wall. He stood and looked at them. They did not turn.

Part Four: The Evening

Ida was sixty and trim and cheerful in a way that took up the whole room. She showed him a room under the eaves with a small window that faced west and gave him tea without asking whether he wanted it and talked, continuously, about nothing.

The garden. The church fete. The weather, which was lovely, really, for the time of year. Her neighbour's dog, which was a terror but so friendly, you know the type. The village show, which had been the best one yet, which Croft suspected was said about every village show in every village in the country, but which Ida said with a conviction that made him feel it might actually be true here in a way it was not elsewhere.

He asked, during a pause, how long the village had been here.

"Oh," Ida said. "A long time. We like to keep to ourselves, mostly. Nice to have visitors of course." She smiled. "But we are quite self-sufficient."

He asked if she had family nearby.

"All here," Ida said. "All in the village. Isn't that nice?"

It did not answer the question he had asked.

He asked about the road, the main coast road, the closure.

Ida kept smiling, but she stopped meeting his eyes. "Terrible for the traffic," she said. "More tea?"

He ate dinner at a table in the front room: soup, bread, a piece of pie that was very good, a glass of something he did not ask the name of. When he finished the pie Ida cut him another piece and set it beside his plate without asking. Her hand stayed on the plate a moment, fingers spread lightly on the rim, then withdrew.

On the mantelpiece was a photograph of a young man in uniform. Croft looked at it once. Ida followed his glance.

"My brother," she said. "Drowned off Porthmere."

She said it with the same brightness she had used for the pie.

Two other residents of the house sat at the far end of the table. They talked about the soup, which was also lovely. When he tried to draw them on anything else, the closure, the fog, the county, whether they had family

elsewhere, they agreed pleasantly with whatever he said and then returned to the soup.

After dinner he went upstairs.

Part Five: The Window

He did not sleep.

He lay on the bed with his boots still on and looked at the ceiling and listened to the village settle. There was very little sound. No traffic on the road. No voices from below after nine. The silence of people who had simply stopped.

At some point after eleven he sat up and looked at the window.

The fog was visible from here: a low coastal mass with the water hidden under it. It was closer than it had been at dusk. Much closer. He watched the edge against the same fence post for several minutes. It seemed stationary while he stared at it, but each time he looked away and back, the fog had advanced a little further inland.

It stopped.

There was no visible edge to it, no boundary marker where it stopped. But the movement ceased, or seemed to cease, and the line at the fields held, and held, and held. He sat and watched and the fog did not come further.

At the window, with the fog held at the fields, he found himself remembering kelp at low tide.

He was still at the window when he heard the floor creak in the doorway.

He turned.

A girl stood in the doorway. Eight or nine. Dark hair, bare feet, in a nightdress that was too long at the hem. She was looking at him with the patient attention of someone who has been waiting for the right moment and judged that this was it.

"You're watching it," she said.

"Yes."

"It doesn't come here." She said it without emphasis, with the flat patience of someone repeating an old fact.

"I can see that," Croft said. "Do you know why?"

She looked at him. Then she came in and sat on the edge of the chair by the window, the same one he had been sitting in, pulling her feet up underneath her. She looked out at the fog on the horizon.

"Before I was born," she said, "before my mother was born, something came through here."

She put one hand flat against her chest and held it there as if checking her heartbeat. Then she looked back at the window.

"Since then, the fog has stopped at the fields."

"Do you want to stay?" she asked. She waited for an answer.

"No," he said.

She nodded once. "Most people don't." She got up from the chair and straightened the nightdress. "The mechanic will have it done by six. He always is." At the door she stopped. "The fog will have moved back by morning. You'll get through."

Then she went back to wherever she had come from, and the house was quiet again.

He wondered how many of them had been born there, and how many had only stopped for the night.

Croft sat for a while longer at the window. The pigs were pressed against the far wall, facing it, backs to the door. On an ordinary stop they spread through the bay. He did not have a word for what had changed them. He

knew only that they had stopped moving on the bad road coming in, and had not moved since.

Part Six: The Road

He was in the cab at five past six with a coffee Ida had left on the hall table, covered with a saucer. The axle was quiet. The mechanic was already back inside, lights off.

The village, in the early morning, was unchanged. Gardens tidy. Street swept. No one about yet, but the sense of people waking in their houses to another morning that would be, without variation, fine.

He drove out. The coast road was open. The fog had pulled back in the night, not far, but enough. He could see water at the road edge, pale under a cloud-white sky.

From the bay: nothing. No movement, no sound. The road was better here, smooth tarmac, the kind of surface that usually set them off again, shifting and complaining. They were quiet.

He drove the route from memory. Porthmere to Redwick to Crale. He did not stop. He did not call anyone.

He pulled up at Harker's at half past eight. A man came out with the board and set it against the bay door and stepped back.

The pigs came out.

He had done this run a dozen times. Usually the first pig balked at the top of the board and the rest bunched behind it; ten minutes of coaxing followed. He had his stick ready. He did not use it.

They came down the board in a line, unhurried. No bunching. No hesitation at the bottom where the smell was strongest. The man with the board watched them go and said nothing. Croft watched from the cab.

The last one paused at the bottom of the board. Just for a moment. It stood in the thin morning light with its feet on the wet concrete, and it did not look at the door ahead of it, and it did not look back at the truck. It stared straight ahead without reacting to the door, the men or the smell. Then it walked inside.

Croft sat for a moment after the door closed.

On the long straight south of Redwick, where the fog pressed closest to the road on clear mornings, he remembered the girl's hand flat against her chest. He remembered the village in the early light. Every garden, painted wall and swept kerb looked ordinary, but the people and animals had moved with the same unnatural calm. He remembered the gulls gone from the stretch between Thurle and Crale.

He did not think about any of it now. The road required attention.

By Crale it had started to rain, which was normal, and the fog was where it usually was, which was less normal than it had been a year ago, and he drove back empty.

That evening, filling in the route sheet at the kitchen table, he came to the box for exceptions and delays. He held the pen over it for a while.

He wrote: Road reopened. No unscheduled stops.

He signed it and put it in the folder by the door, the one Redwick collected on the first of the month. He did not think about the blank box further down the form, the one marked Detail any diversion taken.

That was Tuesday.

* * *

End

The Lighter

Part One: The Sheet

His mother had left it on his pillow.

He found it when he came back from school, folded once, his name written on the outside in her handwriting, which was neat and slanted right and looked like the handwriting of someone who had given the matter thought. He unfolded it and read it sitting on the edge of his bed.

It was a list. Fifteen-minute walk each morning. Swimming twice a week. Reduced portions. Less bread. Less of everything, more or less. At the bottom she had added, in smaller letters, the school has a running group on Tuesdays.

She had written please beside swimming twice a week, then crossed it out so neatly that the word was still visible.

Pete folded it again and put it in the drawer with the other things he put in drawers. Then he lay back on his bed and looked at the ceiling.

He was twelve and large for twelve and had been large for as long as he could remember. Large in the top few of his class, and in a way that was wide and soft rather than tall, which was what he sometimes told himself when things were going badly. When he ran, which he did not do if he could avoid it, there was a movement to him that he was aware of in a way that the others were not aware of their own movement, because their movement did not call attention.

He drew instead. He had drawn since he was small: animals first, then buildings, then things he invented, machines that did not exist and creatures that occupied a position between fish and something else. He drew in the margins of his exercise books and on loose paper at his desk and occasionally on the inside cover of library books, which he knew he was not supposed to

do. On the kitchen fridge his father had put up a drawing Pete had done two years ago, a harbour scene in biro with a trawler that was slightly too large for the harbour mouth. It had been there so long that Pete no longer saw it when he opened the fridge, but he knew it was there.

His mother, Carla, was thin. She was thin in the specific way of a woman who had worked to be thin and intended to stay there, and she wore clothes that showed this, and she moved with the efficiency of someone who had made a decision about her body and did not intend to revisit it. She did not say much about his weight directly. She said things around it. She bought certain foods and not others. She mentioned the running group more than once. She had never said anything about the drawings.

His father was not thin. His father was large in the same way Pete was large, but older and settled into it, and did not seem troubled by the question. His father worked at the harbour authority and came home with the smell of the water on him and ate dinner with appetite and fell asleep in the chair with his feet up. He called Pete son and meant it in the simplest possible way, and Pete loved him for it without ever saying so.

His parents lowered their voices when they disagreed. Pete could usually identify the subject and each parent's position, although he could not quote a complete sentence.

He put the list in the drawer and went downstairs for dinner.

Part Two: The Advertisement

He found it three days later on the community board at the newsagent.

He had not been looking for it. He had been reading the board while he waited for his father, without much intention. Cards for gardening services. A piano teacher in Kestle Street. A lost cat. And below those, half-covered by the piano teacher's card, a small white rectangle with small black text.

Difficult to shift weight? No exercise required. Natural vapour method. Lasting results. Discreet. Ask within.

The drawing pin holding it was new.

He stood and looked at it. Then he went in and asked within.

The woman behind the counter was old and unhurried. She did not ask which advertisement he meant. She produced from beneath the counter a small flat box.

"You burn them," she said. "One a day. No more."

The box was plain white with a green stripe. Inside were twelve thin sticks, pale grey, slightly waxy to the touch.

"What's in them?" he said.

"Natural ingredients," she said, which was what people said when they did not want to say what was in something.

"Does it work?"

She looked at him. "It works," she said.

He paid with his pocket money and walked home with the box in his bag.

Part Three: The Smell

He tried the first one that evening, in his room with the window open.

He stood the stick upright in the pencil pot and lit the end with his father's old harbour-authority lighter. Nobody smoked anymore, but the lighter had never been thrown away. The flame died to a thin curl. Instead of rising, the smoke spread sideways and filled the room within two minutes. Pete smelled salt. The walls looked greyer. He blinked hard and they stayed grey.

He sat on the bed and waited.

He had expected something medicinal or sweet. Instead, the back of his throat felt cool.

He lay back and looked at the ceiling. Its edges seemed to recede slightly as sleep approached.

He slept.

When he woke, the stick had burned down to a small grey stub in the pencil pot and the room smelled of nothing. Before he stood, he already felt lighter than he had when he lay down.

Part Four: The Weeks

By the end of the first week he had lost weight.

He felt the change before he could see it. His clothes sat more loosely, and the classroom chair no longer pressed against his sides. On Saturday morning the bathroom scales confirmed it. The number had dropped enough to matter.

He did not tell anyone. He bought more boxes from the woman at the newsagent, who produced them without comment. He tried, on the second purchase, to find a name on the box, a manufacturer, an address, anything that would tell him where the sticks came from. There was nothing. The green stripe and the twelve sticks and the woman who did not say what was in them.

He burned one each evening as instructed. One a day. No more.

The floating feeling he had noticed the first time became something he looked forward to. It became the best part of his day because, while the smoke affected him, he stopped monitoring how much space his body occupied and how other people might see it.

In the mornings he was lighter. Week by week he was lighter.

By the fourth week the boys at school had started to notice.

Part Five: The New Shape

He moved through school with less resistance. Boys who had ignored him now spoke to him. In the corridor he no longer braced before passing groups. People looked, registered him, and moved on.

He played football for the first time since primary school. He was not good at it. But he was on the pitch, which was its own kind of goodness in the arithmetic of twelve-year-old boys.

The drawings in the margins of his exercise books stopped around then. He did not notice this until later, and then only because the pages looked cleaner. The margins had become margins again.

In his maths book he found an unfinished creature with fins along both sides and a row of windows in its back. He looked at it for a while and could not remember what the windows were for. He knew, vaguely, that they had mattered. He could not now imagine why. He rubbed them out. The page looked better after.

His mother noticed and said nothing. She began buying different food. She suggested they walk somewhere together on Sunday, which they had not done in years. Once, in the kitchen, she put a hand on his shoulder and left it there a second too long.

He did not know what he felt about this. He put the feeling in the same drawer as the list.

On the second Sunday she bought him a jacket from the sale rail in Crale, navy, narrow at the waist. In the shop mirror her face loosened into such bare relief that he had to look away. "There," she said. "That's you."

At school the next day Marcus clapped him on the shoulder and said he looked sharp. Pete kept the jacket on through lunch, though the room was warm. People looked once and then stopped. He liked that.

His father noticed too, but differently.

His father seemed genuinely pleased by Pete's increased movement, by the football and by the Sunday walk. Doug did not voice his concern. He sometimes watched Pete for several seconds without speaking, and Pete noticed the scrutiny but did not ask what his father was checking.

Part Six: The Drawer

His father found the box in the third month.

He had not been looking for it. He had come in to leave a folded jumper on Pete's chair and the box was on the desk, in plain sight, the green stripe visible. Beside it, his own lighter, the harbour authority one from the kitchen drawer. He picked up the lighter first. He held it for a moment, then set it down and picked up the box. He opened it and looked at the sticks. He smelled the box. He put it down.

He did not speak to Pete immediately. He went downstairs, and Pete heard his parents lower their voices. He could identify the sticks as the subject but could not hear complete sentences.

That evening his father said: "Where did you get those sticks?"

"The newsagent," Pete said.

"What are they for?"

Pete said nothing.

His father sat down on the end of the bed, which he had not done in a long time. "You've lost a lot of weight," he said.

"Yeah."

His father looked at the box on the desk. "I'd like you to stop using them."

"Why?"

His father took his time before answering. "Because I'm not sure they're what they say they are."

"They work," Pete said. "That's what they say."

His father did not have an answer for this that he seemed satisfied with. He sat for a moment and then stood up and left the room and Pete listened to him go down the stairs.

He burned a stick that evening. He burned one the next evening. He did not stop.

Part Seven: What His Father Saw

Doug had a way of watching things.

He had developed it over many years at the harbour authority, where you learned to read water and weather and the behaviour of vessels at a distance, to distinguish between ordinary movement and movement that required attention. A quiet habit. The kind other people often did not notice.

He watched Pete.

Across the months Doug watched his son become easier in his body. Pete joined in. He laughed at the right moments now, with the others instead of a beat behind them. These were good things. Doug could see they were good things.

But.

There was something Pete had always done that Doug had always liked. When Pete was thinking about something, really thinking, he had a habit of going very still and looking at a fixed point, his brow slightly creased, his hands loose, a focused stillness that told Doug Pete was working through a problem. He had watched Pete do this since the boy was small and had always found it, privately, one of his favourite things about his son.

Pete had not done it in months.

At the harbour authority Doug had learned to classify movement at a distance. A vessel running normally. A vessel taking on water below the line. By the time the difference showed clearly, the moment to act had usually passed. He had been watching Pete like that for four months.

He laughed, moved easily and played football. But between activities his face showed no curiosity, concentration or private amusement. Doug had never seen that blankness in him before.

Doug sat in his chair in the evenings and thought about this.

One afternoon, while Pete was at school, Doug took the box from the desk and put it in the bin in the kitchen. That evening Pete asked where the box was with a flatness in his voice that Doug had not heard before, and Doug said he had thrown it away, and Pete looked at him without expression and went upstairs.

The next day there was a new box on the desk.

The morning after that Doug went to the newsagent. The board had no advertisement. The woman behind the counter looked at him without recognition and said she sold newspapers, sweets and batteries. When he described the box she shook her head. When he described the advertisement she said she didn't know what he meant. He drove home and there was a new box on the desk, identical to the one he had thrown away, the green stripe exactly the same.

On Sunday Doug asked if Pete wanted to walk down to the harbour. Pete said he was meeting Marcus. Doug said another time. Pete said yes, but in the tone of a boy agreeing to a thing that had already become unlikely.

Part Eight: What Remained

By the end of the fourth month Pete was the right kind of thin. That was how Doug thought about it, without pride. The right kind of thin. The kind that would fit into the world as his mother understood it.

Pete was also harder to find in a room. The smaller body did not trouble Doug as much as the new timing: small portions, quick answers, laughter arriving exactly when expected. Before, Pete had interrupted, laughed late and asked questions that required actual answers. Doug had loved that about him without ever saying so.

On a Friday evening in November Doug sat in the chair and listened to Pete upstairs, the faint smell reaching him even through the ceiling, the air that now came down whenever Pete used the sticks. He had stopped trying to describe it, even to himself. It was like air from somewhere else. It was simply not from here.

He heard Pete's door open and close and then Pete came downstairs and said he was going round to Marcus's, which was what he said most evenings now, and Doug said fine, and Pete left.

Doug went upstairs.

On Pete's desk was a sheet of drawing paper. The creature on it had no fins, no windows, nothing of the old inventions. It was a boy in the kitchen seen from behind, narrow in the new jacket, and around him a pale field worked in tight pencil strokes. At the bottom Pete had written something and crossed it out so hard the paper had thinned.

Doug held it to the window and tilted it until the pressure marks caught the light. He could make out the tail of what might have been a y, and further along a downstroke that could have been an h or a k. Four words, he thought, going by the spacing. None was clear enough to trust.

Doug folded the sheet and put it in his pocket.

In the kitchen Carla looked at him. She touched the side of her waist without seeming to know she had done so.

"He's done so well," she said.

"Yes," Doug said.

When she went upstairs, he took the harbour-authority lighter from the drawer and carried the folded drawing to the back step. The flame caught at one corner. He held the paper until the boy in the jacket blackened, then dropped it into the metal ash bucket and watched the crossed-out words go last.

He went back inside. The old harbour drawing had slipped under its fish magnet. Doug straightened it carefully and added a second magnet at the lower corner. The trawler was still too large for the mouth. Pete had drawn it when he was ten.

* * *

End

The Circle

Part One: The Camp

They had done the sensible thing, which was to pitch the tents on high ground.

No one had been able to identify who owned the field. A farmer named something, or a trust, or the estate of someone whose heirs had not reached an agreement. Piers had found it in a cycling guide published before the collapse, described as a permitted stopping point on the coastal route. The guide was twelve years old. The permission might have lapsed. None of them had looked into it.

There were four of them: Piers, who had organised it; Nessa, who had brought the better sleeping bags; Felix, who was Piers's housemate and who had come because Piers had asked and because he had no reason not to; and Ida, who had cycled ahead by three hours and already had a fire going when the others arrived.

Ida had arranged the tents in a circle with the fire at the centre. Piers had tried to make a square of it when he arrived, a more practical shape he thought, easier to manage tarpaulin. Ida had looked at him and said nothing, and somehow the circle had remained. She had left the south side wider than the rest. Piers called it uneven. Ida said it was easier to get in and out that way. Felix had almost asked why it mattered because Ida had clearly made the gap wider on purpose. She had paced the distance between the tents before driving the pegs. When Piers moved one peg to tighten the line, Ida moved it back while he was looking for the mallet.

The field sat on a ridge above the estuary. Below the ridge, perhaps two hundred metres down the slope and across a belt of rough grass and gorse, the fog lay across the low ground and the water in a band that ran north and south as far as they could see. Green in the evening light. Still.

"Coastal advisory says it's stable," Piers said, looking at it. "Inland limit's been the same for three weeks."

"The coastal advisory also said the estuary path was passable," Nessa said. "We walked in knee-deep mud for an hour."

"Ankle-deep."

"My boots disagree."

Ida was sitting on her pack with her coat buttoned and her hands around a tin cup, watching the fog below. She had a way of arriving at things already prepared that the others had stopped being surprised by.

"How close is it?" Felix asked.

"Two hundred metres. Maybe two-fifty."

"That's fine," he said.

"Of course it's fine," Ida said. "People live next to it."

"People disappear next to it."

"People disappear next to rivers. Next to roads. Next to each other."

He sat down beside her. Below the ridge, the fog was catching the last of the light. Its surface moved in shallow bands that his eyes could not resolve into wind, tide or current.

"It's beautiful," Nessa said, from behind him.

It was. That was the thing about it. It had always been beautiful.

Part Two: The Rules

They ate late, tinned food heated on the camp stove, bread that had gone stiff at the ends. Piers had brought wine in a flask, which was either optimistic or just Piers. They drank it around the fire and the fog below them did not move.

Felix had suggested the game. He could not remember exactly how, only that he had been talking about the fog and Ida had said something about how the fishermen told stories about it, specific stories, each one a different rule for how it behaved, and he had said: what kind of stories? And Ida had said: bad ones, mostly.

"We should tell them," he said.

"We don't know them," Piers said.

"We make them up. It's dark. We're camped two hundred metres from the fog. It's the correct activity."

"We're not eight," Nessa said.

"We're tired and a bit drunk and looking at the most reliably unsettling natural phenomenon on the coast," Felix said. "We're basically eight."

Nessa looked at the fog.

"Rules," she said. "If we're doing it, rules. Each story has to get worse than the last one. And if you're too scared to go on, you say so and someone else takes over."

"Nobody's going to be scared," Piers said.

"The rule stands anyway," Nessa said. "One more. Each story has to bring back something from the one before it."

"Why."

She looked at the fog. "So we're not just talking. So it goes somewhere."

"Fine. Who starts."

Ida refilled her cup. "Me," she said.

Part Three: Ida's Story

"This one is from a man I talked to in Mossbank," she said. "He drove a supply van on the coastal route before the roads got bad. His name was Carrow. He told me this in a pub and he had clearly told it before."

She looked at the fog.

"There's a section of coast road about eight miles north of here where the fog comes in off a cove. Local people know not to drive it at night because when the fog is thick the headlights do something wrong, they don't bounce back the way they should. Carrow didn't know this, the first time. He drove into the fog at about ten at night, slowed to walking pace, just trying to get through it.

"And his lights hit something in the road.

"A man. Standing perfectly still, facing away from the car. Carrow stopped and got out and called to him. The man turned around.

"It was Carrow's face on the man's face. His specific face. Not like a twin or a resemblance. His.

"Carrow got back in the car. He drove in reverse, slowly, for six hundred metres until the fog cleared, and then he turned around and drove home. He never drove that road at night again.

"He told me the face was not frightened. He said that was the part he couldn't get past. His own face, in the road, and it wasn't frightened at all."

She stopped.

The fire moved. Below the ridge, the fog was dark now, the green gone out of it.

"That's good," Piers said. "That's genuinely good."

"It was Carrow's story," Ida said. "I just remembered it."

Felix looked out past the firelight. A pale form appeared briefly beside the gorse and disappeared before he could identify it. He said nothing. Farther north, a strip of grass lay flatter than the surrounding field, although none of them had walked there.

Part Four: Piers's Story

"Mine's shorter," Piers said. He was looking at the fire, not the fog. "I found footage in an Authority archive, misfiled under tidal monitoring. A researcher had left cameras at the edge of a field for three weeks.

"On the fourteenth night, marks appeared at the limit of the frame. A line of grass pressed flat toward the equipment. They stopped twelve metres short.

"She checked the earlier footage. The marks were there every night, each time closer. She had been watching the fog.

"She moved the cameras further into the field.

"The next marks stopped six metres short."

He looked up.

"It was a calibration problem," Piers said. "Or she made it one by moving the cameras. Either way, once you change the observation point, you own the error."

"It's not a proper story," Piers said. "There's no ending."

When Piers finished, Felix noticed a dark line in the grass just beyond the firelight. He looked at where they had dragged the wood. The line was not there. It was further round, on the north side, where none of them had been. He watched it for a moment. It did not move. He looked back at the fire.

The smoke had begun to lean north.

Part Five: Nessa's Story

She had been looking at the fog for a while before she started. The others waited.

"When I was seventeen," she said, "my uncle lived in a coastal village farther north than the Cordell house. The fog had been coming in for about two years at that point.

"There was a man in the village who kept goats. Eleven of them. One morning they were all standing in the same field, facing north.

"The next morning they were still there. Third morning, still there. Eating when they had to, drinking when they had to, then returning to the same line.

"North from that field was the estuary.

"My uncle didn't know what the goats were looking at. Neither did anyone else. But the thing he couldn't stop thinking about was that they didn't look afraid.

"They looked," she stopped.

She looked at Ida.

"Attentive," she said.

A silence.

Then Piers said, in a different voice: "What direction is north from here."

Nobody answered. But all four of them were looking north. They had been looking north for a while, Felix realised, without any of them having decided to.

"It's the smoke," Nessa said. She could feel no wind on her face. "We're following the smoke."

He turned to say something to Ida and found that she was not looking north. She was looking at them, one by one, as if she had been waiting to see which way their faces turned.

The smoke from the fire was going north as well. There was no wind.

Part Six: Felix's Story

The fire had burned low. Piers added wood from the stack Ida had prepared, and the flame took and threw light out across the grass and caught the edge of the fog two hundred metres below.

Felix had been quiet for a while.

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

"No. I've got one." He looked at the fire, not the fog. "This one isn't a story. Not exactly."

Nessa looked at him.

"You said the rule was each one has to be worse," he said. "This is worse."

He looked at the fog. The goats had faced north for three days, Nessa's uncle said. Attentive. Not afraid. He had been thinking about that word since she said it.

"There's a man named Dalby. He supervised a communications relay station on the coast, one of the ones that used the fog as a carrier. I met him through work, a few years back. He told me this because I asked him directly, and because he was the kind of man who answers direct questions.

"His station had an operator. A good one. Methodical. She'd been working the station for seven months when things went wrong. He wouldn't say exactly how things went wrong, just that she'd been receiving signals she hadn't reported, and that eventually she went outside at night to stand at the intake array, and in the morning she wasn't there.

"He searched. They all searched.

"She'd left a logbook entry. He told me she wrote that she was going outside to listen to something directly. That she understood what it might mean.

"He didn't tell me what happened to her."

"You said you met him through work," Nessa said. "What work."

Felix was quiet for a moment. "I was doing assessments for the Authority. Incident reviews. She was the third operator that station had lost in two years." He looked at his hands. "I wrote a report. My recommendation was decommission. They didn't act on it."

"And the station is still running," Nessa said.

"Yes."

Piers looked at him. "You knew stations like that existed. Before this weekend."

Felix did not answer.

"You knew people went missing near them."

"Not here," Felix said.

It sounded weak even to him.

A silence.

"What he said was that in the months after, other operators came and went. Good operators, careful people. None of them lasted as long as she had. None of them could tune the membranes the way she could.

"And sometimes, when the fog was at the right density, signals came through on the exact frequency she had used. Dalby was careful about this: the signal did not contain her voice. The equipment simply returned to her setting.

"He never reclassified those signals. He logged them as operational noise. But he saved every one.

"I asked him why. If you're going to log them as noise, why save them.

"He thought about it for a long time."

Felix stopped.

"What did he say," Ida asked.

"He said: because noise doesn't come in on the same frequency every time."

Part Seven: The Circle

The fire was the only sound for a moment.

Then Ida said, quietly: "Felix."

"What."

"The fog."

He turned around.

It was at the edge of the firelight. Here, at the perimeter of the camp, sitting where the light the fire threw across the grass gave out. Green at its surface, darker at its centre.

He stood up.

"It was two hundred metres," he said.

"It was," Piers said.

All of them were on their feet. The fog was on three sides of the camp. Not closing. Just there, sitting where it had not been sitting twenty minutes ago, at the limit of the firelight.

The fourth side was open. South. Toward the slope, toward the road. The way out was clear.

None of them moved toward it.

"It doesn't usually move inland," Nessa said. Her voice was level, precise in a way the moment did not deserve.

"No," Ida said.

"The advisory said three weeks of stable limits," Piers said.

No one answered him.

Felix looked at the open side. South. The road was down there. A two-hour walk in the dark, but the road. He looked at the others. He could see from their faces that they had noticed the gap as well. That they were not moving toward it.

He thought about Dalby. He thought about the signal logged on the missing operator's frequency, quiet and persistent. He thought about the report and the recommendation and what he had told himself about it afterward.

He began, almost automatically, to sort what he was seeing. Distance from last known edge: two hundred metres. Direction of advance: uphill, against advisory expectation. Human response:

He did not say this aloud.

The fog did not advance. It held the three sides of the circle and left the fourth open.

In the fog, at the edge of the firelight, one shape stood facing in. He could not see it clearly. The firelight made edges uncertain. But it was there, and it was the right size.

Ida set her cup down slowly. She was looking at the shape nearest to her, and her face had the expression of someone reading a word they had not expected to find in that sentence.

The others had gone very still.

Felix looked at the shape. His height. His build. Weight resting on the left foot, his own tired stance. It showed no fear.

Ida picked up her cup. She held it in both hands and looked at the shapes with the face of someone who had been afraid of being right.

The smoke from the fire was still going north. It had been doing so since before any of them had noticed they were looking that way.

"We could get in the tents," Ida said.

Nobody answered.

The fire burned.

The shape in the fog was still. Attentive.

Below on the slope, the road lay clear in the dark. The gap remained open.

Felix looked at it until the measure of it came clear.

The gap was the same width as the space Ida had stepped out between the tents.

The fire burned lower.

None of them moved.

* * *

End

The Blank Stone

Part One: The Kerchief Gate

The stone beside Edie's had no name on it.

He had not expected it. He had known the grave would be there since booking the room, when Mrs Peel repeated a whole week, Mr Cope and left a beat afterward. He had ignored the beat then. He could not ignore the nameless stone at Edie's feet.

It was a child's stone. Low to the ground, the inscription space blank, uncut. Along the lower edge a faint line where a mason had begun and stopped. The grass around it had not fully knit: thin seams where the turf had been laid over disturbed earth, still settling. Recent, though not this week or last month, recent enough.

He stood there for a long time.

Then he went back up through the churchyard and out through the Kerchief Gate.

Fowler was at the hinge of the side gate with an oil can. He received Aldred with the manner of a man who had expected him, which Aldred had put down to small-town memory. He was less certain of that now.

"Come about the grave," Fowler said. Not a question.

"The stone beside her. The child's grave. Do you know whose it is?"

Fowler considered this with the unhurried precision he applied to everything. "It's a local burial," he said. "A few years back."

"There's no name."

"No."

Aldred waited. More did not come. "Is that usual?"

"It happens," Fowler said, "when the family can't agree on what to put."

He looked past Aldred toward the lower section, where the ground fell away toward the coast path and the fog sat on the water below. Low. Further in than it used to be, Aldred thought, though he could not be certain. He had been gone four years. The old line was somewhere in his memory, approximate, the kind of detail that shifted when you were not watching it.

"Best in the mornings," Fowler said. "Before the wind comes round. I'd ask you not to linger down there."

Aldred said he understood.

He walked back across the square to the Anchor. He had booked a week, which was longer than a grave visit required. When Mrs Peel had said a whole week, he had not had an answer. He did not have one now either, only the shape of the blank stone, the uncut inscription space, and the ground that was still settling as if the question beneath it had not finished yet.

Part Two: What He Remembered

He ate at the Anchor that evening. Mrs Peel brought soup and bread and asked if he had been to the churchyard and when he said yes she said "good" in a way that seemed to mean something other than approval.

He had told himself, when he left four years ago, that the leaving was practical. There had been no work in Dunmore, no family left except Edie's people, and Edie's people had their own grief. Walking back up to his room now, he thought about what he remembered.

He and Edie had wanted a child. That was a fact, solid, the kind of memory that did not move. They had tried for two years and nothing had come of it and Edie had gone to doctors in Porthmere who had said things that were kind but not useful. She had been, in those years, a woman who

carried something heavy in a way that did not show from the outside. He had watched her carry it and had not known how to help and had told himself that was because there was nothing to be done.

He remembered the conversation about the fog.

He was less certain about when, exactly. They had been in the kitchen, he thought, or possibly on the coast path, and she had said that she had heard something, from one of the older women in the village, about what the fog could do for women who went to it in a particular way, at a particular time. He had said that was the kind of thing that people said about things they did not understand. She had looked at him with the expression she kept for his most careful sentences, the expression that said: you are being precise and useless at the same time.

He did not remember what he had said after that.

He remembered she had told him, some weeks later, sitting on the edge of the bed in the morning with her back to him: I know I'm pregnant. I can feel it.

He remembered the feeling that had arrived in him then: something between hope and scepticism that he had not been able to resolve into either.

Once, after that, a small voice in the passage had called the umbrella an umberella. Aldred had been half asleep and had not corrected it. The day, the house and the child's face were gone. Only the extra syllable remained.

He had been sick a month after that. Badly sick, the kind that put him in bed for two weeks and left him thin and slow for a month more. During the worst of it he had woken more than once with salt on his lips, though the window had been shut and the house stood three streets up from the water. By the time he was properly well Edie had stopped talking about it. He had not asked. He had been grateful, at the time, for the clean surface of their days. No appointment to attend. No claim to test. No sentence that would require another sentence after it. He could not now say whether she had

changed in those months. He should have been able to say. That was what troubled him.

He had known she had gone. The salt on his lips during the fever and the silence where the word had been had told him enough. He had understood and had not asked. At the time he called that restraint. In the Anchor, with fog below the window and old carpet and sea in the room, the word no longer held.

Edie had died eight months after that, which was a different thing and he did not think about it now.

He looked at the tile, whose crack branched like a tributary river. For a moment he felt certain he had seen this exact crack years earlier.

He put it down to the room being similar to rooms he had stayed in before.

Part Three: The Third Day

He went to the grave each morning. Fowler's conditions held: the fog retreated with the outgoing tide and the path stayed clear for two hours, sometimes three. Aldred said nothing. He had never spoken to graves. He stayed anyway.

On the third day he looked at the small stone and understood that it was bothering him in a way he had not admitted.

He went to find Fowler and asked again about the child's grave.

Fowler was oiling a gate hinge. He gave the same answer in the same tone: local burial, a few years back, no name because the family could not agree on what to put.

Aldred went to the pub on the lower street that afternoon, which was called the Reach and which he had drunk in when he lived here. The barman was younger than he remembered but the barman's mother had

been a friend of Edie's and when Aldred mentioned the grave, the barman stopped wiping the glass and looked toward the other end of the bar.

"Poor little thing," the barman said. "Terrible business."

"What was?" Aldred said.

"Oh." The barman moved to the other end of the bar. "The usual, in those days. The fog."

Aldred sat with his drink and thought about this. Those days suggested a specific time. The fog had been here, in some form, for eleven years or more. Those days could mean anything within that span. It could mean the year Edie died. It could mean the year before.

He walked back to the Anchor through the lower street. Fog showed at the end of every seaward lane, a low floor between houses. It seemed closer than yesterday. Four years away had made the old shoreline unreliable in his memory, so he counted the lanes instead.

He counted the lanes. Five. The fog at the bottom of each one. He tried to remember if it had been visible from here four years ago. He could not be certain.

Part Four: The Crack

On the fourth morning he stood at the washbasin and looked at the crack in the tile.

It was shaped like a tributary river. A main channel running left to right and two smaller branches splitting off upward. He had looked at it every morning and the looking was becoming a habit, which meant it was becoming a way of locating himself in the day, which meant it was becoming more important than it should be.

He tried to remember if there had been a crack in the tile in the room he and Edie had shared. Their room had been on the far side of the village, a

rented house that had gone back to the landlord after she died, and he could not now bring the bathroom tile to mind with any certainty. There had been a window with a view of the back garden. There had been a loose board on the landing. He could not remember the tiles.

He went to the grave.

The ground beneath the stone had settled further. The thin lines in the turf where it had been laid were less visible. The stone itself was the same: inscription space blank, uncut. The faint line at its lower edge was still there, a little darker than it had been on Monday, like dirt caught in a cut.

He was trying to remember the sequence.

Edie had said she was pregnant in the morning, sitting on the bed. That was clear. The kitchen conversation about the fog had come before that, he was certain. How long before? He could not have said. Weeks, he had thought. But it might have been a month. It might have been longer.

He had been sick after. How long after? He had thought a month, but he was less certain of that now.

He stood up. The yew above Edie's grave moved in the wind off the sea. From somewhere below the churchyard wall he heard a sound, brief, the kind of sound the wind made in coastal grass, or the kind of sound a child made when it was playing alone and did not know it was being heard. He stood very still. The sound did not come again.

He went back up the path.

Fowler stood at the gate without working on the hinges or the path.

"You're here early," Fowler said.

Aldred said he had not been able to sleep.

Fowler looked at him with pity and recognition, though Aldred did not understand what Fowler recognised.

"The fog's been coming in at night," Fowler said. "Some people find it unsettling."

"Has it been reaching the churchyard?"

Fowler looked toward the lower section. "The fog reaches the lower path on some mornings, but it has not reached the graves."

Not yet, Aldred thought, and did not say.

Part Five: What Shifted

On the fifth day he could not remember whether he had eaten breakfast.

He thought he had. He had a clear image of the table at the Anchor, the blue cloth, the rack of toast, the pot of tea. But when he tried to place it in the morning, to say: I sat down and then I stood up and then I went out, the sequence did not hold. The image was there but it had no before or after.

He went to the pub and asked the barman, directly, what he had meant by the usual, in those days.

The barman looked at him for a moment. "There were a few," he said carefully, "that went too close. The year your wife died and the year before. People thought distance was enough then."

"Children?"

The barman's hands went still on the glass he was drying. "Some."

"And the grave beside my wife. The one with no name."

"Mr Cope." The barman set down the glass. "Your wife was well-liked here. She is well-remembered. I wouldn't go looking for more than that."

Aldred walked back to the Anchor. He sat on the bed and tried to reconstruct the week: the day he arrived, the first visit to the grave, the conversation with Fowler, the dinner, the second visit, the third. The days were there but they would not go into order.

He wrote the days down on the notepad by the bed.

Monday: arrived. Saw grave. Small stone.

He looked at what he had written and could not be certain Monday was right. It might have been Tuesday.

He looked at the tile with the crack. Main channel, two branches. He could not decide which of the smaller branches was the one he had noticed first. He had the clear and inexplicable conviction, arriving fully formed, that he had lain in this bed before. Not in a room like this. This bed. This crack. Before Edie died. Before they were married, possibly. He had no memory of staying here before and no reason to have done so, and the conviction was groundless, and he knew it was groundless, and it did not go away.

Part Six: The Last Morning

He went to the grave in the early morning, before the tide turned.

The fog had reached the lower churchyard wall and pressed flat against the old stone despite the lack of wind. Aldred watched it for a moment, then turned toward Edie's grave.

He stood there for a long time. He remembered her voice, her small left-slanting handwriting, her shoulders drawn slightly forward as she sat with her back to him on the morning she told him.

I know I'm pregnant. I can feel it.

He had not known what to say. He had wanted to believe her. He had believed her and not believed her at the same time and told himself that both could be true while the certainty arrived.

The certainty had not arrived. He had been sick. Then she had been sick. Then she had been gone, and he had been left in a house too full of her absence to stay in. He had called leaving the only practical thing.

He looked at the small stone. The blank inscription space. The ground settled now, fully settled, the turf knit as if it had always been there.

He still did not know what Edie had done or what had happened afterward. He had avoided those questions for four years, and returning to Dunmore had made them harder to avoid.

He took the pencil from his coat pocket, the same one he had used for the list of days. He crouched at the stone and set the point against the blank inscription space, and wrote, in small careful letters, the name they had allowed themselves just once, the winter before she told him. It had been a joke at first and then not a joke, and he had never said it aloud since.

He wrote it and sat back on his heels and looked at it.

The letters were there, grey on grey, faint but legible. He watched the letters and doubted that his own hand had written them, although he remembered doing so. The fog below the wall did not move. The sound did not come. While he watched, the pencil lines blurred although nothing touched them. Within seconds the name had disappeared and the stone was blank again.

He stayed crouched at the stone for a long time.

The sound came again from the fog below the wall. This time it continued without the breaks and changes of wind moving through grass.

He stood very still.

Then he turned and walked up the path and out through the Kerchief Gate and across the square to the Anchor, and he went up to his room and sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the crack in the tile.

He did not think: tomorrow I will go home.

He thought: I will stay until I can write the name without watching it disappear.

Part Seven: What Remained

Mrs Peel found the room empty on the eighth morning.

The bed had been slept in. The bag was still there, open on the chair, clothes folded inside as if packed and then not taken. The notepad on the bedside table had a list of days written on it, ending on a day that was not the day before, with a gap of at least two days unaccounted for. The window was latched from inside. On the floor by the washbasin was a little grey grit, the kind that collected on the lower path after rain.

She called Fowler, because Fowler was the person you called in Dunmore when something had happened that you did not want to name yet.

Fowler came and looked at the room and looked at the bag and looked at the car on the square, still parked where it had been since Monday or Tuesday.

"I'll make some enquiries," he said.

Mrs Peel nodded. She had known it might go this way when he had booked a whole week. She had hoped it wouldn't.

She stripped the bed and opened the window to air the room. Then she put the bag in the back cupboard behind the coats where she kept things people left. She wrote his name on the paper, though everyone knew whose bag it was.

The car stayed on the square for another three days. Then it was gone, and no one in the village mentioned who had moved it or where it had gone, and after a time no one mentioned Aldred Cope at all.

The grave beside Edie's remained as it was. Blank stone, settled ground. The faint line at the lower edge had darkened a little, or looked as if it had. No one asked Fowler about it. No one asked Mrs Peel about the bag. The grass above it grew as grass grows: evenly, without hurry, the same as everything else in the lower section of St Bede's churchyard, which the fog

reached now on most mornings and which Fowler tended each week regardless, because that was his work, and some things stayed where they were by not being asked about.

* * *

End

The Garden

I had been dying for three years before I met the man who saved me.

That is what I believed. I kept the evidence in a notebook with a red cover: fatigue, headaches, a tremor in my right hand. Four doctors had found nothing. One had written health anxiety. Another had shown me clear blood panels and a clear MRI while I watched his finger move down the page, missing me entirely.

The sentence I repeated, quietly and often, was simple: I am not dying.

I was fifty-one and had been an accountant for twenty-two years. I applied the same precision to symptoms and balance sheets.

Once, eighteen months before the garden, I had been right. A pharmacist noticed the rash on my wrist while handing me a prescription and told me to ask for a different antibiotic. The GP called the next morning and said the interaction was rare but possible and that I had done well to mention it. I wrote rare but possible in the red notebook and underlined it twice. After that, every dismissal had to pass through that one correct entry.

By the time I met the man, I had spent eleven hundred pounds on private consultations and twice that on supplements: expensive forms of reassurance that wore out quickly and required replacement.

* * *

He found me at the market.

Or I found him. The distinction seemed important once, and does not seem important now.

He had a table between the cheese seller and a woman who repaired shoes. No sign. A few brown glass bottles arranged without labels. I assumed they were remedies. Later I wondered whether they had ever contained anything at all. He was perhaps sixty, perhaps older, the kind of

face that had settled into itself a long time ago and stopped changing. He watched me slow as I passed his table, his face idle and his attention fixed.

"You look tired," he said.

I told him I was always tired.

"That's a different thing," he said.

I stopped.

We talked for perhaps twenty minutes. He did not itemise my symptoms or file them into categories. He listened closely and nodded before I had finished several of the details. When I mentioned the tremor he said yes in a way that meant he had expected it. When I mentioned the headaches he said of course without surprise. He did not tell me what I had. He told me he knew what I needed.

"There is a garden," he said. "Old ground. The fog comes through it differently there. Not like the street fog. Older than that." He looked at me steadily. "I don't take everyone. But I think you would benefit."

I asked him what it cost.

He named a figure. It was less than I had paid the third doctor and considerably less than the supplement programme that had lasted six weeks before I had concluded it was insufficient. I paid him in cash, which he preferred.

"Saturday morning," he said. "Early. Before the ordinary people are about."

I did not ask what he meant by ordinary. I went home and wrote the appointment in my notebook with the red cover, and for the first time in three years I slept without waking at three in the morning to check my pulse.

* * *

Saturday was clear and cold. He met me at the end of a lane I did not know, on the east side of town where the streets gave out and the land ran toward the coast. He was wearing a waxed jacket and carrying nothing. He looked at me in the morning light with an expression I could not read clearly and said: "Good. You came."

We walked for perhaps fifteen minutes without speaking. The paved lane narrowed into a track, and the track faded until only flattened grass marked the route. On either side the land was rough and damp and smelled of the coast. The mist was low in the hollows, the ordinary grey of early morning, nothing unusual.

Then we came to the wall.

Old stone, chest high, green with moss along the cap. A wooden gate, swollen in its frame, that he opened with his shoulder rather than his hand. Beyond it: the garden.

I do not know what it had been. A kitchen garden, perhaps, or something more deliberate. The beds were still faintly visible as raised rectangles beneath the overgrowth, and along the far wall something had once been trained and had long since gone its own way. A pear tree, I thought, or something that had started as one. Stone walls enclosed three sides. The rear wall of an abandoned house formed the fourth, and its windows remained dark even in the morning light.

The fog was different here.

I noticed it immediately. Denser than the street fog, clear enough to see through and still wrong against the skin. It sat between the overgrown beds at about knee height. The grass within it bent one way, then another, without wind.

"Walk through it," the man said. He had stopped just inside the gate. I realised later that he had not crossed the threshold. "Take your time. There's no wrong way."

I looked at him.

"I'll be here," he said. He leaned against the gatepost. He had the posture of a man who intended to wait.

I walked into the garden.

* * *

The cold was immediate. Four or five degrees, the drop you feel entering a cellar. Within a few steps condensation filmed my boots. Against my hands and face the fog felt dry, a fine even pressure, like cloth held close without touching.

I walked the length of the first bed and back along the second. The fog moved around me and closed behind me. I breathed it with the rest of the cold air. For a moment I had the odd impression that it was waiting for me to stop moving.

The pressure across my chest released. My shoulders dropped, and I drew a full breath without checking whether it hurt. I had catalogued the pressure for three years under chest discomfort, intermittent in the red notebook. It ended without drama or a moment I could identify afterward. Only when it was gone did I realise how continuously I had braced against it.

I stood in the middle of the garden and breathed.

The sky above the walls was very blue. The pear tree or whatever it was moved slightly at the top in a wind I could not feel below the wall, and I noticed that the movement came a moment after the wind had already passed through the grass beyond the wall. A small thing. A trick of distance, I thought. Along the nearest bed, water drops hung from the grass stems without falling, each one complete and still, and I stood watching them for what felt like a few seconds before I understood they had not moved at all.

The fog folded around my boots. For the first time in three years, I felt no pain, tremor or need to check my body for another symptom.

I walked back to the gate.

* * *

The man was still at the gatepost. His eyes narrowed when I returned, and he straightened abruptly from the gatepost. His lips were moving, and I realised that he had been counting. His lips stopped moving when I reached him. He pulled off his right glove and looked at his hand, then put the glove back on.

"Well," he said.

"I feel extraordinary," I told him.

"Good." He latched the gate. His hand on the latch stayed there a moment longer than the action required. "That's good."

"How soon before we come back?"

He looked at me. "We'll see how the next few days go," he said. "Some people find once is enough." He said it as if once had not always meant leaving.

I thanked him several times on the walk back to the lane. I am not certain he heard all of it. He was slightly ahead of me and his pace had changed, and once, when I caught up with him, he glanced at me sideways with the expression of a man revising a calculation he had thought was settled.

We parted at the end of the lane. He told me to rest. He told me to eat well. He told me to notice how I felt in the mornings.

I noticed. For four days I felt better than I had in three years. I wrote this in the red notebook. I wrote: perhaps it was always psychosomatic. Perhaps the garden simply interrupted the cycle. I wrote: I do not care what the mechanism is. I feel well.

On the fifth day the tremor came back.

* * *

The old tremor came when I was tired, a fine vibration in the fingers of my right hand that vanished if I focused on it. This was different. This

movement was slower and broader than a tremor. My hand responded later than I intended whenever I reached for something.

I went back to the lane. I found the man at the market the following Saturday. He looked at me and something in his face arranged itself carefully.

"Once more," he said. "Some people need it twice."

I paid him again. Before we left, he noticed the split lace on my right boot and replaced it from a coil under his table. He knelt in the mud to tie it properly, then stood and counted the notes twice.

We walked to the garden. I walked through the fog.

Halfway along the second bed I stopped and looked behind me. My footprints were there in the soft ground, the impressions of my boots in a line from the gate. But they were still forming. The last three, the ones nearest to me, were pressing themselves into the earth as I watched, slowly, like something being written out by hand. I had already taken those steps. I was standing still now and the ground was still receiving them.

I looked at my feet. I looked at the prints completing themselves behind me.

The tightness in my chest disappeared again. The blue sky above the wall. The last footprints settling into the earth behind me. I walked back to the gate.

The man took one step back when I came through, not far, not dramatically, the automatic movement of a person who has misjudged a distance. He turned to latch the gate, but the gate was already latched.

"Same as before?" he asked.

"Better," I said.

He did not look at me. He looked at the gate, then at his gloved hands, then at a point somewhere past my left shoulder.

I should have asked him then what he expected to happen. I should have asked him what usually happened, with the others, the ones who went in and did not feel better, or who felt better and did not come back. I should have asked about the garden, about the house behind it, about what old ground meant and why the fog moved differently here.

I thanked him instead. I walked home in the late morning light feeling very well.

His boots were dry. I noticed this only later.

* * *

The slowing was gradual enough that I did not name it for some time.

I noticed first that my handwriting had changed. Not worse, not trembling: slower. Each letter formed with a deliberateness that had not been there before. I sat at my desk one afternoon and watched my hand move across the page and thought: I am being careful. That is all. I am taking my time.

I noticed that television had become unwatchable. Everyone moved too fast. The cuts between scenes came before I had finished with the previous one. I turned it off and sat in the quiet. I opened the red notebook, wrote the date, and left the line beneath it blank. After a while I closed the book. Blank entries, I decided, were a form of progress.

At the bakery a woman asked whether I wanted the usual. I had formed the word yes by the time she had already turned to the next customer.

I did not go back to the market.

* * *

One evening in February I opened the red notebook.

I had not opened it in some weeks. The cover was where it always was, on the left side of the desk, beside the lamp. I opened it to the next blank page, uncapped the pen, and wrote the date. The date took longer than it should

have. I watched my hand form the numbers and thought: the cold. The heating had been unreliable. That was the explanation.

I wrote: tremor, right hand.

By the time the words were on the page the tremor had moved into the left. I looked at what I had written. The entry was already incomplete. I wrote: also left. I looked at that. I wrote: hands.

I sat for a moment. I looked at the columns above it, the careful entries going back three years, symptom and date and duration and severity on a scale of one to ten, the correlations I had noted in the margin, the patterns I had circled and connected with thin lines. The notebook was precise. The notebook had always been more precise than the doctors, more precise than the consultations, more precise than the blood panels and the MRI and the follow-up appointments that came back clear.

I picked up the pen again.

I could not think of the next thing to write because my condition changed before I could finish describing its previous state. What I wrote would be the record of a previous state, a condition I had already passed through. The notebook would be a document of where I had been, not where I was. That had never been its purpose. Its purpose was to track the progression. That required keeping up.

I looked at the open page.

I closed the notebook.

I did not put it back on the left side of the desk. I put it on the shelf above the desk, behind the row of reference volumes I had not opened in years. It fit there without difficulty. There had always been space exactly its width.

I sat at the desk for a while with the lamp on.

There was a lightness to it, and underneath the lightness something I had not yet learned to fear.

* * *

My sister came in March.

She sat across the kitchen table and talked to me and I watched her face move through its expressions, each one arriving and departing before I had fully understood the previous one. She was saying something about my colour, about whether I was eating. Her voice sounded high and fast to me, and I could no longer separate one word from the next.

I told her I was fine.

She looked at me for a long moment. Her expression changed. I watched it change and by the time I had identified what it was changing into she had already reached across the table and put her hand on mine.

"Edmund," she said.

Her voice was very fast. I recognised my name and concentrated on it while the surrounding words passed too quickly.

I told her: I am fine. I am better than fine. The garden helped. The fog. I felt it loosen in my chest. I am not dying. I was never dying. I told her this clearly and with the conviction of a man who has understood something important and wants to share it. Something had been progressing after all, I told her. I was relieved to know I had been right.

By the time I understood that she had stood up, she had already reached the door. I could not reconstruct the movements between those two positions.

* * *

I am writing this slowly.

Each word takes the time it takes. I do not rush them. There is no benefit to rushing.

The room I am in is white. People come and go. Their mouths move before their faces have settled, and their voices are high and fast like birds,

like the sound a recording makes when the tape runs too quick. I follow what they say. I understand all of it. I simply cannot respond at the speed they require.

I have been told, I believe, that this is catatonia. I have been told there is no medical explanation. I have been told the tests are clear.

The tests are always clear.

I think about the garden often. The blue sky above the walls. The fog moving around my boots. The loosening in my chest, which was real, which I do not regret. I think about the man at the gatepost watching me come through the gate with his hand still on the latch, his expression doing something careful and quick that I understand now was the expression of a man who has made an error he cannot correct.

He gave me exactly what he sold me.

I am not dying.

I have thought about this more than anything else and I am certain of it. My heart is steady. I am present. I am watching the light move across the white wall and I am thinking clearly and I have, I believe, a great deal of time.

That is precisely the problem.

The people in this room move like weather now. Rapid and purposeful and gone before I have finished watching them arrive. My sister comes on Tuesdays, I think, or what are called Tuesdays here. She sits and holds my hand and her face moves through grief and hope and grief again in the time it takes me to form the thought that I would like to tell her: I am here.

I am here.

I am forming the words.

I will tell her when she comes back. I will have it ready. The sentence is almost complete. She will come back and I will say it and she will know and

the expression on her face will be the expression I remember from when we were young, before the red notebook, before the market, before the garden with its knee-high fog and its blue sky and its loosening.

I am nearly ready.

She was just here, I think.

She will be back soon.

I am

* * *

DUNMORE HERALD & COASTAL REGISTER: FOG REVIEW REPORT

THE DUNMORE HERALD & COASTAL REGISTER Serving the coastal parishes since 1887

* * *

FOG REVIEW RECOMMENDS 'MEASURED APPROACH' TO COASTAL PHENOMENON

Authorities welcome findings as basis for long-term planning

A review commissioned by the Regional Coastal Management Board has concluded that the green coastal fog affecting the Dunmore estuary and surrounding parishes may be treated, on present evidence, as a stable environmental condition requiring no intervention beyond existing guidance.

The review, conducted over fourteen months by a panel drawn from coastal ecology, public health, and regional planning, describes the fog as a persistent low-level atmospheric phenomenon with a broadly consistent seasonal pattern. It recommends that current advisory frameworks be maintained and that local authorities incorporate fog presence into standard land-use and residential planning assessments.

Speaking at a briefing in Dunmore, the panel's lead author said the findings should provide reassurance to residents and businesses in affected areas. "This is not a new phenomenon," she said. "Records consistent with a fog of this character suggest a presence on this coastline considerably longer than living memory. What is new is our capacity to document it systematically."

The review acknowledges a limited number of unresolved incident reports from the preceding three years. It states that, on the evidence presently available to the panel, no causal relationship between fog exposure and reported harm can be formally established.

Parish councils in Crale, Porthmere, and Mossbank have been invited to submit responses before the final report is published in the spring.

The full review is available to registered parties through the Regional Board office. Public summaries will be circulated to harbour authorities and coastal health providers in due course. Requests for the supporting incident data should be directed to the Board secretariat.

* * *

End

The Rule

Part One: The Last Time

The rule was simple: you stopped when Kit stopped.

That had been the rule since the first time, which was eighteen months ago in Mara's brother's van on the coast road, and none of them had broken it since. They followed it because Kit was careful, and careful was worth something in a place where the hospital had been running on volunteer shifts for three years.

There were five of them tonight. Kit. Cara. Mara. Ellis. A boy called Seb who had started coming with Ellis in September and who nobody had officially invited but nobody had told to stop either. They were in the old chandlery at the bottom of Slip Lane, which smelled of rope and salt-damp and had one working window that looked out over the harbour wall toward the fog bank sitting low on the water.

It was the last time. They had all agreed on that.

Ellis was leaving for the mainland in a fortnight, some logistics work that paid actual wages. Mara was getting married in the spring. Cara had said she wanted to stop because she had been having the same dream three nights running and dreams felt like a sign. Kit had not said why she wanted to stop, only that she did, which was enough.

She had buried the jar in the garden three months ago. She had found it on her kitchen shelf the following Tuesday, clean and dry, the lid sealed.

She had not told the others that either.

* * *

Part Two: The Jar

The device was a glass jar with a rubber lid, a length of thin tubing, and a small mesh screen that had started its life as a tea strainer. It looked like something built by a child. The rubber tube had teeth marks near the end. Kit had always assumed they were Ellis's. There was a faint ring of discolouration on the glass near the base, where something had rested against it for a long time. Kit had seen a jar like this in a photograph of her mother's kitchen. She had assumed it was for jam. In the photograph, her mother's thumb had rested over the same scratched line near the base.

Ellis said they had been there when he got it. A line had been scratched into the glass near the base. No one called it a fill line. They all knew what it meant.

Ellis held the jar while Cara worked the lid. Outside, the fog sat where it had sat for eleven years, a permanent feature of the harbour approach like the rusting crane and the painted tide marker on the west pier wall. On still nights like this it held level against the harbour wall.

Mara had driven down Slip Lane in her brother's van to collect the jar that morning. The collection took four minutes. She had the window down because she liked to watch the fog, and when she drove back up the lane she thought she could smell it even without having opened the jar. Faint. Green and mineral, like copper in rain.

She had not mentioned this to the others.

Kit sat on an upturned crate near the window. She was not going first. Watching Ellis fit the tubing brought her mother back. Frances had used the jar too, long before any of them. Kit had learned that two years ago from a woman at the community meals. Your mum loved it, the woman had said, stirring her tea. Couldn't leave it alone, at the end. Kit had not asked what at the end meant. She had spent two years calling that choice something other than fear.

She had one other thing of her mother's from that time: a page torn from a diary, kept folded in the tin with her birth certificate, dated the March before Frances died. Most of it was ordinary, a shopping list, a doctor's appointment crossed out and rewritten. At the bottom, in different ink added later: the line was higher this week. I did not move it. Kit had read that sentence perhaps forty times without once being able to decide whether it frightened her or not.

"Ready," Ellis said.

* * *

Part Three: Under

The routine held. Ellis first, three slow breaths. The colour behind his eyes, he always said, was like watching someone light a fire in a dark room. He passed to Mara. Mara to Seb, who went long because he always did, and Cara put her hand on the tubing and said his name and he surfaced blinking.

"Sorry," Seb said. His voice was strange for a moment, and then it steadied. He looked at the window rather than at any of them.

"Don't be sorry," Cara said. "Just stop when you're told."

She took her turn. Kit watched her go under, which was the only word Kit had for it, that slow softening of the face and the loosening of the hands in the lap and the eyes going half-closed and tracking something that was not in the room. Two breaths. Kit counted. Three.

Cara was still going.

Kit touched her shoulder. "Cara."

Four.

"Cara."

Cara lowered the tubing and blinked twice. For several seconds she stared past Kit before her eyes focused on Kit's face.

"I'm here," she said.

"You went long."

"I know. Sorry. It was different this time."

"Different how."

Cara looked at the window. The fog sat where it had always sat. "Bigger," she said. "There was more of it. And there was..." She stopped.

"What."

"Someone answered."

"What did they say?"

Cara looked at the jar. "They knew the rule."

Kit looked at Seb. Seb was still looking at the window.

Kit passed the jar to Mara to seal and said nothing.

Mara sealed it with both hands, checked the lid twice and wiped the rim, making the procedure look safer than it was.

* * *

Part Four: The Walk Home

Outside was cold and clear. The lane smelled of low tide and someone's chimney. Ellis and Mara walked ahead. Seb trailed behind them, quiet in a way that was new. Once, Kit looked back and found him mouthing something without sound. Kit watched him go.

Kit kept pace with Cara.

"You okay."

"Fine," Cara said. "Better than fine, actually."

She began to smile only after Kit had finished looking at her.

They walked up past the newsagent, which had been a newsagent since Kit's grandmother was alive, and past the church hall where the community meals ran on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Cara said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Obviously."

"Your mum. The name."

Kit looked at her. "What about it."

"What was her name? I've been trying to remember."

Kit's chest tightened. She had not spoken her mother's name to Cara before. "Why?"

Cara shrugged. She was looking at the pavement ahead of her. "I don't know. I've just been wondering. Since we went under. Don't ask me why. It came to me."

"Frances," Kit said.

"Frances," Cara repeated. She nodded slowly, as if confirming something. "Frances. That's right."

Kit had never told her.

* * *

Part Five: The Morning

She was sure of this by the time she reached home. She was certain of it by the time she brushed her teeth. She went through every conversation she could remember, and there had been no reason to bring it up, and she had not. Cara had not known her mother. Cara had been twelve when Frances died and they had not been close then and Kit had not spoken of her much since. The name had not come up.

She sat on the edge of her bed and thought about the fog.

The vapour produced coloured visions, warmth and a temporary loss of awareness of the room and the body. The Hargreaves boy had come out of it speaking a language no one could identify, for three hours, then stopped. The Murch woman had seen something she refused to describe and taken down every mirror in her house. Kit had always treated this as folklore.

She picked up her phone. She put it down.

There was another explanation: she had told Cara and simply could not remember. That was possible. People forgot the small things first.

She lay down without undressing and left the light on.

* * *

In the morning Cara sent a message. It said: slept well for the first time in weeks. how are you feeling?

Kit looked at the message for a while. Then she wrote back: Fine. You?

Really good, Cara wrote. Honestly better than I have in ages. Whatever last night was, it did something.

Kit set the phone face-down on the kitchen table. She made tea. She stood at the window and looked at the lane and the rooftops and, beyond the rooftops, the grey strip of sea and the fog on the water.

At ten past ten the letterbox clicked. A folded piece of paper lay on the mat. She opened it. Seb had written two words in block capitals: WHO IS FRANCES

There was no one on the step.

She thought about what Cara had said on the walk home.

Frances. That's right.

A confirmation, not a question. Like someone checking a list.

She poured the tea down the sink and called Ellis.

"The name," she said when he picked up. "My mother's name. Have I ever told you?"

Kit waited. "Frances."

Her hand tightened on the phone. "When did I tell you?"

"You didn't," he said, and then neither of them spoke.

"Kit."

"I know."

"Do you want me to come over?"

"No," she said. "I just wanted to know."

She ended the call and stood very still in her kitchen. Outside, the fog sat on the water.

Your mum loved it, the woman had said. Couldn't leave it alone, at the end.

Kit wondered what Frances had heard, in those last months. What name the fog had offered her. Whether it had been someone she recognised.

* * *

Part Six: The Name

She told herself she was only going to look at the tin again, the diary page, the line she had read forty times. She sat with it at the kitchen table until midnight and then she put on her coat.

The chandlery was unlocked. It was always unlocked; none of them had ever thought to fix that. She let herself in and found the jar where Mara had left it, sealed, on the shelf by the window. The rule was that you stopped when Kit stopped. There was no rule for what happened when Kit went first, and alone, because it had never once occurred to any of them that she would.

She told herself she wanted to ask only one question. She knew she could reseal the jar and leave, but she broke the seal instead.

She copied Cara's practiced twist of the lid. She breathed.

She did not ask about Frances' name. She already knew that. She asked what the line meant, the one Frances had written about and not moved, the one scratched into the glass near the base that none of them called a fill line because they all knew what it meant. She asked what her mother had wanted, at the end, badly enough to keep coming back for it.

Something answered, but afterward Kit remembered no words. She remembered only the certainty that an answer had been given and that another presence had remained with her. It stayed after the words were gone.

She sealed the jar herself, badly, her hands unsteady, and did not make it look organised at all.

She walked home the long way, past the newsagent, past the church hall, and did not think about who else the fog might tell.

* * *

In the morning someone knocked at the door before seven. It was Mara. She did not say anything. She held up her left hand, palm inward. On the inside of her wrist, in her own handwriting, was the name Frances.

Kit looked at it for a moment.

She thought about the chandlery at midnight, and the seal she had broken alone, and the company she had asked for without once asking herself what it would cost the people closest to her to provide it.

She stepped back to let her in. On the kitchen table, the jar waited.

* * *

End

The Form

Part One: The Police

The duty officer's name was Greaves. He had a lanyard and a form already on the desk when she sat down, which meant he had done this before.

"Name of the child."

"Lotte. Lotte Draper. She's nine."

He wrote. His handwriting was careful, the handwriting of a man who understood that forms were documents.

"Date of last contact."

"The fourteenth. Eleven days ago."

"And the circumstances."

Clem Draper had repeated the same sequence four times in eleven days. Her daughter had been playing in the garden. The fog had come in off the low ground earlier than usual. When Clem had gone out twenty minutes later, Lotte was not there. The gate was closed. The shoes Lotte had taken off on the step were still on the step. The left one was always the one she left untied.

She told it to Greaves. He wrote while she spoke. The form had boxes for all of it.

"And you've seen her since."

"Three times. The first time was the day after, at the tramstop on Aldgate Street. She was on the other side of the road. I called her name. She looked at me and walked away."

Greaves's pen had stopped.

"She looked at you."

"Yes."

"And walked away."

"Yes."

He put the pen down because he no longer needed to record a conventional missing-person report.

"Mrs. Draper," he said. "I want to be straightforward with you. Children who have had contact with the fog are not processed under the missing persons protocol."

She looked at him.

"The criteria for a missing persons investigation require that the individual's whereabouts be unknown and that there be no evidence of voluntary movement. In cases where mist contact has occurred and the individual has subsequently been observed making deliberate decisions about direction of travel, those criteria are generally not met."

"She's nine," Clem said.

"I understand."

"She walked away from me. That doesn't mean she chose to leave."

"No," Greaves said, but he did not change the classification or reopen the report. "What I'd suggest is the hospital. The coastal health authority has a specialist unit. They have more appropriate protocols for these situations."

He wrote an address on a piece of paper and slid it across the desk. The paper was pre-printed with the station's letterhead. He had the address ready to write. He had written it before.

Part Two: The Hospital

The unit was on the third floor. Unlisted in the lobby directory. The woman at the information desk had known where it was without looking it up.

A nurse named Lund sat across from Clem at a table in a small room with a window that looked onto an internal courtyard. There was a plant on the windowsill. It was doing well. Better than the light allowed.

Clem told the story again. The garden. The shoes. The tramstop. The second time she had seen Lotte: four days ago, in the window of the café on Market Street, looking out. By the time Clem had pushed through the door the window was empty. The third time: the school playground, a Tuesday, the wrong time of day, no other children. Lotte at the far end of the climbing frame, on the high platform, the place she always stood to wait when Clem was late to collect her. Clem had gone through the gate. Lotte had gone through the far gate.

"Each time she sees you, she moves away," Lund said.

"Yes."

"Does she appear distressed?"

Clem thought about the tramstop. Lotte's face across the road. The expression on it.

"No," she said.

"Does she appear to recognise you?"

"I don't know." She stopped. "I think so. The way she looked at me before she walked away. It wasn't the way you look at a stranger."

Lund wrote something. Then she put the pen down.

"Mrs. Draper. Children who have had significant mist exposure undergo changes that fall outside the clinical parameters we're able to treat here. The

changes aren't injuries. They're not illness. They don't present as symptoms in a way that allows for a treatment pathway."

"What are they."

Lund looked at the plant on the windowsill. "We don't have good language for it yet."

"She's nine."

Lund was quiet. She looked at the plant on the windowsill, then back at Clem. "I know."

"She walked away from me. She walked away from me three times."

"What I'd suggest," Lund said, "is the municipal registration office. The municipality has a dedicated unit for cases of this kind. They have the appropriate framework."

She wrote an address. Ground floor of the civic centre. Room 14. Ask for the registrar on duty.

The address was already written on a card she took from a small stack in her desk drawer. She had a stack of them.

Part Three: The Registrar

Room 14 was at the end of a corridor painted the colour of old cream. The door had a sign that said Extraordinary Absence Registration and below it, smaller, in brackets: (Mist-Related Cases).

The registrar's name was Harlow. He had a jacket and a cardigan under the jacket and the manner of a man who had chosen his profession because he was good at providing clarity in situations that resisted it.

He had a form. It was longer than the police form and had more categories. The paper smelled faintly of wet stone and closed underground rooms.

He took Clem through it methodically. Name, age, date of last home residence. Date of mist contact. Duration of estimated exposure. Subsequent observations: how many, where, duration of visual contact each time.

"And on each occasion," he said, "she moved away from you under her own power."

"Yes."

"She was not being restrained or directed by any third party."

"No. She just walked away."

He wrote. "And you attempted to approach her."

"Every time."

"And she was aware of your approach before she moved away."

Clem looked at him. "Yes."

His pen hovered over the box beside category three. Clem gripped the metal edge of the chair until it pressed a line into her palm.

Harlow put the pen down. He aligned it with the edge of the form.

"Mrs. Draper," he said. "I want to explain the framework we work within, because I think it will help you understand what we can and can't do here."

She waited.

"Children who have had mist contact are classified according to a set of observed behaviours. The classification determines what kind of support is available and from which service." He turned the form slightly so she could see it. The categories were printed in two columns. "Category one is temporary non-responsiveness: the individual is physically present but not engaging. That resolves on its own in most cases. Category two is affect reduction: the individual is present, engaging, but with a reduced emotional

range. Category three is voluntary withdrawal: the individual has left the family home or care environment without coercion and has not returned."

"She's nine," Clem said. "She didn't leave voluntarily. She was in the garden."

"The category refers to current behaviour, not the circumstances of initial contact. An individual who is currently making consistent, deliberate choices about direction of movement, who is avoiding contact with their prior care environment, meets the criteria for category three regardless of how the fog exposure occurred."

"She's avoiding me," Clem said. "She hasn't chosen to leave."

Harlow looked down at the form before answering. Clem could tell that he had heard the distinction before and knew the approved response.

"Mrs. Draper. In the cases we process, the distinction between avoidance and choice is one we're not able to make. We don't have the tools to determine what's happening internally for individuals in category three. What we can observe is behaviour. The behaviour your daughter is displaying is consistent with voluntary withdrawal."

"She's nine years old. She doesn't have anywhere to go. Where is she sleeping?"

Harlow was quiet for a moment. "The current framework doesn't track that."

Clem sat very still. Outside in the corridor, a trolley went past. Someone coughed. The civic centre did its ordinary work.

"What is your framework able to do," she said.

"We register the case. We assign a category. The registration creates a record that any other service can access if they encounter your daughter. If she presents at a hospital or a police station or a school, the record will show she's known."

"Known."

"Registered," he said. "Known to the system."

"And the record will show she's category three. Voluntary withdrawal."

"Yes."

"So when someone finds her, the record will say she chose to leave."

Harlow looked at the form. He aligned the pen again. "The record will show the category based on observed behaviour at the time of registration. If her situation changes, the category can be updated."

Clem looked at the form. The two columns of categories. Category three, voluntary withdrawal, was the longest entry. It had four sub-categories.

"There's a sub-category here," she said. "Four-B. Withdrawal with maintained visual contact with prior care environment."

Harlow was still.

"That's her," Clem said. "She keeps appearing where I am. She keeps looking at me. That's maintained visual contact."

She looked at the sub-category again. The wording was precise. Someone had written it down, which meant someone had seen it before. More than once. Enough times to name it and give it a letter.

He looked at the form. He looked at it for a moment longer than he needed to. "Four-B is a sub-category of category four," he said. "Temporal displacement. That's a separate classification. It requires a different referral pathway."

"What referral pathway."

He opened his desk drawer. He took out a card. He looked at it. His thumb moved once across the printed address, almost offering it. Below them, from somewhere under the floor, a low vibration moved through the

chair legs and was gone before she could be certain she had felt it. He put the card back.

"The pathway for category four cases is currently under review," he said. "I'm not able to make a referral at this time."

She looked at him.

"What I'd suggest," he said, and his voice was different now, quieter, the voice of a man saying something he knows is inadequate and is saying anyway because it is all he has, "is the family support service. They have a counselling resource. For parents in situations of uncertainty."

He took a different card from a different part of the drawer and put it on the table.

Clem did not pick it up.

"My daughter," she said, "is nine years old. She is somewhere in this town. She keeps appearing near me. She is not eating. She is not sleeping anywhere I can find. She is category four-B if you look at your own form, and the pathway for that is under review, and you are giving me a card for a counsellor."

Harlow said nothing. He was looking at the form.

She stood up. She picked up her bag. She left the card on the table.

Part Four: The Hall

She sat on a bench in the main hall for a while.

The hall was high and old, the kind of civic building put up when civic authority meant something people wanted to express in stone. The floor was marble, or something meant to look like it. There were noticeboards with planning applications and consultation documents. There was a trolley with forms outside three different offices.

She had the card Greaves had given her. The card Lund had given her. The card Harlow had not given her because it was for a pathway under review. She put them in her bag.

She thought about Lotte at the tramstop. Clem had called the expression recognition. It had been briefer than that, closer to acknowledgment.

She thought: Lotte was always like that. When she had done something wrong she would look at Clem with exactly that expression, directly, for one moment, and then find something else to do. The thing she had done wrong would be dealt with later, when the moment was right, on Lotte's terms.

She thought: that is what I told myself at the tramstop. That it was like that. That it was Lotte being Lotte.

She did not know if that was true or if she had invented it so that what she had seen on her daughter's face was something she could bear.

She stood up.

The lift was to her left. The main entrance was ahead. Between her and the entrance, a service door stood open onto a stairwell. Concrete steps going down. A sign on the wall: Technische dienst. Alleen personeel.

From below: light.

Green. Moving with the basement air in a motion she had learned over eleven years to treat as weather: something that happened to the coast, was managed, and was not thought about unless it came inside.

It was inside.

It was in the basement of the civic centre and it was moving in the slow rotation she recognised, and within it, at the edge of what the stairwell light reached, there was a shape.

Small. The right size. Standing still, at the edge of what the stairwell light reached, visible but unreachable.

A security guard came around the corner. Clem continued toward the entrance without hesitating, so he had no reason to stop her.

She went through the entrance and out onto the street.

The town was ordinary. Traffic. Cold air. A shop with a light on.

She stood on the pavement and did not look back at the civic centre.

She had her bag. She had three cards. She had the address of a counsellor for parents in situations of uncertainty.

She thought about the shape at the edge of the green light. The right size. She had not seen the face. She knew that was not entirely true.

She walked to the tramstop and waited. The tram came. She got on. She took a seat by the window.

At the next stop, on the platform, a small figure stood apart from the people boarding, watching the tram instead.

The doors closed.

Clem did not move. Every other time she had run. Through café doors, through playground gates, across roads. Every other time the distance had closed to nothing and Lotte had gone through the next gate. She stayed in her seat. The tram pulled away.

In her bag, under the three cards, was the form she had taken from Harlow's desk when she stood up. He had not seen her take it. She had not decided to take it. Her hand had simply known that the form was the only record that existed, and that if she left it behind, it would be filed under voluntary withdrawal, and that would be what her daughter was.

She put her hand into her bag and held the form without taking it out.

Outside, the town moved past the window. The civic centre slipped behind the tram.

Clem kept her hand on the form inside her bag until her stop.

* * *

End

The Pearls

Part One: The Pearls

The winter assembly at Carrow Hall drew forty-three people in the year of the second collapse, which was twenty fewer than the year before and would have been fewer still had the organising committee not dropped the ticket price and opened the door to the fishing families. Gil Hasp had noticed the decline but said nothing to Petra. Because she had grown up in a fishing family, she would have heard any suggestion that opening the event to fishing families had lowered its status.

He had not dropped the ticket price. He had been on the organising committee for four years and had opposed it, and been overruled, and come anyway, because not coming was worse than coming.

He saw Elowen Vass from across the room before the music started.

She was not the tallest woman in the room, nor the best dressed by any conventional measure. Her gown had the colour of deep water, simply cut, the kind of thing that cost either nothing or a great deal and gave no indication which. What she wore at her throat was a single strand of pearls that caught the light in a way that the other jewellery in the room did not. The other jewellery reflected the chandeliers directly. The pearls returned a dimmer green light from angles that did not match the lamps above them.

Gil stood at the edge of the room and looked at them.

He had a reasonable knowledge of jewellery. Petra had taught him in the first years of the marriage, patiently and without condescension, because she understood objects and their meanings. Natural pearls from the old sources. Cultured pearls from the Far Eastern farms before the shipping lanes collapsed. Freshwater pearls from the river beds. He knew what each looked

like and he knew their approximate value and he knew their lustre, how a good pearl held a surface that a poor one did not.

Elowen Vass's pearls were green.

The colour differed from dyed pearls, whose green remained flat across changes in light. These pearls changed from sea-green to dark copper as Gil altered his viewing angle. He looked at them for long enough that he became aware he was looking, and looked away.

Across the room, a woman he did not know leaned close to another woman he did not know and said something he could not hear. The second woman glanced at Elowen Vass and nodded.

He found himself moving toward the bar in a direction that took him within a few metres of where Elowen was standing.

Up close, the pearls troubled him more. Cultured pearls should have given him regularity. These shifted gradually in both size and colour: dark green near the clasp, almost old copper, clearing toward the centre into the sea-green he had noticed across the room. The grading looked deliberate.

"Mr. Hasp."

Elowen Vass was looking at him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was admiring your necklace."

"Most people are," she said.

He wondered whether she was vain or merely exact. Her face gave him nothing. She had the stillness of someone who had recently lost something and had not yet decided what the loss meant.

"You were widowed," he said, and then immediately regretted the bluntness of it.

"In March," she said. "Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Her fingers went to the pearls and left them again almost at once. "They were his. He found them."

"Found them."

"He dived for them. He knew the bay." She said this in the flat register of a woman reciting a fact she has been asked about before and will be asked about again. "In the cove at Trevith. In shallow water. He found a colony of them."

He did not ask what kind of oyster produced a pearl that colour. He understood, somewhere below the level of articulation, that this was not the right question.

"They're extraordinary," he said instead.

"Yes," she said. "They are." She touched them again. "Will you excuse me. I see the Holloways."

She went. He stood at the bar with his drink and watched her cross the room. The strand pulled more heavily against her collarbone than its size suggested and barely shifted when she walked. In the light from the chandelier they went briefly dark, and then green again, and then a shade between the two he had no name for.

He drank his drink. He thought about the cove at Trevith.

Part Two: The Enquiries

He started asking the following morning.

He began with the harbour registrar's office, because the registrar filed moorings and boat licences and equipment purchase records, and a man who dived commercially in the Trevith cove would have some record there.

He found nothing. The registrar, a careful man named Oller who had been in the post for twenty-two years, told him that no commercial diving

licence had been issued for the Trevith cove in the past decade. Recreational divers were not registered.

"Her husband," Gil said. "Vass. He would have been diving in the last year or two."

Oller looked at him. "Bernard Vass did not register any diving activity with this office."

Then he straightened the papers on his desk with the small precise movements of a man who has decided this conversation is over.

He went next to the fishing cooperative, where three men who had known the Trevith cove for forty years between them told him three slightly different things: that the cove was shallow, that the seabed was sand and chalk, and that there had never been, to their knowledge, any oyster bed within three miles of that shoreline.

He drove to Trevith in the afternoon.

The cove was as described: small, curved, the water barely four metres at its deepest point even at high tide. On a clear day you could see the bottom from shore, pale sand and weed in slow ribbons between chalk outcrops. No oyster. No mussel. The water was clear and cold. At the cove mouth the fog held a fixed line and did not enter. Gil would not have called it waiting.

He stood on the shore and looked at it.

He had served on the organising committee for four years and knew which clothes and jewellery drew attention at Carrow Hall. He believed the pearls would prevent guests from dismissing Petra because she came from a fishing family.

Two years ago, at this same assembly, a woman named Lund had admired Petra's brooch, a piece of her grandmother's, silver with a green stone, and then asked, with the precise timing of someone who had been saving the question, which family the stone had come from. Petra had named her grandmother. Lund had nodded once with her mouth closed

and moved away. He had watched Petra understand what the nod meant. He had watched her put the brooch in her bag before the second dance and not take it out again.

What had stayed with him was not only Petra's face. Two men near the mantelpiece had then glanced at Gil, as though Petra's background reflected on his ability to manage his household.

He drove home through the coastal lanes with the fog on his left the whole way, and that evening he made three more telephone calls, and the third one was answered by a man who said only: come to the boatyard. Tomorrow morning. Before the tide turns.

Part Three: Tench

The boatyard at Pencarrow had officially closed two years earlier, but unregistered workers still moved equipment through it and repaired boats. The yard manager, Tench, had deeply lined skin and an age Gil could not estimate between sixty and seventy.

He was mending net when Gil arrived. He did not look up.

"Hasp," he said.

"You know who I am."

"I know what you want." He kept working. "Sit down if you're going to stand there."

There was a wooden crate. Gil sat on it. The yard smelled of diesel and brine and fibreglass resin, with the cove beyond the gate pressing cold into the air.

"The Vass pearls," Gil said.

"People have been asking about them since the ball." Tench did not look up. "You're the fourth."

"What did you tell the others."

"That I knew where they came from." He set the net down and looked at Gil for the first time. His eyes were the grey of the water in winter, a colour that had no warmth in it but was not unkind. "Which is a different thing from being able to help."

"Can you get them for me."

"No."

"You know where they are."

"I know where they are." He picked up the net again. "Knowing doesn't mean I can get them."

"Because."

Tench looked at the fog over the gate. "Because they're not picked. They're found. The man who goes in needs to be the man who wants them."

"I want them."

"Yes," Tench said. "I can see that."

"So tell me where they are."

Tench set the net down again. He studied Gil before deciding how much to tell him.

"The colony is at the north end of the Trevith cove," he said. "Under the chalk overhang. Six, seven metres down, when the tide's in. At low tide it's closer to four. The fog sits outside the cove mouth. It doesn't come in." He paused. "It doesn't come in during the day."

"You said there were no oysters in Trevith."

"I said no such thing."

Gil was quiet for a moment. "What are they growing in. The pearls."

Tench looked at the fog. Then he reached into his coat pocket and brought out a single shell, intact, the size of a large coin. He held it out without speaking.

The inside of the shell was green. Abalone threw colour from layered surfaces; this green appeared to sit deeper, inside the shell itself. Like looking into water.

"Where did you get this," Gil said.

"Found it on the tide line. Years ago." He took it back. "The colony's been there a long time. Longer than this coast has been inhabited, I think. Bernard Vass found it four years ago. He went in three times before the last time."

Gil looked at him. "The last time."

"He didn't come back from the third dive." Tench put the shell back in his pocket. "His wife found the wetsuit and the tank on the shore the next morning. Nothing else."

The yard was quiet. A gull landed on the gate post and looked at them and left.

"And Elowen," Gil said. "How did she come to have them."

"Same way the tide delivers things." Tench picked up the net. "She found them on the shore the morning after. Strung and knotted, as you saw them. Already finished." He did not look up. "That's the part I can't account for."

Gil stood.

"Low tide is at eleven tomorrow," Tench said. "North face. You'll know the water above it."

"How far in."

Tench looked at him. "If you need that told to you."

He worked the net. "Bring your own equipment. I won't lend you mine."

Part Four: The Cove

He told Petra he was going swimming. She studied him because the explanation did not fit his equipment or his usual habits.

She looked at the boot before he closed it.

"Swimming," she said.

"Yes."

She handed him the thermos. "Then take something warm."

At the door she caught the torn strap of his equipment bag and tied it back with kitchen string.

"If you bring something home," she said, tightening the knot, "don't say it was for me."

He drove to Trevith in the early morning. The equipment was in the boot: his own tank, bought three years ago for a holiday diving course he had attended twice and then stopped attending. He was not an experienced diver. He was a competent one, which in his experience was a distinction that mattered less than people claimed until it suddenly mattered entirely.

The cove was still at nine in the morning. The tide was on its way out. The fog sat at the cove mouth in the early light, its edge precise in a way that weather was not precise: a line rather than a gradient, the fog on one side and the ordinary air on the other.

He looked at it for a while.

The water inside the cove was clear. He could see the bottom, the pale sand, the chalk outcrops running east-west. He could see the north wall of the cove, the chalk face dropping into the water, the overhang undercut by old tides.

He suited up. He checked the tank twice, then a third time, then a fourth. He was aware of doing this and did not stop himself.

He walked into the water.

Cold. Even in the wetsuit the cold found every edge of the seal and pressed against it. He breathed through the regulator. The sound of his own breathing was the sound of a room with no other noise in it. He put his face under.

The cove floor was forty feet below. He descended slowly, watching the pressure gauge. The sand came up to meet him. He oriented himself north and moved along the cove wall, the chalk face on his right, his left hand trailing. The water was clear to the bottom. He could see his own shadow on the sand.

He found the overhang.

The water above the overhang was a little darker and greener than the surrounding cove. The difference was slight but remained fixed when he changed position.

He went under the overhang.

The shell colony was on the underside of the chalk, where the rock curved inward. They were pale, small shells attached beneath the chalk. Fourteen were visible, each set at a slightly different angle with regular gaps between them. When Gil looked along the row, the interior of the nearest shell reflected a narrow green light that had no visible source.

He found the one he wanted without knowing how he knew it.

It was third from the left, slightly larger than the others, its surface rougher at the hinge. He reached for it and his right glove caught the chalk edge, a short tear along the palm seam that let the cold in immediately, specific and sharp. He did not pull back. He closed his hand around the shell.

The shell did not resist. It came away from the chalk cleanly, without the adhesive resistance of a mussel, as if it had been waiting to be lifted.

He turned it over in his hand. The shell was closed. He could feel the weight of it: heavier than the size suggested, the same density he had noticed in Elowen Vass's strand across the room. He held it in both hands and looked at it and the green from its interior came through the closed seam of the shell, a hairline thread of light in the winter water.

Something moved at the edge of his vision.

He turned. The cove was empty. The chalk wall, the sand below, his own shadow elongated across the bottom. The fog at the cove mouth was where it had been, its edge still precise, the ordinary air on one side and the green on the other.

The fog had advanced perhaps five metres into the cove. Its edge remained clean and straight, and the entrance was visibly narrower than when he had descended.

He looked at his watch. He had been under for eleven minutes. His air was adequate. The water was the same temperature.

He looked at the shell in his hands.

He thought of Petra watching Lund leave the last assembly. He thought of Elowen Vass touching her pearls on the walk to the Holloways. He thought of the wetsuit on the shore.

He thought: I know what I'm holding.

He put the shell back on the chalk. He oriented it as he had found it, third from the left, the hinge facing in. It settled without adhesive, the same waiting light at the seam.

He turned and swam for the cove entrance.

Part Five: The Shore

He surfaced to find the fog had come into the cove to the halfway point.

He pulled himself onto the shore rocks and sat with the regulator in his hand and looked at it. The line of it was still clean. It had not followed him. It was simply where it was, occupying the cove mouth and half the cove, the green light of it moving in its own slow currents, and the water inside its boundary was dark and the water outside was ordinary winter grey.

He pulled the wetsuit hood back. He breathed the cold air. His right hand was cold where the glove had torn. He looked at it. The seam had opened three centimetres. Chalk dust was still in the crease of his palm.

He sat on the rocks for a long time.

When the fog retreated, Gil saw only the chalk wall, pale sand and clear winter water. Nothing on the surface revealed the shells beneath the overhang. He turned away.

He drove home. He did not stop at the boatyard.

Petra was in the kitchen when he arrived. She looked at him, and at his wet hair, and at the thermos he had not opened.

"How was the water," she said.

"Cold," he said. "Completely ordinary."

She looked at his hand. The torn glove was still on it.

She went back to what she had been doing.

He sat at the kitchen table. The thermos was in front of him. The chalk dust was still in the crease of his palm. He did not wash it off. He sat at the table until the light changed.

When the kitchen was dark, the thermos was still unopened.

On Wednesday he took the torn glove from the radiator and folded it into his coat pocket. Petra was upstairs. He stood by the kitchen door with his hand on the latch and could have called her name. He did not.

He left before the tide turned.

Part Six: What Was Found

The cove at Trevith yielded a diving tank, a wetsuit, and a pair of fins in the early morning of the following Thursday. They were found by a fisherman named Orin who worked the estuary twice a week and had no reason to go near the cove and went anyway, which he described afterward as a feeling rather than a decision.

The equipment was at the tideline, above the watermark, dry. Arranged, though Orin did not use that word in his report. He said they were where you would put them if you were intending to come back.

No body was found. The coastal search covered three miles in each direction and the seabed of the cove was dredged to ten metres and the chalk overhang was examined by two men from the harbour authority who filed a report describing the colonisation of the overhang by an unusual bivalve species they could not identify. The report noted fourteen specimens. The report noted that the bivalves appeared to be intact and undisturbed. The report did not note the colour.

Petra Hasp did not attend the winter assembly at Carrow Hall the following year.

She attended the one after that.

Part Seven: The Second Assembly

The winter assembly at Carrow Hall drew sixty-one people in the third year of the second collapse, which the committee called a recovery. The organising committee had kept the ticket price low, and the fishing families had come again, and the Holloways had donated a piano which was more useful than the donation they had made the previous year.

She came in after the music had started.

She was wearing the colour of deep water. At her ears: two small pearls, each one lit from within, moving slightly with the angle of observation, refusing a single colour. At her throat: a strand she had not worn before, longer than Elowen Vass's strand, and fuller, the pearls graduated in a way that suggested they had grown together over time. Her wedding ring was gone. The pale band it had left was visible when she lifted her glass.

She stood at the door. Then she moved to the bar.

A woman near the piano leaned close to another woman. Petra did not hear what was said. The second woman looked at Petra and looked away and looked again.

Elowen Vass was at the far end of the room. She watched Petra come in. She touched her own pearls, briefly, the same gesture, the same unconscious accuracy.

She raised her glass.

Across the room, a man Petra had not met stepped slightly forward from his group. His attention fixed on the pearls. Gil recognised the look; two years earlier he had mistaken it for admiration.

In the cove at Trevith, the chalk overhang held what it held.

The fog sat at the mouth of the water, its edge clean against the air.

It did not enter.

* * *

End

The Vintage

Part One: The Pub

The Anchor had been running on volunteer goodwill and a dwindling cellar for two years, and what remained showed it. Yusuf Aldred sat at the bar with a glass of something that called itself a bitter and tasted of tin.

"You're staring at it like it owes you money," the barman said.

"It owes me something."

He had once been able to place a vineyard's altitude on his tongue before he knew its name, the mineral finish telling him what the soil had been. He missed that more than he missed the money the writing had paid. Other people drank to blur things; Yusuf drank to keep the edges sharp, one glass at a time, the taste itself the point rather than what it dulled.

Four months earlier, alcohol had stopped dulling the thoughts he drank to escape. He sat in his flat in the evenings and watched the light change and thought: this is it. The year and the next year and the one after, exactly the same, until it stopped. He had tried to make peace with this. He had tried to find a reason to argue with it. Both had failed.

"Yusuf."

Pita Soane was at the far end of the bar. He worked for the coastal mapping office, had a weathered face and spoke as though most questions had direct answers. He was not looking at Yusuf with the expression of a man who had spotted a former colleague. He was looking at him with the expression of a man who had been waiting.

"Sit down a minute," Pita said.

* * *

He described the vineyard without flourish. South-facing slope above the estuary, three miles north. Planted before the collapse, fog in from the following autumn, never retreated. The vines had no business producing fruit in those conditions.

They produced fruit.

"The wine is different," Pita said.

"Different how."

"It helps. With the weight of things."

"Like alcohol."

"Not like alcohol." He turned his glass in his hands. "Alcohol takes the edge off. This takes the thing itself. For a while."

Yusuf said nothing.

"I know how that sounds."

"It sounds like the fog. Which is not something people recommend."

"No."

"How long does it last."

Pita looked at him carefully. "The first time? A week. Maybe more."

Yusuf picked up his tin-tasting bitter and put it down again.

Pita reached into his coat and produced a small bottle. Green glass, no label, sealed with wax. He set it on the table between them.

"One glass. Try it."

Yusuf looked at the bottle. He looked at Pita's face.

"What does it taste like," he said.

Pita swallowed and looked at the bottle before answering.

"Like something worth having," he said.

Part Two: The Week

He drank it at home, alone.

The wine was darker than a coastal vineyard in poor weather should have produced. It smelled of salt, smoke and damp soil. Beneath those scents Yusuf detected a heaviness that eased after each breath.

He drank it.

The taste lasted longer than tastes were supposed to last. His palate separated layers that he had not been able to detect for years, though he could not match them to any known grape, soil or ageing method. Just before sleep, he felt an exhaustion that did not correspond to anything he had done that day.

He slept at ten, which he had not done since Carol left.

* * *

He woke to ordinary light. His back ached where the mattress needed replacing. His mouth tasted of sleep. He was hungry.

That was all.

The pressure behind his ribs had gone. The absence felt as complete as the silence after a machine stops. He waited for the usual thought that every coming year would repeat the last, but it did not return.

He made eggs. He ate at the table by the window. He watched the lane and did not think about the wine or Pita or the fog on the estuary, visible from the end of his street, lying where it always lay.

He washed the plate. He put the cork back and put the bottle in the back of the cupboard.

He did not touch it for six days.

Part Three: The Return

On the seventh day the weight returned before he opened his eyes. His chest tightened, and the coming day again seemed indistinguishable from every day that would follow. He thought: there it is.

He went to the back of the cupboard. The bottle was empty.

He set it on the counter and went to find Pita.

* * *

Pita handed him a second bottle immediately. The ease of the exchange should have warned Yusuf that Pita expected repeat customers. The effect lasted five days. He counted this time, aware that he was counting, aware of what counting meant. On the fifth day the weight returned.

"The third," Pita said, "will be shorter. I should tell you that now."

"How much shorter."

"Three days. Perhaps four."

"And after the third."

Pita looked at his hands. "What I have left is what I have. After that, if you want to continue, you need to help make it."

"I'm not a viticulturist."

"You don't need to be." Pita slid the bottle across. "You need to be there."

Part Four: The Slope

He said no twice before he said yes. The second no lasted nine days, which told him more than he wanted to know.

There were four of them when he arrived: Pita, a woman named June Obi who had been a pharmacist before the coastal clinics consolidated, a retired harbour pilot called Stennis, and a younger man named Ross. Ross

did not say what work he had done before, and nobody asked. He showed no interest in discussing any life outside the vineyard.

They stood at the bottom of the slope in the early morning, fog on the water below them, sun on the south face above.

The vines had copper-dark leaves that folded inward toward each plant's root crown instead of turning toward the sun. When Yusuf reached into the first row to take a cluster, the nearest leaves turned fractionally toward his hand.

He withdrew it.

"They do that," Pita said, from behind him. "It doesn't affect the fruit."

Yusuf took a berry and pressed it between his fingers. Dense, small-skinned, juice the same colour as the wine. He put it to his lips.

The taste was there. The full thing, even raw, even at seven in the morning. The berry carried fruit, mineral and salt flavours, followed by the same unfamiliar exhaustion he had felt before sleep. The exhaustion then disappeared, leaving relief that did not feel like his own.

He picked for three hours without stopping.

* * *

By the end of the first week they had settled into the work: pick, sort, carry, the rows in the morning, the pressing shed in the afternoon. His hands found the rhythm. His shoulders ached and his fingers were stained and the slope gave a long view south over the estuary, the fog on the water catching the light.

He felt, without accounting for it, entirely correct.

The weight was not absent on the slope. It was suspended. He was aware of the distinction.

In the first week Pita had whistled while he worked. Four notes, the same four, never resolved into anything. Yusuf had found it irritating. By the

third week the whistling had stopped. Yusuf noticed only days later, with the unease of finding that a clock had wound down without him hearing it.

Ross worked faster than anyone. He had been the first in the rows each morning since the second day, already picking before Yusuf was dressed, and he worked with an efficiency that looked less like industry than like appetite. He did not talk during the work. In the evenings he sat at the edge of the fire with both hands open on his knees, looking at nothing in particular.

On the fifth evening Pita asked him to take a row on the upper terrace. Steeper ground, older vines, a section none of them had touched.

Ross went up. He came back forty minutes later with his basket less than a quarter full.

"The yield is lower up there," he said.

Pita looked at the basket without commenting.

The following morning the upper terrace had been picked clean. The fruit lay sorted in the crates beside the shed. None of them had done it. They stood and looked at the crates and said nothing.

Ross looked at them for a long time. Then he went to his bunk and came back with his bag already packed.

"It's not going to use me," he said without addressing anyone. He went down the lane without waiting for a response.

Pita watched him go.

"What does that mean," Yusuf said.

"It means," Pita said, still watching the lane, "that Ross will be fine."

Part Five: The Dreams

The dreams started on the third night.

The dreams did not frighten him. In each one he was on the slope, picking in clear morning light. The rows extended further than they should, curving down toward the water, and he followed them without deciding to. The fog was below, always below, close enough that he could smell it.

In the third dream a figure was at the end of the furthest row, picking with his rhythm exactly. When he got close enough to see clearly he woke.

He did not tell anyone. He was not sure whether this was caution or the beginning of something else.

Stennis left on the ninth day. Two words on his bunk: not for me. His work had been the steadiest of any of them. His hands had never shaken.

June Obi changed more slowly. She still picked, sorted and came to meals, but she stopped initiating conversation and answered each question after a delay.

On the twelfth day Yusuf found her sitting at the end of a row, not picking.

"June."

She looked at him. Something located.

"I tried to remember why I wanted to leave," she said. "I could remember the sentence. Not the reason."

He crouched beside her.

"What sentence," he said.

"That this is wrong." She turned her hands over on her knees, looking at the stained palms. "I can still say it. I just can't feel it anymore."

She stood, brushed the soil from her knees, and walked down the slope with her bag. She did not look back. He watched her until she reached the lane and turned and was gone.

He went back to the picking.

Part Six: What He Tasted

He noticed it first in the second week.

He was sorting the afternoon's fruit at the pressing shed when he put a berry in his mouth without thinking, the automatic reflex of a man who had spent years working by palate, and stopped.

There was something in this batch that had not been in the morning's.

He stood still and concentrated on the aftertaste. The fruit carried the slope's mineral and salt flavours, followed by a specific heaviness before the relief. He had tasted that sequence before.

He had tasted it in the wine Pita had given him in The Anchor.

He went to the shelf and took down one of the older bottles. The label had a date in Pita's hand. He looked at it for a moment. The date was eleven months before the evening in The Anchor, before the conversation, before the first bottle on the table.

He opened it, poured a small glass, held it to the light.

He tasted it.

Pita was in it. Yusuf did not mean flavour. He meant weight: whatever Pita had carried hard enough to drive him to the vineyard four years ago. The wine left the same pressure in the room that Pita once had.

He put the glass down.

The shed was very quiet.

He took a label from the shelf and wrote Pita on it. The name was accurate. He looked at it, then crossed it out and wrote Lot 3, north slope. He tied the label to the bottle.

He thought of June's sentence. He thought of Stennis's two words on the bunk. He remembered Pita setting the first bottle on the table at The Anchor with both hands and more care than the bottle required.

The vines had known before he did.

He went outside and stood at the top of the slope and looked at the fog on the water below and breathed it in and thought about what he was doing and did not stop doing it.

Part Seven: The Pressing

On the last morning of harvest, before dawn, Yusuf went to the pressing shed alone.

He had come because of the smell. It had been there for three days beneath the wine and must. He knew iron, mould, ferment and rot. This was none of them.

He stood with the lamp and breathed.

Then he went to the first vat and opened the drain valve.

He did not think about it first. He simply did it: crouched, turned the valve, waited for the sound of liquid on the stone floor. He needed to know if he could. He needed to know if his hands would do what he told them.

The valve opened. Must ran onto the stone, dark in the lamplight, the smell sharp and ferrous. He watched it run.

He turned the valve closed.

He stood up and looked at his hands.

He stood there for a long time. Then he crouched again and opened the drain valve on the second vat.

He turned it closed before any liquid reached the floor.

He stood up a second time.

He had opened the first valve and then closed both. Later he remembered the sequence clearly but not the decision between them.

He took one of the small bottles from the shelf. He filled it from the third vat. He pressed his thumb into the wax seal and held the bottle up to the lamp.

The wine was darker than it should have been and showed no suspended sediment when he held it to the lamp.

He put it in his coat pocket and went to find Pita.

* * *

Pita was at the fence line at the top of the property, looking north. Clear morning, the ordinary land running down to the estuary, bracken and field grass. Nothing to look at.

He turned when Yusuf came up.

"I'm going into town," Yusuf said. "For supplies."

"Yes," Pita said, no question in it and no note of what to bring, just yes, as though everything in the statement, the going and the not-returning and the thing in Yusuf's coat pocket, were already legible.

In the early light his face had the stillness of something emptied, cleaned, and set aside.

"Was there someone before you," Yusuf said.

"Yes."

"Did they stay."

"Long enough," Pita said.

Yusuf nodded. He turned and walked down the slope.

He did not look back at the fence line.

Part Eight: The Anchor

The Anchor was quiet at noon. The barman was someone he did not recognise, which happened more often now. He ordered a coffee and sat at the bar.

He had been sitting for twenty minutes when the man came in.

Perhaps fifty. A coat that had been expensive once. He sat two stools down, ordered whatever was open and received the tin-tasting bitter. He held the untouched glass in both hands. Four months earlier Yusuf had sat in that posture when Pita found him.

Yusuf looked at him.

He recognised the man's posture. The man moved only when necessary and kept his attention on his own thoughts rather than on the bar or the people around him.

The bottle was in his coat pocket. He could feel its weight.

He thought about the drain valve. He thought about June's sentence, intact but emptied of its reason. He thought: the vines don't stop.

He turned on his stool.

"Excuse me," he said.

The man looked at him.

"You're not drinking that," Yusuf said.

"No."

He reached into his coat pocket. The wax seal was smooth under his thumb. He set the bottle on the bar between them.

The green glass was cool when it left his coat. By the time it touched the bar it was warm.

The man looked at it. He looked at Yusuf's face.

"What does it taste like," he said.

Yusuf looked at the green glass. When he spoke, the voice was Pita's before it was his.

"Like something worth having," he said.

* * *

End

The Looking

Part One: The Method

Marion had a system.

She kept her husband comfortable and the house running. In the gaps, she hunted. She would not have used that word.

The coat parties in autumn. The pub on Seagate Road on Fridays. The fish market on Tuesday mornings. No one from the school gate. No one her husband knew by name. No one who looked likely to return.

She was at the Corn Exchange on a Saturday in November when she saw him.

He stood at the bar with an untouched glass and surveyed the room without speaking to anyone. He was tall and wore a dark coat that was too heavy for the mild, wet evening. Outside, rain marked every shoulder that came in from the street. His coat was dry at the seams and cuffs. And his eyes, when they crossed hers for the first time, were the deep green of old glass, or of a harbour bottom where the water runs deep enough for colour to shift.

She looked away first. This was the system: always look away first.

Part Two: The First Contact

She spent twenty minutes establishing his position in the room.

He did not speak to anyone. He did not check his watch or his phone. He stood at the bar and examined the room slowly. Before looking at each person, he turned his head until that person was directly in front of him. Once he looked at her again and this time she let it run three seconds before

she looked away. Three seconds was enough. Three seconds was an invitation that maintained deniability.

She was at the cheese table when he appeared beside her.

"You've been here before," he said.

She noted that he had phrased it as a statement. She treated questions as uncertainty and statements as tests of how much she would reveal.

"Have I," she said.

"Last spring. You were wearing something yellow." He picked up a piece of hard cheese from the board and looked at it rather than at her. "You left before nine."

She had been here last spring. She had left before nine because the man she had come with had disappointed her before the evening was properly started. For a moment she thought: green. Then she thought: yellow.

She did not say any of this.

"Good memory," she said.

"For some things." He put the cheese back. "Are you here with someone?"

"My husband." She spoke flatly and without apology, presenting his presence as information rather than a refusal. The men who heard it as a boundary were not interesting.

He nodded once, slowly, as though confirming something. "He's the one near the door. Blue jumper."

She did not look. She knew where her husband was. She had placed him thirty minutes ago.

"You've been watching," she said.

"The room," he said. "Yes."

She looked at him directly for the first time. The green of his eyes was the same up close. Steady. Not warm, not cold. Old glass under harbour light.

She had not thought about the fog. She pushed the image away.

"I'm Marion," she said.

He smiled slowly, without surprise.

"I know," he said.

Part Three: The Rules

She thought about it for three days. Usually she needed one.

She kept returning to the coat. It was wrong for November, wrong for the coast, wrong for a man who claimed to have watched the room last spring and remembered what she was wearing. Everyone else had brought rain inside. His heavy coat was dry.

She also kept returning to I know.

She had not told him her name before she said it. She had replayed the evening three times and she was certain of this. She was a careful person. She did not forget things like that. She had said: I'm Marion. He had said: I know.

There were explanations. Someone nearby might have said her name. Her husband might have used it earlier. Enough people in town knew her, and the man claimed he had seen her here before.

The explanations were adequate.

She found his number through the usual back routes that left no trace and sent a message on Thursday afternoon.

Coffee. Saturday morning. The place on Wren Street.

His reply came within two minutes.

I was wondering when you'd ask.

Part Four: The Coffee

Wren Street in November: cold, bright, the smell of the sea three streets over, the fog sitting on the water as it always did in the mornings. She arrived six minutes early, as usual, so she could choose the table and watch him enter.

He was already there.

He was at the table by the window, the table she would have chosen, with two cups already in front of him. He had ordered for her. She did not know how he knew what she drank. She sat down without saying this.

"You found it all right," she said.

"I know this street," he said. "I've been on this coast a while."

She wrapped her hands around the cup. It was what she would have ordered. Flat white, no sugar. She drank it and looked at him over the rim and tried to locate the thing that was wrong.

She could recall his green eyes and the slight asymmetry of his mouth, but she could not reconstruct the rest of his face after looking away. She knew he was good-looking. She could not have said precisely how.

"You remembered me from last spring," she said. "Yellow coat. Before nine."

"Yes."

"Why remember that."

He looked at her steadily. "Because you were doing what you were doing and you were very good at it."

She held the cup. "What was I doing."

"The same thing you're doing now." He said it without inflection, which offered no place to push back from. "You're very good at it. You have been doing it for a long time."

She put the cup down.

"You're not what I thought," she said.

"No." He looked out at the street. "What did you think?"

She didn't answer that. She looked at his hands on the table. They were ordinary hands. She could not have described them later.

"What do you want," she said.

He turned back from the window. The light outside had changed: the November sun catching the low mist that pressed up from the harbour end of the street, turning it briefly green along its upper edge.

"To be found," he said. "By the right person."

She looked at the fog on the street.

"And am I."

"You've been looking longer than you know," he said. "Most people stop. You didn't."

She did not ask what that meant. She picked up the cup and finished it, and he watched her with those steady green eyes, and outside the fog came another yard up the street and stopped.

Part Five: The Coat

She began to lose things in the third week.

Small things first. Her reading glasses, which she had left on the kitchen table and found in the bathroom. The book she had been reading, which appeared on a different shelf with a bookmark at a page she did not remember reaching. Her husband asked her once, without looking up from

his newspaper: "Did you move the blue bowl?" She had not moved the blue bowl. She said she had.

The meetings with Theo continued: two coffees and an evening walk along the harbour wall. He had not touched her, and she had not created an opportunity for him to do so. Her usual sequence of meetings was therefore no longer under her control.

On the second coffee her husband rang because the boiler had gone out. He did not know which cupboard held the long matches. She watched the phone light on the table until it stopped, then turned it face down. Later, at home, the kettle was full and her mug waited beside his. He did that every night. She found it irritating.

She had started bringing things to remember him by.

She did not describe these objects as reminders. She told herself she was recording details that she might need later. She had a habit of writing down details she needed to retain. She wrote in the small notebook she kept at the back of the kitchen drawer: green eyes, steadier than they should be. Coat, wrong season. Wren Street: ordered for me. Last spring, yellow coat, before nine.

She closed the notebook. Three days later she opened it again.

The handwriting was hers. The pressure on the page was hers. She read: green eyes. Coat. Wren Street: found me. Last spring, yellow coat, first contact.

She looked at this for a long time. She did not remember writing found me. She did not remember writing first contact. She went back to the kitchen drawer and checked the pen she used for that notebook, which was a specific pen, a blue rollerball with a hairline crack in the cap. She found it. She held it. She closed her hand around it until the cracked cap split under her thumb.

She could not prove she had not written those words.

She had stopped being able to describe his face.

She had not tried to describe him to anyone else. Even alone, with her eyes closed, she could recall only the green eyes and the slight asymmetry of the mouth.

She told herself this was a symptom of frequency. She saw him twice a week.

On the fourth Friday she went to the pub on Seagate Road alone.

She sat at the bar and let her eyes move over the room. Forty minutes passed before she noticed the pattern: every few seconds she checked the door. She was waiting for him.

She left at nine without speaking to anyone.

On Monday she made a decision.

She would apply the system to him. She had done it seventeen times. The system did not fail.

She wrote his schedule in the notebook, the times and places she had observed him: Tuesday mornings at the harbour wall, Thursday evenings near the Corn Exchange, the coffee on Wren Street. She identified the gaps. She identified where he was not. She arranged to be in one of those gaps, at a place her rules defined as clean: no prior history, no mutual acquaintance, a pub on the north side of town she had used twice in three years and left no trace in.

She arrived at seven. She ordered her drink. She positioned herself correctly.

At eight she accepted that he was not coming.

At eight-fifteen she looked up and he was at the bar.

He had not come through the door. She had been watching the door. He was simply there, the dark coat, the green eyes, a glass he was not drinking from. He looked at her. She looked at him for three seconds.

Then she looked away first.

She left without finishing her drink. She walked home the long way, through streets she had not mapped for him, and did not look back, and when she arrived home she went directly upstairs and opened the notebook and wrote: system applied. system did not hold.

She read it back.

It said: he found me here too.

She put the notebook in the kitchen drawer and did not open it again for six days.

Part Six: The Mirror

She looked in the bathroom mirror at ten past eleven on a Tuesday and could not remember what she looked like.

The face in the mirror was correct. That was the problem. She recognised it. She knew it was hers. But when she tried to hold the image of it in her mind after turning away, it did not stay. She turned back. It was there. She turned away. It went.

She stood at the mirror for a long time, looking and looking away, looking and looking away.

Her husband called from downstairs. She answered. She went down.

On Wednesday she met Theo at the harbour wall.

She had been going to say something. She had planned it on the walk over: something direct, something that ended it or moved it forward. She was good at this conversation. She had always been good at this conversation.

She opened her mouth and what came out was: "What's happening to me."

He looked at the water. The fog was in, thick, sitting low on the harbour, hiding everything below the gunwales of the moored boats. The masts showed above it without hulls, a field of cut lines.

"You kept looking," he said.

"That's not an answer."

"It was enough of one."

She gripped the wall. "What are you."

His gaze stayed on the harbour.

"The shape you answered."

She thought: I have never been sure those are his actual eyes.

She gripped the wall harder. "Use how."

He said nothing. His eyes went to the fog on the water.

She heard herself say: "How long."

"You wore yellow."

"That was last spring."

"Yes."

She thought about the yellow coat. She thought about three seconds.

"My name," she said.

He turned back to her. She saw the green eyes, the slight asymmetry of his mouth, the narrow bridge of his nose. Three weeks of failed recollection snapped into those details, and already she knew they would loosen again when she looked away.

"Still yours," he said. "For now."

Part Seven: What Remained

She walked home through the town.

She passed the pub on Seagate Road. The light inside was warm and there were people at the bar and she did not look at them. She passed the Corn Exchange, dark at this hour, the door locked. She passed Wren Street. She did not turn down it.

At home her husband was asleep in the chair with the television on. She stood in the doorway and noted the blue jumper, his open mouth and the fact that he had never studied a room or another person as she did.

She went upstairs.

She sat on the edge of the bed and tried to remember what she had looked like before the mirror stopped working. She tried to find the face. She had looked at it every day of her adult life. She had known it better than she knew most things.

She could not find it.

She tested her name instead. She said Marion quietly and still recognised it as her own.

She said it again in the morning.

It was there, but lighter.

By the end of the week she had stopped being able to remember which pub she had preferred, before. Which table she usually chose. She still remembered the rules and routes she had used for eleven years, but she could no longer recall the observations and judgments that had produced them.

She still knew her husband's name. She knew the school gate she avoided. She knew the rules. They no longer told her where to stand.

On a Thursday in January she stood in the fish market at eight in the morning and watched the workers and felt nothing. No assessment. No placement. No calibration of distance. Just the fish and the cold and the wet concrete and the smell of salt and scales and men with their breath coming white in the air.

She stood there for a long time.

A man looked at her across the stalls. She met his eye for three seconds and then looked away. The old satisfaction did not come.

Something else did.

She went home through the square and passed the Corn Exchange. She knew that an important meeting had occurred there but could no longer recall the person, conversation or decision involved.

At home she sat at the kitchen table.

Her husband came in, made tea, put a cup in front of her, went back to his newspaper. She studied the blue jumper, the open mouth, the exact set of his shoulders above the page. Once, she had reserved that attention for rooms.

Age. Habits. Daily route. The time he left in the morning and the time he returned. The things he would not notice.

She looked at him for three seconds.

Then looked away first.

She said her name to herself.

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COASTAL AND ATMOSPHERIC STUDIES: PROXIMITY, RETURN AND DISTRIBUTIONAL ANOMALY

COASTAL AND ATMOSPHERIC STUDIES: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY REVIEW Vol. 7, No. 2

* * *

PROXIMITY, RETURN AND DISTRIBUTIONAL ANOMALY IN COASTAL FOG EVENTS: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS FROM THREE ESTUARY SITES

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* * *

Abstract

This paper reports preliminary findings from a three-year observational study of green-spectrum coastal fog events at estuary sites in the Dunmore basin, the Hesswick inlet, and the Erne river mouth. We document a statistically significant correlation between fog density at observation points and the duration of prior human presence at those points. We further note a pattern of distributional return: fog concentrations that disperse following human withdrawal from a site show a measurable tendency to reconcentrate at the same site within a predictable interval. We propose no causal mechanism for either finding. Both warrant further investigation.

* * *

2. Distributional Patterns

Standard meteorological models predict fog dispersal as a function of temperature gradient, wind speed, and surface moisture. At all three sites, observed dispersal events conformed to these predictions in aggregate. However, in 34 of 91 recorded dispersal events, reconcentration occurred at the originating site within an interval inconsistent with prevailing meteorological conditions. The mean interval between dispersal and reconcentration in these cases was 4.3 days. We have not identified a meteorological variable that accounts for this interval.

We note, without interpretation, that the 34 anomalous events were disproportionately associated with sites at which extended human observation had taken place in the preceding week. The association is statistically significant ($p < 0.03$) but the mechanism, if any, remains unclear. Alternative explanations including topographic channelling, localised thermal variation, and observer reporting bias have been considered and cannot be fully excluded.

3. Proximity Effects

A secondary finding concerns the relationship between fog density and proximity of human observers. Instrumented measurements at fixed points showed no consistent correlation between observer presence and density readings. However, observer logs recorded a repeated subjective impression of increased density during active observation periods that was not reflected in contemporaneous instrument data.

We consider two explanations. The first is perceptual: extended observation of low-contrast atmospheric phenomena may produce systematic overestimation of density change. The second is methodological: it is possible that the instrumentation deployed was not sensitive to whatever property of the fog observers were responding to.

We record it for completeness.[1]

* * *

[1] One member of the research team has requested that this footnote record a dissenting view: that the instrument data and the observer logs should not be treated as measuring the same thing, and that the assumption that they do may be the source of the discrepancy rather than its resolution. This view was considered by the group and not adopted as a finding.

* * *

End

The Member

Part One: The Absence

The young man was not at the club for the second Thursday running.

That was when Halcott understood he had come to find him.

At Aldersgate, absence had rules. A man could miss one Thursday without comment. Two required a raised eyebrow from someone of equal standing. Three permitted a question through the secretary. To ask too soon was need. To ask too late was failure to notice. Halcott had lived by such measures for nineteen years and had rarely misread them.

Two weeks earlier the man had sat at the edge of Inch's table, dark-suited, unplaceable, listening while Halcott complained that the fog had made the world smaller. The east coast route gone. Carrow Marsh gone. The Aldgate races cancelled. The usual list, offered with the usual contempt.

The young man had said only that the world was smaller for cautious men. For a man of genuine appetite, he had said, perhaps the opposite was true. The fog had closed routes and cancelled races, but men who still possessed courage and appetite would find other places to test them.

Then he had gone.

No one had introduced him. No one had caught the name.

On the second Thursday of his absence Halcott asked Inch about him. Inch said he believed the man had been a guest of someone, he couldn't remember who. He thought the name was something with an S. He was not certain. He had the impression the man had mentioned the club to Inch at some point, or perhaps Inch had mentioned the club to him, he could not now reconstruct the sequence.

"You invited him," Halcott said.

"I may have," Inch said. "I honestly can't say."

The Thursday after that, Halcott arrived earlier and stayed later. He had two brandies instead of one and asked after the young man with the dark suit and the unplaceable accent.

No one knew him. Several people had nearly seen him. No one had caught the name.

His sister telephoned that evening while he was dressing for the club. He watched her number ring out on the hall table. She called every Thursday because Thursday was the night their father used to call. Halcott left before the answering machine clicked on.

Halcott dreamed, twice that week, about the east coast route before the fog. The flat horizon, the line of the ships, the feeling of standing at the edge of something large and having the means and nerve to go into it. He had not thought about those years in a long time. He woke both times with the specific restlessness of a man who has remembered what it was to want something badly.

He associated restlessness with younger men who had not learned to manage their expectations. Experiencing it again made him feel more alert rather than uncomfortable.

Part Two: The Offer

The young man was at the club on the first Thursday of November, alone at a table near the window, reading.

Halcott crossed the room before he had decided to.

"I've been hoping to find you here," he said.

The young man looked up. "I know," he said. He said it without satisfaction, simply as a fact. His cuffs were fastened with plain black links,

no crest. Halcott had owned a pair like them at twenty-five and sold them when he joined Aldersgate because they looked insufficiently established.

Halcott sat down. He was not a man who waited to be invited.

"You said something," Halcott said, "about the world being less crowded. About certain qualities being relevant."

"I said I was still forming a view."

"And have you formed it."

The young man studied him before answering. "Almost," he said. He folded his book and set it on the table. The cover had no title, only a narrow dark initial pressed into the cloth. Halcott could not remember seeing him turn a page. The young man's eyes moved once around the room, taking distances. Then he looked back.

"A smaller world," he said. "You said that. On the first evening."

Halcott had said it. But Inch had been the one sitting beside the young man. Halcott had been across the table. He had said it to the room, but quietly. He had not thought anyone outside the immediate group had heard. "You've been a member here for nineteen years."

"That's correct."

"You built the Aldersgate coastal route. You held the Carrow Marsh contract for sixteen years before the insurance situation made it untenable. You were, by most accounts, a man who did not avoid difficulty."

"I was not."

"Were," the young man said.

The word sat between them.

"I'm still not," Halcott said.

"No," the young man said. "I don't think you are."

"There is a place," he said, "that some men use. Men of a particular type. Unadvertised. Something between a club and something else. It exists because there are men who find that the ordinary measures of experience have become insufficient. Who require something that tests them in ways that money and position do not."

"What kind of test."

"The relevant kind." He looked at Halcott steadily. "Not everyone who goes is suited to it. Most are not. I've been trying to determine whether you are."

"And."

"I believe you may be." He picked up the book. "The difficulty is not the place. It's finding men who won't waste it." He stood. "Let me think about it a little longer."

He left before Halcott could respond, which was a technique Halcott recognised and resented and found, despite himself, effective.

When Halcott signed for the brandy, he noticed a clean dark mark in the slip's lower corner. It was too narrow and regular to be accidental damage and resembled an incomplete initial. He rubbed it once with his thumb and it smeared into nothing.

Part Three: The Address

He found the young man at the club twice more before December. Each conversation was brief. Each time the young man gave him a little more: outside the town; self-possession required; men came back changed and did not regret it.

"Has anyone not come back," Halcott asked, on the second occasion.

The young man looked at him. "Is that a serious question or a performance of seriousness."

Halcott considered this. "Both," he said.

"Then you are better suited than I initially thought." He took a card from his pocket and placed it on the table. An address, handwritten, on card stock of good quality. On the bevelled edge, almost lost in the fibre, was the same dark narrow mark. "Wednesday. After ten. Dress for cold."

On Wednesday Halcott drove to the address, which was a property outside the eastern edge of town, past the old tide mill, along a track that deteriorated for the last half kilometre into something that required care. He had told himself, on the drive, that he was going to assess the situation. He knew, turning onto the track, that this was not true. A house: old stone, two storeys, the windows shuttered. Fog lay across the ground at ankle depth.

The door opened before he knocked.

A man inside, not the young man, older, with the build of someone who had done physical work for a long time, handed him a foil without ceremony.

"You fence," the man said.

"I was club champion three years running," Halcott said. "Thirty years ago, but the form stays."

The man nodded. "There's one other tonight. You'll hear him. Follow the sound."

"Where is..." Halcott began.

The man was already gone, into a back room, a door closing.

Halcott stood in the entrance hall with the foil in his hand. The house smelled of stone, wet cloth, and old leather. He looked at the well-kept foil. Its grip had been worn smooth by a hand that held it differently from him.

He went further in.

Part Four: The Sound

The house was larger than it appeared from outside.

The rooms were interconnected in a sequence that did not match the outside of the building. He moved through three of them, each darker than the last, the shuttered windows admitting only thin lines of exterior light. In the third room the floor was flagged stone and the fog he could see through a gap in the shutters was below him.

He stood still and listened.

Footwork. His own rhythm, drilled past conscious effort. He followed it through a corridor and a door into a space too dark to dimension. Stone underfoot. Cold grip. The sound of a blade moving.

He raised the foil.

Contact: a tap, light, testing. A response: the same weight, the same timing, the same measure he himself used. His response. The blade opposite him moved again in his attack pattern, the one the masters had told him was his tell.

His wrist moved into an outside recovery before the opposing blade pressed him. Pain and pressure appeared above his elbow before the blade touched him there.

In the grey line of light from the shuttered window he saw the other guard: his own old club ribbon tied to it, the blue and gold he had not seen in twenty years, the ribbon from his last championship season. He had not worn it since. He did not know how it had come to be here.

He attacked.

There was a door. Then cold air, the smell of the fog, a sky beginning to grey toward morning. He did not know how much time had passed. His upper arm carried the deep ache that normally followed prolonged fencing. He stood in the open and breathed.

He drove home before it was fully light. He did not remember choosing to leave. The foil was not in his hand. He could not remember setting it down.

Part Five: The Thursday

He woke in his own bed. His jacket was on the chair by the door, his shoes on the floor beneath it. His arm ached still, the same deep ache, and when he pressed the muscle above the elbow he found a bruise he did not remember taking. His left hand smelled of cold iron. He washed it twice and the smell did not entirely go.

He went to the club on Thursday.

Vere was there. Inch was there. The woman Harlow with her husband's seat. The gas lamps, his preferred table and the brandy were unchanged. He could identify no physical difference in the room.

The trouble with the membership account arose when he settled the bill.

The secretary, a careful man named Oakes who had been in the post for eleven years, looked at the slip and looked at his ledger and looked at the slip again.

"I'm sorry," Oakes said. "The number."

"Forty-seven," Halcott said. "Nineteen years."

Oakes checked the ledger. He checked it again. He turned one page back, then one forward. Oakes frowned at the ledger and checked the entry a third time before deciding to defer the problem.

"My apologies," Oakes said. "An administrative error. I'll correct it." He wrote something in the margin and took the payment without further remark.

Halcott returned to the table. He sat down and had the unpleasant impression that he had chosen the wrong chair, though it was the chair he

had always chosen. He sat with his brandy and looked at the room: the three portraits, the surviving men, the leather that had grown older without anyone deciding to replace it. He had sat at this table for nineteen years. He knew the crack above the window, the loose third floorboard and the November draught from the east-facing sash.

He picked up his pen to sign the evening's chit.

He looked at the signature.

It was his hand: the pressure, the forward lean, the joined letters he never lifted the pen between. All of it correct.

The initial before his surname was not A.

He looked at it for a moment. He was not certain, looking at it, what the initial should have been. The letter in front of him was not one he recognised as his own, and yet he could not have said, sitting there, what it should have been instead. He could still retrieve the name Aubrey and recognise its sound. He said it to himself, silently, and it was the right sound. But the letter on the page did not correspond, and the letter on the page was undeniably in his hand.

He folded the chit and left it on the table.

On his way out he stopped at the secretary's stand. Oakes was closing the guest register for the evening, the long ledger with its columns: date, guest name, sponsoring member, purpose of visit.

"Oakes," Halcott said. "The register. The evening in October. The first Thursday."

Oakes turned back the pages with the precision of a man who knows his ledger as well as his own hands. He found the date. He turned the book so Halcott could see.

The entry for that evening listed guests brought by Inch, by Vere, by Harlow. Below them, a single line in a hand Oakes had already noted, when

he first found it, as one he did not recognise. The guest column was blank. In the column for the sponsoring member, a single initial.

Not H.

The same letter that was on the chit in Halcott's pocket.

Halcott looked at the hand. The dark, narrow script. He had seen it before: on the card with the address, on card stock of good quality, placed on the table in the same unhurried way.

"Whose hand is that," Halcott said.

Oakes looked at it. He was a careful man and he had looked at it before. "I don't know," he said. "I made a note to follow up."

"And."

Oakes straightened the register. "I'll look into it," he said.

Part Six: The Drive

Halcott drove home through empty streets. The fog lay at the end of every east-facing road, low against the kerbs, keeping its own level.

His left hand on the wheel still carried the faint smell of cold iron.

He thought about the foil, which he had not found in his hand when he reached the cold air outside the house. He thought about the bruise above his elbow and the ache of effort well made. He thought about the identical initials on the chit and in the guest register. Whenever he concentrated on that letter, he briefly lost confidence that Aubrey was his name.

He said his name aloud in the car. Aubrey Halcott. The sound was correct.

He said it again.

The fog at the end of the road kept its level against the kerbs, as if the street had been measured for it.

He did not say it a third time.

It had begun to sound as though he were asking permission.

* * *

End

The Pattern

The sleep clinic had given her a name for it, which was not the same thing as a cure.

Sian Fallow had been awake between two and five every night for eleven months. The first three months she had tried the prescribed things: the weighted blanket, the blue-light glasses, the breathing exercises the leaflet described in the careful register of people who had never tried them at desperate hour in the dark. Then she had tried the unprescribed things. Four weeks of this, four weeks of that. She had a drawer full of supplements that smelled of the pharmacy she had stopped using when it closed in March.

What she had settled on, after the options ran out, was walking.

She left the house at two-fifteen and walked until physical fatigue made it easier to sleep, though each week she needed to walk longer. The town was useful for this: small enough that she knew all the routes, varied enough that she could choose a different one each night, quiet enough after midnight that she could walk without performing the ordinary alertness of a woman alone in a street.

She had been walking the town for six weeks before she noticed the fog.

* * *

She noticed it by accumulation.

The fog had been on the water for years. People noticed the rusted crane and boarded shopfronts just as little. It was regional, atmospheric, geological: three accepted explanations and a fourth no official would endorse, though it circulated freely in the bakery queue. The coastal health authority had a leaflet. The leaflet said: avoid prolonged exposure. If you have concerns about a loved one's contact with the coastal fog, contact your GP.

Sian had put the leaflet in the drawer with the supplements.

What she had not done, walking the town at two-fifteen and three and four and five, was pay attention to where the fog was on any given night.

Until the Thursday in October when she rounded the corner from Priory Street into Chandler's Lane and found the fog had reached as far as the old ironmonger's, and she stopped walking, and stood very still, and counted: she was on her fourteenth consecutive night of this route, and this was the furthest into the town she had seen it come.

She went home and wrote it down.

She had kept notebooks since she was twelve. Not journals: records. She was precise about the distinction. A journal was a conversation with yourself. A record was a document.

At nineteen she had written down the dates of her father's missed hospital calls because the ward kept saying there was no pattern. After the fourth date, a consultant found the medication error. She had trusted written sequence more than reassurance ever since.

The notebook she started for the fog was a small hardback, dark green, eighty pages. She began with the date and time and position: Thursday, 19 October. 03:14. Ironmonger's corner, Chandler's Lane. Approx. 60% density. Not moving. Leading edge at the broken drainpipe, third building from the corner.

The following night she walked the same route and noted: same position. Fractionally thinner, or seemed thinner. No movement.

The night after that: withdrawn to the lane mouth. Less dense. Wind from north.

She recorded everything she could measure: density, leading edge, estimated temperature, wind direction, her own time of arrival and departure. She was aware that some of these measurements were imprecise. The density was a judgment, not a reading. The temperature was her hand

in the air and a number she assigned. She noted these as estimates in the margin: est. She noted the distinction every time.

By the third week she had thirty-two entries and a sheet of graph paper from the post office. The woman behind the counter had watched the purchase with a guarded concern Sian had ignored.

The graph was inconclusive. She had expected that. She was not an expert in mist behaviour and she had no control data. The entries suggested two possible relationships: the fog tended to reach further on nights below seven degrees and to withdraw after at least three windy nights. It had also appeared once in a street where Sian had never recorded it before.

Chandler's Lane. Then, one Wednesday: Rope Walk.

She stood at the top of Rope Walk at three in the morning and looked down it and tried to think whether there was any reason the fog would be here instead of there, any gradient or temperature differential or drainage pattern that would account for it.

She could not think of one.

She went home and added Rope Walk to the graph.

* * *

She began to look forward to it.

She understood this was not a neutral observation. She was awake every night regardless of the fog, and the walking had always helped, but there had been nothing in the walking before that engaged the part of her mind that the problem-solving had quieted. The fog gave her a position to record each night and a dataset she could compare over time, even though she did not yet know what the comparison would establish.

She had worked as a records manager for the county authority before the office was absorbed and her post split into three part-time roles she had not applied for. She knew how to build a dataset and test a pattern across time. The notebook brought that old competence back.

She added columns to the graph. On nights when the fog was somewhere it should not have been, she marked the entry with a cross.

The sixth cross made an arc.

She sat at the kitchen table at six in the morning and wrote in the margin: pareidolia?

She went to bed at half past six and was asleep by seven, which was the earliest she had slept in four months.

November. Eleven nights straight of walking, eleven entries, the notebook's first section almost full.

She wrote two provisional rules that her later observations could confirm or disprove.

Rule one: the fog did not move during observation. She had never seen it move while she was watching. It arrived and it withdrew, but the transitions happened between her visits, not during them.

Rule two: it advanced into the town in arcs, not in lines. The shape of the front edge was always curved. She had seventeen measurements of the leading edge and they were all curved.

She looked at the two rules for a long time.

In the margin she wrote: Was I recording the pattern, or teaching it?

* * *

The centre point, if the arc was real, was approximately at the junction of Priory Street and Chandler's Lane.

She stood at the junction at three-forty in the morning and looked at it. Two terraced streets meeting at an ordinary right angle. A lamp that had been reported to the council twice and not repaired. The old ironmonger's building on the corner, boarded at the ground floor, its first-floor windows dark. No reason for it to be significant. No history she knew of, no event she could attach to it.

The fog was at the far end of Chandler's Lane, a hundred metres south. She watched it from the junction for twenty minutes. It did not move.

She went home.

She added the junction to the graph with a small circle rather than a cross, marked: possible centre? No basis for confidence.

She began changing her routes to test whether the fog responded to her absence.

She had been mapping the fog's position each night for seven weeks. In one of the later entries she wrote: Seems to prefer positions I have not recorded recently. Est. possibly coincidence.

She sat with this for a moment. Then she wrote: Next three nights: do not walk Chandler's Lane. Check whether the fog moves toward Chandler's Lane in my absence.

She put the notebook on the kitchen table and looked at what she had written.

The proposed test assumed that the fog might respond to where she directed her attention.

She wrote in the margin: attribution of intentionality. Unwarranted.

She walked around Chandler's Lane for the next three nights.

On the fourth night she went back.

The fog was at the ironmonger's corner.

She stood in the lane mouth for a long time. She thought: it was at this position before. This is not unusual. She thought: but it withdrew two weeks ago and has not been back since.

She wrote: Returned to Chandler's Lane after 3-night gap. Mist at ironmonger's corner, same position as first significant observation 19 October. Estimated density similar.

She wrote: coincidence.

Then, below it, smaller: or response.

She looked at what she had written for a while. The lamp at the top of the lane flickered once and held. The fog was still. She was cold in a way she had stopped noticing before she noticed it.

She went home.

When she took the notebook out of her coat pocket at the kitchen table, the spine was damp along its full length. Her coat pocket was dry.

She looked at this for a moment. She did not write it in the notebook.

* * *

She began testing in earnest the following week.

Rope Walk. Gap. Return. The fog was there. North quay. Gap. Return. The fog was there. Twelve nights. Fourteen. On eleven of them, it met her.

She sat at the kitchen table with the graph and the notebook and the second sheet of graph paper with the centre point on it, and she thought about the rules she had written: never in the same configuration twice. And then she thought: unless the configuration is determined by where I have been, in which case it is, in a sense, the same configuration every time.

She wrote this in the notebook. She underlined it.

Then she added: I may have been playing this wrong. I have been testing whether it responds to my absence. I have not tested what happens if I go closer.

She had not gone closer because she had not thought it was necessary. The distance had felt like part of the methodology: observe without interfering with what you were observing. Standard procedure. She had written it as a principle in the first week: maintain observation distance. Do not alter the variable by introducing yourself into it.

She read this back and thought: you introduced yourself into it on night one.

The notebook was more than half full by the time she crossed Chandler's Lane on a clear night in the third week of November and walked toward the ironmonger's corner.

She counted her steps. The fog was at the end of the lane, which was its usual position when she approached from this direction. She had documented it there eleven times. She walked toward it at her normal pace, counting, and stopped when she was twenty metres from the leading edge.

The fog was still.

She stood there for five minutes. Then ten. Nothing changed. The fog held at its position, its density unchanged, its curved front edge the same shape it had been when she arrived.

She walked back to the junction.

She stood at the junction and looked down the lane at the fog. Twenty metres. It had been twenty metres from the ironmonger's corner. The ironmonger's corner was the centre point.

She was standing at the centre point.

She looked at the fog.

The fog held. Not weather-still. The stillness of something waiting to be approached.

She went home and wrote: Approached to 20 metres. No movement. Mist at consistent position. No response to approach. Returned to junction. 20 metres from junction to edge currently. Centre point unconfirmed.

She slept four and a half hours. The longest stretch in two weeks.

She did not go back for four nights.

The gap was not planned. The third night she was genuinely ill, a chest cold that had been building for a week and which caught her at one in the morning with a temperature she could not ignore. She lay in bed and listened to the town and thought about the notebook and did not go out.

On the fourth night she was better. She put on her coat and laced her boots and went out at two-fifteen.

The fog was at the junction, not at the end of Chandler's Lane where she had been standing ten nights ago. The leading edge was at the post box on the south corner, which was twelve metres from her front door.

She stood on her doorstep and looked at it.

She had been in the notebook data every night for eight weeks and she had never seen the fog this far in. The junction was two streets from the waterfront. She had never recorded it past the first block of Chandler's Lane, sixty metres further south.

She went back inside. She closed the door. She stood in the hallway with her coat still on.

Four nights. The longest gap she had taken in eight weeks, and the fog had used it to come twelve metres closer to her own front door than it ever had before.

She sat down on the floor with her back against the wall, still in her coat, and opened the notebook and wrote: Night of return after 4-night gap. Mist at junction, approx 12 metres from house. First observation of mist north of Chandler's Lane entry. Possible interpretation: mist advances during gaps. Possible interpretation: correlation only. No basis for causal conclusion.

She did not write the other interpretation, the one about who had been solving what, and who had been played. She told herself that one was not falsifiable and therefore not a useful data point.

She slept three hours. She got up, made tea and stood at the window. The junction was empty. Before first light, as usual, the fog had retreated.

She looked at the graph.

The arc, with the junction added as a new data point, had tightened. The curve was closing. The centre point was still the junction of Priory Street and Chandler's Lane. But the distance from the centre to the leading edge, measured from tonight's position, was approximately twelve metres.

The distance from her front door to the junction was twelve metres.

She poured her tea down the sink and stood at the window until it was fully light.

She went to the table and looked at the second sheet of graph paper.

The arc had a new cross on it. She had not marked it. It was at the north end of the quay road, in a position she did not recognise from any of her routes. She looked at the shape of the alley indicated by the surrounding streets. Short. Dead end. One way in.

She had never walked it. It was not in the notebook.

She stood at the table for a long time. Then she wrote the position in the notebook margin and drew a small question mark beside it.

At two she sat on the bottom stair in her boots and coat. The front door was within reach. She could take the coat off, leave the notebook on the table, and let the unmarked cross remain unvisited. The kettle clicked as it cooled in the kitchen.

She stood and opened the door.

She went back.

By the time she reached the front door, she understood that safety had not persuaded her to return. She could not tolerate leaving the test unfinished. She had a chart on the table and a notebook dense with entries and a hypothesis that was six weeks old, and if she stopped now she would spend every night in this house knowing the fog was out there and not

knowing what came next, which was a worse version of the sleeplessness she had started with.

She went out at two-fifteen.

The town was cold and clear and the lamp at the top of Chandler's Lane was completely dark. She had previously seen it flicker but never fail entirely.

She walked to the junction and stopped.

The fog was in Priory Street.

It had come further up the street than she expected, past the end of Priory Street and past the corner, and it was sitting six metres from the junction, its front edge curved as cleanly as the line on her graph. The air was still while movement continued inside it. It turned on the same bearing she had drawn with a ruler the previous week, the same counterclockwise pull that appeared in the coastal authority's redacted incident log she had found on a third-party server and printed and kept in the drawer with the supplements.

She stood at the junction six metres from the leading edge.

The cold was specific, the drop of several degrees that everyone who had been near it described. She had been near it before and noted the temperature change. This was not the same. This was the cold of something that had gotten closer than the data had indicated it would.

She took her notebook out of her coat pocket.

She wrote the time. She wrote the position. She wrote: mist at 6 metres, Priory Street, north of junction. Furthest advance recorded.

She looked up.

The fog had moved.

It had moved only one or two metres, if she was reading the post box correctly, which she had been using as a fixed reference point for three

weeks. But it had moved while she was writing. Rule one: the fog does not move during observation.

Rule one was wrong.

She put the notebook in her pocket.

She turned and walked east, away from Chandler's Lane, away from Priory Street, away from the junction. She walked quickly, not running, the walk of someone who has decided something and is implementing it. She turned into High Street and then into the lane that ran behind the bakery and came out onto the quay road and walked north.

The fog was in the lane.

She was certain of this. She was at the quay end of the lane and the fog was at the bakery end, forty metres, and she had not seen it move into the lane but it was there. She stood and looked at it.

She felt a steady pressure against the side of her body from the lane, although there was no wind.

She turned north along the quay and walked for three minutes without stopping and turned into Fisher's Court, which was the only alley off the quay road, a short dead end with a locked door at the far end that nobody had opened in years. She went because it was the one direction she had never walked, the one part of the town's night geography that was not in the notebook.

She stopped at the far end of the alley, back to the locked door.

She was thinking clearly. She was certain of this. She was tired, but the cold and forty minutes of walking had made her unusually alert. She had not felt this focused since the years when her work still involved problems she could define and resolve.

She thought: I should have stopped before I marked the alley.

She thought: the alley is not in the notebook.

She sat down against the locked door, back against the wood, notebook in her hand, and looked at the entrance to Fisher's Court.

The fog came in by degrees.

It filled the alley from the quay road end, the leading edge keeping its curve between the two walls. Its density held at the percentage she would have written if she were still able to pretend the number mattered. The smell was paper gone damp in a closed drawer, salt in the spine of a notebook.

She opened the notebook. She found a blank page.

She wrote the time. She wrote: Fisher's Court. Mist entering from quay road end. Leading edge advancing. No wind.

She kept writing. She was methodical. She had always been methodical. She documented what she saw in the language she had developed over weeks of night walks, and the fog came in slowly and she filled the page and turned to the next one, and the cold settled into her shoulders and her hands and the pen moved steadily across the paper, because whatever else was happening, the record needed to be complete.

* * *

She was found by the baker at five forty-seven, when he came to open.

He saw her from the alley entrance: back to the door, legs extended, coat buttoned, notebook open across her knees. The pen was in her right hand. The last entry trailed off mid-sentence in the lower third of a page that was otherwise complete.

The fog had gone before first light.

He called the emergency line. She was breathing. She was warm, which he said afterward was the detail that bothered him most. The alley was cold. She was not.

The notebook was on her knees when they found her.

She has not woken.

The notebook is on the table by her bed. The last diagram is not a map of the town. It is a map of the walks.

The last complete entry, on the page before the one that trails off, reads as follows: The arc is closed.

Below it, in the same hand, same pen, same pressure: Do not walk it again.

* * *

End

The Listing

Part One: The Viewing

The woman who opened the door was very old and very upright. Ottilie Vetch. She had written the name in the correspondence in a hand that was precise and unhurried, each letter fully formed, the kind of handwriting that had been taught and then practised for sixty years without varying. She stood in the doorway and looked at them both.

"You found it," she said.

"Navigation app," Keir said.

She did not receive it as a pleasantry. She stood aside and let them in.

The asking price had been forty percent below comparable properties in the district, which was either structural problems or an unmotivated vendor, and Keir had decided on the drive that either way was negotiable.

The spreadsheet had been useful before. On the Finch Road conversion it had caught a drainage liability the surveyor's prose had softened into weathering, and the correction had saved thirty-seven thousand pounds. He trusted the spreadsheet because it did not flatter anyone. It placed risk in a cell and gave the cell a cost.

The house was clean and well-ordered and smelled of cold stone after rain. Coastal properties had a smell. He noted the ceiling height, the width of the hall, the original cornicing intact. Good bones, he thought. The phrase pleased him. He liked thinking in phrases that property professionals used. It made him feel like one.

Ottilie Vetch walked them through without commentary. Sitting room, dining room, kitchen with the original range still in place. Greer asked about heating. The old woman said there was a boiler in the cellar. Greer asked when it had been serviced. Ottilie said: "Recently."

Keir was measuring the sitting room with his eyes, estimating. Four bedrooms above. The outbuildings would convert. He had already, on the drive, sketched a rough financial model in his head and liked the number. He had not written it down because he preferred not to have evidence of optimism before negotiation.

"The rear garden," he said. "Can we see it?"

Ottilie looked at him. "Of course."

Part Two: The View

The garden ran south to a low stone wall. Beyond the wall the land dropped in a series of terraces toward the estuary, and the estuary was not visible because the fog was on it.

Keir looked at the fog.

It sat at the base of the terraces, level with the wall and very still, the colour the estuary took in bad light. He had seen it before, on other viewings, on the drive up. You stopped noticing it after a while. Everyone had.

"It clears by noon?" he said.

Ottilie was standing at the door. She had not come out into the garden. "Not always," she said.

"Most days."

She looked at him. "You should understand," she said, "that the fog here is not the same as the fog on the road."

Keir smiled. He had a particular smile for vendors who said things intended to lower expectations. "Every coastal property has its microclimate," he said.

"This one has the fog," Ottilie said. "Has had it since before this house was built. I have managed the situation for thirty-one years. Without management it comes further in."

Greer was looking at the wall at the far end of the garden. At the exact line where the fog stopped and the garden began.

"How do you manage it?" she said.

"That is a longer conversation than a viewing allows," Ottilie said. "I would need to know you were serious buyers before I had it."

"We're serious," Keir said.

"I don't mean financially serious," she said.

He did not ask what she meant. He took out a notepad and wrote the dimensions of the outbuildings from memory. He did not write down what Ottilie had said. He was not taking notes on things vendors said. He was taking notes on things that mattered.

* * *

While Keir was in the larger outbuilding, pacing the floor with his hands in his pockets, Greer went back through the kitchen to use the bathroom.

The bathroom was at the end of a short passage off the hall. On the way, she passed a door standing slightly open, a small room that had been a study. She did not go in. But the door was open far enough that she could see the desk, and on the desk, squared to the edge with the same precision as the handwriting, a notebook open to a page of dense script.

She stopped.

She could read three lines from where she stood. She was not trying to read them. They were at eye height and the door was open and the lines were there.

Day count from last maintenance: do not let it exceed four. The wall holds at four. At five the pressure begins. At six...

Keir's footsteps on the gravel outside.

She went to the bathroom and ran the tap and looked at herself in the mirror until the feeling in her chest settled into something she could manage. Then she went back out to the garden and stood beside him while he told her about the outbuilding's roof timbers, which were sound.

She did not mention the notebook. She told herself she had not read it, not properly, not enough to report. Three lines through a half-open door was not reading. It was proximity.

She told herself this all the way home.

* * *

They sat at the kitchen table for the negotiation, which Keir had decided on the drive was going to be straightforward. He made the offer twelve percent below asking.

Ottilie Vetch sat with her hands flat on the table and looked at the figure he had written on a piece of paper.

"I will accept," she said, "if you agree to hear what I have to tell you before completion."

"We can schedule a call," Keir said.

"Not with your solicitor. With me. There are things about this property that cannot be conveyed by a solicitor."

Greer said: "What kind of things."

"The management of the fog," Ottilie said. "There is a routine. It is not complicated, but it requires consistency. If the routine is not maintained, the fog comes to the wall. If it reaches the wall, it comes over it."

"And into the garden," Keir said.

"And further," Ottilie said.

He smiled again. She did not respond to the smile, which was unusual. Most people responded to the smile. "We'll schedule the call," he said.

Ottilie looked at him for a long moment. Then she looked at Greer. Then she picked up the piece of paper and folded it and put it in her cardigan pocket.

"Schedule it soon," she said. "I will be gone by the end of November."

Part Three: Due Diligence

They did not schedule the call.

Keir's solicitor moved quickly. The searches came back clean, the survey found minor pointing on the north gable, and completion was set for the fourteenth of November. Keir had a spreadsheet with seventeen tabs.

He had named it The Finch Project. At forty-two, after nineteen years making other people's systems more efficient, he wanted the margins to belong to him.

Property books had given him a language he liked for instincts he already trusted.

Greer had looked at the spreadsheet once and said: "Have you looked up what the fog actually is?"

"It's coastal fog," he said. "The whole region has it."

"She said this one was different."

"She's eighty years old and she's lived there alone for thirty years. Of course she thinks it's different."

Greer said nothing. She thought about the three lines through the half-open door. At five the pressure begins. She did not say this.

The call from Ottilie Vetch came on the seventh of November. Keir was in the middle of something when it came in. He let it go. He listened to the

message that evening. Three minutes. Ottilie's voice was the same on the recording as it had been in person: precise, unhurried, each word fully formed.

She described the routine. She had put it in writing, she said, and would send the document by post. It would explain the plantings along the inner wall, the maintenance schedule, and the importance of not missing days.

She paused. Then she said: "I want to be clear with you, Mr. Finch. I am not a superstitious woman. I am a practical one. I have lived in that house for thirty-one years. I have kept the routine for thirty-one years. The routine works because it has to work, not because I believe in it. You will make your own choices. But I would ask that before you make them, you understand what you are choosing between."

Keir said: "She sent us a message about her garden."

"She said she'd send a document," Greer said.

"The survey was clean. The searches were clean. An old woman's garden routine is not due diligence."

Greer said nothing.

The document from Ottilie arrived by post four days before completion. Keir saw the envelope, recognised the handwriting, and put it on the pile with the other correspondence. He did consider opening it. Then he considered the advantage of not having opened it if anyone later asked what he had known before completion. The thought arrived cleanly and did not trouble him.

They completed on the fourteenth. Collected the keys. Drove to the house and stood in the empty kitchen and Greer made tea from a flask and Keir walked the rooms with his notepad out, measuring, checking the light.

The document was still on the kitchen counter of their other house, under a council tax bill and a delivery notification.

Part Four: The Finch Project

They moved in at the start of December because Keir had calculated that six months on site would save the project management fee. Greer did not argue. Keir often treated delayed disagreement as agreement.

The outbuildings were better than the photographs. By breakfast Keir had them divided into three holiday lets, one premium and two standard, with a projected yield that covered the purchase and more.

She listened and said: "What about the garden?"

"What about it?"

"The plantings. Along the inner wall."

"We'll replant. Whatever's there now probably isn't what we want anyway." He poured more coffee. "We're going for a contemporary feel. Clean lines. Low-maintenance. That cottage-garden look doesn't fit the market."

Greer said nothing.

He did not notice the fog for the first two weeks. It sat below the stone wall at the far end of the garden, the same depth it had been on the viewing day, still in the mornings and level with the lowest course of stone. He photographed the garden from the upstairs bedroom window and cropped the photographs to show the terracing and the aspect and the stone wall. The photographs looked like the photographs in the listing. He was pleased by this.

In the third week the plantings along the inner wall died.

They had not been watered. He had not given them any consideration. They were low, dense things, dark-leafed, and when they went they went without drama: a drying and darkening over four or five days, the leaves folding inward, the colour gone. He saw it on a Tuesday morning and made a note to clear them. A clean bed would be easier to replant.

On Wednesday the fog was at the wall.

He noticed this at seven-thirty, standing at the kitchen window with his first coffee. The fog had always been below the wall. Now it was pressed against the outer face, one continuous presence from the lower terrace to the stone. The wall was all that separated the garden from it.

He stood at the window and looked at this.

Then he said, to himself, because Greer was still upstairs: the fog is higher this morning. Weather. Tidal. Something.

He went upstairs to take the room measurements he had been putting off.

* * *

On Thursday morning Greer walked to the village to find the plant nursery the estate agent had mentioned in passing during the viewing.

There was no nursery. There was a hardware shop with seed packets outside. The woman behind the counter had lived in the village all her life and remembered several residents who had arrived, struggled with the house and left.

Greer asked about the plantings at the Vetch house. She described them: low, dense, dark-leafed, along the inner garden wall.

The woman looked at her. "You bought it, then," she said.

"Yes."

"When did you move in."

"Start of December."

The woman was quiet. She straightened the rack of seed packets, though it did not need straightening.

"Mrs. Vetch planted those herself," she said. "Brought them from somewhere further up the coast. She was very particular about them.

Particular about the maintenance too. She used to come in here sometimes for the feeds she needed, and she'd tell me the schedule like I'd asked, which I hadn't, but she wanted someone to know." She paused. "She was a practical woman. Not given to fuss."

"The plants died," Greer said. "We didn't know we needed to maintain them."

The woman looked at her steadily. "She didn't tell you."

"She tried to."

A silence.

"The family before her," the woman said. "The Carrows. They left after fourteen months. The husband went into the fog in the January and didn't come back, and his wife packed up the same week and we never heard from her again." She put both hands on the counter. "Before them there was a man on his own who lasted less than a year before he stopped being seen. And before him the house stood empty for eleven years, which is the longest it had managed."

Greer stood at the counter.

"Mrs. Vetch lasted thirty-one years," the woman said. "Longer than anyone. And she kept those plants. Every morning and every evening, whatever the weather." She looked at Greer. "I don't know what they do. I don't think she fully knew either. But I know the house was quiet while she had them."

Greer paid for a packet of seeds she did not need and walked back to the house.

She did not tell Keir what the woman had said. She told herself she would tell him that evening, when the moment was right. But that was not the complete truth. The complete truth was that she had wanted the house too. She had stood in the empty kitchen on completion day and felt something she had not named and had not needed to name. For years Keir had

dismissed the physical details she noticed as atmosphere. During this purchase, she had chosen not to challenge him.

She told herself this with less conviction than she had managed before.

Part Five: The Wall

On Thursday the fog was over the wall.

The fog crossed the top of the wall and spread through the lower third of the garden. By quarter to eight it had reached the first gravel path and covered the dead plantings.

He stood at the back door and looked at it.

It was a Thursday in December and the garden was in shadow and the fog was in the garden. He breathed in. It smelled of wet wall, dead leaves, and the room beyond the cellar door. He had smelled it before without noting it. He noted it now.

He went back inside and opened the spreadsheet.

Greer appeared in the kitchen doorway. She had her coat on. She was carrying her keys.

"The fog is in the garden," she said.

"I saw it."

"The plants are dead."

"I was going to clear them next week."

She stood in the doorway and looked frightened. Keir chose to interpret the expression as doubt.

"She told us," Greer said.

"She told us her garden routine. Which we were never going to follow because it's not our garden anymore."

"She told us the fog would come to the wall. And that after the wall it would come further."

"It's in the lower third of the garden, Greer. It's weather."

"The document," she said. "From Ottilie. Have you read it?"

He had not read it. He had not said he had not read it. He said: "The survey was clean. The searches were clean. A document from an elderly vendor about her garden is not our concern."

Greer went out through the front door. He heard her car on the gravel.

He turned back to the laptop. Builder's quotes tab. The second builder's figure, which he was provisionally preferring. He made a note. He looked at the overall column and found it satisfying.

He did not go back to the kitchen window. He did not want to look at the lower third of the garden before the fog had time to thin.

He was on the revised costings when he stood, for no reason he could name, and went to the window.

The path was empty. The upper terrace was empty. At the top of the steps down to the lowest level, where the fog was waist-high and still, a figure stood with its back to the house.

The figure was not Greer. He had heard Greer's car on the gravel ten minutes ago.

He looked at the figure. It was very still. It was looking toward the far wall, or at something between the steps and the far wall he could not see from the window. It had the posture of someone who had been standing in that position for a long time and expected to stand there longer.

He went to the back door and opened it.

The path was empty. The upper terrace was empty. The steps went down to the lowest level, where the fog was waist-high and working along the wall line.

He stood in the doorway.

He went back inside. He sat at the table and looked at the laptop and after a moment opened the builder's quotes tab and read the figures, which were the same figures they had been before.

He did not write this down anywhere. He told himself: coastal light. Fog distortion. The mind making a figure out of colour.

He believed this for most of the afternoon.

Part Six: The Garden

Greer drove to the village and sat in the car park behind the harbour building. She did not go anywhere. She sat with her hands on the wheel and thought about what the woman in the hardware shop had said, and about the three lines she had read through the half-open door in November, and about the fourteen months the Carrows had lasted before January took the husband into the fog.

She drove back.

She sat in the car in front of the house for a while. The front of the house was fine. Stone, south-facing, the gravel path, the gate. She could see why he had looked at those photographs and felt the thing he felt. She had felt it herself, briefly, on the viewing day.

She went in and found him at the table.

"The document from Ottilie," she said. "Where is it?"

"Kitchen counter. Other house. With the pile."

"You didn't bring it."

"I didn't think we needed it."

"I want you to call her."

"She's moved out. I don't have a new number."

"The solicitor will have it."

"Greer."

"The fog is in the garden, Keir. She said after the wall it comes further. She managed it with the plants and the plants are dead." She stopped. She looked at him. "Before her there was a man on his own. He lasted less than a year. Before him the house stood empty for eleven years."

He looked at her. "Where did you get that."

"The woman in the hardware shop."

"Village gossip."

"She knew Mrs. Vetch. She knew the schedule. She knew what the plants were for."

He used the expression he used when she found atmosphere in practical situations. "I'll replant in spring," he said. "Dense planting along that wall, same principle, better species."

"There was a family called Carrow before Ottilie. The husband went into the fog in January. His wife left the same week."

He was quiet.

"She told us," Greer said. She sounded exhausted rather than angry. "She told us on the viewing. She rang. She sent a letter. She was right about all of it, and the plants are dead, and the fog is in the garden."

He looked at the laptop. He looked at the figures on the screen, which were the same figures they had been before, and which did not account for any of this.

"I'll replant in spring," he said.

Greer stood. She picked up her keys.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"The garden."

He watched her go through the kitchen. He heard the back door open. He sat for thirty seconds.

Then he stood and went to the window.

Greer was on the path. The fog was in the lower third of the garden, thicker than the morning. She walked to the upper edge of the lowest terrace and stopped. She stood looking at the fog. She looked up at him through the window.

He went to the back door.

"It's rising," she said.

"Come inside."

She looked at the fog for another moment. Then she walked back to the path. She stepped onto the gravel. The leading edge reached the gravel and held there, exact along the path. He looked at that line.

"The plants," she said. "I'm going to find out exactly what they were and replant them."

He said nothing.

"Today," she said.

He moved aside and let her in.

Part Seven: What Keir Did

She went to the kitchen to find the hardware shop woman's name, which she had written on the seed packet receipt in her coat pocket. She would go back and ask her properly this time: the species, the feed schedule, whether anyone still had the original stock.

She was standing at the counter with her coat on when she heard the back door open.

She turned.

The door was standing open. Cold air from the garden.

She went to it. The path was empty. The upper terrace was empty. At the top of the steps to the lowest level, where the fog was now at neck-height, she could see one thing: his boot print in the wet gravel at the edge of the top step, still filling with water.

"Keir."

The garden was very quiet.

She stood on the path and counted slowly, as her father had taught her to do when frightened.

She reached eleven.

The fog did not move. Its surface was perfectly still, which was wrong, because it had always worked along the wall line, and now it did not work at all.

She waited for a shape in it, for a hand at the top of the steps, for anything.

She did not go in.

She stood on the path and did not go in and she could not have said when she understood that this was the right decision. Only that she did. Clear and final and too late to be useful.

She thought about the three lines in the notebook. At five the pressure begins. At six.

She had not read what came after six.

She walked to the car.

She drove to the village. She went into the hardware shop and stood at the counter and said to the woman: "I need to know exactly what Mrs. Vetch planted along that wall, and where she got it, and whether any of it is still available. And I need to know today."

The woman looked at her for a moment. Then she reached under the counter and brought out a small card, handwritten, in the same precise and unhurried hand as all the rest.

"She left this," the woman said. "Last October. Said if I saw the plants fail, I was to give it to whoever came asking."

Epilogue: The Listing

The property at the above address is available for sale by private treaty.

Stone construction, pre-war, two storeys. South-facing. Original features throughout, including cornicing, kitchen range, and cellar with boiler. Outbuildings with conversion potential, subject to planning. Large rear garden with terracing to the estuary.

The property has been lightly used and is in good condition throughout.

Viewing strictly by appointment.

Prospective purchasers are advised that the vendor's representative will require a preliminary conversation prior to any formal offer being submitted.

Note appended by the vendor's representative, O. Vetch:

The planting along the inner wall has been reinstated and is included in the sale. A maintenance schedule is available to serious purchasers and must be reviewed before exchange.

It is not long. It takes less than twenty minutes.

The alternative is longer.

* * *

End

The Picture

Part One: The Town

Pell was the kind of place that had stopped apologising for itself.

The market ran on Thursdays and Saturdays, though by November the Saturday stalls were down to three: a van selling root vegetables, a woman with bootleg vitamins, and old Kezia Tarn who had been selling the same hand-dipped candles since before the road widened. The harbour held six boats. Two of them still worked. The cinema had been closed since March, which anyone with eyes had seen coming for a year before that: the boards going grey, the marquee letters missing their vowels, the manager, a quiet man named Rook, last seen loading boxes into a hire van on a Tuesday afternoon without telling anyone he was leaving.

Jago had lived here all his life, which at seventeen felt like a sentence he had not been given the chance to appeal.

Fenella had moved to Pell at fourteen, from somewhere inland, and knew things Jago had never had to learn: which roads flooded in November, which shops you could credit from, which silence in a conversation meant something had already been decided without you. She walked faster than he did. She always had.

They had been together since June. He had kissed her first, by the old tide marker, with the fog coming in off the water and neither of them saying anything about it. The fog had been part of the coast for so long that residents treated it like tide or wind. It came in, withdrew, turned the harbour the colour of old copper and carried a mineral smell from the sea. You did not discuss it. You worked around it.

The cinema was Fenella's idea, which he should have remembered afterward.

She had heard it from a girl in her form group, who had heard it from an older brother: that the Lyric was running again, quietly, that if you knew the side entrance on Copse Lane you could get in on Thursday evenings, that it was not exactly legal and not exactly not. The older brother had gone twice. He had not said much about what he'd seen, only that it was worth going.

"What film?" Jago had asked.

"He didn't say."

"That's not a good sign."

"Or it's a very good sign," Fenella said. "Depending."

He had agreed because he wanted to make her happy, which was the truth, and also because there was nothing else to do in Pell on a Thursday in November, which was equally the truth and less flattering.

Part Two: The Lyric

Copse Lane ran along the side of the building, narrow enough that the wall on each side brushed your shoulders if you weren't careful. The main frontage was dark: boarded windows, the marquee empty, a chain across the box office steps. A narrow strip of light showed beneath the side door.

Fenella pushed it open.

The corridor inside was low-ceilinged and smelled of old carpet, damp paper tickets, and the closed sweetness of a room that had been shut since March. Coat hooks on the wall, still holding two or three forgotten jackets. A fire extinguisher in a bracket. A printed card taped to the door of the main auditorium, hand-lettered in blue pen: Tonight. Main Hall.

They looked at each other. Fenella pressed her lips together in the smile she used when nervous and unwilling to admit it.

"This is fine," she said.

"Absolutely," Jago said.

He pushed the auditorium door open.

The screen itself emitted a faint green light before the projector started. It illuminated rows of worn velvet seats and about thirty people, most sitting in pairs or small groups with empty seats between them.

Jago looked at the nearest couple. A boy and girl, perhaps his age, perhaps a year older. He did not know them.

He looked at the next. Two girls, close together, one with her head on the other's shoulder. Strangers.

He scanned the room. Thirty people, and he recognised none of them. This was not possible in Pell. You could not put thirty people in a room in Pell and not know at least a third of them by name. The town was not large enough.

He said this to Fenella in a low voice.

"Maybe they came from outside," she said.

"From where?"

She had no answer to that. They found two seats near the back, on the left, away from the other groups. The velvet was cold under his hands. The green light from the screen shifted across the rows like damaged film.

No one spoke. The hall was very quiet.

Then the projector started.

Part Three: The Film

There was no title card.

The film began with a harbour. He recognised Pell harbour from the tide marker, the far pier's lean and the early-summer light on the water. The image had been filmed in June.

On screen, a boy and a girl stood by the tide marker.

Jago watched them for three seconds before he felt Fenella go still beside him.

The boy on screen was Jago. He recognised his shoulders, his habit of resting on the left foot and the torn left pocket of his winter coat. The girl was Fenella, hair down as she had worn it in June. Behind them stood the tide marker and the incoming fog.

On screen, the boy kissed the girl.

Jago sat very still.

Beside him, Fenella drew a breath but did not speak. He reached for her hand and she let him take it, but she was still watching the screen.

The film continued. Summer scenes. The harbour, the Saturday market, the two of them on the coast road. It caught the small unchosen details: his August slouch, her chips in the left hand while the right moved as she talked. Everything on screen had happened.

"How," Fenella said.

He did not have an answer.

"Jago."

"I don't know," he said. "Keep watching."

The screen shifted. The green in the light deepened. The summer scenes gave way to autumn, October, a Thursday evening on the market square: the two of them, her in the green coat she'd bought from the charity shop on Mill Street, him with his collar up against the wind. He remembered the evening. He remembered what they had talked about. He did not remember who had been watching.

For one frame the tide marker filled the screen. Beneath the iron scale, a cinema ticket softened in the rain. Only one word remained legible: admit. Then the film cut back to them.

He glanced around the hall.

At the edges of his vision, in the other rows, something was happening. Other couples, leaning forward. Faces turned toward screens he could not see from his position. One girl sitting alone, two seats from a boy who was not looking at her, both of them watching something he could not read. A low sound from somewhere to his left: a girl, or a woman, drawing breath through her teeth.

He looked back at the screen.

Part Four: October

The film was in October now. Late October, the specific cold of it.

And there was the girl from the road past the fish shed. She was in the film for twelve seconds. He and she, at the corner of Copse Lane and the harbour road, at a time he had told Fenella he was at home. Twelve seconds. Her face turned up toward his. His hands where they were.

He knew what happened next. He did not need to see it and the film did not show it, which was almost worse. The twelve seconds ended and the film cut back to Fenella, at home, at the kitchen table, writing something in a notebook, unaware.

He had seen her the following morning. He had told her he had gone home early, along the harbour road, that the cold had got into him. He had said this looking at her directly, which was the part he had been most careful about.

Jago sat there.

He was aware of the velvet under his hands, the cold of it. Fenella stopped squeezing his hand and held her arm rigid beside him. Jago noticed the change without looking at her face.

He looked at the screen.

The film had split. He understood this without knowing how he understood it: the screen now showed two threads running side by side, a seam down the middle. On the left, the world where October had gone differently. On the right, the world as it had been.

On the left: the two of them in November, her laughing at something, the specific laugh she had when something actually caught her. Her hand on the table, his across it. A future that was still being built.

On the right: October as it happened. The corner of Copse Lane. Twelve seconds.

He looked at the left side of the screen for a long time.

Fenella stood up.

She did not say anything. She took her hand back first. Then she gathered her coat and she walked up the aisle toward the exit and she did not look back. He watched her go. In the row ahead of them a boy sat alone; the seat beside him held a coat that was not his, unclaimed. From somewhere to the right, footsteps, quick and deliberate.

Jago put one hand on the seat in front of him and started to stand. On the left side of the screen, Fenella laughed again in the future that had not happened. The laugh was clean. It offered him a version of himself in which the twelve seconds on Copse Lane had not cost anything. He kept his hand on the seat until his knuckles hurt, and then he sat back down.

The door opened and let in a cold stripe of corridor and then closed again.

Jago sat in the seat with both hands in his lap and looked at the screen.

Part Five: What Remained

The film did not stop.

He had expected it to stop when Fenella left. Some part of him had expected the whole hall to resolve, to snap back to whatever it had been before: a closed cinema, a dark room, an empty screen. Instead the projector ran on, and the light was still green, and the hall was still full of the people he did not know.

The seam down the middle of the screen closed.

The left side was gone. The two threads merged back into one. The film was in the present now: a Thursday in November, the Lyric, two seats near the back, a boy sitting alone. He was watching himself sitting in this seat, in this room. The screen showed the hall from a position he could not locate, somewhere above and behind, and in the image he could see the other couples and the girl sitting alone and the boy two seats from her and the faces turned toward their own screens.

He watched himself watching.

The film moved forward.

The film moved several weeks or months beyond the present, though Jago could not determine the exact interval. The light changed, the angle of it through windows he saw in passing. The screen showed the life that followed from the present, from this seat, from October having happened as it had. It was not violent. It was not dramatic. He sat in a flat somewhere, a city he did not recognise, and the flat was fine, and the view from the window was a canal or a river, grey and ordinary, and he was at a table with work he was doing and the flat contained only essential furniture and no personal objects, as though he had moved in but had not begun to live there. On the table beside his cup was a second cup, unused, handle turned toward the empty chair across from him. The unused cup remained opposite him because someone had continued setting the table for two.

He watched for a long time.

The film showed no dramatic suffering. It showed the grey canal, his work, the unused cup and a winter afternoon in a city where he knew no one.

He sat in the seat until the film ended.

He could not have said when exactly it ended. The screen faded to green and then to dark. The hall was quiet around him.

He thought about staying in the seat. Nobody would have stopped him; the other watchers had their own screens, their own weeks and months running out in green light, and no one here would have noticed one more person who simply did not get up. It would have cost him nothing further, sitting there. The film had already shown him the room, the canal, the second cup he would never fill. Staying meant not having to walk into it.

Then he stood up, put his coat on, and walked out through the side door into Copse Lane, into the exact life the screen had shown him, because the alternative was to stay in the dark and watch it happen to someone who never got up at all.

Part Six: The Following Year

Miss Wick taught geography at the secondary school in Pell, which she had done for eleven years and expected to do for several more.

On a Tuesday in October she was taking register for Year 12. She read the names in the order she always read them, first to last, and when she reached the C's she paused without meaning to.

"Jago," she said. Then stopped.

The class looked at her.

She looked at the register. His name was there, printed in the standard type the system used. She had been taking this register since September of the previous year. She had a clear memory of a Thursday in November when

he had not been in her class and had been marked absent. After that, nothing she could place: no conversation, no piece of work, no face at a desk that she could swear to. When she tried to locate him in the months between that Thursday and the spring, she found only a general impression: present, then less present, then gone. She could not produce a single afternoon she was certain he had been in the room.

She had taught him for two years.

"Has anyone heard from Jago?" she said. "Where he is now?"

A girl in the second row looked up. "He moved to the city," she said. "In the spring, I think. For work or something. My mum said she saw him packing boxes."

"Do you know which city?"

The girl shook her head.

Miss Wick looked at the register. She put a mark in the column and moved on. She read the next name, and the next, and the class settled back into itself.

She did not think about it again until the following Thursday, when she passed the Lyric on her way to the post office. The boards were back on the windows. The marquee was empty. The side entrance on Copse Lane showed no sign of anyone having used it recently: leaves banked against the door, the gap at the threshold dark and dry.

She stood outside for a moment and looked at it.

She had heard the rumours about the Lyric the previous autumn. She had heard them and said nothing, which was the position of most adults in Pell on most things that didn't have an obvious remedy. Now she stood on the pavement with her post office envelope and looked at the boarded windows and thought about a boy she had first taught at twelve, who had been good with maps and poor with patience and had the capacity to stare

out of windows for long stretches without appearing to think anything in particular.

The week after the rumours began, the head had asked whether the school should contact parents. Miss Wick had said it was probably ordinary truancy dressed up to sound interesting. No call had gone out.

She tried to remember whether there had been others. There had been a girl two years before, Phoebe something, who had left for the mainland in the spring and whose name Miss Wick now had to look up when it came to her. Before them, two Year 13 boys had disappeared from her active memory. She recalled their faces but had to search the register for their names. She had not connected these. Standing on the pavement outside the Lyric, she almost did.

Then the fog came in off the harbour and she lost the thread of it.

She thought: he must have left in the spring.

She thought: I don't remember him leaving.

At school the next morning she marked his record left area, destination unknown. The attendance system accepted the code and removed his name from the active register.

The fog came in off the harbour at ankle height, sliding along the gutter and under the market stalls toward the side door used on Thursdays. She watched it reach the kerb and press on.

She tucked the envelope under her arm and walked to the post office and did not look back at the Lyric.

On the way home she passed the tide marker. Someone had wedged a cinema ticket beneath the iron scale, half-pulped by rain, the ink washed pale except for one printed word: admit. She didn't know who had left it or why. She kept walking.

The fog sat on the water all the way to the horizon.

* * *

End

The Works

The train came in at half past four and Oswin Bray was the only one who got off.

The platform was wet, though it had not rained. The station building had been unmanned for years, its windows boarded from the inside rather than the outside. He did not examine this. He picked up his case and walked through to the forecourt, where a taxi was waiting because he had arranged one, and where the driver did not speak during the twelve-minute journey to the harbour.

Morrow had occupied his thoughts for most of the journey, although Bray repeatedly tried to concentrate on the inspection instead. Morrow at the conference bar in October, already two drinks ahead of the room, with the looseness of a man who had recently stopped caring about something he had cared about for thirty-one years. Early retirement at fifty-eight, which nobody took unless they had to or had been asked to.

There's a protein works on the cliff road outside Harrowe, Morrow had said. Been there since before the war. You won't find it on the active inspection list.

Bray had asked why not.

Morrow had looked at his glass. I'd leave it, he said. That's my advice. I'd leave it where it is.

Morrow had rolled the cardboard beer mat into a tube while he said it, then flattened it carefully under his palm, leaving two dark crescents where the cardboard had cracked. Bray remembered the crescents more clearly than the man's face.

If you get into the annex, Morrow had said, look at which side the pressure gauges are numbered from. The cliff, not the floor. That detail never reached my report.

Bray checked the discretionary register. The works had not been inspected in eleven years, despite rules requiring more frequent visits. Someone had repeatedly taken it off the schedule. That was enough. He filed a discretionary visit, collected his kit and booked the train.

He was a man of procedure. This was procedure.

Three years earlier, Bray had accepted a manager's correction at a dairy plant instead of checking a valve sequence himself. Two weeks later a worker lost the skin from the back of his hand to alkaline wash. Bray had followed procedure. That was what stayed with him.

* * *

The town was small and grey beneath a chalk cliff. Three boats still worked from the harbour. The high street had a post office, a pub, a hardware shop and a chemist whose hand-lettered sign read: respiratory complaints, open daily. Bray noted the indoor pallor of people on the pavement. He noted the low sound beneath the town.

It was a low sound. Below the wind, below the gulls, below the traffic of the one working road. A rhythm felt in the sternum before it was heard in the ear. He had found a complaint in the regional digest, filed sixteen months ago by a retired schoolteacher: a persistent low-frequency vibration consistent with heavy industrial process. No follow-up on file.

The hotel was above the pub. His room looked west, over the rooftops, toward the cliff. At the top of the cliff, just visible above the roof line, the stacks of Vane & Carling Protein Works rose against the late sky. Four of them, wide at the base, narrowing to a point, and from each one came a dark vapour that moved against the wind in repeated bursts rather than dispersing like smoke.

Once, as he watched, the smoke went green at the edges. Just for a moment. Then black again.

He unpacked his case. He took out the inspection forms, the sampling kit, the laminated authority card. He laid them on the desk in the order he used for every inspection: card first, forms second, kit third. He had done this in abattoirs and rendering plants and coastal processing facilities across the region for seven years. The order did not change. The order was the thing that did not change.

He went downstairs for dinner. The pub served a stew that tasted of very little, and the other diners did not look at him, which was unusual. People looked at strangers. These people did not look at anyone. They sat and ate and the low sound went on beneath everything and he felt it in his jaw and in the base of his throat and by the time he went back upstairs he had decided it was the boiler.

He slept badly. He did not remember his dreams.

The works sat at the top of the cliff on a platform of poured concrete that extended fifteen metres beyond the natural edge of the rock. The platform was not recent. It had the look of something built before anyone thought to ask permission, before the category of asking existed.

Bray drove up the cliff road in the hire car and parked in the visitors' bay. The bay had fresh gravel. The lines had been recently repainted.

The main building was substantial: pre-war brick, four storeys, with a newer concrete annex running the full length of the seaward face. The stacks rose from the annex. At ground level, along the base of the seaward wall, a row of discharge pipes emerged from the concrete and extended over the cliff edge. He counted nine. He could not see where they ended because the fog was on the water below.

It was always on the water below. He had noticed this from the hotel window the previous evening: the fog did not move with the tide or the wind. It held its position at the base of the cliff, tight to the chalk like a retained material. The discharge pipes went into the fog and stopped being visible.

He took photographs. He noted the diameter of the pipes. Below the discharge points, dark greenish deposits ran vertically down the chalk in layers, oldest at the base and fresh near the top.

A man was standing at the main entrance watching him.

He wore a dark suit with a visitor badge already clipped to the pocket. Although he was middle-aged, his face showed no lines around the eyes or mouth. He smiled when Bray turned.

"Mr. Bray," he said. "I'm Talbot. We spoke on the telephone."

They had not spoken on the telephone. Bray had filed the visit notification with the central log and booked the train. He had not contacted the facility.

"We didn't," Bray said.

Talbot's smile did not change. "Of course," he said. "Of course. My mistake. Come in."

The processing floor occupied the full ground level of the main building and half the annex. Bray had been in larger facilities. He had not been in one whose floor plan resisted being reduced to a form.

The ceiling was lost in steam. The floor was wet concrete, channelled toward a central drainage system that ran the width of the building and disappeared under the annex wall. The smell was animal and salt and the hot-metal tang of equipment working beyond its stated purpose. He noted it on his form under ambient conditions. He wrote: strong process odour, multiple components, one unidentified.

The workers moved through the steam in orange coveralls. Bray counted eleven. None looked up when he entered. One reacted only when Bray crossed with the sampling kit, eyes on the case rather than Bray's face, then returned to the flow. The movement seemed disordered until Bray watched long enough to see every path bend around one point: the drainage channel.

The cattle came in from the north end, through a low door he had not seen from outside. They were quiet. He had been in many abattoirs and the cattle were never quiet, not on the approach, not in the holding pens. These were quiet. They moved without resistance, single file, their eyes forward, and they were wrong in a way he could not immediately specify. He watched one pass and then he had it: too thin, but not from starvation. From something else. Their neck and shoulder muscles looked stringy, as he had seen in old or sick cattle. Their hides had a slight greenish undertone at the ears and muzzle.

He photographed them.

Talbot appeared at his elbow. "Heritage breed," he said. "The colouration is characteristic. The breed certification is current."

"I'll need to see it."

"My office has copies. I'll have them sent to your authority."

He noted: cattle presenting abnormal colouration and muscle condition. Certification not provided on site at time of inspection.

He moved toward the drainage channel.

It was deep, a metre at least, carrying a dark red-brown liquid faster than the floor gradient should have allowed. Against the current. Bray crouched. The liquid moved in slow pulses.

"The effluent management system," Talbot said, from behind him. "Fully certified under the coastal discharge protocols of 2019."

Bray looked at the liquid moving against the current, toward the annex wall, toward the pipes.

He stood up. "I need to see the annex."

Talbot did not want him in the annex.

He did not say this directly. Talbot did not say anything directly. He said the annex was a secondary processing area undergoing routine maintenance

and that a visit today might not give the most accurate picture of normal operations. He said the sampling Bray wanted could probably be conducted from the primary floor. He said these things in a voice that was smooth and even and continuous, the same frequency as the sound in the floor, and Bray noticed this and did not mention it.

"Annex," Bray said.

The annex was darker than the main floor. No windows on the seaward face, which was the cliff face. The wall itself was the cliff, or the concrete poured over the cliff, and from it, at intervals of approximately three metres, the intake pipes emerged.

The pipes carried material into the facility rather than discharging it.

He stood in the annex and looked at the intake pipes. They came through the seaward wall from outside, from the cliff face, from whatever was below the cliff face. Each one had a valve housing and a pressure gauge and a collection vessel below it. The vessels were copper, the same weight and construction as the ones described in the Crane mill documentation, which he had found in the authority's own archive when he went looking for background on coastal processing facilities.

The vessels held the fog, not the smoke from the stacks or the effluent. The fog from below the cliff, drawn up through the pipes and held under compression in the copper vessels and then, he understood now, released into the drainage channel on the main floor. The channel did not drain the floor. It distributed.

He stood in the annex and looked at this for a long time.

The cattle came in from the north end quiet and wrong-coloured. The workers circulated around the drainage channel. The discharge pipes on the cliff face sent something back down to the fog below. He tried to work out the sequence and could not. Intake or discharge, which came first. What the cattle were for. He could construct several answers, none of them the right shape.

"The intake system," he said.

"Condensate management," Talbot said. "The cliff environment generates significant moisture. The system captures and processes it."

"These are Crane-type vessels."

Talbot stopped speaking for the first time in two hours.

"The manufacturer supplies to multiple industries," he said. "The vessels are standard equipment. Continuity is the important thing. Interruptions are where problems begin."

Bray photographed everything. He took his samples from the collection vessels, from the drainage channel, from the discharge pipe nearest the access hatch on the cliff face. He labelled them in the order he always labelled them. He did not allow the labelling to become something he had to think about.

He left the annex and went back to the main floor and then to the car park and sat in the hire car with his samples and his forms and the low sound of the works going on through the car floor and up through the seat and into his back.

He wrote his initial notes for twenty minutes.

Then he drove back to town.

That evening he watched the fog from his window.

It lay at the base of the cliff as it always did, dense and still, and the discharge pipes from the annex emerged from the cliff face just above the fog line and extended down into it. Where they entered, the surface tightened around the pipe mouths like liquid under suction. He watched this for a long time. The stacks above breathed their dark smoke against the wind and once, for a long moment, the smoke and the fog were the same colour.

He went to bed at ten. In the dark the low sound travelled through floor, walls and mattress. His chest trembled with it. He had been breathing in time with it since morning without knowing.

He tried to breathe differently. He could not sustain it. After a while he stopped trying.

He slept.

The dream left him calm enough to remember every detail. The annex, the copper vessels and the intake pipes remained, but the walls and pipes felt secondary to the process running through them, human fittings built around something older. In the dream the sequence made sense, though he could not have said where it began.

He woke at three with the low sound going on and the window pale with the ambient light of the fog below the cliff.

He did not write the dream down. He lay still until it was light and then he packed his case and left.

He wrote the report over three days at his desk in the regional office.

He wrote it carefully, in the register he used for all his reports: factual, precise, sequential. He described the facility, the stacks, the discharge pipes, the cliff face staining. He described the cattle. He described the drainage channel and its movement against the gradient. He described the annex and the intake system and the Crane-type vessels and the pressure gauges and the samples he had taken and sent to the laboratory.

The laboratory results came back on the fourth day. He read them twice. He added a section to the report.

The discharge sample contained no bovine material. The intake sample did.

He picked up the telephone and dialled the first two digits of Kezia's direct line. A spoken instruction from her could put an officer at the gate

that afternoon. It would not be logged, and if she refused there would be no record that he had asked.

He replaced the receiver. He opened the submission portal.

He wrote his recommendation at the end.

The facility at Vane & Carling Protein Works, cliff road, Harrowe, should be closed pending full investigation of discharge practices, intake operations, effluent management, cattle sourcing, and the relationship between the facility's coastal systems and fog formation documented in this and related regional reports. The recommendation is immediate suspension of operations.

He signed it. He filed it with Kezia's office at nine-fifteen on a Thursday morning, through the standard submission portal, using his standard credentials. He followed every required step of the submission procedure.

He received a response at four-seventeen the same afternoon.

Kezia worked methodically. During four years under her supervision, Bray had watched her read complete files and issue decisions that cited the relevant evidence. She read everything and then acted.

She had read his report. He could see from her expression that she had read it carefully.

"Oswin," she said. "Sit down."

He sat.

"The samples," she said. "The laboratory results."

"Yes."

"The discharge composition is unusual."

"It's more than unusual."

"The intake system." She looked at the report, which was open on her desk. "The Crane-type vessels."

"Yes."

She was quiet. She had a pen in her hand and she was not writing with it, which was unusual for her. She held the pen above the report without writing, then lowered it to the desk.

"There are fourteen facilities in this region with active discharge permits," she said. "Vane and Carling is one of them. The permit was reviewed eighteen months ago."

"By whom."

She looked at the pen. "The regional board."

"Kezia."

"The certification is current, Oswin. The breed documentation, the effluent protocols, the discharge volumes. All current."

"I know what the certification says. I also know what the samples say."

She put the pen down. She looked at him. Her expression showed that she understood the report but had not decided how openly to acknowledge it.

"I'm going to refer the report to the environmental science panel," she said. "For technical review."

"That takes four months minimum."

"Yes."

"The facility will continue operating."

"Yes."

He looked at her.

"Oswin," she said. "The panel review is the correct procedure for findings of this nature. I cannot recommend closure of a certified facility on the basis of a single inspection report, however thorough. You know that."

"I know the procedure," he said. "I'm asking you what you know."

She was very still.

"The fog," he said. "The facilities. The regional board review eighteen months ago." He waited. "What do you know."

Kezia picked up the pen again. She looked at it. She set it precisely parallel to the edge of his report.

"The panel will review within the standard timeframe," she said. "I'll flag it for priority consideration."

He stood.

"Oswin."

He picked up his copy of the report.

"The discretionary visit provision," she said. "You used it correctly. The notification was properly filed. That's noted."

She used the same even, uninflected tone Talbot had used in the annex.

He looked at her.

She looked back at him with the expression of someone who has said what needed to be said and is now waiting for the meeting to conclude.

He went out.

He did not take leave.

He went back to his desk the following morning and opened his caseload. Two new assignments had been added overnight: a poultry facility in the north of the county and a fish processing plant near the inland reservoirs. Neither was coastal. He noted this. He prepared his forms. He laid them out in the correct order: card first, forms second, kit third.

The panel review would take four months. The facility would continue operating. The certification was current. These were facts and he logged them as facts and continued.

Three weeks later he received a letter from the authority's internal review office. His discretionary visit to Vane & Carling had been assessed. The notification had been correctly filed, the visit properly conducted, the report submitted through standard channels. No procedural irregularity had been identified.

The letter also noted that the discretionary visit provision would be subject to revised guidance from the following quarter. Individual officers would be required to obtain line manager approval before filing discretionary visit notifications. The change would apply across the authority.

He read the letter twice. He filed it.

He continued to work. His cases were clean and orderly and none of them were coastal. He was good at his work. He had always been good at his work. The forms went out and came back and he processed them and the days accumulated. The panel review was ongoing. He checked the public register periodically: the certification remained current, the permit remained active, the discharge volumes remained within approved parameters.

On a Wednesday evening in February he was at his desk late, mapping the inspection routes for the following month. He spread a regional map across the table and marked the sites in an order that minimised travel time and grouped similar facility types.

He finished and looked at what he had drawn.

The route ran in a slow curve from the office northward, looping back south, then east, then completing a wide circle that returned almost to its starting point. He had drawn the route automatically while minimising travel time between sites.

The route reproduced the drainage channel's circular flow, including the loop around its central point. Bray noticed the match only after finishing the map.

He sat for a long time.

He thought about Morrow in the conference bar. I'd leave it, Morrow had said. That's my advice. The beer mat had cracked beneath his palm in two dark crescents. Morrow had taken his pension. Bray had filed the notification, written the report and submitted it through standard channels.

He looked at the map.

He picked up the pen. He considered redrawing the route. He held the pen over the first mark.

Then he put it down.

The route was efficient. It was the most efficient configuration given the locations. He had checked it. Any other sequence would add time and cost. The form he had used to calculate it was the standard form, the one the authority used across all regions, the one that had been in use since before he joined.

He folded the map.

He turned off the desk lamp. He put on his coat. He picked up his case.

He locked the office and walked to the car and drove home through the dark. Somewhere on the bypass, the low sound was in the car with him. This time he measured it without meaning to.

Card first, forms second, kit third.

* * *

End

The Archive

The catalogue entry read: Unclassified. Coastal parishes, misc. correspondence. Pre-1700. Condition: poor. Not digitised.

Hugh Tanner had been the diocesan archivist for eleven years and he knew what not digitised meant. It meant no one had looked at it since the last person who looked at it had decided not to look further. He pulled the box from the shelf himself, which was not usual. Normally he sent Prentice, who was twenty-three and thorough and who did not need to understand what he was filing to file it well. This time Hugh carried the box to his own desk and closed the door.

He had been building toward this box for eight months.

Eleven years in the archive had taught him that most discoveries were administrative rather than revelatory. A missing date. A corrected attribution. A parish name restored to a damaged fold. He had made peace with this, or had told himself he had.

Part One: The Correspondence

It had started with the Halcott papers.

Reverend Thomas Halcott, coastal parish of Mossbank, letters and sermons 1671 to 1689. Hugh had processed them in March as part of the broader coastal parishes cataloguing project, the project that was his main reason for existing in this office, the project that had been running for four years and would run for another two before anything like a complete picture emerged. The Halcott papers were ordinary by the standards of the collection: disputes over tithes, a long and tedious correspondence with the bishop about the condition of the nave roof, a series of sermons on the usual topics. He had flagged three items for the regional history database and moved on.

He had gone back in April because of a single line.

It appeared in a letter from Halcott to an unnamed correspondent, undated, never sent or sent and returned: the green that comes off the water is not new, as I wrote to you before, and what it does is not new either, and I believe the Franciscan brothers at Blakeney had knowledge of it that was taken elsewhere when the house closed, and I have been trying to find where.

Hugh had read this line four times.

In June he found the first Blakeney reference in a separate collection entirely: a fragment of a monk's personal account, undated but watermarked to the 1540s, one of a group of items recovered from a demolished farmhouse wall in 1932 and donated to the diocese with no further provenance. The fragment described a viridis nebula rising from the estuary on mornings of low wind. It described the effect on the brothers who went near it. The letter described which men the fog approached, which men it ignored and the behavioural changes observed after the fog withdrew. Its author had hidden those observations beneath an unrelated file heading.

He put the fragment in a separate folder and said nothing to Father Carne.

This was the first error. He knew it was an error at the time.

* * *

In August he drove to Norwich.

The Cathedral archive held three items he had identified through the online finding aid: a report from a visitation commissioner dated 1538, the year of the Blakeney dissolution; a letter from the prior to the bishop; and a bound volume of miscellaneous ecclesiastical records from the coastal deaneries, 1490 to 1560, catalogued only to the level of miscellaneous and left there.

The visitation report was routine: inventory of assets, condition of the buildings, notes on the community's numbers and practices. The prior's letter was more interesting. It was a formal request to delay the dissolution, on grounds he described as matters pertaining to the maintenance of the shore, and it was refused, and the refusal was brief. What caught Hugh's attention was the list of items specifically excluded from the general inventory of Blakeney Priory's portable goods: eleven manuscripts, a set of copper vessels of varying sizes, and one item described only as the frame, with glass, as maintained.

Frame with glass. He wrote it in his notebook and underlined it.

The miscellaneous volume took him two days. On page 214, filed between a record of a boundary dispute and a list of feast day allocations, was a document in a different hand, on paper of a different weight, with no header and no date. It was in Latin, which he could manage, though not quickly. He photographed every page and went back to his hotel and sat with his dictionary and his photographs until midnight.

What it described was a practice.

The practice was older than its liturgical frame, or the liturgy had been laid over it later. The document called the phenomenon viridis afflatus, the green breath, and handled it as a practical condition: damp in a wall, flooding in a low nave. It specified windows, attendance and procedures for an affected member of the community.

There were no instructions for stopping it.

Hugh sat in his hotel room and read the document three times. Then he closed his laptop and looked at the ceiling for a while.

Halcott's line came back to him: what it does is not new, and I believe the Franciscan brothers had knowledge of it. The copper vessels excluded from the inventory. The frame with glass.

And the box in his own archive that he had not yet opened.

Part Two: The Churches

He began with St. Andrew's at Cley.

He had visited before, without a research question: font, roof timbers, medieval glass, brass memorial plates. The usual circuit through a building that had been accumulating significance longer than any individual life. He knew the church. He did not know what he was going to find when he went back.

He arrived on a Tuesday morning in September. The church was unlocked, still common in this part of the coast. In the nave he let his eyes adjust and searched for the shade named in the document: viridis sub aqua, green beneath water. Ordinary glass was too clear. Foliage was too warm. The panel held a colder depth.

He found it in the north aisle.

A panel of glass no larger than a dinner plate, set into the lower corner of a window that was otherwise plain, older than the surrounding glass, set into the frame with different leading, the work of someone who had incorporated rather than created. The image within it was less specific than he'd expected: a figure standing in water or near water, hands at the sides, face turned away, unnamed, unhaloed. The water around it moved, or appeared to.

He photographed it and told himself: old glass frequently depicts figures that are now unidentified. He told himself: one panel proves nothing.

He drove to Blakeney.

* * *

The church of St. Nicholas at Blakeney was seven miles west along the coast. Nothing of significance remained above ground of the Franciscan priory: a few courses of flint incorporated into a later farm building, a field name on the OS map. The priory itself was gone.

The church was not the priory's church. The Franciscans had used their own. But the church was the community's church, and communities carried things forward across centuries without needing to explain why.

He found the second panel in the south chapel: again in the lower corner of a larger window, again the glass older than its surroundings, the same colour. A different image. This one showed only water in the lower half of the panel, and above the waterline, no figures, no sky. An edge. A boundary. The place where one thing became another.

A woman came in to do the flowers. He asked her about the panel.

"Very old," she said. "The vicar would know more. But Reverend Holt's away until Thursday."

He thanked her, photographed the panel, and left.

* * *

He found three more over the following six weeks. Coastal churches. Lower corners of windows. Same shade. Water, figures at water, the boundary between water and air. None named. In two inventories the panels had been filed as purpose unclear, possibly votive.

The fifth panel was different.

It was in a small church outside Sheringham that was not on any tourist circuit and was open only on Sunday mornings. He had found a reference to it in a 1908 diocesan report on the condition of medieval glass in the coastal parishes, a single line: one panel of exceptional age and unusual subject, retained in situ at the recommendation of the visiting commissioner. He drove out on a Sunday and arrived five minutes before the service.

The panel was in the east window, set near the bottom of the central light, in a position that would catch the rising sun at certain times of year. Hugh stood in front of it while the small congregation arranged itself in the pews behind him.

The colour was the same. The image was not.

What it showed, as clearly as six-hundred-year-old glass could show anything, was a group of people standing at a waterline. The water was depicted in the lower section of the panel, green, that same specific green. Above the waterline, the figures stood with their backs to the water. They were looking inward, into what the image implied was a settlement. One figure at the edge of the group was turned differently: facing the water, one hand raised, neither in blessing nor in prohibition.

Hugh looked at the gesture for a long time before he could name it.

Maintenance. The hand of a person maintaining something.

He stood through the opening of the service without moving.

The young vicar was named Holt, and he had come from the same benefice as the church at Blakeney. Hugh waited until the congregation had gone and asked about the panel.

Holt looked at it with an expression Hugh had learned to recognise over the previous weeks. A face deciding what it knew.

"It's medieval," Holt said. "Probably fourteenth century, based on the leading. The county glass survey mentioned it. I've looked into it a little."

"And?"

Holt glanced back at the panel before answering. "There are several panels like it along the coast. I've visited two others."

Hugh looked at him.

"The iconography doesn't match any standard programme," Holt said, limiting himself to the published research. "No saints. No scripture scenes. The best interpretation is a local weather tradition, perhaps a votive practice for communities dependent on coastal conditions."

"Is that what you think?"

Holt looked at the panel. "I think it's older than the church," he said. "The glass was moved here. Possibly from the priory at Blakeney, when the house was dissolved." He paused again. "The commissioner's report from 1908 recommended it be retained. He didn't say why."

"Do you know why?"

"No," Holt said. The answer came too quickly to be uncertainty.

Hugh thanked him and drove back to the diocesan offices.

Part Three: Father Carne

He had worked with Father Carne for eleven years and he understood the man precisely: a careful intelligence, slow to commit, allergic to disorder. Carne ran the diocese's document management with the thoroughness of someone who understood that an institution's survival depended on knowing exactly what it had and controlling exactly what it released.

Hugh knocked on his office door on a Thursday afternoon.

He had brought photographs of the panels and his Norwich notes, leaving the Blakeney fragment in his desk. On Carne's table he arranged the material chronologically, labels square to the edge, and began without preamble.

Carne listened. He looked at the photographs. He read Hugh's transcription of the Latin document from the Norwich miscellany volume, slowly, without expression.

When Hugh finished, Carne set the papers down with the care of a man returning a borrowed object.

"You've done thorough work," he said.

"Thank you."

"The Latin document. You're confident in the transcription?"

"I had it checked." Hugh had sent it to a colleague at Cambridge who worked in ecclesiastical Latin. The colleague had confirmed the transcription and asked no questions, which Hugh had found quietly significant.

Carne looked at the photograph of the Sheringham panel. He looked at it for longer than the others.

"The practice described in the document," he said. "Management of the viridis afflatus."

"Yes."

"Management, not removal. Not suppression."

"No. The document is entirely operational. It assumes the phenomenon is present and addresses only how to work around it. Or with it."

A silence.

"Hugh." Carne lowered his voice and separated each word. "How much of this have you shared?"

"I'm sharing it now. With you."

"With anyone else."

"No."

Carne looked at the panel photograph again. "The panels were installed by someone," he said. "Over a long period, in a number of separate churches. Someone made a decision to place this particular glass in these particular buildings."

"No."

"It was policy," Carne said. "Of some kind."

Hugh waited.

"There are materials in the restricted archive," Carne said, "that I have not shown you because your cataloguing work has not required them." He

stood and went to the window. Outside, the close was empty, the afternoon light flat. "Some of them are relevant to what you've found. I've known that for several months."

Hugh said nothing.

"I was waiting," Carne said, "to see how far you'd get independently." He turned. His expression was not unkind. It was the expression of a man who has been managing something for a long time and has found the person he was waiting for. "That sounds worse than it is. It's how this has always been done."

He went to the cabinet in the corner. He used a key Hugh had never seen on a lock Hugh had not known was there. He produced a folder, grey, unmarked, and set it on the table next to Hugh's photographs.

"Read this here," he said. "Not in your office. Here."

He went out and closed the door.

Part Four: The Folder

The folder contained seven documents.

A fifteenth-century letter listed the consequences of unmanaged contact. A visitation report from 1612 described the use of window glass to mark and contain the approach. An undated memorandum listed six coastal parishes and the condition of their panels. Three had been removed. Against each removal, one word: Advised.

The sixth document was a set of instructions, operational, precise, stripped of interpretation. It was dated 1974, the year Hugh was born. It described access, maintenance, and what it called proximity protocol: who could stand near the panels, for how long, and what to observe afterward.

His fingertips had taken on the dry grey smell of old paper. Under it, for the first time, something saline.

The final item in the folder was a handwritten note on plain paper, recent, the ink still clean.

For the archivist, when ready. The glass does not depict the phenomenon. The glass is made from material recovered from the shoreline at specific intervals over a period of at least four centuries. My working belief is that the phenomenon responds to what was made from the recovered material. This is how I classify the panels' function. Their removal has repeatedly been followed by reversal or regret. E.C.

E.C. Father Edmund Carne.

Hugh sat with the note for a while.

He remembered the glass as the green of deep water. Light passing through the Cley panel had cast a slightly different green across the stone floor. He remembered standing before the Sheringham panel and feeling warmth at his back, which he had attributed to morning sun through the clear windows.

He turned to the last page of the folder.

Below Carne's note, in a second hand, three lines:

The practice pre-dated the brothers' records. They named it so that they could assign maintenance duties. Whenever someone removed a panel or related document, another copy or replacement later appeared. The archive should record those returns.

No attribution. The handwriting was later than the document, though Hugh could not date it more closely.

He closed the folder.

Part Five: The Box

Carne came back an hour later and found Hugh at the table with the folder closed and his own photographs arranged in a neat row beside it.

"The restricted archive," Hugh said. "How much more is there."

"Considerably more."

"And you've been waiting."

"We wait for the person who gets this far independently. It's not a test. It's more that the work selects." Carne sat down. "The question is always whether someone has followed the evidence or the instinct. Your instinct was right, but you followed the evidence first. That matters."

Hugh looked at him.

"Proximity protocol," he said. "Is that why you sent me to Sheringham without telling me what I'd find."

Carne did not answer that directly. "The documentation is careful not to claim an explanation," he said. "Only a procedure. I'd rather you kept it that way."

Hugh thought about the box on his desk. The unclassified pre-1700 coastal correspondence he had not yet opened.

"The box in my office," he said.

"I know."

"Did you put it there."

Carne waited several seconds without answering.

"Open it when you're ready," Carne said. "There's no urgency. There hasn't been urgency for centuries." He stood. "I'd like you to take on the restricted archive as a secondary project. Alongside the cataloguing work. It needs proper organisation. The institutional memory is not as well maintained as it should be."

Hugh picked up his photographs. "Why wasn't I told at the start."

"Because at the start you were a cataloguer." Carne moved to the door. "Now you're the archivist."

He said it without particular emphasis, in the same tone he had used for dates and catalogue numbers.

Hugh drove home through the coast road, which added twelve minutes to the journey but which he had been taking without deciding to for the last three months. The fog lay over the fields to the east. Flat, still, the same pale green at the horizon it always was in the evenings at this time of year.

He had taken this route for the view. That was what he had told himself.

Part Six: The Morning

He opened the box the following Tuesday.

Prentice had left for the day. The archive was quiet. He carried the box to his desk, not the cataloguing table, and set it in the lamp light and lifted the lid.

On the temporary catalogue sheet, in Prentice's hand, a pencil note: See restricted archive? Hugh had not discussed the box with him.

He rubbed the side of his thumb over the question mark. The pencil held. Prentice had a good eye. In another archive, under another subject heading, Hugh would have called him in the next morning and shown him why the question mattered.

Correspondence. Pre-1700. Coastal parishes. Condition poor.

He worked through twenty-three documents in order. Most were routine. Three he flagged. The nineteenth stopped him.

A letter, no date, poor condition, addressed to no one. Or addressed to the keeper of these accounts, which was the same thing.

He had not encountered the handwriting in eleven years of archival work. Its letter forms belonged to an earlier period and required careful reading. He worked slowly, translating into his own hand as he went.

What comes from the water was here before me and will remain after me. I record this as fact. The brothers named it; we do not. A name makes a claim, and we have no claim upon this thing. We maintain the glass because the glass holds attention. If attention is what it seeks, let the glass receive it before a person does. This is the function of the panels as I received it and as I pass it forward.

He sat for a long time after he had written it out.

The lamp made a small circle on the desk. Outside the archive windows the town was quiet, the evening ordinary. He read his transcription again. Then he read the last sentence again: as I pass it forward.

Carne's note came back to him. For the archivist, when ready. And what Carne had said. The work selects.

And the warmth at his back in the church at Sheringham, standing in front of the glass while the service began behind him. He had stood there for longer than he had intended. He had noticed the colour where the light through the panel reached the floor, not the same colour as the glass, and had not moved.

He looked at his hands.

Eleven years in the archive had taught his hands the difference between foxing and mould, water damage and deliberate erasure. He looked at his hands now and they were the same hands.

The light through the archive window was the ordinary grey of evening. Nothing suggested by it. Nothing unusual.

He put the letter back in the box. He took Prentice's temporary catalogue sheet and laid a clean sheet over it. The old note remained beneath, visible only as a faint pressure in the paper if he angled it toward the lamp.

He began to write: Letter, undated, re: coastal glass maintenance practice. Unusual theological position. File under: restricted archive.

When he looked back, the last line read: See: restricted archive. File: Carne, E.C., current.

He had written it himself. The pressure was his. The abbreviation was his. That was the difficulty.

He put the temporary sheet in the confidential waste tray beside his desk. It was a defensible decision. Temporary working notes were not records. Restricted routing should not be left on an open catalogue slip by a junior assistant. He could have explained each step.

He closed the box.

He turned off the lamp.

He stood in the dark before moving to the door. The box remained on the desk, and his transcription remained in his notebook. He had also read the letter aloud without intending to and had noticed only halfway through the second paragraph.

He had read it aloud.

He went home through the coast road.

He ate at seven, an hour earlier than usual. He went to bed at ten and lay awake for a time, not thinking about the archive, or so he told himself. In the morning he woke four minutes before his alarm and lay still in the dark and waited for it to sound.

He was already thinking about the restricted archive. About how many panels had been removed and found their way back.

He wondered whether cataloguing, restricting and returning the panels helped maintain the system described in the letters.

He wrote the time down.

Below it, before he had properly woken, he wrote: First morning after contact. Observe for changes.

* * *

End

The Eastern Shore

Part One: The Loch

The loch was four miles long and nobody fished it commercially anymore. Two seasons running, nets had surfaced split from beneath by something large moving at depth. The boats from Kinloch had moved south to the coast. Ferris Dreich had not moved anywhere.

He went out each morning at five. The boat was a fourteen-footer with an outboard he had rebuilt twice with parts from a supplier in Inverness who no longer answered his letters. He knew the loch through the boat's movement: the slight list where the depth changed and the extra resistance in the eastern shallows where peat lay close to the surface.

The green was on the water most mornings now. Not fog. The coastal fishermen called it the green keeper and meant something by that, something they did not spell out to outsiders. On the loch it lay in slow formations, thick near the far shore where the hill dropped into the water without a beach, thinner in the middle where the current ran. Ferris went out into it and worked his lines and came back and did not speak about it.

His wife had been gone two years. His son Alec had been gone eight months.

The order of those losses was the thing he did not let himself think about too directly.

Part Two: What He Told Conal

Conal Sutherland had known Ferris since school and owed him a debt that was old enough to have become simply friendship. He came to the loch on a Saturday in November and sat in the bow of the fourteen-footer while Ferris worked the lines, and he listened.

Ferris described the fish.

He had seen it first in September of the previous year, in the green just before dawn. Twenty feet below the hull, a mass moved slowly across the light. Too broad for a pike. A seal was impossible; nothing larger than a trout could reach the loch from the sea. Ferris watched until it passed and went home.

He had seen it again in October. Closer. Fifteen feet, perhaps twelve. The shape was longer than the boat. It moved slowly and did not accelerate when the boat approached or when Ferris lowered a line.

He had taken Alec out the following week. He had told himself he wanted a witness. He had told himself the boy was thirteen and needed to see things worth seeing.

Alec had seen it.

Alec had stood at the bow with one hand on the rail and watched the green water without speaking or shifting his weight. Ferris had watched his son's face instead of the water. Alec had looked down with the still attention he gave to things he already understood.

On the way home Alec had asked whether something could be lonely if there was only one of its kind. Ferris had told him not to be daft.

Conal listened to all of this without speaking.

On the way back in he said: "How long after that did Alec go into the water."

Ferris shipped the oar and looked at the far shore.

"Three weeks," he said.

Conal said nothing else until they reached the dock.

Part Three: What the Water Gave Back

They found Alec on the eastern shore, where the peat shelf ran out and the loch dropped suddenly to depth. He was face down in two feet of water. There was no mark on him. The doctor said the cold would have killed Alec quickly. Ferris accepted that explanation because no witness or physical evidence offered a better one.

What the doctor did not explain was why Alec had gone to the water at all. It was February. Four in the morning. He had put on his coat and his boots and walked the two miles from the house to the eastern shore without waking anyone.

Ferris had found his footprints in the frost. They ran straight to the water without a hesitation or turn.

In the statement he gave the constable, he said only that there were footprints. He did not say they were straight. He did not say there was no wandering, no doubling back, no sign of panic in the frost. The constable had looked tired and cold and grateful for the simpler account. Ferris signed it.

He had followed them to the water's edge. He had stood there for a long time. The green was heavy that morning, sitting low on the surface, moving in its slow formations. He had looked into it and seen nothing.

He understood then that Alec had not been taken from the house. Alec had gone. The difference should have comforted him. Instead it gave him a smaller and more exact thing to carry: he had shown the boy where to look.

He had come back the next morning and the morning after that.

On the fourth morning, twenty feet from the shore, the shape had passed beneath the ice at the edge of the frozen shallows: slow, horizontal, unhurried. The green moved with it while the water above barely stirred.

Ferris stood on the shore and watched it until it was gone.

He went home and got the boat.

Part Four: The Season

Conal came out with him through November and into December.

He was not a man who needed things explained twice and he did not ask again about the timeline. He worked the second oar and watched the water and said little. Once, in the second week of November, he saw the green shift in the middle of the loch, a slow parting of the surface haze, and he pointed and Ferris nodded and neither of them spoke.

The fish did not break the surface. It never broke the surface. It was always at depth, always moving at the same deliberate pace, always passing beneath them rather than toward them. Ferris had brought a line with a hook large enough for salmon. He had brought, once, a gaff he had borrowed from a man in the village who had not asked why. The fish ignored both and continued beneath the boat at the same speed and depth.

On the last day of November Conal set down his oar.

Ferris did not look at him.

"Ferris," Conal said.

"I know," Ferris said.

"The boy walked to the water on his own."

"I know that."

"You told him about the fish. You took him out to see it. But he went to the water on his own."

Ferris picked up his oar and tightened both hands around the wood until his knuckles whitened.

"The fish was there the morning he went in," Ferris said. "I saw it after."

"After," Conal said.

"Aye. After."

The word sat between them on the water.

Ferris did not answer. He rowed. The green lay across the loch in the low winter light and the shape did not appear that afternoon, and they came in at dark and Conal tied the boat and stood on the dock for a moment.

"I won't be out tomorrow," he said.

He walked up the track without looking back.

Ferris stood on the dock until Conal's footsteps were gone. Until the sound of his car was gone. Until the only sound was water striking the hull; no birds, traffic or wind could be heard across the winter loch.

He did not go in.

He sat in the boat with his hands on his knees and looked at the dark water until it was too dark to see anything, and then he kept looking.

Part Five: The Turning

He went out alone through December. Through Christmas, which had stopped meaning anything the year his wife left and had arrived at something worse since February. Through the short dark days when the green was so thick in the mornings that the far shore disappeared and the loch became a contained thing, a room rather than a body of water.

The village had stopped asking. That was the nature of small places: the questions ran their course and then there was simply the fact of a man going out on the water each morning, and the fact became part of the landscape, like the derelict fish house at the south end of the dock and the rusted winch that had not turned in fifteen years.

He saw the fish six times in December. Always at depth. Always unhurried, displacing the green as it passed, a pressure under the loch rather

than a creature crossing it. He brought the gaff twice and left it in the hull both times.

It did not come close enough.

In the third week of December he rowed to the eastern shore and set a net across the mouth of the deep channel. It was not a legal net for this water and he did it before first light, which told him something about where he was by then. He left it overnight and went back in the morning.

The net came up with a single clean split through the centre. No fraying, no snag. The mesh had opened outward. No catch. No scale, no slime, nothing that said a living thing had been in it. The tear ran longer than the boat.

He held the net in the hull.

Then he folded it and put it under the seat and did not take it out again.

In January the loch froze at the edges and he could not get the boat out for eleven days. He stood at the shore each morning and looked at the ice and the green water beyond it and felt the eleven days as a specific weight. On the twelfth day the ice broke enough at the dock and he went out before it was fully light.

The fish moved less than eight feet beneath the hull and matched the boat's speed whenever Ferris rowed. He stopped rowing. The fish stopped moving.

He sat very still.

The green was thick around the boat, the loch entirely obscured beyond twenty metres, the sky above a flat white that gave no direction. He could not see the shore. He could not see the dock. He could hear nothing but his own breathing and the small sound of water against the hull.

The fish was eight feet below him. He could see the shape of it in the green: the slow flex of the tail, the mass of it, the length. It was facing the same direction as the boat. It held its position without apparent effort.

He thought about Alec standing at the bow with his hand on the rail. The stillness of him. The recognition.

He thought: what did you see that I cannot see from up here.

The fish turned.

The turn took perhaps ten seconds. The great body rotated in the green until it faced him. He could not see eyes. He saw the head's width and the water folding around it in a pressure wake no fish he knew could make.

It was looking up at him.

He knew this before he could say how.

He picked up the gaff.

His hands were steady. He had expected them not to be. He leaned over the side and held the gaff into the water and the fish was eight feet down, which was four feet beyond the gaff's reach, and he knew this and leaned further anyway.

The fish sank.

Slowly. It simply descended, the shape of it receding into the green, getting smaller, until the green closed over it and there was nothing beneath the hull but water and the usual dark.

He stayed leaned over the side for a long time. The water was very cold against his face. The green moved in its slow formations.

He straightened.

He sat there for what he estimated was an hour. The cold worked through his coat and into his shoulders. The green stayed where it was, undisturbed, giving nothing back.

He set the unused gaff on the floorboards. The fish had gone, and no other boat, person or animal was visible across the frozen loch. Ferris remained seated because he no longer had an action to take.

He picked up the oars.

He rowed toward where he believed the dock was. He could not see it. He rowed by the angle of the light through the green, by the slight current that ran from east to west in the middle of the loch. After twenty minutes his hull touched the dock pilings.

He tied the boat.

He sat in it a while longer before he climbed out.

The track back to the house was unchanged: frozen ruts, peat smell, black hills against the white sky. He followed it without thinking about the destination because the destination was simply where the track ended.

Behind him the loch was quiet. The green lay over it in slow formations, moving in its own rhythm, independent of the wind.

He did not look back.

He had known, sitting in the boat in the centre of the loch with the gaff in his hand and the fish receding into the green, that it would not come again. Not close like that. It had shown him something, or he had imagined it had, which by this point was the same thing.

Alec had stood at the bow with one hand on the rail, utterly still, looking into the green. Ferris had watched his son's face. He had not watched the water.

That was what he had refused to look at for eight months.

Alec had gone straight to the water. Without hesitation. Not like a boy taken in his sleep. Like a boy who had been shown something and had decided what to do about it.

The constable's statement was still in a file somewhere, carrying the version Ferris had allowed it to carry. Footprints present. No indication of third-party involvement. No suspicious circumstances. It did not say

chosen. It did not say called. It did not say Ferris had known the difference and left the difference out.

The track ended at the house. He went inside. He put the gaff in the shed.

He did not go back to the loch the next morning.

He did not go the morning after that.

On the third morning he stood at the shed door with his hand on the latch. Inside were the gaff, the spare oar, the coils of line, the torn net folded under the seat of the hull outside.

It would still be there tomorrow.

* * *

DUNMORE HERALD & COASTAL REGISTER: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE DUNMORE HERALD & COASTAL REGISTER

Letters to the Editor

* * *

On what we have decided

I have been trying to write this letter for some time. I am not certain I have the right words for what I want to say, but I have decided to send it anyway because not sending it has not helped either.

I read the piece about the review board in your February edition. I have no complaint about the reporting. What I want to address is something the review itself seems not to have considered, or if it did, did not include in what was made available to the public.

My brother assisted in the search on the eastern shore last winter. He saw the footprints before the thaw. He says they ran in a straight line from the

track to the water, with no turn, fall, or sign of pursuit. The published account states only that footprints were present. I do not know who decided the direction was not relevant.

My mother lived on the Crale road for forty-one years. In that time she described the presence to me in ways that changed. In the early years she described it as weather. Later she described it differently. When I try to recall exactly how she described it in those later years I find I am reaching for something that is not there. I know the descriptions changed. I cannot tell you what they changed to.

I want to be clear that I am not drawing a conclusion from this. I am simply reporting it, in the same spirit that the review board reported its findings: as something observed, without a causal mechanism, that may or may not warrant further investigation.

I note that the review board's threshold for inclusion was a finding that warranted further investigation.

I am asking whether this does.

Name and address supplied

* * *

End

The Canvasser

Part One: The Diversion

The road to Whitmore was blocked at Gall's Cross by a tree that had come down in the night and taken the telegraph wire with it. Desmond Orde sat in the Ford Popular with the engine idling and looked at it for a moment, then looked at his route card. The route card had been prepared by the regional office in Norwich and it did not mention Gall's Cross, which was typical of the regional office in Norwich.

He kept his own notes in the margin. Two months earlier he had written husband deaf, knock at side window beside a farm outside Dereham. The next canvasser had done so, reached the customer, and sold the cylinder model. The office had credited Desmond with the lead. A useful note changed what happened at the next door.

He wound down the window and looked at the wire across the tarmac. It was thicker than he had expected. Where it had pulled free of the pole, the end had sprung into a loose spiral. He would not be moving it himself. He was forty-three years old and travelling light: two sample cases, a demonstration kit in a canvas holdall, a packed lunch his wife Marion had made that morning, and a driving licence issued by the county council in 1947.

He reversed to the junction and took the left fork.

The lane was single-track and the hedges were high on both sides and the surfaces had not been attended to in some years, but it ran roughly northeast, which was the direction of Whitmore, and after four miles he expected to find either a crossroads or a larger road. He found neither. He found a village.

No signpost. He pulled up beside a post box set into a stone wall and got out. The post box was red and current, not a Victorian relic, and it had a collection time listed: Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 10 a.m. He looked at his watch. It was ten past nine on a Thursday.

Beyond the post box, the lane widened into something that might have been a high street if the high street had been designed by someone with a different idea of what high streets were for. One side: a row of cottages, each fronted with a small garden in good order. The other side: a general store with a hand-lettered sign, a building that might have been a pub, another building whose function he could not determine from the exterior. At the far end of the street, closing it off, a church with a low square tower and a weathervane in the shape of a fish.

The fog lay ankle-deep along the cottage fronts, level with the interior skirting boards. He had driven through coastal fog before. It lay in the hollows, it filled the ditches, it was weather.

He got his sample cases from the boot and started up the street.

Part Two: The Calls

The first door was answered by a woman of about sixty in a housecoat and good shoes, which was a combination Desmond had learned to read as a housewife who had been at work since six but retained her standards. She looked at his cases and then at his face with an expression he did not often see at a first door. Recognition, almost. As if she had been expecting someone carrying something.

"Good morning," he said. "My name is Desmond Orde, with Hallam Domestic. I wonder if I might take a few minutes of your time."

"Come in," she said.

He had been doing this for eleven years and a first-door come in, no preamble, was rare enough that he noticed it. He went in.

The kitchen was at the back. She led him through a hallway that was narrow and well-kept and smelled of beeswax, warmed iron, and stone that had been wiped dry too often. The kitchen was large for a cottage. Good light. A wooden table scrubbed white. A range with four rings and a simmering pot. On the wall above the range, a ventilation grille of the kind found in older properties, cast iron, painted dark, perhaps thirty centimetres square. He noted it because it was not the standard position: it was low, half a metre from the floor, and it had been recently cleaned. The paint around the frame was new, or nearly so, applied with attention to the edges.

"Sit down, Mr. Orde."

He sat and opened the first case. He began with the hand-held model, which was the standard opener: lightweight, easy to demonstrate, low price point, a purchase a woman could make without consulting her husband. He moved the nozzle in the figure-of-eight he had practised until it required no thought, and he talked about suction capacity and the new filtration system and the three-year guarantee, and the woman listened.

He was not certain she was listening to him.

Her attention was not on the machine. It was on the grille above the range. He followed her gaze once and the grille was a grille, dark iron, the fog outside the kitchen window at its low ordinary level, nothing passing through the grille that he could see. When he looked back at her she had turned to face him, composed, as if she had been there all along.

"It's a very good machine," he said. "Perhaps your husband would like to see the demonstration."

"My husband is out," she said. "I'll take the leaflet."

He gave her the leaflet. She ignored the text, ran her thumbnail along the fold to test the paper's thickness, then set it face-down on the table.

"Do you know the village?" she said.

"I don't. I came in off the lane from Gall's Cross. A tree came down."

"Yes," she said. "The tree."

He waited for more. She did not offer more.

He packed the first case and stood. "Do you know a Mrs. Gale, perhaps? Or a Mr. Tarn? The office sometimes gives me names."

"Everyone here knows everyone," she said. "I'll tell them you called."

* * *

The second door was a carpenter's workshop. Desmond adapted, opened the larger case, and talked about the cylinder model with the industrial filter.

The man gave Desmond the same full attention as the woman had, yet kept glancing past him toward the ventilation slot in the exterior wall. This one sat almost at floor level: the same cast-iron pattern as the kitchen grille, recently painted, with fresh pointing around the frame.

Sawdust had gathered against the grille's outer face in a fine ridge.

The sawdust had gathered on the outside of the grille. Air was being drawn out.

"The cylinder model," Desmond said, "has a reversal function. For clearing fine debris from hard-to-reach channels."

The man looked at him then. Directly, for the first time. He had pale eyes, pale lashes, a face that revealed nothing and had been that way a long time.

"What kind of channels," he said.

"Ventilation, mostly. Boiler flues, that sort of thing. The reversal function is popular with building maintenance contractors."

The man looked at the grille. Then back at Desmond.

"Leave the leaflet," he said.

* * *

The third door was not answered.

He knocked twice, waited, knocked again. A downstairs curtain moved once. The garden had been tended, but not recently. Where the other front walls held the low drift against stone, this one had a break at ground level, the kind of gap a route card would miss.

He checked the front wall. No grille visible from the outside. He looked at the window where the curtain had moved. A woman was standing well back in the room, not hiding, just not coming to the door. She held a folded cloth against her chest and watched him without moving toward the door.

He left a leaflet on the step and moved on.

Part Three: The Pattern

By the fifth house Desmond had sold nothing and collected four leaflets back from people who had taken them and returned them as he left, pressing them into his hand without comment.

What he had encountered, five times, was the grille.

Each house had one. Same cast iron pattern, same low position, same recent cleaning. The iron was not original. The patching around each frame showed later work, done to a common specification.

At the sixth house, a Mrs. Verity Slade, he asked.

He asked because she had the seniority of someone who had stopped cushioning local facts for visitors.

"The ventilation grilles," he said. "I've noticed them in each house. Same pattern."

She looked at him over her reading glasses, which she had not removed when she let him in.

"Yes," she said.

"They're not original fittings."

"No."

"Who put them in."

She set her cup down and looked at the table for a moment before she answered.

"They've been here as long as any of us can remember," she said. "Some need attention from time to time. The pattern is the original pattern. If one needs replacing, we match it."

"All the same height," he said. "Low down."

"That's where they need to be," she said, with the tone of a statement so obvious she was mildly surprised it required saying.

"For the fog," he said.

She set down her cup.

"The fog," she said, "finds its own level. It comes in off the coast and it settles in the low ground. The grilles are at the level it settles at. That's all."

"To let it in."

"To let it through," she said. "There's a difference."

He looked at the grille in her kitchen. It was above the skirting board, perhaps fifteen centimetres above the floor. The fog outside the window was at exactly that level: a slow green surface, moving in its own time, pressed against the glass without weight or urgency.

"What does it do," he said. "Coming through."

Verity Slade looked at him for a long moment.

"It circulates," she said. "That's all, Mr. Orde. It circulates."

Part Four: The Lunch

He ate his packed lunch in the Ford Popular with the windows up.

Marion had made sandwiches: ham and mustard on white, wrapped in wax paper. A flask of tea. A slice of fruitcake in a separate parcel. He ate the sandwich and drank the tea and looked at the high street through the windscreen.

He counted three grilles on the lower facades to his left. Same height. Fresh paint. Between two cottages the fog moved through a gap in a narrow current, tightened at the stone, found the opening in the nearest front wall and passed through it like water finding a drain.

He watched it for a long time.

He was not a man who frightened easily. Eleven years on the road had given him a tolerance for doors that led to unexpected interiors and conversations the brochure had not anticipated.

He was unsettled.

What he had seen in five houses was not strange in any individual component. Ventilation grilles were ordinary. Mist was ordinary. People declining vacuum cleaners were ordinary. The pattern was not.

He thought about what Verity Slade had said.

It circulates. That's all.

He thought about the sawdust on the outside of the workshop grille. Air drawing out, not in. Which meant somewhere, something was drawing in. A system. A circuit.

He poured the second cup of tea.

He thought: I have six more calls on the route card. He had made the route card himself that morning, from the county business directory and the Hallam office's postcode listings. This village was not in the county

directory. He had not made calls here by prior arrangement. He was here because a tree had fallen.

He thought about that for a moment.

He finished the tea. He wrapped the fruitcake back up and put it in the glove box. Then he got out of the car, picked up both sample cases, and continued up the high street.

Part Five: The Store

The general store had a bell above the door and two aisles of stock and a counter at the back with a cash register of a type that had been discontinued before the war. Behind the counter, a man of about seventy who introduced himself as Norval was stacking tins with the methodical concentration of a man for whom the stacking of tins was not trivial.

Desmond looked at the stock.

The store carried full shelves of established brands rather than the substitutes and gaps Desmond expected in an isolated village. Maintaining that stock required regular deliveries. He looked at the tinned goods, the dry goods, the soap and cleaning products and light hardware.

He looked at the cleaning products for a long time.

Nothing that belonged in a general store, no vacuum cleaner bags, no replacement filters, none of the consumables that Hallam Domestic relied on for its recurring revenue. What was on the shelf were brushes. Brass-bristled brushes of various sizes, the kind used for cleaning vents, flues, narrow ducts. A range of them, more than a general store in a village of this size would ordinarily stock. He counted seven different sizes, three of each.

"For the grilles," he said.

Norval set a tin down and looked at him.

"People clean them regularly," Desmond said. "I've seen it in every house. You'd need the right brush for a grille that size."

Norval set a tin down and looked at him without hurrying toward an answer.

"The grilles need to be kept clear," he said. "If they block, the circulation fails."

"And if the circulation fails."

Norval picked up another tin. "Then the fog has nowhere to go," he said. "And it finds somewhere else."

"Where else."

"Somewhere the people haven't prepared," he said. "Somewhere the people don't know to open up for it."

Desmond studied the brushes. He noted the bell above the door. He looked at the low threshold below the door, and the gap at the base of it, wide enough to be deliberate, wide enough to let the fog at floor level enter without impediment.

"How long has this been going on," he said.

Norval looked at him. "Longer than the village," he said, without particular emphasis, as if this were a fact of geography. "The village grew up around it."

Part Six: The Last Call

The last house on the high street was at the far end, nearest the church. It was larger than the others, and older, the stone darker with weather, the garden at the front running the full width of the plot. A man came to the door before Desmond knocked: he had been watching from the window, or had heard the gate.

He was perhaps fifty-five, well-made, and stood with the deliberate stillness of someone accustomed to giving nothing away. He looked at the sample cases.

"Mr. Orde," he said.

"That's right."

"Gideon Slade," he said. "Come in."

The house was the largest interior Desmond had been in all day. The hallway ran the full depth of the building, flagged, with a ceiling high enough to have a beam across it. The beam had been marked. He looked at the marks: a series of horizontal lines cut into the wood, a ruler's width apart, starting from the floor and running upward to about a metre and a half. The lowest marks were darker, older. The higher marks were fresher. Someone had been measuring something, at intervals, for a long time.

He looked at the floor. At floor level, on the inner face of the hallway wall, two grilles: the same pattern, the same height, but paired. Side by side. The fog was coming in under the front door and moving along the floor in the purposeful current he had been watching all day, and at the grilles it passed through without slowing, into the wall, and was gone.

"You've been measuring the level," Desmond said. Looking at the beam.

"The level rises," Gideon said. "Slowly. A centimetre a year, more or less. The marks go back to my grandfather."

"And when it reaches a certain height."

"It won't," Gideon said. "Not if the system is maintained."

Desmond looked at the marks. At the current level on the beam, which corresponded to the height of the grilles. At the paired grilles, side by side, a redundancy built in by someone who understood that a single point of failure was not acceptable.

"What does it want," Desmond said. "The fog. Coming through the houses. What does it do inside."

Gideon looked at him steadily. He did not seem to be deciding whether to answer. He seemed to be waiting for Desmond to finish the question he was actually asking.

"You've been in five houses today," Gideon said.

"Six."

"How did they feel."

Desmond thought about it. The kitchens. The warmth of them, even in the ones where the range was not lit. He had also noticed that the rooms lacked the usual salt smell of coastal houses. Beneath the household smells, the air remained unusually still.

"They felt lived in," he said.

"Yes," Gideon said. "They do. They always have."

He was quiet for a moment.

"The fog passes through," he said. "It circulates through the lower level of every house on this street, through the grilles, room to room, floor to floor. What it takes, we don't keep a ledger of."

"And the people," Desmond said. "The ones who live here. What does it take from them."

Gideon looked at him.

"It takes attention," he said. "The grilles need cleaning. The circuit needs maintaining. The level needs measuring. Houses where people stop doing that tend to have trouble." He looked toward the low vent. "That's enough of a rule for us."

"Who made that arrangement."

"It was already in place," Gideon said. "My grandfather's grandfather knew the system. He didn't build it. He maintained it, and taught his son to maintain it, and so on." He looked at the marks on the beam. "Some of these marks are not my grandfather's. The oldest ones, at the bottom. We don't know whose they are."

Desmond stood in the hallway with both sample cases and looked at the grilles. The fog continued through them, unhurried, a steady low flow, green in the grey afternoon light.

"I should be getting on to Whitmore," he said.

"Yes," Gideon said. "The road will be clear by now. They'll have seen to the tree."

Desmond picked up his cases. He walked to the front door. He put his hand on the latch.

"Mr. Orde," Gideon said.

He turned.

Gideon was looking at the grilles, not at him. "The leaflets," he said. "The ones you left. People will hold on to them for a while. Then they'll put them somewhere."

"Somewhere."

"The grilles need paper sometimes," Gideon said. "When the iron gets old and the gap at the edge lets more through than we want. A folded leaflet, pressed into the frame. It holds for a few weeks." He looked at Desmond. "The leaflet paper is thick enough to hold in the frame. Newspaper tears too quickly."

Desmond stood at the door.

He thought about the four households that had examined his leaflets before returning them. They had tested the paper's weight, thickness and fold, and the first woman had run her thumbnail along the crease. The

leaflet from the fourth house had felt faintly damp when she pressed it back, though the kitchen had been dry and warm; he had attributed it to her and not looked at it again. It was still in the outside pocket of his case.

What happened, he wondered, to material that was pressed into a grille through which the fog passed continuously.

He opened the door and went out.

Part Seven: The Road

The Ford started on the first turn, which it did not always do. He pulled out onto the high street and drove south. Behind him the village arranged itself as it had been when he arrived: cottages in good order, gardens kept, the general store, the church. He did not look in the mirror.

At Gall's Cross the tree had been moved. Someone had dragged the entire fallen tree to the field side of the verge and propped it against the hedge without cutting it into sections. It would have taken machinery, or a great many people. He had not heard machinery. He had not seen a tractor on the high street.

He drove through and took the Norwich road.

He was on the A47 before he opened the glove box. He pulled the fruitcake parcel out and put it on the passenger seat. Beside it he put the route card, which had the village marked in pencil where he had added it himself that morning. He looked at the pencil mark while he drove. He would need to report the diversion to the regional office. He would need to explain the detour and the lack of sales and the six calls that had produced nothing.

He would need to decide what to put on the call report.

He drove for twenty minutes.

He pulled into a lay-by and stopped the engine and sat for a moment.

He pictured the leaflets pressed into iron grilles while fog passed through them for weeks. He wondered whether the fog deposited a substance in the paper that the company later collected with the completed call reports. The Hallam Domestic call report form had a section for address, a section for products demonstrated, a section for outcome, and a section for notes. In eleven years he had filled out the notes section with brief, factual observations: dog on premises, recommend morning call, customer preferred larger model.

He opened the glove box and took out his pen and the route card.

He crossed out the pencil mark.

On the call report, later, he would write: Diversion due to obstruction at Gall's Cross. No calls made before Whitmore. Time lost: 1 hr 40 mins. It was small enough to pass as tidiness. It was not a false sale, not an invented customer, not anything the regional office would chase.

He sat with the pen in his hand and thought about what Gideon had said about attention: the maintenance of a system, the cleaning of grilles, the measuring of levels, the daily work of keeping something in its circuit rather than letting it find somewhere unprepared. The blank notes section in his briefcase. He knew what a useful note could do. He knew what an omitted one could leave alone.

He put the pen in his pocket. He started the engine.

In Whitmore he made four calls and sold two hand-held models and drove home. He ate his fruitcake on the doorstep before he went inside, in the early evening, because Marion had been baking and the kitchen was warm and he wanted to be outside for another moment.

He surveyed the street. The ordinary street, the familiar terrace, the low garden walls and the bins and the neighbours' car. At street level, a thin drift of mist coming in off the park, the usual evening ground-fog of the low season, dispersing as it crossed the pavement.

He checked the base of his own front door.

The draught excluder was worn. He had been meaning to replace it for two years. Below it, a gap of perhaps a centimetre, open to whatever came in off the street.

He stood and looked at it.

Then he went inside and ate his dinner and did not write anything in the notes section of the call report that evening.

At three he got up and pushed a towel against the gap beneath the front door. By dawn it was damp, and when he lifted it to his face it smelled faintly of salt.

In the morning he wrote: unusual village, no map reference, road blocked. Six calls, no sales. Will not revisit.

He folded the report and sealed the envelope and went out to the post box.

He did not look at the gap under the door as he left.

He did not need to. He had been looking at it all night.

* * *

End

The Aura

Part One: The Move

Cass had not seen the sea. He had not seen anything for three years, and the sea was no exception.

The smell entered through the car window before his mother closed it: salt mixed with the metallic smell left on fingers after holding a coin. He pressed his face to the gap and breathed it in.

"Close that," his father said. "Zelah's cold."

Zelah was five and not cold. Five minutes earlier she had complained that her sock seam was hurting and demanded the last mint from their mother's handbag. Now she was watching something out of her window and had been watching it in silence for twenty minutes, which was unusual enough that their mother had twice asked her what she saw.

"Nothing," Zelah said, each time.

The village was called Hawe. It had a market square, a church, a post office that was also a hardware shop. Their father had found the house through a letting agency that no longer had a website, which he said was a good sign. Quiet. Off the grid. He had used that phrase several times on the drive down, as if repetition would make it mean something.

Cass had heard what the phrase actually meant. He had heard it the first time his parents thought he was asleep, eight months ago, when the consultant in the city had said: the optic nerve is intact. There is no structural reason for the blindness. We have no further recommendations at this time. He had heard his father's breathing in the pause after that. He had heard what his father did not say.

The phrase off the grid meant: away from the place where the thing happened. As if distance were the same as reversal.

He said nothing about this. He was ten years old and he understood some things were not useful to say.

* * *

The house smelled of stone and other people's years. Cass walked it with his hand trailing the walls, building the floor plan in his head: hall, two steps down to the kitchen, three doors off the main passage. He counted everything. His mother followed him the first time around and then let him go, which he appreciated. His father carried boxes. Zelah ran ahead and then stopped and ran back, which was her way of exploring.

"There's a window," she said. "In my room. You can see the water."

"Good."

"It's far away. And there's something on it."

"On the water?"

"On the window."

Cass stopped walking. "What kind of something?"

"Like when your breath goes on glass. But green."

He stood in the passage. His hand was on the wall and the wall was cool and ordinary.

"Outside," she said. "Not inside. It's outside the window."

"Tell Mum," he said.

"She'll say it's nothing."

He found the stairs and went up to his own room. He sat on the bare mattress and listened to the house settle around him: his father's boots on the kitchen flags, his mother opening and closing the airing cupboard, Zelah in her room talking to something that did not answer.

From outside came the smell of the sea, and beneath it the other smell, the coin smell, the one that had no useful name.

He had smelled it before. Three years ago. He remembered very little else about that day.

Part Two: The Dark and What Came After

Six weeks into the school term, Cass had learned the village by walking its routes and cataloguing the sounds that marked morning, afternoon and the times when children were called indoors.

The market square he could navigate from memory. The post office. The churchyard with its leaning gate. The lane that ran west toward the coast and the long straight road that ran east toward the next town, where his school was.

He did not walk west.

He could identify no physical reason to turn back. The lane was passable. He had tested the first hundred metres twice and the surface was good, the verge clear. He simply stopped at the same point each time and turned back.

His mother assumed he was being cautious. He let her assume it.

What he knew: the coin smell was strongest to the west. It was there every morning when the wind came off the water, faint enough that he could ignore it. On still days it was stronger. On still days he found reasons to stay inside.

He had not told anyone this.

He had not told anyone because there was nothing to tell. A smell was a smell. The fact that he had been smelling it on the day he lost his sight was not a fact he had been given officially. It was a thing he had assembled from the edges of conversations, from the pauses when adults thought he was not attending. His parents did not talk about that day directly. He had learned not to ask.

* * *

Zelah found him by sound, as usual. She had a gift for locating him in any space, a quick instinct for where he had settled, and she used it without consideration.

She sat beside him on the garden wall.

"You're doing the face," she said.

"What face."

"The listening face. Like there's something."

"I'm always listening."

She kicked her heels against the stone. "Mum says you need to stop doing that."

"Doing what."

"Being weird about it."

He said nothing.

"She didn't say weird. She said anxious." Zelah paused. "But she meant weird."

The garden backed onto a field and the field ran toward the lane and the lane ran west. He could smell the water. He could hear, very faintly, the market beginning across the square, the Wednesday traders setting up their stalls.

"Zelah," he said. "Do you ever smell something. Outside. Sort of green and old."

She was quiet.

"Like coins," she said.

He turned toward her.

"I smell it sometimes," she said. "In the mornings mostly. I don't mind it. It's kind of nice."

He sat very still. Then he said: "Yes. Kind of nice."

Part Three: The Field

It was three weeks later when she left him.

She had not meant to. He was certain of that afterward, though the certainty did not help him. She had not planned to leave him. She had noticed something in the field, walked toward it and failed to return. He had called her name from the gate until his voice became hoarse and frightened.

He did not know how long he stood there. He had stopped counting at some point. The coin smell was very strong. The air was still and the field was quiet and Zelah had not answered the last twelve times he called.

He had two choices. Go after her, or stay and call. He stayed and called because he did not know the field. He had learned the garden but not the field. He did not know what was in it.

His mother found him twenty minutes later. He heard the back door and her quick step on the path and then she was beside him and her hand was on his shoulder.

"I can't find Zelah," he said.

"She's inside." His mother's voice was tight and careful. "She came in the back way. She's fine."

"I called her."

"I know. She didn't hear you."

He turned toward her. "Where was she?"

He looked toward the field. "In the field."

"She went into the field."

"Yes."

"Without telling me."

His mother's hand pressed his shoulder. "She's five. She doesn't always think."

He said nothing for a moment. Then: "I got turned around," he said. "I couldn't find the gate."

He had not gotten turned around. He had been at the gate the whole time. He said it because it was easier than saying: your daughter left me standing in a field calling her name for twenty minutes, and the air smelled like the day I went blind, and I did not go after her because I was afraid of what was in the field.

"Let's go inside," his mother said. "It's getting cold."

Zelah was at the kitchen table when they came in. Cass heard her before he reached the door: her breathing, and beneath it something else, a faint wet sound, the sound of someone breathing through a nose that had been recently in water. He stopped in the doorway.

"Cass," his mother said, behind him.

He went inside.

He was sitting at the table. His mother was at the counter. He could hear Zelah breathing, shifting in her chair and placing her feet heavily on the front-room floor.

He looked toward the front room.

He was not certain that he looked. For three years, sound, temperature and air movement had allowed him to distinguish one dark room from another. Now a green form appeared in front of him without any matching sound or change in air pressure. The experience resembled sight but lacked colour, distance and detail as he remembered them.

In the doorway there was a shape.

Green. Low and unsteady, shifting before it settled. A child's shape in the doorframe, dim as if seen through water. The green had edges without solidity. Cass knew darkness by texture and pressure; this occupied the room differently.

He made no sound.

The shape moved. It crossed the hall and went into the front room and the green dimmed slowly to nothing.

He sat at the table.

"Mum," he said.

"Mm."

"Are you near the door."

"I'm at the counter. Why?"

He pressed both hands flat on the table. "Nothing," he said. "I thought I heard something."

Part Four: The Aura

It came back. It was always green and it was always dim and it was nothing like what he remembered sight to be, but it came back.

His father was a shape beside him at breakfast: faint, nearly nothing, the green so thin he could barely find it. His mother the same. Less than shadow. Almost absent.

Zelah was different.

The green around Zelah was not thin. It did not dim when she left the room. He could track her through the house by it, the same way he tracked her by sound, except the green was present in a different part of him, somewhere behind the eyes that no longer worked. He did not know what to call it. He did not tell anyone.

He began to pay attention to other people.

At school he had learned the classrooms by proximity and habit. Now he tried to attend to what came with them. Most of them were dim, barely there, the same thin trace his parents carried. A few were a little brighter. Two were bright enough that he knew them before they spoke.

One was an old woman who sat every Thursday on the bench outside the post office: Mrs. Gault, the man in the shop told him. She had been in the village longer than anyone Cass had found a record of. Long enough that the coin smell was written into her like grain into wood.

The other was a boy called Knox, who lived on the lane that ran west.

He thought about Zelah.

* * *

He started counting days.

He could not see the green get brighter, not precisely. He detected the green as a change in temperature and pressure rather than as a colour. Around Zelah, both changes became stronger.

It had been one thing the day after the field. A week later it was another. The change was not dramatic. It was the change in pressure before a storm, present in the body before anyone names weather.

He did not know what it was growing toward.

He thought about Knox. Knox was in his class, walked his route, ate his lunch at the same table on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Two months ago Knox's brightness had been close to Zelah's. Last month it had been brighter. Three weeks ago Knox had not come to school.

He asked about Knox and the teacher said he was unwell.

He asked again the following week and the teacher said Knox's family had moved.

He did not ask again. He did not need to. He had his sequence now: brightness, then brighter, then gone. He sat with it for a long time, until he could think it without recoiling.

That evening he listened to his parents in the kitchen. His mother was saying Zelah had been unsettled since the move. His father said children adapted. Cass stood on the stair, one hand on the banister, and had the whole sequence ready: Mrs. Gault, Knox, Zelah, the lane west, the field, the coin smell. He could have said it then. They would have heard his voice from the stairs and stopped talking.

He went back to his room instead.

Part Five: The Mouth

The last thing he saw clearly was Zelah's face.

For weeks Cass had located Zelah through temperature and pressure. He could tell where she stood and whether the pressure around her was building.

Then he saw her face.

Only the eyes and the mouth showed, where the green was brightest.

He was sitting across the table from her at supper. He was listening to his parents talk about something ordinary. He reached for his glass and he looked up and there was Zelah's face in the green, the eyes burning with it, the mouth sealed and full of it, and she was talking, saying something to their mother about school, and every word she spoke lit her mouth green from the inside.

He put his glass down carefully.

He sat through the rest of the meal. He said the things he was expected to say. He listened to Zelah's mouth light up every time she spoke and he did not say anything.

Once he almost did. While his mother refilled the glasses, Zelah spoke about a girl at school and the green around her mouth brightened. Cass opened his mouth to call his mother. He thought about what would come after. He thought about anxious, and the consultant's voice, and his father's breathing in the pause. He closed his mouth.

His mother said, softly, "You're doing the face again."

Zelah laughed. His father said, "Leave him."

Cass let them have that explanation.

That night he lay in his room and thought about Mrs. Gault and Knox and the field and the coin smell and the lane that ran west and the day three years ago that he had no clear memory of, only the smell. He thought about his father, barely visible, and his mother, barely visible, and how long they had lived in cities, away from the coast, away from the fog.

He thought about Zelah, who had been born here. Who had lived her first two years here before the city. Who had said the coin smell was kind of nice.

He thought about Knox's family, who had moved.

* * *

Three weeks later Zelah was not in her room.

He woke to his mother calling Zelah's name, his father searching downstairs and then both of them falling silent. He lay still and listened to it. He did not call out. He pressed his hands flat on the mattress and felt the morning cold and listened.

His father came to his door.

"She's not in the house," his father said. His voice was the voice of a man who had decided to be calm and was managing it. "We're going to look outside. Stay here."

"Okay," Cass said.

He listened to his father's footsteps on the stairs. He listened to the back door. He noticed, as his father went through it, that his father did not say anything about how it had been found: not open, not shut, not locked, nothing. Cass lay on the mattress and understood that no one was asking how she had gotten outside.

The green was gone.

He had not noticed it going. It had been there every morning, the first thing he attended to, the trace of her through the wall of her room. Now, when he turned toward Zelah's room, he felt no change in temperature or pressure. He knew this feeling. He knew it from three years ago.

He did not go downstairs. He lay still and waited and when his mother came to him two hours later he was still lying in the same position and she sat on the edge of the mattress and said his name and he said: I know.

* * *

They went back to the city in November.

His parents drove mostly in silence. He sat in the back beside the empty seat and listened to the road changing under the tyres, the coastal lane becoming the A-road and the A-road becoming the motorway and the motorway becoming the city, and with each change the coin smell thinned and receded until he could no longer find it.

He was glad of this. He allowed himself to be glad.

He pressed his face to the window as the city came around them, the particular density of it, the sound of it layered and close. No fields. No lane running west. No bench outside a post office where an old woman sat with the fog written into her.

His mother said his name.

He turned toward her voice.

She was in the front seat, talking to his father, and the green around her was the same thin trace it had always been, nearly absent, the trace of someone who had lived most of their life away from the coast. He found it comforting. The near-absence in both his parents steadied him.

He sat back.

The car stopped at lights. Around them the city pressed in, ordinary and solid and full of people who did not carry the coin smell.

He relaxed for the first time in months.

Then the man in the car beside them turned to look at something in his back seat, and his face passed through Cass's field, and the green was there.

Cass did not move.

The pressure around the man's face was stronger than it had been around Zelah or Mrs Gault. It concentrated around his mouth and eyes.

The lights changed. The car pulled away.

Cass turned back to face front.

"You all right?" his mother said.

"Yes," he said.

He folded his hands in his lap and pressed them together. For the rest of the drive he kept his face from the windows. The pressure was no longer only around Zelah. He could feel it gathering around strangers in the city.

He counted the turns until they reached home and did not think about the man in the car.

* * *

End

The Well

Part One: The Pamphlet

He had found it in the rack beside the vestry door, between a notice about the harvest collection and a card for a piano teacher in Chard. It was not from his parish. He could see that at once: the paper was heavier than anything his church used, cream stock, folded twice, with a woodcut on the front that showed a coast and a building set back from the cliff edge and, above the building, a cross.

The Brothers of the Holy Strand invite those called to contemplative life to consider a period of discernment at Carrow House, situated at the coastal edge of the parish of Erne. Our Rule observes the ancient form. The spring of Saint Idris provides water for sacrament and daily sustenance. Men of sincere intention may write to the Prior.

There was no printing date and no named publisher. At the bottom, in small capitals: Carrow House, Parish of Erne, Coast Road North. Nothing more. The woodcut had uneven hand-cut lines, but the off-centre cross appeared deliberate rather than careless.

He did not know how it had come to be in the rack. He asked the verger, who said he had not put it there and did not know it. He asked Father Gest, who said he had not seen it and suggested it might have been left by a visitor, and moved on to the matter of the boiler.

Emlyn kept the pamphlet.

He looked up Saint Idris that evening. Years of parish life had given him the familiar Celtic names: Columba, Brendan, David, Cuthbert. Idris was not among them. The name belonged to a Welsh mountain and an older tradition; any saintly connection was disputed. The Dictionary of Christian Biography had no entry. Two other reference works gave him nothing.

He put the pamphlet on his desk and looked at the woodcut. The cross sat slightly off-centre. The building stood farther back from the cliff than the composition seemed to require.

He had considered a period of discernment for three years, since his mother's death had reduced his attention to grief and routine. Prayer had not resolved whether he should enter religious life. His spiritual director interpreted that uncertainty as meaningful, but Emlyn continued reconsidering it during sleepless nights. He was twenty-six. He had no dependants. He had a job at the council planning office that he did carefully and without particular feeling.

He wrote to Carrow House, Parish of Erne, and trusted the postal service to find it. The reply came in twelve days, in the same cream stock, in a hand that was precise and not unkind.

Come when you are ready. There is a place.

Part Two: Arrival

The road narrowed twice before it ended.

A brother had met him at the station, a man of perhaps forty in a dark coat, who had held a card with Emlyn's surname written on it in the same cream stock as the pamphlet and the letter. He had taken Emlyn's bag without being asked and carried it to an old Volvo estate in the station car park and put it in the back and got in and started the engine.

He had not spoken, not at the station, not on the road, not when the tarmac gave out to a chalk track with grass down its centre and the track became indistinguishable from the field around it. He had stopped the car at a gate, got out, retrieved Emlyn's bag from the back and set it on the ground beside him, and driven away.

The silence had lasted forty minutes. Emlyn had opened his mouth twice and closed it.

He walked the rest with his bag over one shoulder.

The building was low, long and stone-built, with a newer wing added at right angles in a different style. Emlyn could not see the sea, but he smelled salt and saw the brighter light that came from the open horizon beyond the cliff. The fog sat along the cliff edge in a band too regular for weather, green in the morning grey, keeping its own level.

A broad-shouldered brother of about fifty met him at the door. He stood without shifting his feet or hands, a restraint Emlyn later noticed in every resident of the house.

The brother did not introduce himself. He took Emlyn's bag without asking, gestured for him to follow, and led him through a corridor that smelled of beeswax and damp stone.

He was shown his cell: a room of perhaps four metres by three, a bed, a desk, a window set deep into the stone that looked north over the cliff path. The window was cold in its frame.

The brother set his bag down and turned to go.

"Excuse me," Emlyn said. "When is the first office?"

The brother looked at him. He raised one hand, palm outward, and held it for a moment. Then he left.

The Rule of silence. Emlyn had expected it. He stood in his cell and heard the building settle around him, and the wind off the sea, and nothing else.

Part Three: The Water

The well was in the inner courtyard, set into the stone of the original building, covered with an iron grate that lifted by a handle on one side. A rope and bucket. A smell that rose from it, cold, chalky, and iron-edged, like water kept too long in a vessel.

Brother Norval showed him on the second morning.

Norval was the only brother assigned to speak with guests in discernment. He used short sentences, answered only the question asked and rarely volunteered information. He was lean and grey-bearded, with hands that had been outdoors for most of his life.

"Saint Idris," he said, at the well. "According to the chronicle."

"He founded the order?"

"He came here. Seventh century. The coast was pagan territory. He struck his staff into this ground and water came up." Norval looked down into the well. "A miracle for the conversion of the people here. The water has been used for sacrament since the house was built over it."

Emlyn looked down into it. The water was not visible; the depth was too great. Far below the grate he saw a faint green light, although no lamp or opening was visible in the shaft.

He crouched and looked at the stone surround of the well. Cut into the face of it, in two columns, was a list of names and dates. Priors of the house, he realised, reading from the top: the earliest dated 1671, the most recent added in a hand different from the rest, more recent chisel work, less worn. Twelve names in total.

He read down the first column. Each name was given in full: first name, second name, surname. The second names were all the same.

All twelve of them. Idris, each one, running from 1671 to the present prior, whose name was listed as Gareth Idris Wace.

He stood up slowly.

"The second name," he said. "All of them."

Norval was already walking back toward the door. He did not turn around. "It is the name taken at installation," he said. "It has always been so."

"The fog," he said. "Along the cliff edge."

Norval looked at him.

"Is it always there?"

"Since I came here," Norval said. "Twelve years. The Prior says longer."

"What do the brothers make of it?"

Norval replaced the grate and set the bucket aside. "They make nothing of it. It is outside the enclosure." He looked at Emlyn with the expression of a man choosing his next words carefully. "If you cannot sleep, come to the courtyard. The cold air and the sound from the well quiet the mind."

He walked back inside without waiting.

Part Four: The Liturgy

The first office was Vigils, three in the morning.

He knew the hours, antiphons, responses, and weekly movement of the psalms. He knew what to expect.

What he heard differed by only a few words.

The chapel was low-ceilinged, twelve stalls, six to a side, lit by candles at the altar and by a lamp above the prior's stall. The brothers filed in silence and took their places without looking at him. The prior, a tall man named Gareth whom Emlyn had met once for fifteen minutes upon arrival, took the lectern and began.

The psalm was the ninety-third. Emlyn knew it. He had the text in his breviary and he followed it as Gareth read.

Gareth's version was not identical.

The changes were small but consistent. Gareth replaced individual words and altered the ends of phrases while preserving the psalm's rhythm. His version of The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice ended with a conclusion absent from Emlyn's printed text.

He looked down at his breviary. He looked up at Gareth.

Gareth read without pause, without any sign of deviation, his voice carrying the words in the tone of perfect familiarity.

The brothers answered in unison with a low, precise chord and held each response slightly longer than the service required.

Emlyn opened his mouth and no sound came. He closed it.

Then came the chant.

What the brothers sang was close to plainchant. Under the melody ran a pulse too regular for breath and too slow for heartbeat. Emlyn felt it through the chapel floor before he heard it fully. The walls held it after each phrase ended.

He stood very still and listened.

After the office, Emlyn continued hearing the low pulse in his cell. It was faint but repeated at the same interval as the brothers' responses. He lay on the bed in the dark and the pulse was there, regular as the hours written on the card beside his bed, and he could not determine whether it was memory or whether it was still coming up through the stone floor beneath him.

His version said what it had always said.

He told himself: tiredness. He told himself: the acoustics of a stone chapel at three in the morning. He told himself he had been half asleep and his ear had filled in what his mind expected.

He went back to his cell and did not sleep.

Part Five: The Courtyard at Night

He came to the courtyard on the fourth night.

The fog was over the well.

Thin and undramatic, a low drift of it above the iron grate, turning just inside the rim as if the well had a breath of its own. The green was enough to show the bucket hook and the wet dark on the stone.

He stood in the doorway and looked at it.

Norval's hands on the rope and bucket. The water drawn up from that depth every morning, carried to the altar, used in the eucharist and the blessing and the signing of foreheads and the washing of hands. Twelve years, and the prior who said longer.

The fog remained above the well while the brothers continued using the water in their daily offices.

He went back inside.

In the morning he went to his breviary and read the antiphon for Lauds carefully, word by word, before the office began. He carried the open book into the chapel and held it open at the lectern passage as Gareth read.

The deviations were not random. He could see that now. They followed a pattern he could not yet name, a direction that the text was being moved in, slowly, consistently, like a vessel on a bearing that was very slightly off from where it claimed to be going.

After Lauds he knocked on the prior's door.

Part Six: The Prior

Gareth listened without interrupting.

He sat behind a plain desk with a breviary of his own open before him, his hands flat on the table, his face arranged in the expression of a man keeping office hours with God. He was sixty or older, angular, with grey eyes that did not soften when Emlyn spoke.

When Emlyn finished, Gareth was quiet for a moment.

"You are describing," he said, "a text that is identical to the one you carry."

"Not identical. Close. The differences are small."

"Show me."

Emlyn opened his breviary to the ninety-third psalm and set it on the desk. Gareth looked at it for a long moment.

"This is the text I read," Gareth said. "Word for word."

"In the office last night, the third verse..."

"Is the third verse as it stands." Gareth set his own breviary beside Emlyn's. The pages were open to the same psalm. The texts were identical. He looked at Emlyn. "The stone chapel has unusual acoustics. You are not yet accustomed to the hour. These are not failures of faith. They are failures of attention, which is why you are here."

"The water," Emlyn said. "From the well. Is it tested?"

Gareth tightened his mouth and stopped treating Emlyn as a confused guest.

Gareth took a small vessel from the corner of his desk. He touched one wet finger to his forehead before he spoke.

"This water held me when my brother died," he said. "It held this house before either of us was born. To question it is to question the ground on which our life stands." He looked at Emlyn steadily. "Consider whether the ground of your doubt is faith or disturbance. The two can feel alike."

Gareth stood, signalling that the meeting was over.

"Rest today," he said. "Come to Vespers tonight. Let the office do what the office does."

Emlyn picked up his breviary and went out.

Part Seven: What He Brought

He had packed it as an afterthought, the morning he left: a small bottle of holy water from the font at his home parish, wrapped in a cloth in the bottom of his bag. He had brought it because the familiar bottle reassured him, though he had not expected to use it.

He sat in his cell and held it for a long time.

The bottle was glass, perhaps two hundred millilitres, sealed with a cork. His parish priest had blessed it at the Easter Vigil three months ago. He had used some of it then and not replaced the cork firmly, and it had leaked slightly in transit and the cloth was damp.

He uncorked it and smelled it. Water. Cold, faintly chalky, the limestone of his home town.

The well in the courtyard. The fog rotating above the grate in the dark.

He thought: it will be noticed.

He thought: I do not know what will be noticed, or by whom, or what it means if it is.

He thought of the woman at the font in his home parish, who came every Sunday and stood at the back and did not take communion and had been doing this for twenty years that he knew of, and of what she must have known, standing at the back for twenty years, that the people in the front pews did not.

He thought about what Gareth had said: disturbance, not error, not inexperience. Disturbance. The word that closed a question rather than opening it. The word that made the question itself the problem.

He thought: tonight I will stand in the chapel and the vessel will be filled from the well and I will receive what comes from it. Whatever that is, I will have taken it into myself.

He put the bottle in his cassock pocket.

He did not consider leaving. Instead, he reduced the problem to four observable elements: object, vessel, substitution and response. He had come to test his vocation and now treated the experiment as an obligation.

Part Eight: Vespers

The office of Vespers was at six, in the last of the winter light.

He had memorised the responses that afternoon. He knew exactly what the Magnificat should say, had checked it four times, had the text clear in his mind before the brothers took their places.

He waited until the altar had been prepared and the candles lit and the brothers had settled into their stalls before he moved to the credence table, where the water from the well stood in its vessel beside the chalice.

He was not the server. The server was a young brother named, he thought, Leith, who stood at the credence table with his hands at his sides, watching Emlyn.

Emlyn met his eyes and did not look away and took the vessel from the table and poured the water it contained into the basin on the floor and poured his own water in its place. His hands were steady. The bottle was light. The exchange took perhaps twenty seconds.

Leith watched him.

Neither of them spoke.

Emlyn set the bottle in his cassock pocket and returned to his place in the guest stall.

The office began.

Gareth read the Magnificat.

He read four lines and stopped.

Gareth stopped in the middle of a word and could not continue, even after opening his mouth again. He stood at the lectern with the book open before him and his mouth open and no sound coming from it, and the silence stretched for long enough that the brothers began to look at one another, and the candles moved in a draft from somewhere, and the shadows shifted across the low ceiling of the chapel.

Gareth looked up from the book.

He looked at the credence table. He looked at the vessel. He looked at Emlyn.

"What did you do," he said.

His voice shook. He tried to speak again but could not retrieve the next word.

"The water is from my home parish," Emlyn said. "Blessed at Easter."

The brothers were very still.

Gareth gripped the lectern with both hands and looked at Emlyn with open fear.

"You have introduced a foreign element," he said, "into a sacrament of this house."

"I have introduced water that was blessed in a church I know," Emlyn said. "If that is a foreign element, I would like to understand why."

Gareth looked at him for a long moment. Then he turned to the older man in the second stall on the left.

"Take the vessel to the sacristy," he said.

The brother rose without hesitation and moved to the credence table and picked up the vessel. He carried it toward the door without looking at Emlyn.

"Put it down," Emlyn said.

The brother stopped. He stood with the vessel in both hands and his back to the chapel.

The other brothers moved faster than Emlyn had seen them move during the previous four days. Two rose at once. A third turned in his stall to look at Gareth rather than at Emlyn and did not wait for instructions.

"Put it down," Emlyn said again.

Gareth came around the lectern.

Several brothers moved and spoke at once. Their established sequence of responses and instructions broke down within seconds.

The brother with the vessel turned. Emlyn stepped toward him. A second brother rose from his stall and moved and misjudged the distance to the candelabrum on the floor at the end of the row. The candelabrum went over. Candles struck the stone and went out.

Part Nine: The Well

Emlyn went out through the sacristy door, which opened onto the inner courtyard. He still had the empty bottle in his pocket. The courtyard was cold and clear, the night fully dark now, the fog above the well denser than before and rotating faster while the brothers shouted inside the chapel.

He stood at the well.

He could hear voices now, the silence of the house broken at last, brothers calling to each other in the yard beyond the gate, the sound of running.

He looked down into the well. The grate was between him and the water. The light remained far below, the same green he had seen each night.

Behind him, in the chapel, someone cried out. Then came the smaller sound: the clean report of old stone giving way under pressure.

A crack opened across the paving between the sacristy door and the well. It ran toward him in a crooked line and stopped at the well's rim.

He stood at the well. The fog above him continued its rotation. The well below held its light. His bottle of Easter water remained in his hand, irrelevant to both phenomena.

The crack widened by the width of a finger.

Emlyn did not step back.

* * *

Appended to the Record of Discernment Inquiries, Diocese of Erne, undated:

The house known as Carrow ceased to function as a religious house in the winter of that year. The circumstances were not entered into the record.

The well in the inner courtyard survived intact. A vacancy for one man in discernment remains recorded against the house.