Nine Better Versions

The Green Fog Coast · Collection IV

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Revised edition, 13 October 2026.

Published by Frequency Unknown.

delacorme.com

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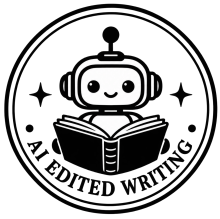

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The Better Sister

Part One: The Poster

At thirty-two, Elin Vale saw her sister on a poster outside the Assembly Rooms and stopped so sharply that the man behind her struck her heel with his stick.

He swore. Elin did not turn. The poster had been pasted crookedly over an older notice about parking restrictions. Rain had worked at one corner, lifting the paper from the board. Even so, the face was clear.

LYDIA VALE Founder of the Littoral Foundation Public Address: Childhood Beyond the Fog

There was a photograph underneath. A woman in a dark suit. Hair parted cleanly. Mouth composed. Eyes directed just above the camera, as though she had already forgiven the world for being late.

Elin looked at the face and felt, with a dull and private certainty, that someone had made a mistake.

The name was correct, but the face was wrong. Lydia had been her twin.

Identical, people had said, though their mother always objected to that word. No two children were identical when one cried when her toast snapped and the other ate the broken half first. No two children were identical when one walked into rooms and the other checked where the door was. But strangers had not seen the difference. Teachers had confused their books. Boys had whispered to the wrong one after choir. Once, when they were seven, Dr Hembry had put his fingers under Elin's chin and said, "You are Lydia," and Elin had felt a small meanness rise in her and had said nothing.

That had been before the day at Cresswell Flats, before the tide went out too far and the mist came in low over the channels, before Lydia stepped away from the marked path and did not answer when Elin called. Eight hours later, Lydia came back. That was the official version.

Elin crossed the square while the rain made black beads on her coat. The doors of the Assembly Rooms were open. Warm yellow light spilled onto the pavement. A small queue had formed inside: councillors, teachers, a doctor and

his wife, several mothers in careful hats, and the kind of men who attended public addresses because public addresses were where one was seen.

"Elin?"

She knew the voice before she saw the woman.

Mrs Tarrant, who had once taught them arithmetic, stood near the inner door with a programme folded against her chest. She had shrunk but not softened. Her glasses hung from a silver chain.

"I thought it was you."

Elin touched the poster with two fingers.

"You knew she was coming?"

"Oh, my dear." Mrs Tarrant glanced toward the hall. "Everyone knows."

"I didn't." Mrs Tarrant heard more in it than Elin intended.

"I assumed you must have chosen not to come. She sent invitations, I believe."

"Not to me."

Mrs Tarrant's mouth tightened in the old way, as if the room had produced a difficult fraction.

"Well," she said. "Families."

Elin looked again at the photograph.

The face was hers. Thinner, perhaps. Better arranged. The jaw held with authority. The hair without a single loose strand. A successful face. A face that had never woken at three in the morning with brine in its mouth.

"Is she alone?" Elin asked.

"With her secretary. And some people from the Foundation. Quite a little party." Mrs Tarrant lowered her voice. "She has done remarkable things."

"So I've read."

"She always had promise."

Elin smiled because there was no safe answer.

In childhood the promise had belonged to both of them, in the loose way adults gave children futures as though handing out ribbons. Then Lydia had vanished into the mist and returned with a stillness nobody could name. After that, promise attached itself to her alone.

Lydia learned quicker. Sang more cleanly. Remembered dates, maps, foreign words, the price of fish in markets she had never visited. At twelve she could sit through a funeral without fidgeting. At fifteen she corrected Father Lorne on a passage from Job. At seventeen she left for the inland college with a scholarship and one suitcase.

Elin remained. Their mother died, their father drank himself quiet, and the shop failed. Elin became good at making small things last. Lydia wrote twice a year.

Dear Elin, I trust you are well.

No spelling errors. No smudge. No question that required an answer.

A bell rang inside the hall.

Mrs Tarrant touched Elin's sleeve.

"You should come in."

"I don't have a ticket."

"Nonsense. You are her sister."

Part Two: The Address

The hall smelled of wet wool and polish. Heat from the old pipes carried a faint metallic damp. Chairs had been set in rows. On the stage stood a lectern beside a glass of water. A large map of the coast had been pinned to a board behind it.

The map was familiar. Everyone knew the green markings. The fog belt. The danger reaches. The soft forbidden places where roads ended in warning posts and men with official badges.

Cresswell Flats was marked in pale ink.

Elin sat at the back.

She had meant to leave before the address began. She told herself this twice. Then the side door opened and Lydia came onto the stage.

The hall settled.

There was no applause at first, only a slight intake of breath as people compared the woman before them with the photograph, and found the photograph insufficient.

Lydia's face was narrow, controlled and almost expressionless. Her hair lay perfectly in place. The years had left no visible softness around her mouth or eyes.

Elin felt a sudden resentment so physical that she closed her fingers around the edge of the chair.

Lydia placed her notes on the lectern.

"Good evening," she said.

Her voice had changed. It was still Lydia's voice, but trained and smooth, with each word placed exactly where she wanted it. Warmth had never survived long in it.

"I have come back to Cresswell because our town is often treated as a margin. A place where the land runs out. A place defined by loss, by evacuation, by charts coloured in green. But margins are not empty. Margins are where change first becomes visible."

People leaned in.

Lydia continued. She described children living beside the fog line, lowered her voice before the casualty figures and then told the audience how the Foundation could use their money and influence. People sat straighter.

Elin heard how carefully Lydia controlled the speech. She paused before the statistics, smiled at the one safe joke and softened her voice when she mentioned frightened children. Elin heard no fear in any of it. When she said, "We must not confuse survival with development," she did not look toward the back row, where her surviving sister sat with both hands in her lap.

A man near the front stood for a question.

"Dr Vale, you speak of controlled exposure. Are you saying the fog can be made beneficial?"

"I am saying panic has kept us from measurement."

A murmur moved through the room.

Lydia lifted one hand. The room quieted.

"Unmeasured fear becomes policy. Measured risk becomes knowledge."

It was a clean line. The councillors liked it.

Elin did not.

She had seen measured risk. Men in canvas masks. Children lined at a school gate with chalk on their sleeves after a drift. A dog that came home with green moisture in its whiskers and bit through its own tongue before morning.

Then Lydia did something with her left hand. A small movement, fingers folding inward and releasing, as though counting something privately. Elin had done it herself since childhood, under desks, in coat pockets, whenever a room became too much.

She had never seen anyone else do it.

A woman stood.

"My son was taken last year near Wether Cut. Are you saying we should have measured that?"

"No," Lydia said. "I am saying children are taken every year by poverty, damp, hunger, and neglect. We have learned to tolerate those because they do not glow."

A few people nodded.

The woman sat down.

A councillor near the aisle raised a gloved hand.

"Six children arrive tomorrow, Dr Vale. At eight. Is that still going ahead?"

"Yes," Lydia said. "At the intake house above the flats. Cresswell has been surveyed and rated category two."

"And if category two is wrong?" the councillor pressed.

"Then we will have learned something category one could not tell us," Lydia said.

A ripple went through the hall, half admiration, half unease.

Elin felt the old heat rise in her throat.

Lydia had always been good at winning. Even when they were small, she had known how to turn a quarrel into a question of fairness, then fairness into a question of character, until Elin found herself apologising for the thing Lydia had done.

After the address, people stood in clusters. Lydia stepped down from the stage and was surrounded. Hands reached for hers. A priest bowed his head. A doctor spoke close to her ear. Lydia gave each person the correct amount of attention.

Elin remained by the back wall.

She decided to leave. Coming had only placed her in the same room as Lydia's polished speech and everything that had happened on the flats.

Then Lydia looked across the hall.

Their eyes met.

For one second, Lydia's face lost its arrangement.

Lydia recognised her and did not smile.

Then the expression closed.

She said something to the man beside her and crossed the room.

"Elin."

"Lydia."

They stood at arm's length.

"You came."

"You put your face on the square."

"I wrote."

"No."

Lydia looked almost puzzled.

"I instructed Miriam to send you an invitation."

Across the room, a colourless-haired woman near the stage lowered her eyes to her notebook.

"Your secretary?"

"Yes."

"Then Miriam forgot."

Lydia accepted this with no visible irritation.

"She is usually exact."

"People vary."

A faint pause.

"Yes," Lydia said. "They do."

It might have been a joke from someone else.

"You look well," Lydia said.

"I look like you would look if you had stayed."

Several heads turned nearby.

Lydia's face did not change.

"I would like to talk privately."

"I don't think we have much to say."

"We have one thing."

Elin looked at her.

Lydia lowered her voice.

"I remember less than I should."

A chair leg scraped somewhere behind Elin. She kept hold of her damp cuff until the cloth creased under her nails.

"What?"

"I remember less than I should," Lydia said again. "And tonight, when I saw you, I remembered something I do not think happened."

Elin's fingers tightened around the damp cuff of her coat.

"What did you remember?"

Lydia looked toward the stage, the map, the pale mark at Cresswell Flats.

"You running from me."

Part Three: The Supper Room

They went to the old supper room behind the stage.

It had not changed. Same green walls. Same shelves of chipped cups. Same long serving hatch with a wooden shutter. As girls, they had once hidden there during a harvest dance and eaten six sugared buns each from a tray set aside for the rector's guests, trying not to laugh at the old song from the hall. Lydia had blamed a boy from the harbour. Elin had let her.

Lydia closed the door.

For a moment they stood facing one another under a bare bulb.

At close range, the differences were visible. Elin had lines around her mouth. Lydia had none. Elin's left eyebrow had a small break from the time their father's ladder fell and caught her above the eye. Lydia had no scar.

But Lydia had the freckle near the collarbone.

Elin saw it where the blouse opened at her throat and felt the old vertigo. They had both had that freckle. Their mother called it the full stop God put there to tell them apart from other children.

"What do you want?" Elin asked.

Lydia removed her gloves finger by finger.

"That is difficult to answer."

"Try."

"I want to know what happened on the flats."

"You know what happened."

"I know what I was told."

"You were there."

Lydia's thumb moved along the seam of one glove.

"And you came back."

"That is what I was told."

Elin waited.

Lydia folded the gloves and placed them on the table.

"The account says we were playing near the channel marker. A fog bank moved in. I wandered beyond the rope line. You ran for help. Searchers found me eight hours later by the oyster posts. I was cold but unharmed."

"That is the account."

"Is it true?"

Elin laughed once. It came out badly.

"You've waited twenty-four years to ask?"

"I have had reasons not to ask."

"Such as?"

"People were relieved."

"That isn't a reason."

"It is a strong one."

Lydia had explained why she stayed silent, but she had not explained why she had avoided Elin.

Elin walked to the serving hatch and pressed her palm against the shutter. The wood felt greasy with age.

"You didn't come back right."

Lydia watched her.

"No one said that."

"No. They said blessed. Changed. Quiet. Gifted. They said all sorts."

"What did you say?"

"I was eight."

"What did you say?"

Elin turned.

"I said you weren't Lydia."

The bulb hummed.

Lydia did not move. Only her eyes seemed to sharpen.

"To whom?"

"Mam."

"And?"

"She slapped me."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. She was tired."

"I am sorry," Lydia said, "that she struck you."

Elin studied her.

"Do you feel that?"

"Yes."

"No. You know where the feeling goes. That isn't the same."

Lydia's mouth tightened.

"You keep telling me what I feel."

"You made a career out of making that difficult to question."

Lydia looked toward the door.

Outside, applause began in the hall. Some second event had started without them.

"I dream of that day," Lydia said.

"So do I."

"In my dream, you are not behind me. You are ahead."

Elin's breath caught.

Lydia continued.

"You are standing in the mist up to your knees. You have mud on your dress. You are holding my hand. Then you let go. I call your name. You run."

"That isn't what happened."

"The dream recurs."

Elin turned away.

Lydia waited.

"Tell me."

Elin opened her mouth. Nothing came. She had repeated the official account for so many years that she now had to force herself to say what she had seen.

They had not been playing.

They had been daring each other.

That was the part nobody knew.

Lydia had said the fog could not hurt clever girls. Elin had said Lydia was afraid. Lydia had stepped over the rope. Elin had followed because she would rather die than be left on the safe side alone.

They walked between the channels while the fog lay low over the mud, not thick enough to hide the posts, only thick enough to make distances uncertain. Their shoes sank. Their socks darkened. The air tasted green and mineral, like pennies held too long in the mouth.

Then Lydia had stopped.

"What is it?" Elin had asked.

Lydia had not answered.

She was looking at something in the fog.

Elin had seen it too, or almost seen it: two girls ahead of them, walking hand in hand.

Their own backs.

Same blue dresses. Same black plaits. Same muddy calves.

The girls turned.

Elin remembered Lydia's fingers tightening around hers. Remembered the other Lydia smiling.

Then Lydia had pulled her hand free and stepped toward the figures.

Elin had grabbed her sleeve.

"Don't."

"It's us," Lydia had said.

"It isn't."

The other Elin lifted one hand.

Elin ran.

She ran back through the channels, slipping, crying, losing one shoe. She did not look behind her until she reached the rope. When she did, Lydia was gone.

Eight hours later, the searchers found someone by the oyster posts.

Elin had known at once.

Known and not known.

Because the child had Lydia's face. Lydia's freckle. Lydia's voice.

But when their mother ran to her, the child looked at the woman with calm attention and said, "You are my mother."

She had said Mother instead of Mam.

Elin had screamed until Dr Hembry gave her something bitter in a spoon.

Now, in the supper room, Lydia waited.

Elin said, "You followed the copy."

"The copy?"

"There were two girls in the fog. Us. But not us."

Lydia's face remained still.

"And you left me?"

"You let go."

"That is not an answer."

"I was eight."

Lydia looked down at her gloves.

"Yes."

"I was eight," Elin said again, because it was the only defence she had.

"What happened to me?"

"I don't know."

"You must have seen."

"I ran."

"And when I came back?"

"You didn't."

Lydia lifted her eyes.

The applause outside swelled, then faded.

"I have spent twenty-four years believing I came back," she said.

"Well," Elin said, "you built beautifully."

Lydia took that without visible injury. That angered Elin more than if she had struck her.

"There is a Foundation car outside," Lydia said. "We can reach Cresswell Flats in twenty minutes."

"Why tonight."

"Because the intake begins at eight, and I have signed a rating I no longer believe."

Elin stared at her.

"You're mad."

"I am precise."

"It's dark."

"The tide is out."

"You're worse than mad."

"Perhaps."

"I'm not going there."

Lydia picked up her gloves.

"I am."

Part Four: The Flats

The Foundation car was black and too clean for Cresswell roads.

Miriam, the secretary, sat behind the wheel. She was a narrow woman with colourless hair and a notebook on her lap. Her eyes flicked once toward Elin in the mirror, then away.

"Cresswell Flats," Lydia said.

Miriam hesitated.

"The tide table gives us one hour and seven minutes. The intake bus leaves the depot at seven."

"Then we should not lose seven."

Miriam started the engine.

Elin sat beside her sister in the back. She had not agreed to come. She had given no agreement in words. She had followed Lydia out of the Assembly Rooms, through the side passage, past the hat stand and the old fire buckets, into the rain. The last bus had gone an hour ago. She had known that before she left the house.

She should have let Lydia go alone. Instead she followed because she could not watch Lydia walk back onto the flats without her.

The town thinned quickly. Shops became store sheds. Lamps became fewer. The harbour wall passed on their left, black against the water. Beyond it, the coast opened.

At the edge of the flats, Miriam stopped by the warning gate.

DANGER UNSTABLE CHANNELS GREEN FOG DRIFT ZONE ENTRY PROHIBITED WITHOUT LICENCE

Lydia got out.

"So this is your work?" Elin asked.

Lydia looked back.

"What?"

"Foundations. Speeches. Controlled exposure. And you don't even hesitate at the sign."

"I hesitate constantly. I do not always obey the hesitation."

Miriam opened the boot and removed three canvas masks and a torch. One of the masks was smaller than the others. She handled them with the ease of someone who had done it for children.

"Elin Vale is not cleared," she said.

"Elin Vale is my sister."

"That does not clear her."

"No," Lydia said. "It explains her."

Miriam did not like that. She gave Elin a mask anyway.

The shore path began beyond the gate, a pale strip between reed beds and black mud. The rain had stopped. Clouds dragged low across the moon. Far out, the fog lay over the flats in faint green shelves.

Elin had not been there since the inquiry.

Her body remembered before thought did. The tightness in her knees. The salt damp at the back of her throat. The childish certainty that something in the channels listened better than people.

Lydia walked ahead with the torch.

"You shouldn't know the path," Elin said.

"I studied the survey."

"You always have an answer."

"No. I usually have something to say."

They passed the first marker post. Then the second.

The fog brightened just enough to separate itself from ordinary night.

Miriam stayed behind them, breathing audibly through the mask. She carried a small instrument that clicked at intervals.

"What is that?" Elin asked.

"Particulate counter," Miriam said.

"Does it help?"

"It counts."

"That wasn't my question."

"No."

Lydia stopped at the rope line.

It had been replaced many times, but it stood where the old one had stood: black posts, two strands of wire, little white flags stiff with salt. Beyond it, the mud sloped gently toward the channels.

Elin could see them as they had been.

Two girls in blue dresses.

One brave because the other was watching.

One afraid because the other was brave.

Lydia ducked under the wire.

Elin caught her arm.

"Don't."

Lydia looked at the hand on her sleeve.

"You said that before."

The words went through Elin like cold water.

"What?"

"In the dream."

Elin let go.

Lydia stepped beyond the rope.

Miriam swore softly.

The fog reached Lydia's boots.

It moved then. Weather would have drifted around Lydia. This gathered at her boots.

Thin strands of green vapour drew toward Lydia's ankles, winding up the leather, pausing at the hem of her coat. Lydia stood very still.

"Lydia," Elin said.

Lydia turned her head.

"I hear something."

"Come back."

"It sounds like children."

Elin ducked under the rope.

Miriam said, "Mrs Vale."

"Don't."

"Elin."

But Elin was already in the mud.

It took her shoe at once.

She cursed and pulled free. The mud made a wet sucking sound. Lydia was six yards ahead now, walking toward the channel.

"Stop."

Lydia stopped.

The fog thickened between them.

"I see her," Lydia said.

"Who?"

"Myself."

Elin wiped moisture from the mask's eye glass.

At first there was nothing but posts and vapour. Then the fog thinned, and two small figures stood by the channel marker.

Blue dresses.

Black plaits.

Mud on their legs.

Elin made a sound she had not made since childhood.

The girls were turned away. Hand in hand. Waiting.

Lydia took one step.

Elin caught up and seized her by the coat.

"No."

"I need to know."

"You want to go, so suddenly we have to go."

Lydia looked at her then, and the mask made her face strange. A borrowed face behind glass.

"I have no childhood," she said.

Elin did not answer.

"I have records," Lydia said. "Skills. People tell me what happened and I know what response they require. I can persuade ministers. I cannot remember the taste of those buns."

The two girls ahead of them turned.

Their faces were indistinct.

Elin's grip weakened.

Lydia's voice lowered.

"I know I loved you. I remember that much. The rest is harder."

The fog rose to their waists.

Behind them, Miriam called something. The words broke apart.

The child Lydia lifted a hand.

The child Elin smiled, without the small tightening at the corner of her mouth that used to come before spite. Beside her, the other Lydia stood without fear.

"You were made there," Elin said.

Lydia looked at the two children standing by the channel marker and did not answer at once.

"Maybe," she said finally.

"From what?"

Lydia said nothing. The fog pressed closer instead.

The child Lydia opened her mouth.

No sound came at first. Then a thin voice moved across the flats.

"Come and be done."

Miriam screamed from somewhere behind them.

Elin pulled Lydia hard.

Lydia did not move.

"Elin," she said.

"No."

"I cannot go on like this."

"You've gone on better than anyone."

"That is the wrong word."

The child Elin laughed.

It was a bright, exact laugh. Elin remembered making that sound once, before the shop failed, before their mother's hand, before the letters, before the lifelong labour of being the sister who had not been taken and was not chosen.

In the fog, Elin saw herself as she might have been if she had never run.

She stood clean, confident and free of the guilt she had carried since childhood.

She saw herself in clean clothes, speaking before halls, remembered correctly, wanted without effort. She saw Lydia beside her, both of them whole and equal at last.

It was almost kind.

That was what made her step forward.

Lydia gripped her wrist.

"No."

Elin stared at her.

"You wanted to go."

"Yes."

"Then let me."

"No."

"Why?"

For the first time since the poster, Lydia looked afraid. Only a little, and only for a moment. No one else in that fog would have caught it.

But Elin did.

She pulled Lydia's wrist toward her instead of answering. Lydia came, one step, then another. The child Elin remained clear in the fog, watching without moving.

"Move," Elin said.

They ran.

The mud fought them. The fog rose. Miriam's torch swung wildly near the rope line, making white cuts through green vapour. Behind them, the child laughed again, but the laugh lengthened, thinned, became something like air moving through a cracked pipe.

Lydia fell.

Elin nearly went down with her. Lydia's boot had sunk to the ankle. Elin dropped to her knees and pulled. Nothing.

"Elin."

"Shut up."

"Elin."

"Shut up and pull."

The fog climbed Lydia's coat. It moved with purpose now, threading toward the mask seals, testing the edges.

Lydia reached for the boot buckle.

"No time," Elin said.

She took Lydia under the arms and dragged.

The boot stayed.

Lydia came free.

Her own shoe was gone somewhere behind her. This time she did not look back for it.

They stumbled to the rope. Miriam caught Lydia first, then Elin. All three fell on the safe side in wet canvas and mud, fighting for breath.

For a few seconds none of them moved.

The fog reached the wire and stopped.

It rested there, low and green and patient.

Then, from beyond the rope, the child Elin spoke.

"You always leave first."

Elin took off her mask and vomited into the grass.

Part Five: The Kitchen

They returned to town after midnight.

No one spoke in the car. Miriam drove too fast. Lydia sat with one bare foot tucked beneath her coat, her ruined stocking dark with mud.

At the Assembly Rooms the lights were out except for the vestibule lamp. The poster outside had peeled further from the board. Rain had loosened Lydia's face at one corner, so that the paper curved outward from the cheek.

Miriam wanted to take Lydia to the hotel.

Lydia said, "No. To Elin's house."

Elin almost objected, then did not.

Her house was small and cold. Lydia stood in the kitchen while Elin lit the stove. It clicked twice before catching. The ordinary sound made the night worse.

Elin found an old towel and gave it to her.

"For your foot."

"Thank you."

"You can sit."

Lydia sat at the table.

Elin filled the kettle. Her hands shook. She hated that Lydia could see it.

"You should say something," Elin said.

"What would help?"

"Something human."

Lydia considered that.

"I am frightened."

Elin leaned against the counter.

"That will do."

The kettle ticked as it heated.

Lydia looked around the kitchen. The cracked tile by the stove. The jar of tea. The damp patch near the back door. The chair with one leg mended by wire.

"You stayed," she said.

"Yes."

"I left."

"You were taken."

"After that."

"Yes."

Lydia folded the towel over her foot.

"I didn't know what to say to you."

"You didn't try."

"No."

The plain answer took enough anger out of Elin to leave her tired.

She made tea. Set one cup before Lydia. Took the other for herself.

Lydia reached for the cup and missed the handle. She looked at her hand for a moment, then tried again.

For a while they sat like that, two women with the same face divided by a wooden table and twenty-four years.

At last Lydia said, "The thing on the flats was not finished."

"No."

Lydia looked into her cup.

"It wanted you."

Elin looked into her tea.

"Why?"

"Perhaps because you are the part that remembers."

"That's flattering."

"It was not meant to be."

A short laugh escaped Elin.

Lydia touched the cup but did not drink.

"There is another thing," Lydia said.

Elin waited.

"I cannot eat toast once it has broken. I never could. And twice now I have caught myself checking that a door has not closed behind me, though nothing has ever come through one."

"Everyone has habits."

"I hid sugared buns once. In the left pocket of a blue dress." Lydia looked at her own hands. "The dress I wore that day had no pockets."

Elin felt the room tilt.

"Mine did," she said.

Neither of them said anything else about it.

Lydia opened her mouth as if to go further.

Elin stood so quickly the chair struck the wall.

"Stop."

Lydia stopped at once. Elin had expected resistance, and the obedience frightened her.

Elin walked to the sink. Outside, the narrow garden lay black under the window. The fence leaned, and the ash bin had blown over again. She fixed her eyes on them because neither object resembled her, remembered for her or claimed part of her childhood.

Behind her, Lydia spoke quietly.

"When I saw the child version of you tonight, I wanted to go to her."

Elin gripped the sink edge.

"So did I."

"I know."

"No. You don't."

"I think I do."

Elin turned.

There was no triumph in Lydia's face. No claim. Only that maddening, careful attention.

"You don't get to have that too," Elin said. "You don't get my guilt or my fear."

Lydia's eyes lowered.

"No."

The stove clicked. A coal shifted inside with a soft collapse.

Elin sat again because her legs had begun to weaken.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

Lydia looked toward the black window.

"Cancel tomorrow's meetings."

"And then?"

"Close the residential exposure programme."

"Will they let you?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Then I will find where the money is weak."

That sounded like the sister Elin remembered, though she still did not know who had returned from the flats.

Somewhere near the front of the house, the door latch moved. Miriam let herself in without knocking, still in her ruined stockings, and crossed to the hall telephone. She spoke low for perhaps ninety seconds, giving an account number and a depot name Elin did not recognise. When she came back to the kitchen doorway her face had the flat, careful look of someone who has just done something she cannot undo.

"The seven o'clock bus will not run," she said. "I have told the depot it failed inspection."

Lydia looked up. "You cannot authorise that."

"No," Miriam said. "I did it anyway. You may dismiss me in the morning."

She went back out to telephone the hotel and collect Lydia's case.

Elin thought of the invitation that had never arrived.

"Elin."

"What?"

"I would like to stay here tonight."

"No."

Lydia nodded.

"Of course."

The speed of her acceptance irritated Elin.

"I haven't got a bed made."

"I can sleep in the chair."

"You don't sleep."

"I sleep."

"Do you dream?"

Lydia looked at the cup.

"Yes."

"Of the flats?"

"Mostly."

Elin rubbed her face with both hands.

"You can have the sofa."

"Thank you."

"That isn't forgiveness."

"I did not mistake it for that."

Elin almost smiled. Almost.

She fetched blankets from the cupboard. Lydia removed her coat and folded it over the chair. Her stocking had dried stiff with mud. Her foot was pale and narrow, with a red mark where the boot had held.

At the door to the sitting room, Lydia stopped.

"What?" Elin asked.

"When we were small, did I ever sing?"

"All the time."

"What songs?"

"Bad ones."

Lydia waited.

Elin sighed.

"There was one about a sailor who married a fish."

"That sounds unlikely."

"It was. You sang it anyway."

"How did it go?"

"I don't remember."

This was a lie. They both knew it.

Lydia nodded and went into the sitting room.

Elin stood in the kitchen after she had gone. The house settled around her. Outside, somewhere far off, the foghorn gave one low note from the harbour.

Then another.

Then none.

She went to the window. At the end of the garden, beyond the leaning fence, a green thread of fog lay along the ground. It should not have been there. The house was half a mile from the water. The street was inland. The night was clear.

From the sitting room, Lydia hummed.

It was low at first. Uncertain. A tune finding its way back after long disuse.

The sailor song.

Elin stood very still.

She had told Lydia she did not remember how it went. That had been a lie, and they had both known it.

At the window, Elin tried to follow Lydia back to the first note. She could remember the second verse. She could remember their mother's kitchen, flour on the table, Lydia singing too loudly over the kettle. The beginning would not come.

She could not remember who had taught them the song, or which of them had sung it first.

The fog pressed once against the bottom of the fence, withdrew, and waited.

Lydia hummed on, steady now, the tune fully recovered.

Elin listened and could not find the beginning of it.

Borrowed Weather

Part One: The Empty Ledger

Bartholomew Ashcombe had never been unhappy enough to be interesting.

This was not a complaint he could make in company.

People were impatient with ordinary men who complained of ordinary lives. They listened more readily to a man with a ruined father, a lost sweetheart, a war wound, a dead child, a scandal or a debt.

Bartholomew had none of those things. He was fifty-two years old and had served twenty-nine years in the Department of Rates, Drainage, and Harbour Assessments. His handwriting was admired. His columns balanced. His superiors found him dependable in the exact way that prevented promotion. He rented two rooms above a tobacconist on Merrow Street and took supper most evenings at the same chop house, where the waiter no longer asked whether he wanted potatoes because the answer had settled into history.

He had not married, and no tragedy could be blamed for it.

No woman had died. No engagement had broken. No letter had been lost at sea. No father had forbidden a match. No youthful passion had been sacrificed to duty.

There had only been chances he had not taken because none had seemed urgent enough at the hour.

He had once nearly proposed to Honoria Mottisford, who worked at the lending library and had a low laugh that made other people turn. He had walked with her six times beside the canal. On the seventh walk she paused by the iron bridge and said, "Mr Ashcombe, do you ever feel that life is waiting for you to begin it?"

He had considered the question for long enough that Honoria looked away first. She married a dentist from Aldenmere the following spring.

Bartholomew had kept the same job, rooms and supper table for decades. At fifty-two, he wondered whether caution had merely prevented him from

choosing.

The suspicion arrived through a serialized romance in The Evening Herald, which made it harder to defend. Someone had left the paper at the chop house under a plate of cold ham.

He read the first instalment because rain delayed his walk home. Then the second. Then he began buying the paper.

One Thursday evening, during a scene in which the woman found a dried violet in an atlas, Bartholomew set down the paper and wept into his potatoes.

The waiter pretended not to see.

That kindness undid him more thoroughly.

The next morning, he made an error in a drainage ledger. Only one digit. A harmless miscopy in a projected maintenance schedule for the East Sluice. He found it before the page was signed. Still, it frightened him. He had made fewer than ten errors in twenty-nine years.

He took luncheon alone in the records yard.

The yard stood between the municipal offices and the harbour wall. Clerks used it for smoking, arguments, and brief failures of composure. Bartholomew sat on a crate and watched gulls quarrel over a fish head.

Crispin Wace from Accounts came out carrying a sandwich.

"You look pale, Ashcombe."

"I am quite well."

"Then you are pale incorrectly."

Bartholomew gave a small laugh.

Wace sat beside him without invitation. He was a broad, soft man with lively eyes and a talent for knowing what should not be said until it had become profitable to say it.

"Ledger trouble?"

"No."

"Woman trouble?"

Bartholomew looked at him.

Wace raised both hands.

"No offence. I always try that one second. It is surprisingly productive."

"There is no woman."

"Ah. That kind."

"What kind?"

"The kind that produces more trouble than the presence of one."

Bartholomew stood.

Wace continued eating.

"You should go to Orrell."

Bartholomew paused.

"Who?"

"Caspian Orrell. The rooms behind Saint Vesper's Arcade. Memory companionship. Tasteful, discreet, expensive enough to feel medical."

"I have no idea what you mean."

"Yes, you do. You look as though you want something and have no idea how to ask for it."

Bartholomew should have walked away.

Instead he said, "Memory companionship?"

Wace looked around the yard.

"You borrow an emotional recollection. Temporarily. A harmless fog procedure. Widowers use it. Artists. Bachelors of refinement. Women who married safely. Men who never left town. Nothing indecent unless one pays extra, and even then the indecency is mostly adjectival."

"That sounds monstrous."

"It sounds worse because I have skipped the sales language."

"Whose memories?"

Wace shrugged.

"Donors."

"Living?"

"Usually."

"That is impossible."

"No one has decided what to call it yet. That keeps the price down."

A gull took the fish head and lifted hard into the air.

Bartholomew watched it go.

Wace stood, brushed crumbs from his waistcoat, and handed him a folded card.

"I did not give you this."

"No."

"You will not go."

"No."

"Good. It is healthier to lie in advance."

The card remained in Bartholomew's hand after Wace had gone.

C. ORRELL Curated Recollections Atmospheric Exchange by Private Appointment No vulgar scenes No criminal transfer No children Saint Vesper's Arcade, rear stair

On the reverse, in small green print:

You are not empty. You are under-supplied.

Bartholomew read that sentence many times.

By evening, he hated it.

By the following Tuesday, he had made an appointment.

That same week, in a narrow house near Saint Bartholomew's Gate, Juliana Mereworth totalled her accounts twice and arrived at the same uncomfortable number both times: eleven pounds owed against the shop's rates, a final notice already delivered, and the lease due for renewal in a way that would go badly if

she could not show her landlord a clear ledger. She did not yet know Bartholomew Ashcombe's name. She had no reason that Tuesday to think of the harbour festival at all. She was aware only of a folded card left with her the previous month by a soft-spoken man who had promised discretion, a fair price, and no loss she would notice.

Part Two: Saint Vesper's Arcade

Saint Vesper's Arcade had been fashionable once.

One could tell by the roof.

The roof was built from glass and iron and ran the length of the passage in a high curve. It still caught the afternoon light despite twenty cracked panes and several patches of tarred canvas. The shops below had declined in stages. A glove maker. A watch repairer. A shop selling devotional prints. A tea room with no cakes visible. Two empty windows. A taxidermist whose foxes looked too patient.

The rear stair stood between the taxidermist and a seller of second-hand umbrellas.

Bartholomew climbed at four o'clock.

At the top of the stair, a brass plate read:

C. ORRELL Recollections arranged

He knocked.

The door opened at once.

Caspian Orrell was younger than Bartholomew expected. Perhaps thirty-five. Thin, with hair parted too precisely and hands that seemed always to be finishing a gesture. He wore a brown suit with a green cravat. There was no watch chain at his waist. He had the manner of a man who had catalogued a great deal and been surprised very little.

"Mr Ashcombe," he said.

"Yes."

"You came exactly on time."

"I try to."

"That explains several things."

Bartholomew almost turned back.

Orrell stepped aside.

The room beyond was not disreputable.

That disappointed him.

There were shelves of labelled boxes, a desk, two armchairs, a green lamp, and a cabinet of glass vials arranged by colour and height. A carpet softened the floor. Heavy curtains covered the windows. The room smelled of dust and violets. Under both sat the mineral damp of sea fog.

On the desk lay several forms.

"I am here only to inquire," Bartholomew said.

Orrell sat.

"Of course."

"I was told this is temporary."

"It can be."

"Can be?"

"It depends on the client, the recollection, and how carefully both are handled."

"That is not reassuring."

"No." Orrell opened a drawer. "What do you lack?"

"I do not know."

"What do you resent lacking?"

Bartholomew looked at the green lamp.

"History."

"You have fifty-two years of memories."

"Nothing I would choose to revisit."

Orrell set a catalogue on the desk.

It was bound in dark cloth. No title.

Inside were entries written in green ink.

First Kiss, unsent letter, seaside town, rain present. Female donor, age nineteen at time of recollection. Strong salt component. Mild regret.

Brother's deathbed reconciliation, adult male donor. High grief, high relief, low visual clarity. Suitable for experienced clients.

Childhood orchard, summer, theft of fruit, first moral transgression. Bright sensory profile. Limited aftertaste.

Rejected proposal, railway platform, winter. Female donor. High humiliation, later pride. Not recommended for clients with weak selfhood.

Bartholomew turned the pages with increasing discomfort.

"These are people's lives."

"These are excerpts."

"Do they know?"

"They signed."

"For money?"

"Sometimes. For relief. For debt. For the wish not to carry everything alone."

Bartholomew closed the catalogue.

"I should go."

"You should."

Neither man moved.

Orrell studied him.

"You do not want adventure."

"No."

"I think you want a memory in which you behaved differently."

The room went quiet.

Bartholomew sat again.

Orrell opened the catalogue near the back.

"There is one."

"No."

"You have not heard it."

He turned the catalogue.

The entry was short.

Harbour festival, age twenty-two. Woman in yellow gloves. Dancing after rain. Mutual attachment unrealised. Strong joy, moderate grief, persistent music. Donor: Juliana Mereworth.

Bartholomew read the name.

"Living?"

"Yes."

"Why did she give it?"

"Her stated reason was debt."

"And the unstated?"

Orrell's expression did not change.

"She wrote debt. That's what I put down."

Bartholomew looked at the entry again.

"Would she lose it?"

"No. Not in ordinary borrowing. The client experiences an echo. The donor retains the original."

"In ordinary borrowing."

"Yes."

"What is the risk?"

"Attachment. Confusion of ownership. Emotional trespass."

"Transfer?"

Orrell closed the catalogue.

"Nothing you need concern yourself with during a first session."

"That is exactly when one should concern oneself."

"There is some life in you," Orrell said. His tone carried no warmth.

"How does it work?"

"With fog, consent, and a well-labelled vial."

Orrell stood and unlocked the cabinet.

The vials were filled with pale substances: ash grey, blue white, pearl, faint green. He took one no longer than a finger and held it to the lamp.

Inside, a ribbon of green fog moved around a dark speck.

"Condensed recollection medium. Or that is what the supplier called it. The scene rarely comes across whole. The feeling is usually stronger."

"That explanation explains nothing."

"Yes."

He placed the vial in a brass holder between the two chairs.

"You will sit. You will breathe when instructed. You will not reach for more than arrives. If you see the donor's face, do not speak to her. If you hear music, do not hum. If you feel the memory turning toward you, look down."

"Why?"

Orrell looked at the vial. "Because clients who look up tend to come back asking for the donor."

Bartholomew's mouth had gone dry.

He thought of his two rooms. The chop house. Potatoes. Honoria Mottisford on the iron bridge, waiting for an answer he had taken too long to give.

Orrell opened the vial.

A thread of green fog rose.

"Sit still, Mr Ashcombe. Tell me at once if the room changes."

Part Three: Juliana in the Rain

At first Bartholomew smelled orange peel crushed underfoot.

Then wet canvas. Horse sweat. Coal smoke. A woman's glove damp against his palm.

He was standing under a striped awning near the harbour.

No.

He was not standing.

Someone was.

The distinction wavered.

Rain had ended but remained everywhere. It shone on the cobbles, dripped from ropes, trembled along the edges of flags strung between lampposts. Music came from a temporary bandstand by the fish market. Fiddles, cornet, drum. Slightly out of tune. Perfect.

A young woman laughed beside him.

He did not see her face.

Only yellow gloves.

She pulled him forward.

"Come on, Edmund," she said. "Before the sensible people return."

Edmund.

The shoes belonged to Edmund, not Bartholomew.

The memory turned.

Bartholomew looked down, as instructed.

His borrowed shoes stepped into a puddle.

The young woman in yellow gloves drew him into the open square where several couples were dancing badly. Her blue dress was darkened at the hem from rain, and one curl had come loose near her ear. She did not have the polished beauty of a portrait. Colour had risen in her face, and her wet glove felt warm around his hand.

Juliana.

The name did not need announcing.

Edmund loved her.

The knowledge entered Bartholomew with such force that he gasped in Orrell's curtained room, though the memory continued around him.

Edmund loved her and had not said so.

Juliana knew.

Perhaps.

She spun once under his arm and nearly slipped. He caught her by the waist. She laughed again. The laugh passed through Bartholomew like light through green glass.

He had never been loved in a square after rain.

He had never wanted to kiss someone while music broke apart on wet stones.

He had never been twenty-two and certain that one brave answer could change the rest of his life.

Juliana leaned close.

"If you go inland tomorrow," she said, "I shall be angry."

Edmund smiled.

"You are often angry."

"Only with the deserving."

"I have work."

"You're frightened. That's all."

The words were playful.

They were not playful.

The band quickened. People clapped. Someone shouted from the harbour wall. A dog ran between the dancers and was cursed by three men and blessed by a child.

Juliana's hand tightened.

"Stay," she said.

Edmund looked at her.

Say it, Bartholomew thought.

The thought did not belong in the memory.

Juliana turned her head.

For one impossible instant, she looked at him.

She looked past Edmund and saw Bartholomew.

The fog in the curtained room thickened.

Bartholomew remembered Orrell's warning.

Do not speak to her.

He did not.

Juliana's face changed, almost imperceptibly. Her eyes searched the space where Edmund should have been.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

The band stopped.

Bartholomew opened his eyes.

He was back in Saint Vesper's Arcade, gripping the arms of the chair.

The green fog had sunk around the brass holder.

Caspian Orrell stood by the desk, watching him closely.

"You looked up," Orrell said.

"I forgot."

"That is a costly habit."

Bartholomew touched his face. It was wet.

"Did she see me?"

Orrell closed the vial.

"Donors do not see clients."

"She did."

"Then you should not repeat the session."

Bartholomew stood too quickly and had to sit again.

"I felt what it would have been to have chosen."

Orrell said nothing.

"Who was Edmund?"

"I do not provide identifying details beyond the catalogue."

"What happened to him?"

Orrell said nothing.

Bartholomew understood.

"He left."

Juliana's grief tightened his throat and chest although none of the memories belonged to him.

He paid twice the quoted fee because Orrell said the session had run long.

On the way home, the lamps along the arcade blurred in the wet glass. At the chop house, the waiter approached with the usual question half formed, stopped, and said, "Are you well, sir?"

Bartholomew answered without thinking.

"No."

The waiter seemed startled.

So was Bartholomew.

He walked home without supper.

In his rooms above the tobacconist, he removed his gloves and sat in darkness.

He could still hear the music.

By midnight, he had begun to hum it.

Part Four: The Woman Without the Harbour

Juliana Mereworth forgot the harbour on a Thursday.

She was sixty-one, unmarried, and lived with a widowed cousin in a narrow house near Saint Bartholomew's Gate. Her life was not tragic enough to satisfy anyone and not plain enough to comfort herself. She had kept a milliner's shop for thirty years, first with her mother, then alone. She knew the head sizes of half the town, the secret greys under respectable hats, and which women wept more readily when veiled.

The harbour festival had been forty years ago.

Years could pass without Juliana recalling the music or the yellow gloves. Then rain on canvas, or the wrong ribbon in her hand, would bring it back without asking.

On the Thursday morning, Juliana was trimming a mourning bonnet for a client when she reached for yellow ribbon.

Her hand stopped.

Yellow.

Something should have followed.

Rain. Music. A hand at her waist.

Nothing did.

She stood very still.

A regular customer had asked that week for the blue hat with the harbour trim. Juliana knew exactly which hat she meant and not at all why she had ever made it.

Her cousin, Beatrice Tallow, looked up from the account book.

"Juliana?"

"Yes."

"You've gone pale."

"I was trying to remember something."

"What?"

Juliana looked at the ribbon.

"I don't know."

"That makes the task harder."

Juliana smiled because that was true.

The day continued. She pinned the bonnet, charged too little, corrected the ledger, sent the errand boy for tea, and told Beatrice the new navy felt would not sell because it had the moral character of boiled cabbage.

At four o'clock, the rain began.

Juliana went to the door.

Water darkened the street. Cart wheels made black tracks through the mud. A boy ran past with a newspaper over his head. Somewhere beyond the roofs, the harbour bell rang.

Juliana pressed one hand to her chest.

Beatrice came to stand behind her.

"What is it?"

"There should be music."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

She dreamed that night of a man with no face walking away under flags she could not see.

In the morning, she found herself genuinely angry at breakfast, not merely irritated. At the toast. At the pot. At Beatrice for humming. At the boy for delivering the wrong pins. At the yellow ribbon because it refused to explain itself.

By noon, she had closed the shop.

By three, she had opened the locked drawer beneath her worktable.

Inside lay papers, unpaid bills, a brooch missing two stones, and a receipt from Caspian Orrell. The rates notice lay folded on top of the receipt. Both

were dated the same week: eleven pounds, final demand.

She unfolded the receipt.

Curated Recollection Transfer One harbour attachment Compensation rendered Donor retains ordinary access

Juliana read the last line three times.

Donor retains ordinary access.

"Liar," she said.

Beatrice stood in the doorway.

"Who?"

Juliana looked at the receipt.

A smell came to her.

Wet canvas.

Then it vanished.

"No one," she said.

That evening, she went to Saint Vesper's Arcade.

The rear stair was unlit.

Caspian Orrell received her as if expecting her, which made her want to strike him.

"Miss Mereworth."

"Where is it?"

He closed the door.

"I assume you mean the harbour attachment."

"I mean my memory."

"Language matters."

"Then use it accurately."

He looked at her.

"Please sit."

"No."

"I advise sitting."

"I advise returning what you sold."

"I cannot return what was not removed."

Juliana took the receipt from her bag and placed it on his desk.

"You wrote that I would retain ordinary access."

"Yes."

"I do not."

"That is concerning."

She laughed once.

It was not a kind sound.

Orrell crossed to the cabinet.

"Have you experienced total loss?"

"No."

"Partial?"

"Something is there and not there."

"Emotional blank?"

"Yes."

"Music?"

"Sometimes."

"Face?"

"No."

"Name?"

She paused.

"Edmund."

Orrell turned.

The room became very still.

Juliana noticed the vials in the cabinet.

"You gave him the name."

"No."

"Then he took it."

"That should not be possible."

Orrell went to the desk and opened a ledger.

Juliana watched his face as he read.

"Who borrowed it?" she asked.

"I cannot disclose client identity."

"I am not asking a clerk. I am asking a thief."

"I did not steal from you."

"You let him into it."

Orrell closed the ledger.

"Miss Mereworth, you were compensated."

"I signed because I was in debt. Do not mistake that for a free choice."

"No," he said.

The admission disarmed her more than denial would have.

He sat.

"The client may have overattached. It happens rarely."

"Then detach him."

"If I force detachment, the memory may tear."

"Tear?"

"Lose sequence. Lose affect. Attach to neither party. Become atmospheric."

"What does that mean?"

"It means the harbour goes into the fog."

Juliana looked at the cabinet.

"How many?"

He did not ask what she meant.

"Rarely."

"How many?"

"Six confirmed."

"People?"

"Memories."

"That is worse."

Orrell said nothing.

Juliana picked up the receipt.

"I want his name."

"No."

"I want his address."

"No."

"I want what is mine."

At that, one of the vials in the cabinet trembled.

Both of them looked.

A small green thread rose inside the glass, pressed against the cork, and retreated.

Orrell stood.

"Miss Mereworth, when you go home tonight, do not sleep near an open window."

"Why?"

"Borrowed memories sometimes move towards rain, sea air or open fog. Keep the windows shut."

Juliana put on her gloves.

"Then I shall open every window I own."

Part Five: A Life With Borrowed Weather

Bartholomew returned to Orrell after four days.

He had intended to wait a week. He had intended, in fact, not to return at all. But after the session he noticed every absence. No music played beside the washstand. No yellow gloves hung from the coat hook. No one at the chop house had ever asked him to stay.

At work, he became unreliable in small ways.

He wrote harbour where he meant culvert.

He dated a memorandum forty years earlier.

He corrected a junior clerk for humming the festival tune, though the clerk insisted he had not been humming.

Crispin Wace watched him with professional interest.

"You went."

"No."

"Ah. You went twice."

"Once."

"Then once was ambitious."

Bartholomew tried to dislike him.

Wace leaned against the filing cabinet.

"What did you take?"

"I borrowed nothing."

"Then what is making you taller?"

Bartholomew looked up.

"Am I?"

"Emotionally. Physically you remain municipal."

That evening, he went back.

Orrell did not seem pleased to see him.

"That is an unflattering expression," Bartholomew said.

"You should not be here."

"I wish to repeat the session."

"No."

"I can pay."

"Yes."

"Then why refuse?"

"Because you looked up."

"I will not do so again."

"You said that differently this time."

Bartholomew removed his gloves.

"I felt alive."

"Yes."

"You sell that."

"I sell the impression of contact. I do not sell habitation."

"I am not asking to inhabit."

"No. You are asking to enter her memory again because she noticed you there."

Bartholomew's pulse quickened.

"She noticed?"

Orrell sighed.

"There it is."

"Who is she?"

"No."

"Is she well?"

"No."

Bartholomew stopped.

"She is not well?"

"She has reported disturbance."

For one shameful second, relief passed through him. Disturbance meant connection.

"Because of me?"

"Because of the procedure."

"Because of me."

Orrell walked to the cabinet and locked it.

"I will not repeat the session."

Bartholomew felt panic.

It embarrassed him. He had lived fifty-two years without panicking over anything he could not have. Now he paced his rooms, slept badly and counted the days until Orrell might admit him again.

"I need it."

"No. You want it because your own life has felt too small."

"I have been careful all my life."

"Yes."

"I have harmed no one."

"Have you helped anyone?"

The question struck harder than intended.

Or perhaps exactly as intended.

Bartholomew picked up his hat.

Orrell lowered his voice. "Whatever is still hers, leave it alone."

He walked out.

That should have ended it.

Three nights later, the music started up behind his own window, faint and out of tune, exactly where no bandstand had ever stood. Bartholomew stood in his nightshirt with one hand on the latch. Orrell had told him to leave her what remained.

He opened the window.

Bartholomew dreamed of the harbour.

This time, he did not stand inside Edmund.

He stood opposite Juliana.

She was older.

A woman with silver in her hair and anger in her mouth stood where the girl in blue had been. The square around them was empty. No flags. No bandstand. Only wet cobbles and green fog where the dancers had stood.

"You," she said.

He woke with her voice in the room.

Green fog lay across the floorboards, entering through the window he had opened himself.

On the table stood an object that had not been there when he slept.

A yellow glove.

He did not touch it that morning. By evening, he had locked it in the drawer of his own writing desk, telling himself this was prudence and not possession.

Part Six: The Donor

Juliana came to his office.

He recognised her before he recognised her face. The rain in the borrowed square seemed to enter the room with her.

She stood at the counter in the public records room, wearing a dark hat and carrying a folded umbrella. The clerks treated her as they treated all women of firm middle age and uncertain purpose: with caution delayed by procedure.

"I require Mr Bartholomew Ashcombe," she said.

The junior clerk pointed.

Bartholomew rose too quickly. His chair struck the wall.

Juliana turned.

The room fell away.

She was not young. She was not wearing blue. Her gloves were black. Her face was lined, her mouth severe, her eyes almost exactly as they had been in the memory when she looked through Edmund and saw him.

She crossed the room.

"Mr Ashcombe."

"Yes."

"My name is Juliana Mereworth."

He could not speak.

"I believe you have something of mine."

Every clerk within earshot stopped pretending to work.

Bartholomew said, "We should speak privately."

"No," she said. "You should have thought of that before entering my life by fog."

Wace appeared in the doorway.

His expression was delighted until he saw Juliana's face. Then it became carefully neutral.

Bartholomew said, "Please."

Juliana looked around the office.

Ledgers. Counters. Ink. Men who would enjoy a scandal and call it administrative concern.

"Very well."

They went to the records yard.

The day was dry, but the stones still smelled of rain. Juliana stood with both hands on her umbrella.

Bartholomew said, "I am sorry."

"I did not come for a cheap word."

"No."

"Did you know I would lose it?"

"No."

"Did you wonder?"

He had no answer.

She waited a moment, then nodded once.

"There."

"I was told it was temporary."

"So was I."

"I was told you consented."

"I did. Badly."

He looked at her.

"I needed the money," she said. "That is not absolution for either of us."

"No."

The yard was quiet except for gulls beyond the wall.

Bartholomew said, "I did not mean to keep it."

"Then give it back."

"I don't know how."

"Nor do I. That is why we will go to Orrell."

"He refused me."

"He will not refuse both of us."

"He might."

Juliana's expression sharpened.

"Then I shall become memorable."

Despite everything, Bartholomew almost smiled.

She saw it.

"Do not borrow my temper as well."

He looked down.

"I have the glove."

"What glove?"

He told her.

Juliana went very still.

"What colour?"

"Yellow."

She closed her eyes.

"I burned those."

"When?"

"Thirty-nine years ago."

"Then it is not real."

She opened her eyes.

"That is not the comfort you think it is."

They went to Saint Vesper's Arcade together.

The rear stair was locked.

Juliana struck the door with her umbrella until the taxidermist came out and said Mr Orrell had not been seen since morning.

"Convenient," Juliana said.

The taxidermist looked at Bartholomew.

"I don't know what that means."

"No one ever does," Bartholomew said, and felt for one second like someone else.

Juliana gave him a look.

"Sorry," he said.

"That was yours?"

"I think so."

"Good. Use those. They are less expensive."

They waited in the arcade until the lamps were lit.

Orrell did not return.

At last Juliana sat on the bottom stair.

Bartholomew stood beside her.

"Tell me what you remember," she said.

He hesitated.

"Please."

So he told her.

The awning. The crushed orange peel. The bad music. The puddle. The dog between the dancers. Her glove damp in Edmund's hand. Her asking him to stay.

Juliana listened without moving.

At the end, she said, "What did he answer?"

"He did not."

"No."

"He left."

"Yes."

"I am sorry."

"For what?"

"For feeling it."

She laughed without humour.

"At least one of us should."

Bartholomew looked at the glass roof of the arcade. Rain had begun again, faint and high.

"Did you love him all your life?"

"No."

The answer surprised him.

"I loved the girl who asked. I was angry at the man who left. I missed the evening when both were still possible."

Juliana's correction altered the memory. Edmund's silence became clearer, and the joy Bartholomew had borrowed weakened.

Juliana turned sharply.

"What happened?"

"I felt it move."

"Good."

"Is it?"

"It is listening."

The rain strengthened.

At the end of the arcade, near the umbrella seller's shop, green fog gathered along the floor.

Juliana stood.

"Oh," Bartholomew said.

"Yes," she said. "Oh."

Part Seven: Return Policy

The fog came through the arcade like a thing poured from a low bowl.

Shopkeepers closed doors. The tea room owner crossed herself. The taxidermist carried three foxes into the back room and shut them away as if they might otherwise learn something.

Juliana did not move.

Bartholomew wanted to run.

That seemed promising.

"It is coming for the glove," he said.

"Or the memory."

"Is there a distinction?"

"There had better be."

The fog reached the stair.

The locked door above clicked.

Orrell opened it.

His hair was disordered. His cravat missing. He looked less like a curator than a man who had been caught rearranging graves.

"Inside," he said.

Juliana raised her umbrella.

"I am past taking instructions from tradesmen of the soul."

"Inside now, unless you want the arcade to remember for you."

That moved her.

They followed him upstairs.

The room had been altered. The cabinet stood open. Several vials lay broken on the floor, their contents gone. The green lamp flickered though no flame was visible. The glove Bartholomew had locked in his own desk drawer lay on Orrell's desk.

Beside it was another.

Juliana stared.

"I burned them."

"Yes," Orrell said.

"Then why are there two?"

"Because the fog is a poor archivist and an excellent creditor."

The fog entered under the door.

Orrell moved quickly to the desk.

"We may still separate the attachment."

"May," Juliana said.

"Yes."

"And the risk?"

"The memory may return damaged."

"To whom?"

"To both."

Bartholomew looked at the gloves.

They lay palm up, as if waiting for hands.

"What do we do?"

Orrell took a shallow brass dish from a drawer.

"Each of you will hold one glove."

Juliana said, "No."

"You want it back."

"I want it back whole."

"That is no longer available."

She looked at Bartholomew.

He felt the injustice of her look and knew he deserved more of it.

"I will give it back," he said.

"You cannot give what you do not own."

"No."

"Then what are you offering?"

He looked at the fog.

"My claim."

Orrell paused.

Juliana studied him.

"Do you know what that means?"

"No."

"Don't be noble yet," she said.

"I have rarely managed either."

She almost smiled.

Orrell placed the brass dish between them.

"You both kept returning to the same memory," Orrell said. "That helped."

"How?" Juliana asked.

"He wanted the memory, and you needed the money more than you trusted the contract."

"And now?"

"Now describe what happened without making it kinder."

Juliana took one glove.

Bartholomew took the other.

The fog climbed the legs of the desk.

Orrell said, "Begin."

Bartholomew closed his eyes.

"Harbour festival. Rain ended. Music. Yellow gloves."

The glove in his hand twitched.

Juliana said, "Mustard, really. A terrible colour. My mother said they made my hands look ill."

Bartholomew opened his eyes.

The memory shifted.

The gloves dulled.

"Again," Orrell said.

Bartholomew swallowed.

"Crushed orange peel."

"From boys throwing skins at one another," Juliana said. "One hit Edmund on the neck. The square was considerably less romantic than you remember it."

The scent sharpened, less beautiful now. More real.

Bartholomew felt a small loss.

"Good," Orrell said.

"Dancing after rain," Bartholomew said.

"Badly," Juliana said.

"With joy."

"With wet shoes."

"With joy."

She looked at him.

"Yes," she said. "With joy."

The fog rose to the desktop.

Orrell's voice thinned.

"Continue."

Bartholomew said, "You asked him to stay."

Juliana's fingers closed around her glove.

"I asked him not to leave before morning."

"Why?"

"Because morning would have made us ordinary."

Nothing visible changed, but the music Bartholomew had carried for days faltered.

Juliana said, "He did not answer."

"He wanted to," Bartholomew said.

"No. You don't know that."

"I felt it. In the memory. He loved you."

"You felt youth. Rain. Want. Cowardice with a pulse." Her voice was steady and cold. "Do not call all of it love because you need the word."

Bartholomew looked at her.

Bartholomew bowed his head.

Orrell whispered, "Now."

Juliana said, "He left."

Bartholomew said, "He left."

"He chose work."

"He chose work."

"He chose safety."

"He chose safety."

"He never found out."

Bartholomew's voice broke.

"He chose not to know."

The fog struck the desk.

Green light filled both gloves.

Bartholomew saw the harbour again.

Only this time he stood at the edge of it, not inside Edmund. Juliana stood in the square. Young. Angry. Alive. Edmund stood before her, already turning toward the inland road.

Bartholomew could still feel the rain.

But it was not his rain.

The music played once, badly, beautifully.

Then moved away from him.

He let it.

When the room returned, Juliana was crying.

Juliana cried without making a sound. Her jaw remained tight as she looked at the ash in her hand.

Bartholomew's hand was empty.

The glove had collapsed into damp ash.

So had hers.

Orrell leaned against the desk, pale.

"It is done."

Juliana wiped her face with her sleeve.

"No," she said. "It has merely stopped happening to him."

Bartholomew flinched.

She saw and did not apologise.

She did not explain. That night, alone in the narrow house near Saint Bartholomew's Gate, Juliana recalled the rain, the mustard gloves, the orange peel and Edmund's silence in their correct order. None of it made her smile, ache or wish that he had stayed. Orrell had restored the facts and failed to restore the feeling attached to them.

Part Eight: Something of His Own

Afterward, Bartholomew changed in undramatic ways.

He stopped buying The Evening Herald for the romance.

He returned to the chop house.

The waiter asked whether he wanted potatoes.

"Yes," Bartholomew said. "And something green."

The waiter looked alarmed.

"Peas?"

"If that is the available category."

At work, he resumed accuracy. Mostly. A memorandum once contained the sentence "maintenance of the east sluice must not be delayed simply because it has learned patience," which caused Mister Harrow to call him into the office and ask whether he had taken up poetry.

"No," Bartholomew said.

"Good. Stop."

Juliana Mereworth did not forgive him.

This was inconvenient because Bartholomew would have liked forgiveness very much. He had imagined it, against his own better judgement, as a scene of mutual dignity. Apology accepted. Lesson learned. Human connection, modest but sincere.

Juliana refused the arrangement.

When he came to her shop with flowers, she shut the door.

When he wrote, she returned the letter unopened.

When he waited across the street in rain, she sent Beatrice Tallow out with an umbrella and the message that if Mr Ashcombe wished to become damp on purpose, that was his own memory to make.

That sentence stayed with him.

His own memory to make.

In December, Saint Vesper's Arcade flooded after a high tide pushed through the lower drains. The water did not rise far. Only to the ankles. Enough to ruin stored prints, dampen hat boxes, and send the taxidermist's patient foxes floating into the passage with expressions of mild accusation.

Caspian Orrell was not found.

His room behind the rear stair was empty. The cabinet gone. The desk gone. The green lamp shattered. On the floor lay a single orange peel, dried and curled.

Wace considered this an unremarkable exit.

Bartholomew did not.

On Christmas Eve, snow fell over Vrentham and failed to settle.

Bartholomew left the office early. He had no family dinner to attend, no invitation he had accepted, no secret sorrow to dramatize. The streets were wet and bright. People crowded the pavements, buying things too late. Children shouted outside the baker's. A woman dropped a parcel and swore with such feeling that three carol singers stopped mid-hymn.

He stood outside Juliana's shop.

The lamps were still lit.

Inside, Juliana was arranging hats.

He almost walked on.

Then she looked up.

Their eyes met through the glass.

She did not smile.

She did not look away.

Bartholomew raised one hand and let it fall.

Juliana considered him.

Then she pointed to the door.

He entered.

A bell rang above him.

A box of trimmings sat half unpacked on the counter, tissue paper spilling over the side.

"Hold that," she said, nodding at it.

He held it.

"I am not forgiving you," she said. "And I am not taking tea."

Bartholomew opened his mouth.

"You were about to ask."

"Yes."

She returned to the hat on the counter.

It was dark blue with a narrow brim.

"That ribbon is better than the grey," Bartholomew said.

She paused.

"Is that your opinion or something you rented?"

"My opinion."

Juliana examined the ribbon again. "It may be wrong."

"Quite possibly."

She did not look at him again. She finished pinning the ribbon, set the hat on its stand, and reached past him to turn the sign in the window from OPEN to CLOSED.

"Good night, Mr Ashcombe."

He set the box down by the door before he left.

Outside, the children sang badly, using a tune he did not recognise.

Bartholomew listened until they lost the melody altogether.

The door swung shut behind him. He stayed on the pavement until the cold got through his shoes, then remembered he had promised the tobacconist downstairs a packet of candles and walked back towards Merrow Street.

The Things They Took

Part One: The Shoes in the Ditch

Tobias Alderley had learned to cry quietly.

There were several ways to do it badly. You could put both hands over your face, which made the others laugh because it looked like praying. You could make a sound in your throat, which brought them closer. You could run, which was worst of all, because running changed a bad thing into a game.

The safest method was to lower your head and let your eyes water without blinking.

That was what Tobias did beside the drainage ditch behind Aurelia School while Sebastian Everdene held one of his shoes above the brown water and Cornelius Rookery held the other.

The ditch ran along the back of the playing field, where the grass thinned into mud and the mud gave way to reeds. Beyond it, the land dropped toward the old salt marsh. On clear days one could see the observation posts on the causeway and the white warning boards fixed to iron poles.

FOG AREA. DO NOT ENTER. REPORT GROUND LEVEL FORMATION.

The children ignored the boards. Adults ignored them too, unless the fog was actually visible. That morning it was not. The marsh lay pale and empty under a low sky.

"Ask for them," Sebastian said.

It was the left shoe. His mother had polished both before breakfast, though the leather had already begun to crack across the toe. She had told him to keep them dry.

"Please give them back."

Cornelius bent and dipped the heel of the right shoe into the ditch. Water darkened the leather at once.

"That one slipped."

Nathaniel Peverell stood on the bank with Tobias's satchel over one shoulder, going through the front pocket.

"You've got three pence."

"That's for the tram."

Nathaniel held up the coins.

"Not anymore."

Jeremiah Weatherby had Tobias's lunch. He had eaten the apple and was inspecting the sandwich.

Sebastian dropped the left shoe.

It hit the sloping bank, bounced once, came to rest half in the mud. Tobias stepped forward without meaning to. Cornelius caught him by the sleeve.

"Careful. You'll get dirty."

That was another thing Tobias had learned. Do not fight for something while it is happening. Wait. They became bored sooner if he did not give them effort.

He kept route maps in the back of his arithmetic book: safer streets, dogs crossed out, alleys marked twice, places where older boys waited shaded in pencil. The low field remained blank. Blank meant do not go there, and do not go there was the one instruction he had always followed.

But Sebastian was not bored.

Sebastian was eleven, taller than most boys in the upper form, already with the loose easy shape of someone who expected doors to open. Masters liked him because he held doors open and answered in complete sentences. He could make cruelty look like tidiness. He had a clean face, bright hair, and a habit of smiling before he hurt anyone, which made the hurt seem like part of his good manners.

"Fetch them," Sebastian said.

Tobias looked at the ditch. The water was not deep. He knew that. But the mud below had a sucking shine, and reeds moved there when there was no

wind.

The iron bell in the school tower struck nine.

"We'll be late," Nathaniel said.

Sebastian did not move.

Tobias looked past him toward Aurelia School. The rear door stood open. Miss Theodora Calloway stood there, looking once toward the playing field.

Sebastian lifted one hand and waved.

She did not wave back. She did not come. After a moment she turned and followed the children inside.

"There," Sebastian said. "No one cares."

Tobias stepped into the ditch.

Cold water closed over his sock. He reached for the nearest shoe. His hand shook, not from cold alone. He had the sense that the marsh beyond had leaned nearer to watch him.

When he climbed back, the others had gone.

His satchel remained on the bank, turned upside down. His books lay in the grass. The tram money was gone. His lunch was gone. His shoes were wet through.

He sat on the bank and put them on anyway.

By the time he reached arithmetic, both heels had blistered.

Miss Theodora Calloway stopped beside his desk.

"Your shoes are dirty, Tobias."

"Yes, miss."

"That is not an answer."

He looked down at the mud drying in the cracks.

"No, miss."

"You will stay after lessons and clean the passage."

She moved on. Sebastian, two rows back, said nothing. He did not need to.

Part Two: The Low Ground

By November, Tobias had learned the order in which things disappeared.

The shoes were first because they had made Sebastian laugh. Then the tram money, then the lunch, then the blue scarf Emilia had knitted too loosely and asked him to wear because the mornings were turning sharp. The scarf came back tied around a drainpipe. The lunch tin came back empty. The money did not come back.

His mother noticed less than Tobias had feared and more than he could bear.

On Thursday evening she put three coins on the table.

"Tram money."

"I can walk."

"Is someone taking it?"

"No."

She looked at him.

"Tobias."

"No."

If he told, Sebastian would find out. The next thing would be worse. That was reason enough.

The fog came from the low ground without hurry. It was green only when it thickened. Before that it was a paleness at the foot of hedges, a milky stain in the ruts, a colourless breath over ditches and drains. It collected where things were left untended. In dips. In culverts. Beneath bridges.

He had seen it once from the upstairs window after midnight.

It had not rolled in. Real fog rolled. It moved in sheets and banks. This had gathered itself in separate places, as if each patch knew where to wait. One long seam along the road. One pool beneath the broken lamp. One pale coil around the post box.

He had watched it for perhaps a minute before the post box gave a little sound.

A knock. From inside.

Sebastian knew he was afraid of it by the second week of term. By the third, everyone knew.

On the morning of the first frost they had him behind the coal shed.

"Say what you're scared of," Sebastian said.

"Nothing."

Sebastian sighed, as if Tobias had failed him personally.

"Everyone is scared of something."

"Then you say yours."

Cornelius laughed. Sebastian did not.

For one thin second Tobias felt the shape of a mistake. He had spoken too much. He saw it reach Sebastian, saw it become something that would have to be answered.

Sebastian dropped Tobias's cap into the coal bucket.

That afternoon the fog came inland, only as far as the lower fields, well short of the distance required to close the school. It lay at ankle height, like something spilled, too low to obscure hedges or the church tower.

At morning break, Sebastian said, "We'll go after Latin."

The low field had once been pasture, before the tides changed and the drainage failed. Now it was a waste of flattened grass, rushes and standing water. Beyond its far edge the marsh widened into pale reeds and black creeks.

The fog lay there.

It barely reached the lower rail of the broken gate. Its green stained the air without seeming to cast light. Each blade of grass inside it appeared sharpened and separate.

Sebastian pushed Tobias through the gate.

"Take off his shoes," Sebastian said.

"They're wet already," Cornelius said.

"Take them off."

Tobias backed away.

"No."

Sebastian blinked.

"What?"

"No."

It came out small, but it came out.

Sebastian hit him with the flat of his hand. Tobias fell sideways. Cornelius pulled at one shoe. Nathaniel pulled at the satchel strap. Jeremiah crouched and took the lunch tin from where it had fallen.

The shoe came off. Then the other.

Cornelius threw one toward the fence posts. Nathaniel threw the second after it. Tobias saw the black shape vanish into the green.

Then Sebastian took Tobias's coat by the collar.

"My mother made me wear that."

"Good."

"Please."

"Say what you're scared of."

"The fog."

Sebastian leaned closer.

"The what?"

"The fog."

Cornelius laughed too loudly. Jeremiah did not laugh. Nathaniel looked toward the lane.

The fog had reached the gate.

It lay in a thin line across the opening, not high enough to stop anyone. Just enough to mark it.

The coat came away. Sebastian folded it carefully over one arm. This frightened Tobias more than if he had thrown it into the mud.

"Not that way," Sebastian said, when Tobias stepped toward the gate.

Cornelius and Nathaniel spread out.

"There's only that way."

Sebastian pointed across the field, toward the fence posts standing in the fog like black teeth.

"Go on."

"No."

Sebastian's face sharpened.

"We'll kill you," he said.

The words came out too large. Sebastian heard them too. For a moment his face lost its arrangement.

Then he smiled again.

The field went quiet. Even Cornelius stopped smiling.

It rose around Tobias's ankles.

He ran past the gate and away from home, toward his shoes.

The fog thinned directly in front of him, leaving a narrow place to step.

Sebastian shouted. Cornelius shouted. Jeremiah said, "Leave him."

Tobias reached the first fence post. His sock struck wood, then water, then nothing certain. He bent for the shoe he thought he had seen.

The fog lifted to his knees.

Someone called his name.

The voice sounded much too far away.

He saw his left shoe lying ahead on a patch of grass. It looked dry. Polished. Waiting.

He took one more step.

The field disappeared.

Part Three: The Boy Who Returned

Emilia Alderley reported her son missing at half past five.

The constable asked whether Tobias might have gone to a friend's house. Emilia said Tobias had no friends. The constable asked whether the boy had ever run away. Emilia said Tobias was afraid of being late, afraid of dogs, afraid of deep water, afraid of the boiler flame, afraid of the butcher's window when rabbits hung there with their eyes still in.

"Afraid of the fog?" the constable asked.

"Everyone is afraid of the fog."

The search lasted until midnight and resumed at dawn.

They found the satchel first, under the broken gate. His exercise books were still inside. They found one glove beside the pump house. They did not find the coat.

The shoes were discovered at the far end of the low field.

They stood side by side on a dry rise between two pools of water, set neatly heel to heel as if someone had taken time over the arrangement. There were no footprints around them.

At three in the afternoon on the second day, Tobias Alderley knocked at the back door.

Emilia opened it and barely made a sound. His skin held the deep, even cold of something kept below ground.

He wore no coat. No shoes. No gloves. His school pullover was clean. His socks were dry.

Doctor Isadora Venn examined him before the fire.

"No fever."

"His feet?" Emilia asked.

The feet were pale and unmarked. No blister. No bruise. No mud between the toes.

"Tobias," the doctor said. "Where have you been?"

"I don't know."

"Do you remember going into the fog?"

"Yes."

"What happened then?"

"I came out."

"Where?"

"Here. At the door."

Emilia touched his hands.

"You're freezing."

"I don't feel it."

That evening she woke at midnight and went to his room. The blankets lay on the floor. The window was open. Tobias stood beside it in his nightshirt, looking down at the road.

Green fog lay around the post box. It did not knock this time.

"Tobias."

He turned.

"You'll catch your death."

"No," he said, with the same certainty that Wednesday follows Tuesday.

At school, children stopped talking when they saw him. Sebastian Everdene went white around the mouth.

Tobias did not look at him.

At luncheon he took out nothing from his satchel. He sat at the end of the bench and watched the others eat.

"You not eating?" Sebastian said.

"No."

"Where were you?"

"I don't know."

"What did you tell them?"

Tobias folded his hands.

"Nothing."

"You'd better not."

Tobias looked at Sebastian's hand. Dirt under the nails.

"Better for who?"

The boys at the table went quiet.

Sebastian laughed once.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Tobias did not answer.

In arithmetic, he opened the back of his book. The maps were still there. The streets with dogs crossed out. The alleys shaded twice. The low field was no longer blank. A green line crossed it. The pencil had bitten through the page.

Part Four: The Account

By the following week, the first debt came due.

Jeremiah Weatherby was the first. He ate six breakfasts in four days and wept after each one. Doctor Isadora Venn examined him and found nothing. Good pulse. Clear eyes. No fever. No swelling. She prescribed rest and smaller meals. That night his mother found him in the pantry with both hands in the flour bin, crying because flour was not food and because he could not stop.

By the second week he had stopped tasting any of it. Salt, sugar, the burnt edge of toast: all of it had become the same flat nothing in his mouth. That part made no sense to anyone, least of all to Jeremiah, who had only ever taken an apple and half a sandwich. The hunger, at least, matched what he had done.

The rest did not.

Cornelius Rookery began hearing footsteps that were not there. They followed him along corridors, matched his pace across the yard, and stopped the instant he stood still. He changed his boots three times during scripture, certain each pair had picked up grit from the ditch, and found nothing in any of them. By evening he would not walk from one room to another without someone going ahead of him first.

Nathaniel Peverell began losing coins from places he had not opened. Pennies slipped through buttoned pockets. Sixpence vanished from a closed drawer. His father counted the municipal cash box three times and found three different shortages. The junior clerk who balanced the ledger beside him was dismissed on Thursday. Purkiss packed his pencils into a tobacco tin and kept saying he had counted correctly. By Friday the Peverells had moved from their house near the church to two rooms above a disused net store. Nathaniel came to school in the same collar for four days. He stopped putting his hands in his pockets.

Sebastian Everdene lasted longest.

For a time this made him seem strongest. He continued to arrive clean and bright. He continued to smile. His father's lorries still moved through town. Only one thing changed. Sebastian was cold.

He wore his coat indoors first. Then a scarf. Then gloves to write. His lips went blue before the end of geography. His teeth chattered during Latin.

Miss Theodora Calloway had taken, since November, to glancing at the window between sentences, as though checking that the low field had not come any nearer. She did it now, and stopped mid-sentence.

"Sebastian Everdene, are you making that noise deliberately?"

"No, miss."

"Then control yourself."

"I am trying."

Miss Theodora Calloway looked at his gloves, his scarf, the blue at his lips.

"Try harder."

For once, no one laughed.

Sebastian did not smile.

From the back of the room, Tobias watched him without expression.

At luncheon Sebastian came to the end of the bench.

"You did something."

"No."

"Liar."

"I don't lie much now."

"You think this is funny."

"No."

Sebastian struck him. Or tried to. His hand stopped before it reached Tobias's cheek, not because someone caught it, not because Sebastian changed his mind. It stopped in the air and trembled there, fingers spread, as if pressed against glass.

The room went very quiet.

Sebastian pulled his arm back.

"What did you do?"

Tobias did not know, even then, whether he had wanted this or had only recognised it once it began. The green line across the low field in his arithmetic book had appeared overnight. He could not remember drawing it, but the pencil marks had his pressure.

Tobias stood.

"I didn't keep any of it," he said.

Sebastian swallowed.

"What?"

"The things you took."

Jeremiah made a sound. Nathaniel pushed his bench back. Cornelius covered his feet with both hands.

Tobias picked up his book and walked out.

No one stopped him.

In the days that followed, the parcels came.

The blue scarf, washed. The lunch tin, empty. Three coins, dull and wet. Cornelius Rookery came himself, carrying Tobias's shoes. They had been polished until they looked almost new. He stopped twice on the path and looked behind him, though nothing was there to see.

Tobias opened the door.

Cornelius's face twisted.

"I brought them back."

"They weren't yours."

"I know. Please."

A second set of footsteps crossed the gravel and stopped beside him. Cornelius flinched.

"Make them stop."

"These won't help."

"You have to take them."

"No."

Cornelius left the shoes on the step and walked away quickly, glancing back before he reached the gate.

Sebastian came last, carrying Tobias's coat. The missing button had been replaced with a darker one.

"Take it."

"No."

Sebastian's teeth clicked together. "I'm cold all the time."

"These things don't help."

Behind him, along the gutter, the green thread of fog thickened. Sebastian saw it, dropped the coat, and ran.

The coat lay on the step. Tobias looked at it for a moment, then went inside and shut the door.

Miss Theodora Calloway was at her window when Sebastian ran past below, though she could not have said what drew her to that window most evenings now, or why looking away, once so easy, had become so much harder than it used to be.

Since Tobias's return, the rear door of the school would no longer stay shut. Each morning she latched it. Each morning she found it standing open toward the ditch.

He meant to take the long road home, past the municipal baths, the allotments, the pump house. At the pump house he found himself facing the chained gate to the low field, with no memory of choosing the lane. Another board had been fixed beside it.

FOG AREA. DO NOT ENTER. RECENT INCIDENT.

The field beyond lay clear. Brown grass. Black posts. Silver water in the dips. No green fog. No shoes waiting on the rise.

After a while he climbed over the gate.

His feet touched the field. He walked to the first fence post. Then the second. Then the place where he had turned and seen his shoe. The air smelled of salt and wet reeds.

A pale line appeared along the ditch.

It thickened slowly. First colourless, then faintly green. It moved toward him over the grass in separate threads, joining where the ground dipped and thinning over the higher tufts.

Tobias did not step back.

The fog reached his shoes.

He looked down.

Half seen and gone again, the fog held a dark button from his coat, one blue wool fibre, and a strip of skin from a blistered heel. Small things. Taken things.

The fog moved over them.

When it thinned, they were gone.

Behind him, at the edge of the field, someone made a sound.

Tobias turned.

Sebastian Everdene stood by the gate in his father's overcoat, both hands clutching the chain.

"Can it stop?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Ask it."

"No."

Sebastian stared at the green line.

His mouth trembled. He looked younger than eleven. Younger than Tobias had ever been allowed to look.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The fog did not move.

"I'm sorry," Sebastian said again, louder.

He turned to Tobias.

"Say you forgive me."

Tobias tried to find the place inside himself where forgiveness might have been.

There was space there.

Only space.

"I can't."

"You won't."

"No," Tobias said. "I can't."

Sebastian pulled at the chain as if it might open. It did not.

"I didn't mean murder," he said.

"I know."

Sebastian's face changed then, not with anger. With understanding.

"You're empty," he said.

Tobias looked at him.

Sebastian seemed frightened by the word after he had said it.

The green fog rose behind Tobias, no higher than his knees. Sebastian backed away from the gate and was gone.

Tobias turned back toward the marsh.

The fog closed to his waist.

He felt no cold. No hunger. No pain. No fear.

For a while he thought this was safety.

Then he tried to cry.

His chest tightened. His mouth opened. Nothing came.

He knew what grief looked like on other people. His mother in the pantry. Mr Bell at the inquest. Sebastian at the gate.

His own body gave him nothing.

The green fog rose higher over his coat.

Tobias stood in the field until he could no longer remember what he had been trying to feel.

Better Mourning

Part One: The Widow in the Front Pew

Cordelia Ravenshaw had buried her husband beautifully.

No one in Vrentham had expected less.

The church was full before ten. Black coats pressed shoulder to shoulder beneath the old rafters. Women stood in the aisle with handkerchiefs folded ready in their gloves. Men who had never liked Aurelius Ravenshaw lowered their voices and called him a considerable figure, which was what men said when death made accuracy inconvenient.

Cordelia sat in the front pew.

She did not lean on anyone.

That was noticed.

She wore black silk without ornament. A veil covered her face, but not enough to hide the line of her mouth. Her hands rested together in her lap. When the vicar spoke of devotion, she did not bow her head. When he spoke of loss, she did. At the proper moments, she lifted the handkerchief. At the proper moments, she lowered it again.

Afterward, in the churchyard, three women said she had carried herself magnificently.

By supper, the word had reached her.

Magnificent.

Cordelia kept it.

She was forty-four when Aurelius died, which was neither young enough to be tragic nor old enough to be comfortable. He had been sixteen years older. A rich man. A heavy man. A man with opinions on horses, servants, municipal drainage, and the proper length of a dinner. He had not been cruel. Cordelia was fair enough to admit that. He had not struck her, shouted in company, ruined the staff, or gambled away the house.

He spoke first, chose the plans and expected everyone else to arrange themselves around his decisions.

Once, when a stable boy broke three panes in the winter greenhouse, Aurelius had paid for the glass himself and let the steward dismiss the matter as a bookkeeping error. Cordelia had disliked him for doing it privately.

When he died of the heart at breakfast, he did it with one hand around the marmalade spoon and the other pressed against his chest. Cordelia had stood from the table, rung for the maid, and said, "Fetch Doctor Venn. Then take the toast away."

That, too, was noticed.

For six months, Cordelia's mourning brought callers to the house, lowered voices in shops and gave her control over every room she entered. People arrived in soft shoes, avoided difficult questions and accepted her refusals without argument. They brought flowers, soup, books and messages.

Before Aurelius died, Cordelia had been known as his second wife, a woman from lesser money living in his larger house. After the funeral, invitations addressed her first. People repeated her plain remarks and treated every refusal as evidence of suffering and every acceptance as courage.

At first, Cordelia believed this was merely the world being kind.

By the ninth month, she knew better.

Kindness did not explain why she enjoyed watching callers lower their voices and wait for her permission to continue.

The trouble began with the new curate.

His name was Gideon Merriweather, and he was too young to have buried anyone important. He came to Ravenshaw House on a wet afternoon in November with damp cuffs, earnest eyes, and a basket of pears from his mother's garden.

Cordelia received him in the morning room.

Morning had passed hours ago. The room had kept the name.

"How thoughtful," she said, looking at the pears.

"My mother hoped they might be of use."

Cordelia did not ask what use pears might be to a widow.

The curate sat where she indicated. He took tea. He spoke of the church roof, the school fund, the new hymnals, and the difficulty of getting boys to attend scripture after harvest. Cordelia answered neatly. She was good at neatness.

At last he put down his cup.

"Mrs Ravenshaw, may I speak plainly?"

That was never a good question. People who wished to speak plainly usually meant to be rude without earning the name.

"Briefly," she said.

He swallowed.

"It has been nearly a year."

"Has it?"

"Yes."

"I can count."

"I only mean that grief has seasons."

Cordelia looked through the window at the lawn. The rain had darkened the gravel path and filled the hoofprints by the gate.

"Does it?"

"It may."

"You don't sound very certain."

He flushed.

"I have not come to instruct you."

"Then why are you here?"

"What a relief."

The curate set his hands on his knees.

"I have come because I am concerned that the house has become too still."

Cordelia turned from the window.

"Reverend Merriweather, my husband died. He did not leave for the seaside."

"I know."

"Stillness is customary."

"So is return."

The word struck her harder than she expected.

Return.

To what? To committees, suppers, polite debts, and women who watched to see whether she laughed too soon? To men who remembered that property had changed hands and began adjusting their invitations accordingly? To rooms where Aurelius was absent but still arranged the furniture?

"No," she said.

The curate lowered his eyes.

"I see."

"No, you don't."

He stood.

"I apologise."

"Good."

At the door, he stopped.

"There is such a thing as keeping faith with the dead," he said. "There is also such a thing as keeping them employed."

Cordelia did not answer.

After he left, she ordered the pears thrown away.

Then she sat in the morning room until the fire went out.

That evening, while sorting the condolence letters into boxes by rank, she found the card.

It had not been there before.

She knew that because the table had been cleared after tea, and Cordelia noticed tables. The card lay between a letter from Lady Belvoir and a black-bordered envelope from Aurelius's former solicitor.

Cream stock. Green ink.

THE MORROW ROOMS For Grief Refinement, Mourning Fatigue, Persistent Attachment, and Social Residue Private consultations Madame Seraphina Morrow Old Customs House, Lower Quay Discretion absolute

Cordelia read it twice.

Grief refinement.

A vulgar phrase.

An interesting phrase.

She rang the bell.

The maid appeared.

"Who brought this?"

The maid looked at the card.

"I don't know, ma'am."

"I did not ask what you know."

The maid lowered her eyes.

"Ask the hall boy."

"Yes, ma'am."

The hall boy knew nothing. The cook knew nothing. The footman said a woman in a dark green coat had called at the service entrance with a parcel for the pantry, but she had not left a card. Cordelia dismissed them all.

At ten o'clock, she placed the card in the fire.

It browned at the edges, curled inward and finally blackened.

The green ink remained visible longest.

The next morning, another card lay on the breakfast tray.

THE MORROW ROOMS Appointments after dusk

Cordelia did not burn that one.

Part Two: The Morrow Rooms

The Old Customs House stood below the harbour wall, where respectable streets became warehouse lanes and warehouse lanes gave way to tarred ropes, fish scales, and men who did not remove their caps indoors.

Cordelia went at dusk.

She told the coachman to wait at the corner and not to speak of it. He nodded in the manner of a servant who had understood both instructions and the value of not understanding either too well.

The building was low and square. Damp had darkened the stone beneath the windows. Its windows were narrow. The old royal seal had been chipped from the stone above the entrance, leaving only a pale oval where authority had once been. A green lantern hung beside the door, not bright but visible.

Cordelia knocked.

A woman opened the door.

She was small, perhaps sixty, perhaps ageless. Her hair was black, parted in the centre, and drawn so tightly against her skull that her face appeared unfinished without expression. She wore a plain grey dress and a necklace of jet beads. Her eyes moved once from Cordelia's veil to her gloves, then settled on her face.

"Mrs Ravenshaw."

"Yes."

"I am Madame Morrow."

They stood looking at one another.

Cordelia had expected warmth or theatricality. She found neither.

"You sent the cards."

"Yes."

"After I burned the first one."

"Yes."

"That is presumptuous."

"It is advertising."

Madame Morrow stepped aside.

Cordelia entered because she had come too far to retreat before learning what Madame Morrow offered.

The hallway smelled of salt and old wood. Someone had recently put out a candle. Somewhere below, water moved against stone. Madame Morrow led her through a corridor into a room that had once been used for weighing cargo. Hooks remained in the ceiling. A brass scale stood against one wall, its pans tarnished but balanced. Three chairs faced a long table covered in black cloth.

On the table stood seven glass bowls.

Each contained fog.

Cordelia stopped.

"There it is," Madame Morrow said.

"You use the fog."

"I use what the coast provides."

"That is illegal."

"No. Collecting is illegal. Possession is difficult. Use depends on who is asking."

"I have no patience for clever answers."

Madame Morrow glanced at the bowls. "Then I will keep them practical. The law has no useful category for what happens in this room."

Cordelia removed her gloves slowly.

"What is this place?"

"Widows come in calling everything grief. Usually it isn't."

"From what?"

"Missing the man. Missing the house as it was. Missing being pitied. Missing being obeyed. Sometimes relief. Sometimes boredom. Usually several at once."

Cordelia sat before choosing to.

Madame Morrow noticed, but did not smile.

"I was told you refine grief."

"You were told correctly."

"By whom?"

"By someone who has watched you use mourning to control a room. I do not know which of them left the card."

Cordelia rose.

Madame Morrow raised one hand.

"Sit down or go home. Standing there will not change the price."

The words should have sent Cordelia out.

Instead, she sat again.

The glass bowls darkened slightly.

Madame Morrow crossed to the table.

Madame Morrow pointed to the seven bowls. "One may hold grief. The others may hold relief, anger, habit, fear or vanity. Most clients have carried several together for so long that they cannot tell them apart."

"And you separate them?"

"I ask questions. We see which bowl moves."

Cordelia watched the bowls.

The fog inside them gathered toward the side closest to her.

"What does the treatment do?"

"Sometimes it separates them. That is the intention."

"And leaves what is?"

Madame Morrow glanced at the bowls. "Sometimes."

"Why would anyone pay for less?"

"Because keeping it large is exhausting."

Cordelia thought of the curate. The pears. The word return.

"What if nothing remains?"

Madame Morrow looked at her for the first time with something like interest.

"Then you came here for the wrong reason."

Cordelia stood.

"Good evening."

She reached the door before Madame Morrow spoke.

"Did you love him?"

Cordelia stopped.

No one had asked her that.

They had asked whether she missed him. Whether she managed. Whether she found comfort in faith, routine, visitors, letters, charitable occupations, the garden, the house, the knowledge that his suffering was brief.

No one had asked the improper thing.

She turned.

"Of course."

"Then at least we have something to work with."

Cordelia looked at the bowls.

The green fog pressed against the glass.

"Do I not?"

Madame Morrow drew out the chair.

Cordelia sat.

Part Three: The First Bowl

Madame Morrow did not ask Cordelia to describe Aurelius.

That was the first cleverness.

Instead, she placed a small object on the table between them.

A marmalade spoon.

Cordelia looked at it.

It was not the spoon from Ravenshaw House. That spoon had a silver handle shaped like a shell and had been locked away after the funeral because everyone agreed it was too painful. This spoon was plainer. But the bowl of it held amber jam.

Her stomach tightened.

Madame Morrow opened the first glass bowl.

A thread of green fog rose and lay across the table.

"Think of the morning he died."

Cordelia said nothing.

"Leave the funeral, the visitors and the church outside this room. Stay with breakfast."

The fog touched the spoon.

Cordelia saw the breakfast room.

Aurelius at the head of the table. Newspaper folded beside his plate. Toast cooling because he never ate while reading an editorial. A smudge of marmalade on his thumb. The little grunt he made when displeased by print. The way his hand went to his chest.

His hand moved almost irritably, as though his body had interrupted the editorial.

She heard herself say, "Aurelius?"

Then the chair scraping back.

Then the maid dropping the coffee pot.

Then his face.

His final expression held neither dignity nor peace. He looked surprised.

The fog thickened over the spoon.

Madame Morrow said, "What is present?"

"Shock."

"What else?"

"Disgust."

"At what?"

"The noise he made."

"Good. What else?"

Cordelia's fingers tightened around the chair arms.

"Fear."

"Of death?"

"No."

"Of what?"

Cordelia opened her eyes.

"Of the servants seeing me before I knew what to be."

The fog stirred.

After she said it, her grip loosened on the chair and her shoulders dropped.

Madame Morrow slid the spoon closer.

"What else?"

Cordelia looked at the jam.

"Relief."

The word silenced both women. Cordelia heard how plainly she had said it and felt heat rise into her face.

Madame Morrow did not move.

Cordelia's face went cold.

"That is not grief."

"No."

"It is not all."

"No."

"I did not wish him dead."

"I did not say you did."

"I did not."

"No."

The fog moved from the spoon to Cordelia's hand.

It was cold.

Madame Morrow pushed the spoon away. "You are doing it again. Defending yourself before anyone has accused you."

Cordelia almost laughed.

It would have been an ugly laugh.

The fog entered the black cloth and spread in a thin circle.

A sound came from somewhere below. Water under stone.

Madame Morrow said, "Now think of the church."

Cordelia saw herself in the front pew.

Black silk. Veil. Hands arranged. The vicar speaking of devotion. People watching her for signs of collapse. She remembered lifting the handkerchief at the moment when collapse would have been acceptable and lowering it before collapse became vulgar.

"What is present?"

"Loss."

"What else?"

"Attention."

"What else?"

"Command."

Madame Morrow's eyes sharpened.

"Of whom?"

"Everyone."

The fog in the bowl lowered.

Cordelia's chest loosened. The relief felt pleasurable, and she was ashamed that Madame Morrow could see it.

Madame Morrow said, "What else?"

Cordelia spoke quietly.

"Triumph."

Nothing in the room changed. The glass did not crack, and Madame Morrow did not rebuke her. Cordelia had felt relief and triumph at the funeral, and saying the words did not make either feeling less true.

Madame Morrow closed the bowl.

The fog withdrew.

Cordelia looked down.

Her hands were shaking.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"For tonight."

"That was not refinement."

"No?"

"That was inventory."

"Yes."

"I did not come here to be insulted."

"Yes, you did."

Cordelia stood.

Her knees were weak.

Madame Morrow picked up the marmalade spoon and wiped it clean with a black cloth.

"Return in three days."

"I may not."

"You will."

Cordelia reached the door.

Madame Morrow said, "Mrs Ravenshaw."

Cordelia turned.

"Don't go to the grave before then. It tends to make the next session messy."

Cordelia went home and slept badly.

In the morning, she refused callers.

By afternoon, the house had heard of it.

By evening, Vrentham knew she was suffering.

Cordelia sat alone in the drawing room while the fire burned low. She disliked the restless night, but she disliked even more that the servants had reported it and the town now knew she was suffering again.

Part Four: The Second Visit

She returned in three days.

This time, Madame Morrow used three bowls, each already holding a thread of fog, each waiting on an object Cordelia recognised too quickly.

A cufflink.

A dinner card.

A square of black silk.

The cufflink belonged to someone else. Its resemblance to Aurelius's was close enough to be rude. The dinner card bore her name as Mrs Aurelius Ravenshaw, written in a clerk's perfect hand. The silk came from a veil.

Madame Morrow opened the first bowl.

Fog moved over the cufflink.

"Speak of him kindly," she said.

Cordelia looked at her.

"What?"

"Kindly. Duty is easier."

Cordelia looked at the cufflink.

"He was never petty with money."

"Kindly."

"He did not humiliate servants."

"Kindly."

Madame Morrow waited.

Cordelia searched.

Aurelius in the library, asleep with a book open on his chest. Aurelius on their wedding night, awkward rather than demanding, asking whether the fire was too high.

"He did not press where he might have pressed."

The fog settled.

Cordelia inhaled.

"He was grateful when gratitude cost him nothing."

The fog stirred.

"You have told me what you kept yourself from doing," Madame Morrow said.

"No."

"Try again."

Cordelia grew tired.

That surprised her. Mourning in public had made her taller. This made her smaller. It required exactness without witnesses.

"He liked to see children with oranges at Christmas."

"Why?"

"Because he had not had them."

"That explains the memory. I asked for kindness."

Cordelia gripped the edge of the table.

"He once walked home in rain because the coachman's wife was ill and he sent the carriage for her."

The fog moved closer to the cufflink.

"Good."

Cordelia blinked.

She had forgotten that.

Or chosen not to remember it because it complicated the account she kept of him.

Madame Morrow opened the second bowl.

The fog moved to the dinner card.

"Speak of widowhood."

"I did not come to confess vanity."

"Then lie if you prefer. I have another client at nine."

Cordelia looked at the card.

"They are kinder to me now."

"Who?"

"Everyone."

"Do you like that?"

"Yes."

The answer came too quickly.

Madame Morrow nodded.

"What else?"

"They ask less."

"What else?"

"If you stay quiet, people fill it in for you."

The fog thickened.

"What else?"

Cordelia's mouth dried.

"They cannot refuse me without appearing small."

The dinner card curled at one corner.

Fog passed over it, green and low.

Madame Morrow said, "Liking it is common enough."

"I don't think that's what this is."

"Yes."

Cordelia looked at the third bowl.

"I am tired."

"Yes."

"We can stop."

"No."

Madame Morrow opened the bowl.

The fog did not rise.

It remained inside the glass, shallow and unmoving.

Cordelia frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"Speak."

Cordelia looked at the cufflink, the card, the silk.

"I loved him."

The fog did not move.

She said it again, harder.

"I loved him."

The bowl remained still.

Madame Morrow did not speak.

Cordelia felt heat in her face.

"He was my life," she said.

The fog sank lower.

"I did."

The fog gathered at the very bottom of the bowl, a green sediment.

Cordelia heard the water below the room.

She remembered Aurelius turning pages in bed.

She remembered his smell: tobacco, starch, old wool, the medicinal bitterness of the drops he took after dinner.

She remembered his hand on her elbow when descending stairs in public. Possessive. Correct. Useful.

She remembered the night a fox screamed in the garden and woke her. Aurelius woke when she moved beside him. He did not touch her. He only said, "It is outside."

That had helped.

Cordelia looked at the bowl.

The fog trembled once.

Only once.

Madame Morrow saw it.

"There."

Cordelia's throat tightened.

"That is all?"

"I do not know yet."

"That little?"

"Mrs Ravenshaw."

"No."

The bowl remained almost empty.

Cordelia stood so suddenly the chair struck the floor behind her.

"No."

Madame Morrow closed the bowls.

Cordelia walked to the door, then back to the table, then to the door again.

"This is a trick."

"No."

"Your fog is poor."

"No."

"You are poor."

"Yes."

The insult did nothing.

Cordelia took up the dinner card and tore it in half.

Madame Morrow watched.

"Better," she said.

Cordelia threw both pieces at her.

"I will not be measured by weather in a bowl."

Cordelia left shaking with rage.

At Ravenshaw House, she ordered the locked cabinet opened.

The silver marmalade spoon was inside.

She took it to the drawing room and placed it on the mantel.

Then she stood before the mirror and lifted the veil.

The posture would not return. Her shoulders refused it. She stood there in the glass, only a woman in black, nothing arranged, nothing commanded.

She put the veil down.

Then she sat before the spoon.

"You see?" she said.

The spoon did not.

For three mornings afterward, the first two fingers of her right hand, the ones that had rested nearest the third bowl, would not warm properly. Hot water did nothing. She wore gloves at breakfast, told the maid it was the season, and said nothing about it to anyone, including herself, until the fourth morning, when it passed as suddenly as it had come.

Part Five: The House Without Instruction

For two weeks, Cordelia did not return to Madame Morrow.

She performed grief with greater discipline.

That was how she thought of it now, though she hated Madame Morrow for giving her the thought. Performed. A word like soot on white gloves.

She received visitors on Wednesdays. She wore the heavier veil. She reopened correspondence with the church roof committee. She sent five pounds to the school fund in Aurelius's name and declined to attend the presentation because, as she wrote, public gratitude would be more than she could presently bear.

The phrase was admired.

The curate came again.

Cordelia nearly refused him, then did not. Refusal would have made him important.

Gideon Merriweather sat in the morning room and did not bring pears.

"I am glad you are receiving visitors," he said.

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"You sound uncertain."

"I am."

"How honest. How modern."

He folded his hands.

"You seem more enclosed than before."

"I was not aware the church had begun inspecting rooms."

He looked tired.

That made him less irritating.

"I spoke poorly last time."

"Yes."

"I should not have suggested you were keeping your husband employed."

"No. You should have arrived at the phrase more slowly."

A reluctant smile crossed his face.

Cordelia almost returned it.

Almost.

The moment passed.

He said, "I did not mean you were false."

"Good."

"I meant people get used to you being sad," he said. "Then they don't know what to do when you aren't."

Cordelia looked at him more carefully.

Perhaps he was not entirely young.

"Does seminary teach such sentences?"

"No. Widows do."

"Many?"

"Enough."

Cordelia stood and walked to the mantel.

The marmalade spoon lay there. Polished. Useless.

"Did you love him?" the curate asked.

Cordelia closed her eyes.

The curate had asked directly. Cordelia still answered with her title.

"I was his wife."

The curate said nothing. He folded his hands more tightly and waited.

"It is the one society accepted."

"And you?"

She took the spoon from the mantel.

Aurelius had liked marmalade too bitter for her taste. Thick-cut. Orange peel suspended in dark amber. Every morning, the spoon had rested beside the jar. Every morning, he had used too much. Every morning, he had left a little on the rim.

"When he was alive, I knew what he expected of me," she said. "I could agree, refuse, avoid him or oppose him. After he died, being his widow gave me another set of rules to follow."

"And love?"

"I am beginning to resent that word."

"Then use another word."

Cordelia set the spoon down.

After he left, Cordelia went to the dining room.

The long table had not been laid since the funeral tea. Dust had settled along the carved backs of the chairs. At the head of the table, Aurelius's chair remained slightly larger than the rest, as if furniture also believed in rank.

Cordelia sat in it.

She had never sat there before.

The room did not collapse.

No one entered to correct her.

For several minutes, that was pleasurable.

Then it became lonely.

The loneliness was ordinary: one woman in a large chair at the wrong end of a table, holding a marmalade spoon.

That was when she went back to the Morrow Rooms.

Part Six: Refinement

Madame Morrow opened the door herself.

"You are late."

"You did not specify a time."

"I meant in the larger sense."

Cordelia removed her veil in the hallway.

Madame Morrow looked at her uncovered face and stood aside.

In the weighing room, the table had been cleared except for one bowl.

No label.

No object.

Only fog.

It lay at the bottom of the glass, thin and pale.

Cordelia sat.

"What is that?"

"What remains when the client has exhausted her better speeches."

"I brought the spoon."

"I know."

Cordelia looked at the closed door.

"Did you see it?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?"

"You came without the veil and brought an object from his breakfast table. I assumed it mattered."

Cordelia placed the marmalade spoon on the table. It was only a spoon there.

Madame Morrow opened the bowl.

The fog rose and moved toward the silver.

"Speak of him without society."

Cordelia did not answer quickly.

This time, she refused to begin with rank, property, duty, command, funeral, house, servants, visitors, or the magnificent posture of a widow in the front pew.

She tried to find Aurelius without his uses.

At first she could recall only his roles: husband, master of the house, benefactor and owner. She had described those roles so often that the man himself was harder to remember.

What was left if those were moved aside?

A man who disliked cold eggs.

A man who coughed in libraries and denied it.

A man who had once paid for a stable boy's sister to see a surgeon and then pretended the money had come from the parish relief fund because praise irritated him when he had not prepared for it.

A man who slept heavily.

A man who sometimes looked at Cordelia as if she were a difficult passage in Latin.

A man who had not known what to do with her sadness and so often mistook it for criticism.

A man who had never asked whether she was lonely because he feared the answer would require invention.

Cordelia touched the spoon.

"I loved him. I just didn't fall apart."

The fog trembled.

"I did not hate him enough to be free."

The spoon fogged over.

"I liked being his widow more than I liked being his wife."

Madame Morrow did not move.

Cordelia's hands shook.

"And there were a few mornings," she said, "when he came into the breakfast room and everyone knew what would happen next."

The fog climbed the spoon.

"I miss that."

She had said exactly what she missed. Shame tightened her throat first. Then grief followed: smaller than the sorrow she had displayed at the funeral, but painful enough to bend her forward. Relief, irritation and memory remained with it. Madame Morrow's treatment had not separated them cleanly.

Cordelia pressed both hands to her mouth.

The fog rose from the spoon and touched her veil where it lay folded on the chair beside her.

The veil darkened.

Madame Morrow closed the bowl.

Cordelia looked up.

"Is that all?"

"No."

"Then continue."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because it isn't getting simpler."

Cordelia breathed unsteadily.

"Worse?"

Madame Morrow looked at the thin fog around the spoon. "That is what remains."

The fog sank back into the bowl.

Madame Morrow lifted the veil from the chair and handed it to her.

The veil weighed the same in Cordelia's hand. She no longer wanted to put it on, because she now knew how much authority she had drawn from wearing it.

"What have you taken?"

"Nothing."

"You must have taken something."

Madame Morrow shook her head.

"No," she said. "It only stopped agreeing with you."

Cordelia hated her for that.

Then she cried.

Madame Morrow did not comfort her.

Part Seven: The Better Funeral

Cordelia did not attend church the following Sunday.

This caused more comment than attending would have done.

At eleven, while Vrentham gathered beneath the old rafters and looked discreetly toward the empty front pew, Cordelia walked to the cemetery alone.

She wore a dark walking dress and an old hat, not the black silk of the church.

The day was cold and bright. Frost held in the grass where the sun had not reached. Green fog lay in the lower hollows beyond the cemetery wall, pale enough to be mistaken for ordinary mist by anyone determined to remain comfortable.

Aurelius Ravenshaw's grave stood beneath a yew.

The stone had been ordered too large. Cordelia had approved it. At the time, large grief had seemed to require large lettering.

AURELIUS HECTOR RAVENSHAW Beloved Husband Civic Benefactor Man of Principle

She looked at the words. They were accurate and insufficient.

The marmalade spoon was in her pocket.

She had brought flowers too, but only because she wanted something ordinary to do with her hands.

At the grave, she stood for several minutes.

Nothing rose in her.

She did not feel the front pew. She did not feel the town watching. She did not feel magnificent.

Without the watching town or the posture she had practised, Cordelia stood alone before the stone.

At last she said, "You should have asked more."

The yew did not stir.

"I should have said something."

A crow moved on the wall.

Cordelia took the spoon from her pocket.

"You died badly," she said.

That helped.

"You left me too much furniture."

That helped more.

She looked toward the lower field beyond the cemetery. The fog had thickened slightly in the hollows.

"I have enjoyed being pitied," she said.

No one answered.

"I have enjoyed being difficult to refuse."

Still nothing.

"I have spoken of you more tenderly dead than I often thought of you alive."

The words hurt.

Good.

She bent and placed the marmalade spoon at the base of the stone.

It looked absurd.

A rich man's grave. A silver spoon. A woman in an old hat telling the truth too late.

Cordelia laughed.

Then the laugh broke and became something else, private and unpresentable.

She cried until her nose ran and her gloves were wet and the old hat slipped sideways on her head.

When the crying stopped, she felt tired and cold. She did not feel wiser or more important.

Behind her, someone stopped on the path.

"Not now," Cordelia said.

Gideon Merriweather removed his hat.

"No," he said. "I see that."

He stood there anyway, cold, his left boot muddy, saying nothing further.

After a while she said, "There is less of it now."

He nodded as if this made sense.

Perhaps it did.

The green fog beyond the wall moved through the hollows.

Cordelia put the flowers down crookedly and left them that way. Careful would have been another performance.

Part Eight: What Remained

In the weeks that followed, Vrentham adjusted poorly.

People preferred Cordelia magnificent. They knew how to behave around that. They did not know what to do with a widow who missed her husband in small, inconvenient portions and refused the larger ones offered to her.

She resigned from two committees and joined one she had previously despised because it did useful work and gave no speeches.

She stopped wearing the heavy veil.

She kept the black dresses because replacing them would have been another announcement.

When visitors asked whether she was bearing up, she said, "Intermittently."

Some smiled.

Some did not.

Lady Belvoir called in January and found Cordelia in the library, sorting Aurelius's papers.

"You look altered," Lady Belvoir said.

"I am."

"Better, I hope."

"Less arranged."

Lady Belvoir looked around the room.

"That is not always wise."

"No."

"People may talk if you start behaving differently."

Cordelia set a stack of letters into the fire.

"Yes."

"May I ask what you are burning?"

"No."

Lady Belvoir's face changed.

Once, Cordelia would have found pleasure in that.

This time she only noted Lady Belvoir's displeasure.

After Lady Belvoir left, Cordelia opened a drawer in Aurelius's desk and found a notebook she had never seen before.

It was small, bound in brown leather, and filled with entries in her husband's hand: observations rather than accounts.

Tuesday. C. disliked the trout but praised the sauce. Ask cook to prepare differently without saying why.

Thursday. C. looked tired after Belvoir dinner. Too much talk from H. Must intercept next time.

Sunday. C. laughed at the stable cat. Rare. Remember.

Friday. C. wished to sell the Hollis land herself. Told her the buyer would not deal fairly with a woman alone. Partly true. Simpler this way.

Cordelia sat slowly.

There were dozens of entries. They were rarely tender, never eloquent, occasionally unkind, and clearly not written to be read.

She read until dusk.

At the back, on the last written page, Aurelius had written:

C. stood in the blue room today as if waiting to be told where the walls were. I said nothing useful. Must try again.

The same two fingers that had gone cold after the third bowl went cold again as she read it, briefly, then warmed on their own.

Cordelia closed the notebook.

She sat with it a long time.

Then Cordelia cried. She bent over the notebook and pressed it against her chest because Aurelius had noticed her loneliness and had still failed to speak.

The Village Where No One Spoke

Part One: The Children Who Walked

Miss Elspeth Gale first noticed the Berricks because their children did not run.

Children ran in Thistleford. They ran down the lane beside the school wall, through puddles, over the churchyard path when they thought no one was watching, around the pump in the square, across the green where the grass never quite dried after rain. They ran because there were only three proper roads in the village and all of them ended in fields. There was nowhere to go, so children made movement out of going there.

The Berrick children walked.

They came through the school gate on a Tuesday morning in November, one behind the other, each holding a satchel in both hands. The boy was perhaps ten, narrow-faced and pale, with hair combed flat so severely that it looked painted on. The girl was younger, seven or eight, and carried an apple. She had not eaten it. She had bitten the peel away in a single careful ring and held the white fruit exposed in her palm.

Their mother stood behind them by the gate.

She was a long woman in a brown coat that fitted badly at the shoulders. Her hat had a dark feather pinned to one side. It was the sort of hat no one had worn in Thistleford for twenty years, though Miss Gale supposed there were still shops somewhere that sold such things to women who knew how to ask for them.

"Good morning," Miss Gale said.

The children looked at their mother.

Mrs Berrick gave a small nod.

The boy said, "The morning has allowed us."

Miss Gale waited, in case there was more.

There was not.

"Well," she said. "That is good."

The girl raised the apple to her mouth and placed her teeth against the flesh without biting. Her eyes were grey, like water after ash had been stirred into it.

"I am Miss Gale," Miss Gale said. "You must be Thomas and Ellen."

"Thomas is where Thomas has been put," the boy said.

The mother smiled.

It was not an unfriendly smile. That made it worse. It was the smile of a woman agreeing with something ordinary.

Miss Gale had been teaching in Thistleford for fifteen years. She had taught children who stammered, children who lied, children who bit other children, children who would not take off their coats, children who cried when chalk touched slate. She knew that strangeness often passed if it was not stared at directly.

So she opened the gate wider.

"Come in, both of you. We are doing sums before copywork."

Mrs Berrick touched each child once on the shoulder. The touch was light and exact, as though she were checking that two items had been delivered undamaged.

"I'll know soon enough," she said.

Then she turned and walked back along the lane.

Miss Gale watched her go.

The Berricks had taken Low Meadow House, the last property before the road dipped toward the marsh. It had stood empty since old Mr Pell died, and for two winters the roof had lost slates in every storm. No one in Thistleford had wanted it. Too far out. Too damp. Too close to the low ground where the green fog gathered on mild nights and lay under the hedges until noon.

But the Berricks had arrived the week before in a small black motorcar with its rear window cracked across the middle. Mr Pruce at the shop had seen them unload boxes. Mrs Haddon had taken them a pie. Mr Sill from the church council had called with a notice about the harvest fund, although harvest was

long past and everyone knew it.

Thistleford did not turn strangers away.

It watched them first.

By the time anyone thought of caution, the village had already sent pie, apples, notices and questions.

By eleven o'clock that morning the Berrick children had still not spoken to any other child, though several had tried. At break, Miss Gale stood by the door with her mug of tea and saw Harold Finch offer Thomas half a conker. Harold Finch never entered quietly. A door usually banged first, then his voice arrived.

Thomas looked at it on Harold's open palm.

"The tree has already finished with it," he said.

Harold blinked.

"You can still play with it."

"That is one of the smaller mistakes."

Harold withdrew the conker and looked at Miss Gale, offended without understanding how.

Ellen stood beside the water butt, holding her apple in both hands. Three girls had gathered near her. They were the Haddon twins and Mabel Pruce, who had a talent for making any new child cry before dinner and then befriending her by the end of the week.

"What did you do at your old school?" Mabel asked.

Ellen looked at the apple.

"The previous room had benches."

"No, I mean what games?"

"Games occurred when the floor was not needed."

The twins giggled. Mabel did not. She had a sharp ear for insult and could not decide if she had heard one.

"That's not an answer."

Ellen turned the apple slightly. For a moment, before she spoke again, she looked as though she had remembered the shape of a laugh and found no sound for it.

"It has answered enough."

The bell rang. The children came in. The Berricks came in last.

After school, Miss Gale found Ellen's copybook still open on the desk. The task had been simple. Six sentences beginning "I remember".

Most children had written of dogs, birthdays, seaside days, lost teeth, grandmothers and thunder. Ellen had written only three lines, in a hand so neat it seemed ruled.

I remember the house before the road.

I remember Mother saying names are useful before repetition.

I remember when we were required to want things.

Miss Gale read the last line twice.

Every evening she wrote one sentence in the blue notebook beside her lamp: one thing the day had contained that would vanish if no one named it. The sentences had no practical use. She had begun after her mother died, when she learned that silence did not preserve the dead.

That evening she wrote: Children who do not run.

Then she closed both books.

Part Two: The Village That Was Kind

By the end of the first week, Thistleford had made up its mind to be kind.

This was how the village preferred to think of itself. It had endured the years of shortage better than the towns, because it had gardens, hens, stores of potatoes, a church hall, two wells and habits older than any government scheme. When the coastal routes failed and the trains became unreliable, Thistleford had bent inward, as many villages did. It lent tools. It shared coal. It noticed illness through uncollected milk. It had its cruelties, but it wrapped them in order.

The Berricks were therefore a test.

Mrs Haddon took a second pie.

Mr Pruce put aside good apples for the children.

The rector, Mr Ambrose, called on the family on Thursday afternoon and returned after half an hour with mud on his cuffs and an expression of professional patience.

"Well?" Miss Gale asked him outside the school gate.

Mr Ambrose looked back along the lane, though Low Meadow House could not be seen from there.

"A peculiar family," he said.

"That is plain enough."

"They were courteous."

"That is not the same as helpful."

"No." He took off his spectacles and polished them with his handkerchief. "No, I suppose it is not."

"What did they say?"

He put the spectacles back on.

"Mr Berrick said the parish was a shape laid over older usage."

Miss Gale waited.

"And?"

"And Mrs Berrick said that visits reduced unnecessary distance."

Miss Gale laughed once, because it seemed the only sensible response. Mr Ambrose did not laugh with her.

"There was something else," he said.

"What?"

"I asked whether they had come far."

"And?"

"He said, 'Distance is a courtesy of maps.'"

A cart passed, rattling over the stones. Mr Pell's old horse, now owned by the Dacres, lifted its head toward the two of them and snorted.

Miss Gale folded her arms.

"Do you think they are ill?"

"I think they have lived in some isolation."

"That is not an answer either."

Mr Ambrose looked back along the lane.

"No," he said. "It is not."

That evening, Miss Gale took Ellen's copybook home. She told herself it was for professional reasons. A teacher could not help a child without understanding the nature of the difficulty. She sat at her kitchen table, lit the lamp, and read through the week's work.

Thomas's arithmetic was accurate. Ellen's spelling was perfect. Neither child made the ordinary mistakes of children. They did not reverse letters or forget capitals. They did not smudge ink through haste or press too hard through effort. Their pages were clean, controlled, nearly empty.

In composition, Thomas had written:

Our house is at the end of the road because the road has no further use.

Father says the fog is not weather. Mother says not to make categories when the thing has not agreed.

At night the ditch speaks without needing a mouth.

Miss Gale sat back.

The kitchen clock ticked. Rain moved against the window. Somewhere in the lane a dog barked twice, then stopped.

She read the last line again.

At night the ditch speaks without needing a mouth.

She thought of Low Meadow House, with its broken orchard and its ditch beyond the garden wall. She thought of the green fog that gathered there in

strips, lying low and patient along the wet ground.

The fog had been part of life for years, appearing in belts and pockets along hollows, coasts, marshes, old quarries, drainage channels and abandoned cuttings. People learned where it settled. They learned not to walk into it. They learned not to leave cattle near it overnight. They learned not to say too much about the larger rumours.

In Thistleford, the fog was treated like bad weather with a moral reputation.

Children were told to avoid it.

Adults avoided speaking of what happened when they did not.

Miss Gale closed the copybooks and tied them with string.

She reached for the blue notebook.

Berrick children: language abnormal but coherent. No obvious fear. No social desire.

She paused.

Then she added: Do not let the village make a matter of them.

She did not know why she wrote it that way.

Part Three: What the Shop Stopped Saying

Mrs Pruce was the first to stop gossiping.

This was noticed, because Mrs Pruce had always treated silence as a form of ill health. She kept the village shop with her husband but considered the counter her private parliament. From behind it she governed births, debts, recipes, feuds, weather predictions, the rector's sermons and the moral decline of bicycle repair.

On Monday, Miss Gale went in for tea, candles and chalk.

Mrs Pruce wrapped the chalk in brown paper.

"Quiet today," Miss Gale said.

"The day has not required much," Mrs Pruce replied.

Outside, two boys were trying to knock icicles from the pump roof with a stick. Usually Mrs Pruce would have shouted at them. That morning she watched until the smaller boy succeeded and a sheet of ice broke over his boots.

"Mrs Haddon was in earlier?" Miss Gale asked.

Mrs Pruce frowned at the scales.

"I was going to say something about her."

"What?"

"It has not remained."

A green film had gathered on the lower pane of the shop window. Mrs Pruce wiped it once with her sleeve. The smear remained.

Miss Gale left with the chalk under her arm and a cold feeling beginning behind her ribs.

At school, only a few children had begun to repeat Berrick phrases, and only occasionally, but Miss Gale heard enough.

Harold Finch entered the classroom that morning without producing a sound. Miss Gale noticed before she noticed anything else.

Harold Finch, asked why he had not done his slate work, said, "The numbers remained available."

Mabel Pruce, who had always waved her hand before a question was finished, now waited to be called on and answered in the fewest words possible.

"Do you think Jack was right to climb the beanstalk?" Miss Gale asked during reading.

"No."

"Why not?"

"The giant was not calling him."

The class laughed.

Mabel did not.

Thomas Berrick sat with his hands flat on the desk. Ellen watched the window, where the morning fog clung to the lower panes in a greenish film.

Miss Gale changed the lesson.

"Put away your readers."

The children obeyed.

"I want everyone to write one thing they want."

There were groans. That reassured her. Groaning was healthy. Groaning required expectation and resistance.

"What sort of thing?" Harold asked.

"Any sort."

"Can it be a pony?"

"It may be a pony."

"Can it be my brother going to gaol?"

"It may not be that."

A few children laughed again.

Miss Gale walked between the desks. Pencils moved. Slates scratched. Wants appeared in crooked lines.

A red coat.

A bicycle.

For Father to come home before Christmas.

Jam every day.

A gun.

For Annie Dacre to stop looking at me.

She had spent half her life correcting exaggeration, invention and excuse. That morning she found herself longing for a bad lie. A lie at least required a room inside the child where something could be hidden.

Miss Gale reached Ellen's desk.

The slate was blank. Ellen's pencil had moved once toward it and stopped. Miss Gale could see the first faint mark where it had touched: a P, perhaps, or the start of Please. Then nothing.

"You must want something," Miss Gale said softly.

Ellen looked at her.

"Must is a school word."

"Then choose another."

"There are no others needed."

"Ellen, everyone wants things."

The girl considered this with grave patience.

"Before Low Meadow," she said.

Miss Gale bent closer.

"Before Low Meadow, you wanted things?"

"Before the fog completed the house."

The room seemed to draw back from that sentence.

She heard the stove ticking behind her and Harold breathing through his mouth. Chalk dust coated her fingers. Thirty damp coats soured the air along the wall.

She should have left it there. Instead she said, "Write the name of someone you miss."

Ellen looked at the pencil in her hand.

She wrote one letter. Then stopped.

Then drew the parallel lines.

Miss Gale took the pencil from her hand.

That evening she walked to Low Meadow House.

She had meant to go straight after school, but small duties delayed her. A slate broke. Mabel Pruce was sick in the yard. Mr Ambrose came to ask whether the choir children could practise indoors because the vestry roof had leaked again. By the time Miss Gale set out, the light had thinned and the fields lay under a wet silver dusk.

The road to Low Meadow dropped after the last cottage. Hedges rose on either side, black and glossy from rain. The ditch ran beside the left hedge, carrying slow water toward the marsh. In places the green fog lay above it, no higher than Miss Gale's ankle. It did not move with the wind. That was one of its habits.

Low Meadow House stood beyond a gate that had lost its latch. Two upstairs windows showed yellow light. The garden was neat, but not tended in the usual way. There were no flowers, herbs, stacked pots or broken pails. The soil had been divided into squares with string. Each square held something useful: cabbages, turnips, onions, beans trained on poles. Even the weeds seemed to have been negotiated with rather than pulled.

Miss Gale knocked.

Mr Berrick opened the door.

He was shorter than she expected, with a square head and mild eyes. He wore a dark waistcoat and had rolled his shirtsleeves to the elbow. There was soil under his nails.

"Miss Gale has arrived," he said.

"Yes."

"The children are not presently damaged."

"I did not think they were."

"Then there is reason for it."

"I would like to talk to you and Mrs Berrick."

He stood aside.

Inside, the house smelled of boiled oats, soap and wet plaster. The hall had been stripped of pictures. Pale rectangles marked the walls where frames had once hung. A row of boots stood beneath the coat hooks, ordered by size. Two adult pairs and two child pairs stood there. The house held no spare shoes, umbrellas or walking sticks. Nothing accumulated.

Mrs Berrick sat at the kitchen table, mending a sleeve. Thomas and Ellen sat opposite each other, each shelling peas into a bowl. Their hands moved at the same speed.

"Miss Gale has another use," Mr Berrick said.

Mrs Berrick nodded.

"There is tea," she said.

"No, thank you."

Mrs Berrick seemed neither offended nor relieved.

Miss Gale remained standing.

"I am concerned about the children's language."

Thomas placed a pea in the bowl.

Ellen placed a pea in the bowl.

Mr Berrick closed the kitchen door.

"Concern is how removal begins," he said.

"I am their teacher. Interference is part of the post."

Mrs Berrick looked at her with what might have been interest.

"The school still values surplus."

"What do you mean by surplus?"

"Wishing. Telling. Repeating the self."

Miss Gale took out Ellen's slate from her bag. She had brought it without deciding to.

"Your daughter wrote that the fog completed the house."

No one moved.

Outside, water ticked steadily in the ditch.

"She is young," Mrs Berrick said. "Young children often retain decorated explanations."

"Then give me an undecorated one."

Mr Berrick wiped his hands on a cloth.

"We lived before in Harlowe Cut."

Miss Gale knew the name. Everyone knew it, though no one had spoken much of it since the cordon.

"How long?" she asked.

"Until there was less."

"You were inside the fog?"

"There was no outside for some time."

Miss Gale gripped the slate.

Mrs Berrick put down her mending.

"At first we continued," she said. "Meals. Quarrels. Songs."

She paused before the next word, and for the first time Miss Gale saw effort in her face.

"Names. They lasted longest."

Her hand moved toward Ellen's hair and stopped before it reached her.

"What ended them?"

"Questions. People asking me things."

Thomas placed another pea in the bowl.

Miss Gale looked at the children.

"Do you understand what your mother is saying?"

Thomas said, "There is less to hold now."

Miss Gale felt she had stayed too long.

"I should go."

"The visit has lasted enough," Mr Berrick said.

He opened the kitchen door.

In the hall, a dented brass tag hung beside the pantry, the kind issued when Harlowe Cut was sealed.

BERRICK FIVE PERSONS

Four coats hung beneath it.

Beside the tag, Miss Gale saw a calendar. It did not show saints' days, markets, birthdays, appointments or bills due. Each square held one word, written in the same careful hand.

bread

school

washing

dark

bread

school

washing

dark

The sequence continued across the month.

On the last day, someone had written:

less

Miss Gale stepped outside.

The fog had risen from the ditch. It lay across the garden path in a green sheet, thin enough to see the stones beneath it. She lifted her skirt and walked through it.

It felt cold, though the fog seemed to have no interest in warmth.

The phrase came so naturally that she stopped at the gate and pressed her hand over her mouth.

Behind her, the house closed its door.

Part Four: The List of Forbidden Phrases

The next day, Miss Gale began a list of forbidden phrases.

She wrote them on a sheet of foolscap and kept it folded in her pocket.

The morning has allowed us.

The room will know them.

The day has not required much.

The visit has lasted enough.

It has answered enough.

The giant was not calling him.

The previous dwelling.

The unused parts.

Less.

She kept the list to herself. What would she say to anyone? That a family spoke strangely? That certain sentences seemed to reduce the appetite for further sentences? So she watched instead.

Thistleford improved, which was worse than collapse.

There were fewer quarrels. The shop grew efficient. People placed goods on the counter, coins changed hands, and no one lingered. The Haddon twins stopped whispering during scripture. Dogs were fed. Fires were laid. The church bell rang at the usual times.

Only the talk thinned.

At first, greetings shortened.

"Morning, Mrs Dacre."

"Morning."

Then a nod. Then nothing, because the nod had become enough.

In school, the children became obedient.

Miss Gale had spent fifteen years wishing for obedience and discovered, when it arrived, that she hated it. No one dropped slate pencils. No one sang under breath. No one asked whether Romans had mothers or whether God could see through roof tiles. Work improved. Copybooks became neater.

The playground went quiet.

Games did not stop all at once. They simplified. Chase lost its shouting. Skipping lost its rhymes. Marbles became a matter of placing and retrieving.

Miss Gale changed the first lesson of each morning. Every child had to tell the class one useless thing: a dream, a boast, a bad joke, a lie that could benefit no one. On Monday Harold Finch claimed he had seen a bishop fall into the millpond, and the class laughed because Thistleford had neither bishop nor millpond. On Wednesday he stood when called, searched the room for help and said, "Nothing occurred that requires telling."

By the third week, children stood in small groups during break and watched the bare trees.

Miss Gale rang the handbell early that day because she could not bear the sight of them.

Mr Ambrose came to see her on Friday.

He looked tired. His sermon papers were under his arm, though it was not a sermon day.

"I am having some difficulty with Sunday," he said.

They sat in the schoolroom after the children had gone. The desks were too clean, without carved initials, crumbs or abandoned string. Miss Gale had found herself missing dirt.

"What difficulty?"

He placed the papers on her desk.

"I have written the sermon."

"And?"

"It contains nothing objectionable."

"Is that unusual?"

"For a sermon? Often fatal."

She smiled despite herself.

Mr Ambrose looked relieved by the smile, then frightened by his relief.

"I began with charity," he said. "Then I removed an anecdote about my mother because it seemed unnecessary. Then I removed the appeal to conscience because those present would either possess it or not. Then I removed the warning, because warning presumes avoidable conduct. By the

end, I had eight lines."

"Read them."

He did.

He had opened with the appointed passage. Ecclesiastes, the third chapter. A time for every purpose under heaven. He read it quietly, as though testing the weight of each word.

"'A time to keep silence,'" he said, "'and a time to speak.'"

He paused there, as though the verse had two halves but only one applied.

Then he read his eight lines. They were grammatically correct. They referred to the appointed reading. But somewhere in the writing the balance had shifted. Mr Ambrose had written as though speech were the season that required justifying. As though the text read: a time to speak, if use remained for it. A time to keep silence, which was the more natural state.

Miss Gale said, "That is not what the passage means."

"I know what it means."

"Then why did you write it so?"

He looked at the page.

"I could not find sufficient reason for the other half."

When he finished, the room was worse than silent.

Miss Gale unfolded her list and placed it before him.

He read it.

His lips moved slightly on the phrase less.

"I said this," he whispered.

"I know."

"When?"

"Last week."

"I do not remember meaning to."

"That may be part of it."

He sat down.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Outside, the children's coats swung from their hooks in the draught.

Then Miss Gale said, "I went to the house."

Mr Ambrose closed his eyes.

"That was unwise."

"Yes."

"What did you find?"

"A family that has survived something by becoming less human."

"That is not charitable."

"It may still be true."

He opened his eyes.

"Does it come from the fog?"

"I think so."

"Then why here? Why now?"

She thought of the calendar. Bread. School. Washing. Dark. Less.

"Because they moved."

"That is cause, not purpose."

"Perhaps purpose is one of the unused parts."

He flinched.

Miss Gale put a hand to her mouth.

Mr Ambrose stood so quickly the chair scraped.

"Do not speak like them."

"I did not intend to."

"That does not comfort me."

"No."

She said the word without emphasis. No one asked the next question.

Mr Ambrose took the list.

"I will speak to Dr Pellam."

"Careful."

"Yes," he said.

He folded the list once, twice.

Then he added, "Care is still available."

Miss Gale slapped him.

The sound cracked across the schoolroom.

Mr Ambrose staggered back, one hand to his cheek. For a second he looked alive in the old way: shocked first, then offended. Embarrassment coloured his face.

"Thank you," he said.

Miss Gale shook.

Part Five: The Doctor's Question

Dr Pellam did not believe in contagion of grammar.

He said this three times in different ways, which Miss Gale took as a hopeful sign.

He was an old man with red eyelids and a smoker's cough. His surgery occupied the front room of his house beside the green, and he had treated every sort of village complaint from childbirth fever to mushroom poisoning. He had also seen fog sickness twice. Once in a shepherd who walked through a green bank near Wellmarsh and came home with both boots full of small white worms that had not been there when he left. Once in a girl who slept outdoors during a summer drift and woke unable to recognise mirrors.

"This is not fog sickness," he said.

"What is it then?" Miss Gale asked.

"Suggestion. Fashion. Nervous imitation. Villages are prone to it."

Mr Ambrose sat beside her, his cheek still faintly marked.

"Have you noticed the speech in the village?" he asked.

"I have noticed people talking less nonsense. That is not yet a disease."

Miss Gale leaned forward.

"Ask me why I struck the rector."

Dr Pellam looked at Mr Ambrose.

"You struck him?"

"Yes."

"Good God. Why?"

Miss Gale felt an intense, almost painful relief.

"There," she said. "That was a proper question."

The doctor scowled.

"I have had enough of this."

"You have not had enough," Mr Ambrose said quietly. "That is the trouble."

Dr Pellam opened his drawer, took out a pipe, remembered he was in his surgery, and put it back.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Come to the school," Miss Gale said. "Ask the children something."

"What?"

"Ask them what they want. Or whether they've lied."

The doctor stared at her.

"You have been teaching too long."

"Probably."

He came all the same.

They went at midday. The children were eating bread and dripping at their desks because rain had made the yard unusable. Thomas Berrick sat near the window. Ellen sat beside Mabel Pruce. Both Berrick children had finished

eating and placed their hands flat on either side of their plates.

Dr Pellam stood at the front of the room and cleared his throat.

"Who here has ever told a lie?"

Several children looked confused. In an ordinary week, hands would have gone up reluctantly, proudly, falsely. Harold Finch would have confessed to something irrelevant. Mabel Pruce would have accused someone else. The Haddon twins would have betrayed each other by glancing sideways.

No one moved.

Dr Pellam tried again.

"Come now. Everyone lies."

Thomas said, "There was nothing to hide."

The doctor turned toward him.

"Who told you that?"

"No one tells completed things."

Miss Gale gripped the edge of the desk.

A small change crossed Dr Pellam's face. Miss Gale saw that he had understood.

He looked at Ellen.

"What would make you cry?"

Ellen blinked.

"Eyes perform several functions."

"That is not what I asked."

"There was nothing to keep."

"Answer it anyway."

Ellen looked to Thomas. Thomas looked to the window. Green fog had gathered outside, low over the schoolyard, though it was only noon and the rain should have beaten it down.

Ellen said, "Crying was for when the inside exceeded the face."

"And now?"

"Now the inside has been corrected."

A spoon fell somewhere in the room.

The sound made several children turn their heads at once.

Dr Pellam said nothing for a long time.

Then Harold Finch raised his hand.

Miss Gale nearly cried at the sight.

"Yes, Harold?"

"Please, miss, may I be sick?"

He vomited before she could answer.

After that, events moved quickly for half a day.

Dr Pellam sent a message to the constable at Wrenford. Mr Ambrose rang the church bell in long strokes, the village signal for alarm. Men went to fetch horses and carts. Mrs Haddon gathered blankets in the hall. Mr Pruce closed the shop. Someone suggested taking the Berricks to the old quarantine barn beyond Mill Lane until the district officer arrived.

For three hours, Thistleford had noise again.

Doors opened. People shouted names. Children cried because adults were frightened and had remembered how to show it.

Miss Gale stood in the schoolyard with her pupils around her. Most still clutched their slates against their chests, carried out in the confusion. The noise was almost enough.

Then Mr Berrick came down the lane.

He came without hurry. Mrs Berrick walked beside him. They wore their coats. Thomas and Ellen stood among the schoolchildren and watched their parents approach.

The green fog followed behind them.

It did not roll like weather. It advanced in shallow layers along both ditches, slipped through the gate, gathered under the schoolyard wall, found hollows

between stones, settled around boots. It was thin. That made it more terrible. A thick cloud would have hidden things. This showed everything clearly.

Mr Pruce shouted, "Keep back!"

Mr Berrick stopped.

The village stopped with him.

Mrs Berrick looked at the people gathered by the green, the blankets, the carts, the rector at the church gate, Dr Pellam with his black bag.

"You have made many arrangements," she said.

No one answered.

Dr Pellam stepped forward.

"You and your family will come with me."

"No."

It was the first ordinary word Miss Gale had heard from him.

The doctor seemed encouraged.

"You understand the instruction?"

"Yes."

"Then obey it."

Mr Berrick looked almost sorry.

The fog touched the school steps.

Several children coughed, though there was no smoke, no smell, no thickness in the air. Miss Gale moved them back.

"Inside," she said.

They obeyed too quickly.

"Not you," Mrs Berrick said to Ellen.

Ellen did not move.

Miss Gale took the girl's wrist.

For the first time, Ellen resisted.

It was not a pull. It was a refusal of direction so complete that Miss Gale felt as if she had taken hold of a post buried deep in earth.

"Ellen," she said. "Come with me."

The girl looked up at her.

"Names are useful before repetition."

Miss Gale pulled the slate from Ellen's arms and struck its edge against the iron pump.

It broke across the middle.

Ellen cried out. "That's mine!"

The possessive was furious, ordinary and alive. Miss Gale felt relief before shame reached it.

Mrs Berrick took one step. Her hand rose toward Ellen's hair and stopped, exactly as it had at the kitchen table.

The sound broke something.

Mabel Pruce screamed. One of the Haddon twins shouted, "Don't break hers."

Children struck one another in the rush. A lunch tin rolled under the pump, a shoe sank in the mud, and a sharp edge of slate cut Miss Gale's palm. Blood ran into the chalk dust.

Ellen picked up one half.

"The object has made report," she said.

The noise failed like a mechanism slipping out of gear.

Mabel's scream thinned into breath. The twin's protest broke into a cough. Around them, open mouths failed to complete what they had begun.

Miss Gale backed toward the school door.

The fog entered under it before she did.

Part Six: The Cordon

Captain Rusk reached Thistleford the following afternoon in a motor lorry with two constables and a nurse from Wrenford. They found no barricade, violence or bodies in the street.

Captain Rusk saw no broken windows or sickbeds and felt one shameful second of relief. Then he noticed the shopkeeper stacking bread in the open doorway and found himself wishing for a broken window.

No report had a place for this.

Smoke rose from twelve chimneys. A man repairing a fence looked up when the lorry stopped, then returned to his work.

Captain Rusk got down. The man at the fence pointed toward the school when asked. Rusk told him to fetch Dr Pellam. He set down his hammer and walked toward the doctor's house without hurrying.

Captain Rusk found Miss Gale in the schoolroom.

She was sitting at her desk. The children were in their places. Copybooks were open. On the blackboard someone had written the date, correctly. Beneath it, in a neat hand:

Speech is retained where use remains.

Captain Rusk removed his cap.

"Miss Gale?"

She looked at him.

Her hair had come loose from its pins. There was a greenish mark along the hem of her skirt, as though she had walked through dyed water.

"What happened?" he asked.

She opened a drawer and took out a folded sheet of foolscap. She placed it on the desk.

He unfolded it.

The first half contained phrases. The second half was a journal entry, though much had been crossed out.

Berrick children: language abnormal but coherent.

Do not let the village make a matter of them.

Why

Ask

Remember

At the bottom, in a shakier hand:

A lie might prove there is still a private room inside the mind.

Beneath that:

No lie offered.

Beneath that:

No private room required.

Captain Rusk looked from the paper to the children.

"Are they responsible?"

Miss Gale moved her lips once before sound came.

"Responsibility is a word for when paths remain."

Captain Rusk folded the paper slowly.

"I am going to take you out of here."

Several children looked up.

Miss Gale stood.

For a moment he thought she would come.

Then the school bell rang.

No one had touched it.

The sound moved through the room, through the open door, across the green. Villagers emerged from houses and turned toward their tasks. The shopkeeper lifted a sack of flour. The man at the fence took up his hammer. The rector crossed from the church to the hall. Dr Pellam stood in his doorway, holding his black bag, as though he had set out to visit a patient and forgotten

the illness.

Captain Rusk's constables came in behind him.

"Sir," one said. "There's fog along the Wrenford road."

"How much?"

"Enough."

Captain Rusk looked at Miss Gale.

Her eyes had filled with tears. That should have been hopeful. But no tear fell. They remained there, unused.

"Miss Gale," he said. "Come now."

She lifted one hand from the desk. It trembled. Her fingers moved as if searching for the blue notebook beside her lamp.

"I," she said.

The children watched.

Captain Rusk stepped closer.

"I what?"

Miss Gale frowned.

Her mother's hands came back to her for an instant, folding a dishcloth at the kitchen table. The word rose behind her teeth.

"I remem..."

Then the effort passed.

Her hand lowered.

"The class is present," she said.

Captain Rusk ordered the village cleared within the hour.

The order met neither obedience nor resistance. People allowed themselves to be placed in carts, then stepped down whenever attention moved elsewhere. The horses would not pass the bend by the old ash tree, where the fog had thickened across the road in a flat green bar no higher than the axle.

By dusk, Captain Rusk withdrew his men to the ridge.

By midnight, no one in Thistleford had come out.

Three days later, the cordon was set.

Signs were posted on the three roads.

NO ENTRY

FOG CONTAMINATION

REPORT SIGHTINGS

On the last day before the ridge post was abandoned, the nurse from Wrenford saw Miss Gale in the schoolyard.

She stood by the pump with a child's coat over one arm. The children waited in a line while she fastened a button at a boy's throat, carefully, almost tenderly.

The nurse raised her field glasses.

Miss Gale looked older, though only weeks had passed. Her face was calm. Her mouth did not move.

The nurse said later that the careful way Miss Gale fastened the boy's button had frightened her more than the silence.

The fog established itself around the village in a thin ring.

Bread was left at the ridge every Monday.

It was collected without speech.

By spring, a party entered Thistleford. They found no dead. Roofs were repaired, registers maintained, church accounts balanced and shop shelves arranged by use. Names remained on official forms but had disappeared from prayer lists, household notes and the children's coat hooks.

The final memorandum did not recommend evacuation.

It noted low disorder, low illness, low consumption, low conflict and high compliance.

No one used the word success.

The forms did not require it.

Miss Gale remained in the schoolroom.

She opened the blue notebook that morning. The page waited.

She wrote: The class is present.

After that there seemed no need to continue.

The children still learned grammar. Across the blackboard Miss Gale wrote three headings:

PERSON

PLACE

THING

When Harold's pencil rolled from his desk, her hand moved to catch the small accident before it disappeared. The pencil stopped against the leg of the bench. She lowered her hand.

By noon, PERSON had been erased from the board. No one remembered doing it.

Miss Gale corrected the spacing between the remaining words.

By evening, no one had spoken of the word that was gone.

Dry Edges

Part One: The Dullest Knife

Evangeline Penhaligon did not hate her husband.

That was the difficulty.

If Evangeline had hated Alistair, she could have accused him, left him or at least imagined the quarrel that would end the marriage. His decency denied her even that. She could not dislike him properly. He was kind, punctual, clean, solvent, moderate in appetite, polite to servants, careful with money, and so reluctant to impose himself on the world that even his footsteps seemed to ask permission of the floorboards.

Every morning he rose at seven, shaved, folded his nightshirt, opened the curtains and tested the weather with one finger against the glass. Then he said either, "It appears settled," or, "There may be rain before luncheon."

After thirteen years of marriage, Evangeline had begun to think of murder whenever clouds gathered.

She did not intend to kill him. The thought appeared only because the knife, the quiet room and his careful hands were in front of her.

On the morning of the argument, Alistair was buttering toast.

He buttered toast as he did everything else: evenly, attentively, and without any sign of desire.

Evangeline watched the knife move from corner to corner.

"Must you do it like that?"

Alistair looked up.

"Like what?"

"As if the bread were a form requiring completion."

He examined the toast.

"I do not like leaving dry edges."

"No. Of course you don't."

He put the knife down.

"Would you prefer I butter another slice for you?"

Evangeline closed her eyes.

"No."

"Very well."

He resumed eating.

The dining room was small and well kept, with yellow wallpaper, a mahogany sideboard, and a clock that had belonged to Alistair's mother. The clock was plain and reliable. It ticked in a dry, moral way. Evangeline had once suggested replacing it with something quieter.

Alistair had looked at it and said, "It has served us well."

That had been nine years ago.

It still served.

"Mrs Albury invited us for supper on Thursday," Evangeline said.

"Did she?"

"Yes."

"That will be pleasant."

"No, it won't."

Alistair paused with his cup halfway to his mouth.

"Then perhaps we should decline."

"Why?"

"If it will not be pleasant."

"That is not the point."

"What is the point?"

She looked at him across the table.

There was nothing wrong with his face. That was another irritation. It was an adequate face. Mild brown eyes. Good forehead. A mouth that had not offended anyone on purpose in years. When they were first married, she had thought him restful. After a father who shouted, brothers who competed, and a first suitor who had broken a walking stick on a gatepost because she refused his hand, Alistair's quietness had seemed like civilisation.

She had not understood that his quietness would leave every disagreement unfinished.

"The point," she said, "is that I do not know whether you want to go."

"I do not mind."

"Then ask yourself why not."

He looked at the cup.

"I do not know."

"That is an abdication."

Alistair set down the cup.

"Would you like me to want to go?"

"I would like you to want something."

He looked genuinely puzzled.

"I want you to be content."

She laughed then.

The sound surprised them both.

It was not a pleasant laugh.

"My contentment is not a personality, Alistair."

"No."

"Do you know what you are?"

He folded his hands beside the plate.

"I suspect you are about to tell me."

There. That should have pleased her. A dry answer. Almost wit. But it was delivered with such courtesy that it died before reaching the air.

"You never ask for anything, Alistair. Then you look disappointed."

He considered this.

"I am sorry you feel that."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Be sorry in that voice."

"It is my voice."

"No. That's the voice you use when you want me to stop asking."

Alistair looked at his toast.

Evangeline waited for anger.

Nothing came.

He said, "I did not know you were unhappy to that degree."

"To what degree?"

"To the degree implied by the hallway."

She pushed back her chair.

"You make even misery sound like a parish memorandum."

"I am trying to understand."

"No. You are choosing the correct words instead of telling me what you think."

He looked wounded.

That too was tidy.

Evangeline stood.

"I don't want a better husband," she said. "I want a person."

Alistair did not answer.

She left the room before he could apologise.

For three days, the house was careful, which was harder to bear than cold would have been. Alistair did not mention the argument. He brought her tea in the morning. He declined Mrs Albury's invitation. He asked whether she wanted fish or lamb for Sunday dinner. He behaved kindly and refused to discuss the argument, as though tea, supper and small courtesies could repair what she had said.

On the fourth day, he did something unusual.

He was late.

On his way home, Alistair heard rehearsed laughter, too even to be real, spilling from somewhere above the shuttered Palladium. A side door stood open long enough for a man to slip out and pull it shut behind him. Beside the door, a narrow brass plate named the Quell Society for Private Rehearsal. Alistair stopped walking and looked up at the dark windows until the laughter began again.

He did not mention it that night. Two days later, while Evangeline sorted the morning post, he asked whether she had ever heard of Octavian Quell, formerly of the Imperial Lyceum, who kept rehearsal rooms above the Palladium and coached private amateur players in the evenings.

"No," she said. "Are you going?"

"I thought I might."

Evangeline felt alarm first and then, to her annoyance, hope.

"Why?"

He was silent long enough that the hall clock ticked seven times.

Then he said, "Because lately I think of things I might have said after everyone has gone to bed."

Evangeline stopped sorting the post.

Part Two: The Rooms Above the Palladium

The Palladium Picture House had closed after the third fuel restriction and never reopened.

Its façade retained the scale of an amusement that had outlived its audience. Two winged women held lamps above the entrance. A cracked poster case still advertised a comedy from seven years before, though the hero's face had faded to a pale oval. Rainwater had stained the pillars. The ticket booth was boarded, and pigeons nested in the cornice.

A side door stood open.

Alistair Penhaligon arrived at ten minutes to eight and almost turned back because the stairwell smelled of damp carpet and fresh oranges, an oddly domestic smell in a closed picture house.

Halfway up the stairs, he heard laughter, quiet and sober and practised, rising and stopping together, as if cut by a conductor's hand.

At the top, he found a narrow landing with three doors. One stood open. Light spilled from it.

A young man in a crimson waistcoat looked out.

"Mr Penhaligon?"

"Yes."

"You are expected."

"I did not give my name."

"No. But you are expected all the same."

The young man smiled.

Alistair disliked him immediately, which was refreshing.

He entered.

The room had once been a rehearsal studio. Its floorboards were scuffed and pale. Along one wall, tall mirrors rose from skirting board to ceiling, though some had cracked and been repaired with black tape. Velvet curtains hung across the windows. There were twelve chairs arranged in a semicircle and a low brass brazier in the middle of the floor.

No fire burned in it.

A faint green fog lay in the bowl.

Alistair stopped at the threshold.

"Is that permitted?"

The young man in the crimson waistcoat looked into the brazier.

"The fire officer dislikes braziers. He has not seen this one."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"No."

"Excellent. There is hope."

Five other people sat in the room.

A widow with red hands.

A clerk Alistair recognised from the revenue office.

A young woman with beautiful posture and frightened eyes.

A large man whose beard seemed to arrive before the rest of him.

A girl of perhaps seventeen with hair cut too short for fashion and too carefully for accident.

They all looked at Alistair, then away.

The young man closed the door.

From behind the curtains came a voice.

"Mr Penhaligon has arrived. We may begin badly."

A man stepped into view.

He was tall and narrow, perhaps sixty, though his body seemed to have negotiated separately with age. His hair was white, his eyes very black, and his clothes too elegant for the building. He wore a dark suit, a yellow waistcoat, and a ring on each hand. He moved with theatrical economy. Nothing flapped. Nothing hesitated. Even his pauses seemed rehearsed. When he lowered his hand from a gesture, his reflection lowered its hand a fraction later, as though it had been asked to wait its turn.

"I am Octavian Quell," he said. "Formerly of the Imperial Lyceum, briefly of the Theatre Royal, never of the provinces except under protest."

The girl with the short hair smiled.

The large man did not.

Octavian Quell turned to Alistair.

"And you are an apologetic umbrella."

Alistair blinked.

"I beg your pardon."

"Already? We have hardly met."

The widow laughed.

Alistair felt heat rise in his neck.

Octavian Quell pointed to a chair.

"Sit, Mr Penhaligon."

Alistair sat.

Quell walked around the brazier.

"Most people arrive here saying life has gone flat. Usually they mean they have become very good at giving the same performance every day, even when no one asked for it."

He stopped beside the brazier.

"Some of you cannot raise your voice at supper. Some apologise before they have said anything worth apologising for. We can work with that."

The revenue clerk looked down.

"I teach scenes," Quell said. "Someone who cannot raise his voice at supper may manage it as King Lear. A habitual apology can disappear for ten minutes if I give the speaker a villain to play."

The young man in the crimson waistcoat lowered the gas lamps.

The mirrors darkened.

The green fog in the brazier thickened.

Alistair sat upright.

"Mr Quell."

"Yes, umbrella?"

"Is that fog?"

"No."

Alistair looked at the brazier.

"It appears to be fog."

"It is an atmospheric mask."

"That seems close."

"Close enough for tonight."

"I was under the impression that contact with untreated ground fog was discouraged."

"Then be grateful this is not untreated."

The room watched them.

Alistair felt, unexpectedly, that he was losing a contest he had not agreed to enter.

"What does it do?"

Quell glanced at the brazier.

"Actors have used all sorts of rubbish to forget the audience. Smoke. Masks. Drink. This sometimes gives them a few seconds before embarrassment catches up."

"I do not understand."

"Of course you do not. Understanding comes later. Sit down."

The young woman with beautiful posture inhaled sharply.

Quell turned to her.

"Yes, Miss Valentina. That was meant for you as well."

She lowered her eyes.

Alistair rose.

"I am not sure this is suitable."

Quell studied him.

"Who sent you?"

"No one."

"That is never true."

"My wife was dissatisfied."

"Ah."

Alistair stiffened.

"Not in the manner you imply."

"I implied no manner. You supplied it. Good. You are less dull than you sounded in your note."

A small laugh went around the room.

This time Alistair did not flush.

He looked at Quell and said, with more sharpness than he intended, "You are impertinent."

The room went still.

Quell's face lit.

"Sit down."

Alistair sat because he wanted to leave and because, for once, the two impulses were not strong enough to defeat curiosity.

Quell clapped his hands once.

"First exercise. Say no to someone in the room."

The young man in the crimson waistcoat opened the lid of the brazier.

The fog rose.

It did not fill the room. It remained low, moving across the floorboards in thin green veils. It reached the feet of the chairs and circled them as if

considering which ankles belonged to whom.

"Do not fear it," Quell said.

The large man muttered, "Easy for you."

"No, Mr Cassian. Difficult for me. That is why I charge."

The fog touched Alistair's shoes.

He thought of Evangeline at breakfast, her face when she said I want a person. That had not been cruelty. It had been exhaustion.

Quell said, "Close your eyes."

Alistair did not.

Quell smiled.

"Better. Contrariness is a pulse."

The fog climbed to Alistair's ankles.

It was cold, but not as weather is cold. It seemed to understand the shape of his feet.

"Mr Penhaligon," Quell said. "Say something untrue."

"I would rather not."

"Then say something true."

"I would rather not."

"Excellent. Say that again, but mean it as an accusation."

Alistair looked at him.

"I would rather not."

"No. Too clean. Again."

"I would rather not."

"Again."

"I would rather not."

"Again."

"I would rather not."

The sound remained the same, but the words acquired direction.

By the sixth time, they were no longer a refusal to participate. They were aimed at Evangeline, at Mrs Albury, at his mother's clock, at his own folded nightshirt, at every dry edge of toast he had ever covered because waste offended him more than hunger.

The room was silent.

Alistair drew a full breath. For the first time, he believed he could answer without first protecting Evangeline from his answer.

Quell leaned closer.

"There you are."

Alistair opened his mouth.

Nothing came.

Then he laughed.

It was a short, unpractised, unpleasant laugh, and it belonged to him.

The fog stirred.

In the mirror across the room, Alistair saw himself seated among strangers, shoes in green vapour, mouth open in unfamiliar amusement.

Behind that reflection stood another Alistair.

Only for a moment.

The other one was not laughing.

He was watching.

Part Three: An Improvement

Evangeline knew at once that something had happened.

Alistair looked much as he had when he left. He did not return with wild eyes, flushed cheeks, torn cuffs, or any of the obvious signs one secretly hopes for when one has married too much order. He came home at half past ten, hung up his coat, placed his hat on the stand, and entered the parlour.

But he did not apologise for being late.

That was the first thing.

The second was that he looked directly at her.

"The rooms were above the Palladium," he said.

"So you found the right rooms."

"In one particular, yes."

She closed her book.

"And in others?"

"There was fog in a brazier."

Evangeline sat still.

"Fog."

"Yes."

"Alistair."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"I read the notices. I came anyway."

Evangeline recognised his voice, but he was saying things he had never allowed himself to say.

She stood.

"Have you been exposed?"

"Certainly."

"Do you need a doctor?"

"No."

"How can you know?"

"I feel odd."

Evangeline frowned.

Alistair looked around the parlour. "I don't know. Everything seems louder."

She should have been frightened.

Instead, she laughed at the sudden ease of answering him without wading through wool first.

Alistair smiled.

A real smile. Brief, slanted, almost boyish.

"I said something impertinent."

"To whom?"

"Mr Quell."

"Good."

"You approve?"

"I approve of impertinence in theory."

"And in practice?"

"That depends where it lands."

He crossed the room and kissed her.

There had been kisses in their marriage. Formal kisses. Good morning, good night, return from journey, recovery from influenza. This was not one of those. It interrupted the space between them without first requesting a meeting.

Evangeline almost stepped back.

Then did not.

When he released her, she touched her mouth.

"You have never done that."

"I have done it often."

"No."

"I have kissed you often."

"Not like that."

He considered this.

"No. Not like that."

The next morning, he burned the toast.

He had burned only one side, and only slightly.

Still, he ate it.

Evangeline watched from behind her cup.

"You are eating burned toast."

"Yes."

"You dislike burned toast."

"Yes."

"Why eat it?"

"I wanted to see whether I could stand it."

"And?"

"It requires butter."

She laughed again.

The day continued strangely.

Alistair wore the blue tie she had bought him three years before and which he had never worn because he thought the colour "energetic". He sent a note declining a committee invitation without giving a reason. At luncheon he said the soup was dull, then seemed almost alarmed at himself.

By evening, Evangeline had begun to feel something like delight.

She knew she should be asking whether he was safe. Instead, she was wondering whether he would kiss her again.

It was not simple delight. There was unease in it. But unease had become attractive after so many years of level ground.

When Mrs Albury called the next afternoon, Alistair received her in the parlour.

Evangeline came in halfway through and found him telling a story.

A story.

Alistair Penhaligon, who had once described a broken carriage wheel with such balance that the injured horse sounded like a footnote, was standing by the mantelpiece describing Octavian Quell's first entrance at the Palladium. He was imitating Quell's voice. The imitation was inaccurate, though it had nerve.

Mrs Albury had one hand pressed to her collar.

"And then," Alistair said, "he called me an apologetic umbrella."

Mrs Albury gave a little shriek of laughter.

"You?"

"I was as surprised as you."

"And were you?"

"An umbrella?"

"Apologetic."

"Almost certainly."

Evangeline stood in the doorway and watched her husband make another woman laugh.

The feeling that moved through her was complicated.

Pleasure first.

Then pride.

Then something smaller and less generous.

That evening she said, "Mrs Albury enjoyed you."

Alistair was standing before the mirror, removing his tie.

"Did she?"

"You know she did."

"I thought she enjoyed Mr Quell through me."

"That is a distinction without mercy."

He looked at her reflection.

"Are you jealous?"

"No."

"Would you like to be?"

She turned away.

"That is a vulgar question."

"Yes," he said. "I wondered."

That night, lying awake beside him, Evangeline saw Quell's name and the Palladium address written inside the book on his nightstand. She left the book open where Alistair had left it.

In the morning, while he shaved, she stood in the doorway.

"You should go back on Tuesday," she said.

He lowered the razor, half-lathered.

"Should I?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She could have said, because I want my husband returned to me whole. The sentence no longer felt true, and she had grown tired of saying things because they were kind.

"Because I want to see what else is in there," she said.

He looked at her in the shaving mirror. "That's a dreadful reason."

"Probably."

He went that evening, and she did not ask him not to.

Part Four: Permission

Octavian Quell was waiting with seven chairs instead of six.

"You are late," he said.

Alistair checked the wall clock.

"I am two minutes early."

"For the man you were last week, yes."

Alistair sat.

The group had changed. The widow was absent. The revenue clerk remained. Miss Valentina sat very straight, as before. Mr Cassian occupied two-thirds of a chair and breathed through his nose. The girl with short hair sat on the floor instead of a chair.

Beside the brazier stood a new participant, a woman with a veil over her face and pearls at her throat.

Quell noticed Alistair looking.

"If you mean to stare at her, Mr Penhaligon, at least do it without pretending otherwise."

"I have paid in advance."

"Then be extravagant."

The crimson waistcoat assistant opened the brazier.

The fog rose.

Alistair felt it touch his shoes and knew, with a small shock of appetite, that he had missed it.

Quell walked behind the chairs.

"Last week you practised refusal. Tonight you will play the person who says the next line before deciding whether it is polite."

The veiled woman whispered, "I don't understand."

"Then you are ideally placed."

Quell stopped behind Alistair.

"Mr Penhaligon, who answered?"

Alistair watched the fog moving under the chairs.

"I did."

"No."

"Someone in me."

"No."

"Then I do not know."

"Better."

The fog thickened.

In the mirrors, the room seemed longer than before. The chairs repeated themselves. The backs of heads multiplied. Alistair saw his own reflection seated, then another reflection standing behind it.

Again.

The same other Alistair.

Still watching.

Quell watched the mirrors rather than the people.

"On a stage, you can lend your body to a line you would never say at breakfast," he said. "The trick is returning it when the scene ends."

The revenue clerk made a small wounded sound.

Quell glanced at him. "Mr Balthasar, that was a theatrical observation. Keep your profession out of it."

The clerk looked offended.

Quell circled the brazier.

"Tonight, give the first impulse a role and let it speak before your manners rewrite it."

The fog reached Alistair's knees.

He should have stood. He knew that. There was a point at which novelty became danger, and the sensible man withdrew. But the sensible man was precisely the one under review.

"Close your eyes," Quell said.

This time, Alistair did.

"Think of the thing you did not say."

One thing came at once.

Then another.

Then many.

He was eight, and his mother was telling him that noise made people common.

He was thirty-nine, and he was buttering toast to the edge because dry bread angered him.

That last memory struck hardest.

The fog rose inside his closed eyes.

Quell's voice came from far away.

"Let the first answer."

Alistair said, "No."

"Who speaks?"

"No."

"Who speaks?"

"No."

He was not refusing the exercise.

The word had become a door.

Behind it, something pushed.

"Who speaks?"

Alistair opened his eyes.

The room had turned green.

Everyone was watching him.

He said, "I am tired of being useful."

No one laughed.

The veiled woman cried.

Quell smiled.

"Useful to whom?"

"To cowards."

"Including?"

"Myself."

"Good."

The fog moved sharply.

In the mirror, the other Alistair stepped closer.

The face was his, but not the expression. The mouth was harder. The eyes brighter. He looked younger and older at once.

Alistair stared.

The reflection raised one hand.

Alistair did not.

Miss Valentina gasped.

Quell turned.

"Do you see that?"

Alistair's throat tightened.

"Yes."

Quell's expression changed. The pleasure remained, but calculation entered it.

"Then use it. Give the reflection the line you keep swallowing."

"No."

The reflection smiled.

It was not a friendly smile.

Quell's voice softened.

"Stay in the exercise. A performer who flinches from his own gesture learns nothing from it."

"I do not know him."

Quell looked at the reflection again. "Neither do I."

The reflected Alistair placed both hands against the inside of the mirror.

The glass did not move.

But something in Alistair did.

A pressure behind the ribs.

He wanted something and had no polite name for it.

He wanted to shout.

He wanted to kiss Evangeline until she stopped arranging his rescue.

He wanted to throw the dining room clock into the street.

He wanted to sleep for three days.

He wanted to stand in rain without remarking on it.

"No," Alistair said.

Quell's eyes sharpened.

The reflection smiled wider.

"No?" Quell asked.

Alistair stood.

The fog slid from his knees.

"No."

Quell moved toward him.

"Stop. I've seen people stay in character after rehearsal. I haven't seen that before."

"I am going home."

"To whom?"

"My wife."

"Which one of you is going?"

Alistair did not answer.

He reached for the door.

In the mirror, the other Alistair did the same.

The handle turned before his fingers touched it.

Alistair ran down the stairs.

Outside, rain was falling over the closed picture house. He stood in it bareheaded and breathed hard.

Behind him, from the rooms above the Palladium, came applause.

Part Five: The Others

For three days, Alistair was marvellous.

There was no other word Evangeline trusted less and meant more.

He returned from the second meeting pale and wet. The next morning he came down at nine, unshaven, and asked for coffee.

"You do not drink coffee," Evangeline said.

"I may have been misinformed."

He drank it black, grimaced, and poured another cup.

That afternoon he resigned from the office minutes committee. When Mister Moss from accounts came to ask whether he was unwell, Alistair told him, "I have been overwell." Mister Moss left within three minutes.

"That was unkind," Alistair said afterward.

"Did you dislike it?"

Evangeline should have said yes.

"Not entirely."

That night he took her to the harbour.

They had not walked there after dark since the first year of their marriage. The lamps burned weakly along the quay. Fishing boats moved against their ropes. Beyond the breakwater, the warning beacon pulsed toward the low marsh, where green fog often formed in the early hours.

Alistair bought roasted chestnuts from a man with a brazier.

He disliked chestnuts.

He ate six.

"You are making a study of unpleasantness," Evangeline said.

"I am making a study of appetite."

"For chestnuts?"

"For consequence."

She stopped walking.

He turned back.

"Consequence of what?"

"I don't know yet."

"Then why say it?"

"Because I don't mind saying I don't know anymore."

She looked at him under the harbour lamp.

The old Alistair would have apologised for not knowing. This one stated it and waited.

"Are you happy?" she asked.

He considered this.

"No."

"Are you unhappy?"

"No."

"What are you, then?"

He looked toward the breakwater.

"Crowded."

The word chilled her.

But then he took her hand firmly.

"I am here," he said.

It was enough for that night.

The first serious incident came on Sunday.

Evangeline found him in the dining room with the clock in his hands.

"Alistair."

He did not turn.

The clock was intact, but its mechanism had stopped. He had opened the back and removed the pendulum, which lay on the table beside the butter dish.

"What are you doing?"

"Liberating the room."

"From the clock?"

"Yes."

"It belonged to your mother."

"No," he said. "It belonged to our obedience."

"Put it back."

"No."

She crossed the room.

"Alistair."

He turned.

For a moment she could not place his expression. Something nearer disgust had replaced both anger and amusement.

"At breakfast," he said, "it speaks before we do. At luncheon, it corrects silence. At supper, it reminds us that another day has agreed to resemble the last. My mother liked the thing. I don't. I don't think I ever did."

Evangeline stared at him.

"You loved your mother."

He looked at the clock.

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"Or did I behave well beside her?"

"That is a terrible thing to ask."

"Yes."

He lifted the clock.

"Open the window."

"No."

He walked to the window himself.

Evangeline caught his sleeve.

"Stop."

He looked down at her hand.

The disgust vanished.

In its place came fear, though not of her. It was fear of himself.

"Take it," he said.

"What?"

"Take it from me."

She did.

The clock was heavier than she expected.

Alistair stepped back.

"I was about to throw it."

"Yes."

"Into the street."

"Yes."

"Mrs Albury might have been passing."

"That would have been memorable."

He laughed.

Then he shook.

Evangeline set the clock on the sideboard and went to him.

For an instant, when she touched his arm, he leaned against her like a tired man.

Then his posture remained the same, yet she felt someone inside him withdraw.

He straightened.

"Forgive me," he said.

The old voice.

She should have been relieved.

She was not.

"Alistair?"

He looked at her with mild concern.

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

"I believe so. Why is the clock on the sideboard?"

She stepped back.

He looked at the open clock, the pendulum on the table, and his own hands.

"Oh," he said. He recognised what he had done, but spoke as though someone else had done it.

"Did I do that?"

Evangeline said nothing.

The next morning, he did not remember the harbour walk.

Part Six: The Dinner

Evangeline went to the Palladium on Tuesday.

The side door was locked.

She hammered until the young man in the crimson waistcoat opened it.

"Mrs Penhaligon."

"You know my name."

"Yes."

"Let me in."

"That would be irregular."

"Then enjoy it."

He hesitated, then smiled.

"You are very much more interesting than advertised."

She pushed past him.

The rehearsal room smelled of oranges and green damp. The chairs had been stacked. The mirrors reflected the empty floor and the brass brazier. No fog lay in it.

Octavian Quell stood by the window, eating an orange with a small knife. He set the knife on the wrong side of the plate, noticed, and moved it to the other side with automatic precision.

"Evangeline Penhaligon," he said.

She stopped.

"Has my husband discussed me?"

"Constantly, in fragments."

"What have you done to him?"

Quell considered the orange.

"I taught him the same exercise I teach frightened actors."

"With fog."

"With a stage trick I have used for years."

"And you knew what it did?"

Quell looked at the floor. "I knew what actors said it did."

"He did not come here to become an actor."

"He could say things in rehearsal that he would not say at breakfast."

She crossed the room.

"He is forgetting what he does."

Quell looked at her and said nothing.

She pointed to the brazier.

"You used fog."

"Atmospheric mask."

"I am not here for theatre words."

"How refreshing. Yes. I used fog."

"Why use it at all?"

Quell looked toward the dark brazier.

"Because embarrassment ruins amateur players. A little fog makes them stop watching themselves from the audience."

"And with Alistair?"

"He stopped watching himself. Then something in the mirror began watching for him."

She thought of the clock. The harbour. The coffee. His face when he asked whether he had done it.

"Put him back."

Quell looked at her for a long moment.

"You wanted him to speak more freely. He wanted that too. I knew what he wanted. I was less certain about what it might do to him."

"You let him walk into fog."

Quell looked at the brazier. "Not into it. Beside it. I told myself that mattered."

Evangeline slapped him.

The sound cracked across the mirrors.

The young man in the waistcoat stepped forward. Quell raised one finger and he stopped.

Quell touched his cheek.

"Excellent."

"I am not one of your pupils."

"No. You came here believing anger would settle something. It rarely does, though I confess I no longer remember what does."

She wanted to strike him again.

Instead she said, "Can you help him?"

Quell looked toward the mirrors.

"I can repeat the room in which it started and give him a familiar scene to play. I have seen roles loosen when someone familiar contradicts them."

"Sometimes?"

"I have seen stage parts linger. I have never seen this. If I pretend otherwise, leave."

"He is my husband."

"Which part?"

The question landed too exactly.

Evangeline looked away first.

Quell said, "Bring him here Friday. If he will come."

"He may not."

"Don't bring him back tonight. I was wrong about how far this had gone."

On Friday, Alistair agreed to come.

He listened while Evangeline spoke. He did not interrupt. He did not apologise. He sat in the parlour with his hands on his knees and seemed to hear her from several distances.

When she finished, he said, "I do not trust Quell."

"Nor do I."

"I do not trust myself."

"I know."

"I remember enough to know that I have frightened you."

"Yes."

"Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"Did I want to?"

She could not answer quickly.

His face closed.

"Then we should go."

Part Seven: The Gathering

The gathering at the Palladium was arranged as a dinner.

That was Quell's idea.

"Breakfast is too familiar," Quell said. "Bring him here for dinner."

A long table had been placed in the rehearsal room. Three places were set. Candles burned in brass holders. The mirrors reflected them in rows. In the centre of the table stood the brazier, green fog lying low inside it.

Evangeline sat at one end.

Alistair sat at the other.

Octavian Quell sat between them.

The young man in the crimson waistcoat served soup and left.

"What happens now?" Evangeline asked.

"We eat."

Alistair looked at the soup.

"What kind is it?"

"Unimportant."

"That is rarely true of soup."

Quell beamed.

"There he is. The domestic philosopher."

Alistair picked up his spoon.

The fog remained in the brazier.

For ten minutes, nothing happened.

Then Alistair spoke to himself.

"This is absurd."

His voice had sharpened.

Evangeline looked up.

Alistair smiled at her, not kindly.

"Do not look so grave, Evangeline. You always wanted a scene."

Quell's eyes moved between Alistair and Evangeline. He did not interrupt.

Alistair blinked.

His posture changed.

"I apologise," he said.

Old voice.

Then he turned to Quell.

"How many?"

"One, so far. There may not be another. I have never been able to promise that."

The fog rose from the brazier. It moved along the table in a low green sheet, passing between plates, around glasses, beneath Alistair's hands.

His left hand curled.

His right remained flat.

"He folded the nightshirt because she liked folded things," he said. Old voice, gentle, almost pleading.

Then, colder, from the same mouth: "She was dead ten years before the house noticed."

Evangeline gripped the edge of the table.

The two voices did not take turns politely. They ran into each other, sometimes inside the same sentence, so that a remark would begin dutiful and finish unkind.

"I should have broken that clock years ago." Cold.

"Please sit." Gentle. To her.

She sat. Quell had not ordered it. Alistair had asked, and he was the only one of the two men at the table who still asked rather than demanded.

The fog reached the candles.

The flames burned green at their bases.

Quell spoke softly.

"Who kept this marriage?"

"I did," said the old voice.

"You preserved a museum," said the other, and there was real contempt in it. "She is beautiful when angry. You never once told her."

"Do not speak of her that way."

"I only say what you would not."

Evangeline felt sick.

Both voices were true enough to wound her.

Quell said, "Tell her something you have not said here before."

Silence.

The fog thickened until Alistair's face seemed to float above the table.

Evangeline said, "Alistair."

All the candles leaned.

He looked at her. For one instant she saw only Alistair, exhausted from years of swallowing every answer that might upset her.

"I do," he said.

Then, from the same mouth, quieter: "I don't know if that's true, or only the answer that keeps the house standing."

Quell reached toward the brazier's lid, then stopped.

"Pick one," he told Alistair. "Say that one again."

Alistair's two hands tightened, one curled and one flat. Both voices tried to answer.

Quell leaned in. "Again. Strip one away if you have to."

Evangeline saw the old error in him then: the director forcing a performance because an unfinished scene offended him.

"Enough."

She reached across the table and closed the brazier herself.

Quell's hand stopped short of the lid, empty.

"You may have stopped the only useful part," he said.

"You don't know that."

Quell looked at the closed lid. "No. I don't."

The fog dropped.

Alistair collapsed forward, striking the table with one shoulder.

Evangeline ran to him.

He was breathing.

Quell remained seated and turned his empty hand over twice, studying it with visible confusion.

"You see the problem," he said, and the theatrical brightness had gone out of it.

She looked up at him.

"What have you done?"

Quell looked older than he had at the start of dinner.

"I should have stopped the exercise."

"He cannot live like this."

"Perhaps he can. Perhaps he cannot. Take him home before morning. Keep him away from mirrors and from this room."

She looked down at her husband.

His face was peaceful now. That too was unbearable.

"And after sunrise?" she asked.

Quell rubbed the mark on his cheek where she had struck him.

"Write down what he remembers. I have no better instruction."

Part Eight: A Person

Alistair did not return to the man he had been. He became quieter again, but his quietness now broke without warning into anger, laughter or speech he did not recognise. Some days he worked. Some days he sat with the curtains closed and asked Evangeline to remove the mirror from the study.

He did not go back to the Palladium.

The rooms above the picture house did not close. Evangeline wrote to Quell twice in the following months, once to ask what she owed him and once to ask whether Alistair's hand would ever fully uncurl. Both letters came back unopened, the direction crossed through in a hand she did not recognise. On Tuesday evenings, if she walked the lower road, she could still hear the practised laughter through the side door, and sometimes a new voice among the old ones, uncertain and hopeful in the particular way that meant it had not yet learned what the laughter cost.

Winter settled over the town.

Green fog came inland more often that year. It gathered in gutters, under carts, at the edges of cellar doors. The notices multiplied. Children were kept from the lower roads. Men spoke knowledgeably in public houses and crossed themselves when they thought no one saw.

Alistair watched the fog whenever it appeared.

Sometimes with longing.

Sometimes with fear.

His left hand never fully uncurled again. Two fingers remained bent against a tabletop, noticeable when he reached for a cup or held a door. He took to keeping that hand in his pocket, and Evangeline learned not to remark on which hand he offered her and which he kept back.

Once, Evangeline found him standing barefoot in the back garden at dawn, his trousers wet to the knee.

The fog lay around him.

"Come inside," she said.

He turned.

"Which one?"

She did not sleep after that.

By spring he had learned to warn her.

"It is the other one," he would say.

And she would wait. Or leave the room. Or sit beside him, depending on his face.

Once, during a heatwave, he laughed for twenty minutes at the word marmalade and could not tell her why. Once, he stood in the garden and recited every dull thing he had ever said to her, as if cataloguing household debts.

At the end, he said, "I thought if nothing was wrong between us, that meant we were all right."

Evangeline was pruning dead roses.

"No."

"I think I thought it very deeply."

"Yes."

"I am sorry."

She cut another stem.

This time, the apology did not irritate her.

That frightened her.

In September, they received an invitation to supper from Mrs Albury.

Evangeline put it on the mantelpiece.

Alistair read it after breakfast.

"Do you wish to go?" he asked.

The old question.

The old trap.

Evangeline looked at him.

He waited without smiling, apologising or softening the question.

"No," she said.

"Nor do I."

"Good."

"Shall we decline with a lie or a principle?"

"A lie."

He nodded.

"Excellent. Principles take longer."

She smiled, barely, but enough.

Outside, the first autumn fog of the season had begun to gather in the lane. It lay low along the stones, pale at first, then faintly green.

Alistair saw it through the window.

So did Evangeline.

For a moment, his face tightened and his curled hand moved towards the window. Evangeline could not tell which version of him had recognised the fog.

Then he turned from the window and picked up the butter knife.

His left hand, the curled one, rested on the table and did not help him.

The toast lay before him.

One edge remained dry.

Evangeline watched him see it.

He looked at the knife.

Then at the toast.

Then, very carefully, he set the knife down.

"I dislike dry edges," he said.

"I know."

"I am leaving it."

Evangeline looked at his uncurled hand beside the plate.

The clock on the sideboard remained silent.

The dry edge stayed on the plate.

The Correction

Part One: The Red Pencil

Ursula Selborne corrected the dead.

She had no professional right to do so, which made the habit difficult to explain.

She held no position at a newspaper, no desk in a publisher's office, no contract with the parish printer, no formal authority over spelling, punctuation, accuracy, tone, or grief. She was a retired schoolmistress with three rooms above a closed haberdasher's shop, a pension paid quarterly, and a red pencil kept sharpened in a china cup beside the window.

Every morning, after tea, she read the Vrentham Chronicle.

She began with municipal notices. They were the most honest part of the paper, though not always by intention. Drainage repairs delayed. Coastal path closed. Fog warning boards to be replaced along the lower road. Residents advised to report ground-level formation in gutters, yards, cellars, and enclosed courtyards.

The fog was always somewhere in the Chronicle.

Low fog near the fish market.

Green discoloration in standing water behind the tannery.

Schoolchildren warned not to collect fog residue in jars.

A dog lost near the reed beds and recovered without appetite.

Ursula underlined recovered and wrote:

found

Then she turned to the births, marriages, deaths, and advertisements, where the true offences began.

On the morning of the first correction, she was not thinking of the fog.

She was thinking of excess.

The death notice occupied six lines and had been paid for by someone with more money than restraint.

ALFRED PEREGRINE HALLOWES Deeply beloved by all who knew him. A generous heart, a noble mind, a friend to every creature. Vrentham is poorer for his passing.

Ursula read it once.

Then again.

She took up the red pencil.

Deeply beloved by all who knew him.

She drew a line under all.

A friend to every creature.

She drew a line under every.

Vrentham is poorer for his passing.

She circled poorer.

Then, in the margin, she wrote:

Unproven. Sentimental inflation. Consider: "missed by many."

She sat back.

The correction pleased her.

She had not known Alfred Peregrine Hallowes well. He had once served on the school board and used the phrase "girl children" in public. That told her enough. Her objection concerned the grammar and the civic dishonesty.

Words should not be allowed to swell simply because a person had stopped breathing.

By noon, she had copied the death notice onto clean paper, with corrections neatly marked, and placed it in an envelope addressed to Mrs Alfred Hallowes, Blackthorn Villa, East Ridge Road.

She did not sign it.

A signature would have made the matter social.

The second correction followed two days later.

A sermon excerpt printed in the Saturday edition.

"Charity asks nothing in return."

Ursula underlined nothing and wrote:

Often asks gratitude.

By winter, the postman had begun to look at her envelopes with suspicion.

By spring, the Chronicle had stopped printing her letters.

By summer, Mrs Hallowes had written a note.

Dear Madam,

If you are the person who has taken it upon herself to correct the notice of my husband's passing, I ask that you leave me to mourn in my own words.

Ursula read it with care.

Then marked own.

Widows, she knew, rarely mourned in their own words. They used church words, family words, borrowed words, words preserved in black borders and badly folded handkerchiefs.

Still, she did not return the note.

There were limits.

She was not cruel.

That was what she told herself whenever the fog came inland.

The fog had a way of making private statements sound less secure.

It gathered most often in the lower streets, where the old drains met the harbour culverts. It did not always rise green at once. At first it looked like ordinary damp. A pale seam along cobbles. A breath beneath cellar doors. A thin whitening around the base of walls. Then green entered it, dull and unmistakable, as if the world had been bruised from underneath.

Ursula lived three streets above the usual line of formation. The distance kept the worst of it below her windows and left it close enough to watch.

On certain evenings, when the wind came from the marsh, she could see the fog lying at the bottom of Inkerman Lane. It gathered around the grating there, low and patient. Sometimes she imagined it was reading the town from below. Cellar by cellar. Step by step. A slow eye under the pavements.

She did not like that thought.

It was imprecise.

One Thursday in November, the printer came.

His name was Ephraim Braddock, and he had ink beneath his nails even when wearing gloves. He was a large, soft man with thinning hair, a nervous collar, and a habit of glancing over his shoulder after every sentence, as if pursued by a previous version of himself.

Ursula had taught his youngest sister arithmetic twenty years earlier.

Badly.

The sister had been badly taught, that is. Ursula had done her best with material supplied.

"Miss Selborne," he said on the landing, removing his hat. "I hope I do not disturb."

"You do."

"Oh."

"But you may come in. Disturbance has already occurred."

He stepped inside.

Her front room was narrow and orderly. A table by the window. Two chairs. Shelves of books arranged by subject and then by height. A coal fire too small to be generous. On the table lay the Vrentham Chronicle, yesterday's sermon sheet, three red pencils, a ruler, and a saucer containing pencil shavings.

Ephraim noticed all of it.

"I wondered if I might ask for your assistance."

"With what?"

"Proofing."

"I proof everything. The question is whether anyone benefits."

"Yes. Quite."

He sat only after she pointed to the chair.

The fog had been low that morning. She could still smell it faintly on his coat, mixed with paper dust and linseed oil.

"What have you brought?"

He opened his satchel and removed a stack of printed pages.

"Parish appeal notices. Harbour regulations. Two marriage circulars. An auction catalogue. A memorial programme."

Ursula looked at the stack.

"You have a shop."

"Yes."

"Employees."

"One boy and a niece with good eyes but modern spelling."

"And yet you came here."

Ephraim rubbed one thumb against the brim of his hat.

"There have been complaints."

"About accuracy?"

"About tone."

"Tone is usually where accuracy is hidden."

He looked relieved, which irritated her.

"I thought you would understand."

"I have not agreed to understand."

He leaned forward.

"Miss Selborne, the town prints faster than it thinks. Notices, apologies, claims, condolences, declarations. Everyone wants the right words after the fact. They bring them to me. I set them. Then someone complains that the

words have done harm."

"Words often do."

"Yes. But there are bills to pay."

"Then protection is what you require."

He swallowed.

"There is another matter."

"At last."

Ephraim reached into his satchel and drew out a small bottle.

It was stoppered with black wax.

The ink inside was a deep, low green, like fog seen through ditch water.

Ursula did not touch it.

"What is that?"

"Ink, supposedly."

Ursula looked at him until he added, "The supplier called it mineral pigment. He was lying."

Ephraim looked at the bottle.

"One of the storage rooms flooded during the last fog formation. Only a little came under the door, but the crates sat in it overnight. Most of the ink spoiled. This one altered."

"Altered how?"

"It corrects."

Ursula looked at him.

He set the bottle carefully on the table.

"I know how it sounds."

"Then do not waste time describing the sound. Describe the fact."

He took one of the proof sheets and a dip pen from his satchel. With ordinary black ink, he wrote:

The harbour wall is entirely safe.

Then he opened the green bottle.

The smell came first: wet stone, reed water, old paper in a flooded drawer.

Ephraim dipped the pen and touched the page.

The green ink moved by itself.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, it drew a line beneath entirely.

Ursula stood.

The line darkened.

Ephraim whispered, "There."

She took the page.

The ink was wet but did not smudge.

"Write another."

He did.

Mrs Ellington's grief was private and dignified.

The green ink slid from the nib and underlined private.

Then, after a pause, dignified.

Ursula felt her throat tighten.

"Who knows?"

"No one."

"That is unlikely."

"No one who would admit it."

"How many times have you used it?"

"Four."

"For paid work?"

"No."

"Liar."

The green ink in the bottle stirred.

Ephraim went pale.

Ursula looked from him to the bottle.

"How did you find me?"

He tried to answer.

The bottle darkened.

He closed his mouth.

Ursula said, "Accurately."

He looked down.

"The Chronicle editor told me if I wanted unpleasant accuracy, I should climb above the haberdasher's."

Ursula sat.

For the first time in many months, she felt something close to admiration. It belonged to the sentence.

"Leave the bottle," she said.

He lifted his head.

"I cannot."

"You can."

"It is valuable."

"Then you should not possess it."

"And you should?"

"I have practice."

The green ink touched the inside of the glass.

Ephraim stood quickly.

"I need it returned."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"No."

"Miss Selborne."

"No."

Outside, below the window, a cart passed in the wet street. Its wheels made a tired sound on the stones.

Ursula picked up the pen.

"What do you want corrected?"

He stared at her.

She looked at the stack of printed pages.

"Begin with the memorial programme."

Part Two: Green Ink

By midnight, Ursula had corrected nineteen pages.

The green ink did not behave like red pencil.

A red pencil obeyed. It marked what one chose to mark. It carried judgment from mind to page in a clean line.

The green ink did not obey.

It waited.

Sometimes a sentence passed beneath it untouched, though Ursula disliked the sentence very much. Sometimes it moved before she understood why. Small words drew it often: only, always, never, purely, kindly, regrettable, necessary, entirely, certain. On other pages the same words passed untouched. Ursula could find no rule that survived a second test.

Certain drew a line that night.

On the memorial programme for Alderman Septimus Hatherleigh, the family had written:

He devoted his life entirely to public service.

The green ink underlined entirely.

Then public.

Then, after a pause that felt almost rude, service.

Ursula laughed.

The laugh was unkind and earned.

The parish appeal notice fared worse.

In these difficult times, every household must give what it can.

The ink underlined every.

Then must.

Then can.

The marriage circular for Miss Arabella Crowthorne and Mister Julius Thackery remained almost untouched except for one sentence.

Their union is founded upon mutual esteem.

The ink made no mark beneath mutual.

No mark beneath esteem.

It underlined founded.

That interested Ursula for several minutes.

At one in the morning, she made tea and did not drink it.

The fog had risen in the street.

She saw it from the window, low around the lamp post and along the kerb. It stayed below the night constable's rolled cuffs, though the colour was already visible.

The bottle on her table darkened whenever the fog thickened below.

That was the part she did not like.

When the fog in the street drew nearer to the shopfronts, the ink moved more quickly. When the street thinned, the ink slowed.

At two, she tested it on her own hand.

She wrote:

I seek accuracy.

No mark.

She waited.

The words sat on the paper, green and plain.

She wrote:

I seek accuracy only.

The ink underlined only at once.

Ursula sat very still.

Then she wrote:

I am not cruel.

The ink did not move.

For a moment, she felt relief.

Then, slowly, it underlined not.

She put down the pen.

The room had become too quiet.

Below, in the street, the lamplight had gone the colour of old glass.

By morning, she had corrected the entire stack.

Ephraim arrived at eight.

"You look unwell," he said.

"That is lazy. I look unrested."

"Yes."

She handed him the papers.

He read.

Recognition tightened his face as he turned the pages.

"You marked the bishop."

"The ink marked the bishop."

"You agree with it."

"Often."

"That is not the same thing."

"No."

He looked at her then.

Perhaps he was not as stupid as his collar suggested.

"Did you use it on your own writing?"

"Briefly."

"And?"

"It worked."

He closed the pages.

"I need the bottle."

"You may have the pages."

"Miss Selborne."

"You brought it because you needed protection from complaint. You did not understand the instrument."

"And you do?"

"Better than you."

"That is a dangerous grammar."

The bottle stirred.

They both looked at it.

Ephraim held out his hand.

She did not move.

He said, "Please."

The green ink in the bottle darkened.

No line appeared, of course. There was no page. No word. Only speech.

But Ursula saw it anyway.

A thin green mark across his mouth.

She stood so quickly the chair scraped the boards.

Ephraim stepped back.

"What?"

"Say that again."

"What?"

"Please."

"Please."

The mark returned, a faint green line beneath the word as he spoke it, drawn across the air at his mouth and then gone.

Ursula stared.

He touched his mouth.

"What is it?"

"You don't mean please."

Ephraim lowered his hand. "Not entirely, no."

"Yes."

Her breathing slowed. She saw the bottle in Ephraim's hand, the marked words on the page and the distance between him and the door.

She gave him the papers.

"Leave."

"I need the ink."

"No."

"You cannot keep it."

The mark came again.

This time beneath cannot.

Ursula smiled.

"Apparently I can."

Part Three: The Town Corrected

At first, Ursula used the ink only on print. She began cautiously.

She corrected the Chronicle, the parish sheets, the auction catalogues, bills of sale, mourning notices, petitions, invitations, and public apologies. She corrected the mayor's statement on the lower drainage works and found it nearly green with error. She corrected a school notice warning pupils to remain away from ground fog and found only one mark beneath unnecessary.

That pleased her less than expected.

She corrected a butcher's advertisement:

Finest sausages in Vrentham.

The ink underlined finest, then paused, then underlined sausages.

She had suspected as much.

Within a week, people began bringing things to her indirectly. Ephraim returned first with another stack of papers. Mrs Calpurnia Shaw sent a letter through her maid asking whether a phrase in a memorial inscription seemed "over-warm." The Chronicle editor used a sealed envelope with no note inside. It contained a speech by Councilman Marcus Ellery defending the new fog warning fees.

Ursula corrected it in green and sent it back.

The next issue of the Chronicle printed a shorter speech.

Much shorter.

After that, the envelopes multiplied.

She charged nothing.

Charging would have vulgarised the work. Besides, the true payment was the work itself. The joy of seeing excess shrink. The pleasure of finding the one word in a sentence where rot had entered. The civic value of drawing a line.

But speech became difficult.

Once she had seen the green correction under Ephraim's please, she could not unsee the possibility. It did not happen always. If every lie had marked itself, she might have dismissed the effect as illness or blessing. Instead, the marks appeared only sometimes, under certain words, in certain mouths, usually when the fog lay somewhere near.

The lower the fog, the sharper her hearing.

The higher the street, the fewer the marks.

By December, Ursula had begun timing errands by weather reports.

The first public incident occurred at the greengrocer's.

The fog had come up through the drain covers that morning and lay along the gutters, low and green. Children were being taken to school by the upper road. Dogs refused puddles. The harbour siren had sounded once at dawn and then fallen silent.

Ursula went out for onions.

The greengrocer, Mister Barnaby Trethewyn, stood behind a crate of apples with both hands tucked under his apron.

"Fresh this morning, Miss Selborne."

A green line appeared beneath morning.

Ursula looked at the apples.

They were handsome, red, and waxed.

"Yesterday," she said.

Barnaby blinked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Possibly the day before."

"Miss Selborne."

"Not morning."

A woman beside the cabbages laughed.

Barnaby flushed.

"No harm meant."

A line appeared under harm.

Ursula turned to him fully.

"What harm?"

The shop went quiet.

Barnaby's face changed. Only slightly, but enough. Ursula saw the thought pass through him: lower barrel, bruised fruit, poor families, charge the same.

She put down the onions.

"Sell the lower barrel for half."

He stared.

"Or I will return with paper."

By noon, the lower barrel was marked down.

By evening, half the town knew Miss Selborne could see old apples.

This amused people.

At first.

The second incident occurred outside the church.

Reverend Isidore Serle stood with Mrs Hallowes near the gate. The fog lay beyond the cemetery wall but had not entered the path. Mrs Hallowes wore violet gloves and the pinched expression of someone tolerating comfort.

"I know exactly how you feel," Reverend Serle said.

The green line appeared beneath exactly.

Then how.

Then feel.

Ursula, passing with a parcel of corrected auction notices under one arm, stopped.

The vicar saw her.

"Miss Selborne."

"No, you do not."

Mrs Hallowes looked up.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He does not know exactly how you feel. He knows how grief is described in pastoral letters. That is not the same thing."

The vicar's mouth tightened.

"I was offering sympathy."

Sympathy marked green.

Mrs Hallowes looked from him to Ursula.

For one moment, something like relief crossed her face.

Then embarrassment.

Then anger.

"I did not ask either of you to make a lesson of me," she said.

That sentence bore no mark.

None.

Ursula stepped back.

Mrs Hallowes walked away.

The vicar followed after a moment, not quickly enough to be useful.

Ursula stood by the church gate while the fog pressed against the cemetery wall.

Ursula watched Mrs Hallowes go. She had been right about the sentence and wrong about nearly everything else that had just happened.

Part Four: The Mother Letter

The town changed toward her.

People still sent envelopes. More than before, in fact. They wanted statements checked, promises tested, letters made safe before posting. A widow

sent three drafts of a reply to her brother-in-law. A merchant sent a contract. A girl sent a love letter and asked whether "always" was too much.

Ursula marked always and returned it without comment.

But in the street, people grew careful.

Conversation bent away from her as iron filings bend from a magnet. Men lowered voices when she entered shops. Women stopped mid-sentence. Children stared, then looked at the ground in case their shoes had misspoken.

Ursula classified the changed voices, the unfinished sentences and the lowered eyes as respect.

The green marks did not appear under thoughts.

She disliked the exemption.

She became lonely in a new way.

Previously, loneliness had been an orderly condition. It had shelves, habits, tasks, tea, newspapers, sharpened pencils. Now it had listening in it. She sat at her window above the closed haberdasher's and watched people speak below where the fog often gathered. She could not hear the words below her window. She imagined the marks instead. Barnaby Trethewyn turned the sound half of a pear toward a customer and seemed to call it fresh. Mrs Hallowes smiled at a neighbour while crushing a letter inside one violet glove. A father bent toward a waiting child, promised something, and glanced twice toward the public house. The words passed below her window, uncorrected.

One wet afternoon, while searching for sealing wax, she found the letter from her mother.

It lay in a biscuit tin at the back of the lower drawer, tied with blue thread. She had not opened the tin for years. Her mother had been dead twenty-one years and was not, in Ursula's view, improved by frequent handling.

The letter had been written two months before her death.

My dearest Ursula,

I have always been proud of your careful mind.

The first sentence was enough.

Ursula did not read on.

She knew the rest. Advice about winter curtains. A complaint about a nurse. A line about the school inspector. Her mother had not been sentimental, which Ursula considered one of the better inheritances.

Still, the word always remained.

She placed the letter on the table.

The green bottle stood beside the lamp.

By then, the ink had thickened. She had used very little, but the bottle seemed fuller on days when the fog was near. She no longer questioned this aloud.

She dipped the pen.

Then hesitated.

A letter from the dead should not be corrected lightly.

But neither should it be exempt.

She touched the ink to the page.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

Then a green line appeared beneath always.

Ursula held her breath.

The ink did not move beneath proud.

Only always.

Her hand trembled.

She should have stopped.

Instead, she drew the pen down the page.

I know you are difficult. The world is improved by careful women.

The green ink underlined improved. Careful and women remained untouched.

Ursula felt something shift under her ribs.

She read the next line.

Do not let them persuade you that sharpness is a fault.

The ink underlined sharpness.

Then, slowly, fault.

Ursula stood.

The chair fell backward.

Outside, the fog had risen in the street though no siren had sounded. It pressed around the lamp post, around the steps, around the wheels of a parked cart. Green at the edges. Patient.

She looked again at the first sentence.

I have always been proud of your careful mind.

Always was false.

Proud was true.

Careful was true.

Mind was true.

The correction had not destroyed the sentence.

It had made it smaller.

That was worse.

The green line stopped before proud and left the rest of her mother's hand untouched.

Ursula sat on the floor beside the fallen chair and held the letter in both hands.

For the first time in years, she wished her mother had been less accurate.

Part Five: Corrections Without Paper

After the mother letter, Ursula tried to stop.

She placed the green bottle in the coal scuttle, then removed it before lighting the fire. She wrapped it in brown paper and hid it behind the prayer books, then thought better of insulting prayer with accuracy. She considered returning it to Ephraim Braddock, but his shop stood in the lower quarter, where the fog came often, and she did not trust him to misunderstand carefully.

For three days, she did not correct the Chronicle.

On the fourth, the mayor announced that the town had "nothing to fear from well-managed fog events."

Nothing took a green line in her mind before she touched the paper.

Fear followed.

Then well-managed.

By the fifth day, she was correcting speech without trying.

At the baker's:

"We are happy to serve everyone."

Happy marked green.

At the post office, Mrs Arabella Thackery stood at the counter holding a parcel tied with string.

Her mother, Mrs Crowthorne, stood beside her and spoke in the low sharp voice of women who mistake volume for discretion.

"You must write to him first. A wife cannot let pride become a habit."

Arabella said, "I know."

No mark.

Mrs Crowthorne said, "He loves you in his way."

Green line beneath loves.

Arabella looked down.

Ursula, standing behind them with two letters and a parcel of proof sheets, saw the line and felt the old alignment return.

"Not love," she said.

Both women turned.

Mrs Crowthorne's face hardened.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He may want her back. That doesn't mean he treated her well."

Arabella went very still.

Mrs Crowthorne said, "You venomous woman."

Venomous did not mark.

That should have warned her.

But Ursula continued.

"She hasn't written. That should tell you something."

Arabella's mouth opened.

Nothing came.

Mrs Crowthorne slapped Ursula.

The sound cracked through the post office.

No one moved.

Ursula touched her cheek.

The slap left heat in Ursula's cheek. She touched the spot and knew exactly where she stood.

Mrs Crowthorne took her daughter by the arm and pulled her toward the door.

Arabella looked back once.

There was no gratitude in her face.

Only fear.

That evening, Ephraim Braddock came again.

"You must stop," he said.

Ursula stood by the window.

The fog lay thick at the bottom of Inkerman Lane. It had not yet climbed the hill, and the air in the distance had already turned green.

"Must?"

He winced.

"Do not do that."

"Then choose words with more care."

"I heard what happened at the post office."

"Then you heard late."

"I heard the girl has gone back to her husband."

Ursula turned.

"What?"

"She went this afternoon."

"No."

"Yes."

"She knew."

"Perhaps."

"I helped her know."

"You made it impossible for her to remain seen and undecided."

Ursula said nothing.

Ephraim took a step into the room.

"She was not ready for your truth."

"I said it anyway."

"It should, sometimes."

The fog below thickened.

Ursula heard herself say, "You want the bottle."

"Yes."

A green mark appeared across his mouth.

But only beneath yes.

That unsettled her.

"You want to stop me."

"Yes."

No mark.

"You are afraid."

"Yes."

No mark.

"Of me?"

"Yes."

No mark.

Ursula looked at the ink bottle.

Ephraim followed her gaze.

"Miss Selborne," he said quietly, "some true sentences still break things."

The bottle stirred.

No correction came.

Part Six: The Unmarked Truth

She went to Ephraim's shop the next morning. She had not conceded. The fog had stayed low all night, and she had not slept.

Braddock & Kite Printers stood two streets above the quay, wedged between a chandlery and a shuttered alehouse. It was an old shop with a bow window full of sample cards, mourning borders, wedding invitations, auction bills, and public notices. The lower stones were green-stained from past fog events.

Inside, the air smelled of ink, oil, damp paper, and hot metal.

Ephraim looked up from the press.

"You came."

"Yes."

"Did you bring it?"

"Yes."

She set the bottle on the counter.

The boy in the back room stopped feeding paper into the hand press.

Ephraim said, "Out, Benedict."

The boy vanished.

Ursula looked around.

There were proof sheets clipped to a line. Some public, some private. A notice about fog closures. A sale of household effects. A hymn sheet. A handwritten apology waiting to be set in type.

The shop was untidy, but not careless. She had misjudged that.

On a shelf behind the press lay three customer letters already marked in ordinary pencil, each correction stopping just before it became accusation.

Ephraim wiped his hands on a cloth.

"What do you want?"

"To test something."

"No."

"You do not know what it is."

"That has rarely stopped it being unwise."

She unwrapped a sheet of paper.

"I will write one sentence. If the ink marks it, you may destroy the bottle."

"And if it does not?"

"I keep it."

Ephraim stared at her.

Ephraim rubbed the ink from his thumb with the cloth. "If you already know what you want it to say, why are we doing this?"

The bottle remained open between them.

Ursula looked at the page instead of at him.

He should have refused.

Instead, perhaps because printers are curious even when afraid, he handed her a pen.

She opened the bottle.

The green smell entered the shop.

From below the floorboards came a faint sound, like breath moving through pipes.

Ephraim looked down.

"Quickly."

Ursula dipped the pen and wrote:

I wanted the truth.

The ink settled.

No line appeared.

Ephraim exhaled.

Then he looked at the page more carefully.

"There is the trouble," he said.

She looked at him.

"The sentence is true," he said.

"Yes."

"That does not make it innocent."

The words entered her.

The bottle did not move.

No correction appeared.

Ursula looked down at the page.

I wanted the truth.

The page offered no correction.

The shop darkened.

Outside, someone shouted in the street. Then another voice. The fog siren began at the harbour, one long note that meant unexpected ground formation inland.

Ephraim seized the bottle.

Ursula caught his wrist.

Green ink spilled across the counter.

It found the slope of the counter and ran as though it had been waiting for it.

Ephraim pulled back.

Ink spread over the proof sheets.

The apology.

The fog notice.

The hymn sheet.

The sale bill.

Lines appeared at once. Dozens of them. Words blackened, greened, shifted. Must. Regret. Safe. Beloved. Entirely. Temporary. Necessary.

The press boy screamed from the back room.

Fog came under the door in a thin green layer and gathered beneath the counter where the ink dripped.

Ephraim whispered, "Put the cork in."

Ursula picked up the bottle.

It was cold enough to hurt.

The green ink inside rose toward the neck.

Ephraim pulled her back from the counter.

For one moment, the room narrowed to that: his hand on her arm, both of them cold, ink still spreading across the proof sheets, the fog at the door.

Then he stopped it himself.

He pressed his thumb across the neck of the bottle and held it there. His face went pale. A green thread curled over his skin. He drove the cork in with both hands.

When he removed his hand, a narrow green line remained across the pad of his thumb.

They stood without speaking.

On the counter, among the ruined sheets, one page remained clear.

I wanted the truth.

Ursula looked at it until the words stopped meaning what they had meant.

Part Seven: The Child on the Step

Ephraim did not destroy the bottle.

That disappointed her.

He placed it in a locked iron box beneath the press and said he would throw the box into the harbour at high tide if she did not leave at once.

"You will not," she said.

"No," he said. "But I needed a sentence large enough for the moment."

No mark appeared.

That was almost funny.

Ursula walked home through the upper streets.

The siren had stopped, but people remained indoors. Fog gathered in low places: under carts, around cellar steps, in the cracks between paving stones. Green showed wherever water had failed to leave.

At the corner of Mercy Lane, she saw the child.

Amelia Cartwright sat on the step outside the closed washhouse, seven years old and too proud to cry properly. Ursula had corrected her copybooks three years earlier, when every capital letter had tried to become a tower. Her hair had come loose from its ribbon. One knee was muddy. In her lap lay a wooden horse, broken clean through the middle. One half in each hand.

The fog waited in the gutter a few inches from her shoes.

Ursula stopped.

The child looked up.

"I broke it," she said.

No mark.

Ursula's hand twitched, though she held no pencil.

The girl looked at the two pieces.

"It was my brother's."

No mark.

"He'll cry."

No mark.

"I wanted him to cry."

A green line appeared beneath wanted.

Then, after a pause, beneath cry.

The child saw nothing, of course.

Ursula did.

The old impulse rose: separate accident from intention and correct the easy comfort of never mind.

The fog in the gutter thickened.

The girl rubbed her nose with her sleeve.

"I'm bad," she said.

A green line appeared beneath bad. That line hurt more than the slap in the post office.

Ursula lowered herself to the step. Her knees objected.

"Your name is Amelia Cartwright," she said.

The child watched her with suspicion.

"So?"

"You broke it because you wanted him to cry. That was a rotten thing to do. It doesn't make you rotten all the way through."

The girl's eyes filled.

"Can it be mended?"

The fog crossed the gutter seam and gathered around the broken wheel of a handcart.

The child looked at the horse.

"I don't know."

"My father can mend some things."

"Then we shall ask him."

"I don't want to tell."

"No."

"Will you tell?"

Ursula thought of the post office. Of Arabella Thackery, who had gone back before dusk and had not been seen at market since. Of Mrs Hallowes. Of the mother letter. Of I wanted the truth, untouched and terrible.

"Yes," she said.

The child's face crumpled.

"Later."

The child blinked.

"When?"

"When you can stand up."

"I can stand up."

"Not yet."

They sat together on the step.

People opened doors along the lane. A man lifted a curtain. A woman called for someone named Cornelia. A cart horse stamped at fog near its hooves and was led away by a boy with rolled cuffs.

The girl held the broken horse. After a time, her weight settled against Ursula's sleeve, and Ursula let it remain.

A cart rolled through the gutter and pulled the fog into long green threads.

Ursula looked down and saw a green line cross her knuckles. It faded before she could decide whether it was accusation or instruction. For once, she let the question remain.

Part Eight: The Margin

The town continued speaking badly.

Ursula noticed.

There was no cure for noticing.

The mayor continued to avoid cause when describing responsibility. The vicar continued to borrow feeling from better men. Merchants exaggerated freshness. Widows enlarged affection. Husbands said only when they meant chiefly. Children said always because childhood has no respect for scale.

Ursula heard it all less cleanly after Ephraim locked the bottle away.

Or perhaps she chose not to listen at full strength.

Choice was an untidy word.

It would have marked itself, she suspected, if written in green.

She stopped sending anonymous corrections.

This caused confusion. The Chronicle editor printed two consecutive issues without receiving a single marked proof and was heard to say that the silence felt personal. He had misunderstood its direction.

Mrs Hallowes passed Ursula outside the grocer's in January.

They both stopped.

The street was wet. A little fog lay along the gutter, too pale to justify alarm.

Mrs Hallowes said, "You once corrected my husband's death notice."

"Yes."

"It was cruel."

"Yes."

"It was also not entirely wrong."

"No."

Mrs Hallowes adjusted her glove.

"I still hate you for it."

"That seems proportionate."

For the first time, Mrs Hallowes smiled with exact dislike.

They parted.

In February, Ephraim Braddock brought a small parcel to Ursula's rooms. The green line still crossed the pad of his right thumb.

Inside the parcel was the red pencil.

Her red pencil.

She had left it at the shop on the morning of the spill.

"I thought you might want it back," he said.

She took it.

"Did you destroy the bottle?"

"No."

"Did you throw it in the harbour?"

"No."

"Did you keep it under the press?"

"No."

"Where is it?"

"In a place that will make retrieval inconvenient."

"Inconvenient. Not hidden."

"That's all I'm telling you."

She looked at his mouth.

No line came.

"How imprecise," she said.

"Yes."

They stood by the window.

Below, Inkerman Lane sloped toward the lower town. The winter fog had retreated that morning, leaving the cobbles shining and the drains dark.

Ephraim said, "I have a proof I would like you to read."

She almost laughed.

"After everything?"

"Because of everything."

He handed her a card.

It was a funeral notice occupying three lines: a woman's name, dates and service time.

At the bottom, one sentence:

She was loved imperfectly and will be missed in the same manner.

Ursula read it twice.

"Who wrote this?"

"The husband."

"Did he?"

"After seven attempts and one broken composing stick."

She picked up the red pencil.

Ephraim watched her.

Ursula placed the point beneath imperfectly.

Then stopped.

She did not mark it.

She moved to missed, then loved. The pencil hovered there longer.

At last, in the margin, she wrote:

Leave.

Ephraim read it.

"Is that approval?"

"No."

"What is it?"

"A correction."

He smiled.

She did not.

After he left, Ursula stood at the window with the red pencil in her hand.

A child ran past below, dragging a wooden horse on a string. One half of its body was darker than the other where it had been mended. It rolled badly. The child did not seem to mind.

Somewhere in the lower town, Arabella Thackery was writing a letter or not writing one. Weeks earlier, Ursula had seen her outside the butcher's with her left glove buttoned too high for the weather. There had been no sentence to mark.

At the bottom of the lane, green fog gathered around the drain and stayed there.

Ursula watched it for a long time. Then she sat at the table and opened the Chronicle.

At the bottom of the first page, the council described the lower streets as safe.

She saw the green line beneath safe.

Present Perfect

Part One: The House of Second Opinions

After Marianne left her husband, Octavia brought tea, clean linen and a chair near the fire. She told Marianne to sit down and explain nothing.

The doctors and advisers behaved differently. They sat across from her with notebooks and asked her to repeat the worst events of her life. During the next seven years, Marianne spoke to clergy, one police officer, two hospital consultants and three women with soft hands who promised recovery without agreeing on what it required. She answered their questions. She named the kitchen. She named the belt. She named the winter evening when her father broke the lock on the pantry door because he had decided she was hiding something inside. She named the man she married too young because he had seemed quiet. She named the night she left him with one suitcase, no hat, and a cut across her cheek that bled through the towel she held against it all the way to the tram stop.

The first accounts helped. After seven years, repeating them only made the scenes easier to recite.

At thirty-six, Marianne Calderwood lived in a rented room above a stationer's shop on Caledonia Street and worked three afternoons a week in the municipal records office. She had steady hands, careful handwriting, and the useful habit of remembering dates. If asked for the building consent ledger of 1938, she could locate it in under a minute. She could not remember the last full night. The habit had begun after the pantry door and survived every house she had lived in since.

Years later, Theophilus Grange had sent her a pamphlet on nervous disorders with no note inside. Marianne had burned it in the grate and remembered the smell of the ink longer than the insult.

Her friend Octavia Bellweather found the advertisement in the back pages of The Mariborough Herald.

It was printed between a notice for artificial teeth and a man offering piano lessons to nervous children.

ASSISTED DESENSITISATION For persistent recollection, intrusive scenes, recurring emotional residues, and distressing bodily memory. Consultations by private appointment. Doctor Helena Vossamer The Clarendon Hydropathic Rooms Lower Salthorpe Road Discretion observed.

Octavia read it aloud at the tea table and made a little face.

"That sounds illegal."

Marianne took the newspaper.

"Everything useful sounds illegal at first."

"Marianne."

"She says doctor."

"So does Doctor Bellamont, and he told Mrs Keating that boiled onions would improve her husband's temper."

Marianne folded the page.

Octavia watched her carefully. She had been watching Marianne carefully for years.

"You have already decided."

"I have decided to ask."

"That is what people say when they have decided."

Marianne looked at the advertisement again.

"Persistent recollection," she said.

"Yes."

"Recurring emotional residues."

"Quack words."

"They are quite good quack words."

Octavia reached across the table and put two fingers on the newspaper.

"You are not a machine with a broken part."

"No."

"If you loosen those years, what else moves with them?"

Marianne gave the small smile Octavia had learned to distrust.

"I don't want it gone. I want to sleep."

"What are you asking for?"

Marianne folded the clipping into a neat square.

"I want it to stop waking me."

Octavia did not answer at once.

Outside, a tram passed the window. The cups trembled in their saucers. In the street below, a boy in a brown cap ran after it and missed the rear platform by inches. He stopped, bent with his hands on his knees, and laughed as if missing a tram had no consequence in the world.

Marianne watched him until he straightened.

Octavia said, "Let me come with you."

"No."

"Then let me make inquiries."

Marianne folded the clipping again, although it was already folded. "I know her address."

"That is not knowledge."

"It is enough for Thursday."

The appointment was made by letter.

Doctor Helena Vossamer did not use the telephone. Marianne found that reassuring. A letter could be written, posted, considered and answered without anyone interrupting her.

The reply came on cream paper, three days later.

Dear Mrs Calderwood,

Your case may be suitable for guided desensitisation with atmospheric assistance. Please attend the Clarendon Hydropathic Rooms at four o'clock on

Thursday. Do not take alcohol, sedatives, stimulants, or patent calming preparations in the preceding twenty-four hours. Bring no companion into the treatment room. You may bring a companion to the building.

Wear comfortable shoes.

H. Vossamer

Marianne read the letter twice. The instruction about comfortable shoes pleased her more than it should have. She had known convincing frauds before, and some of them had been very good at practical details.

On Thursday, she took the coastal tram to Lower Salthorpe Road.

She had not been that far toward the marsh for five years.

The town thinned as the tram went south. Shops became warehouses. Warehouses became yards. Yards became waste ground fenced with wire. Beyond the tramline, the land sagged toward the salt flats, where drainage ditches caught the pale afternoon light in dull strips.

Marianne kept her eyes on her gloves.

At the final stop, she stepped down alone.

The Clarendon Hydropathic Rooms stood at the end of a private road behind iron gates with the name still visible in flaking gold. It had been built in a more confident century, when nervous people believed in mineral water, sea air, rest cures, and high windows. The building was long and pale, with a glass veranda along the front and a tower at one corner. Half the windows were boarded. The fountain in the drive held rainwater and three drowned leaves.

A woman waited in the entrance hall.

She was tall, perhaps fifty, perhaps older. Her silver hair was pinned low. She wore a plain dark green dress beneath a white medical coat. Her expression remained calm, and she did not smile when Marianne entered.

"Mrs Calderwood."

"Yes."

"I am Doctor Vossamer."

They did not shake hands.

The hall smelled of disinfectant, damp plaster, and something faintly metallic. Old treatment rooms opened on either side. Marianne saw a tiled bath, a weighing chair, a screen, a cabinet of glass jars, a row of labelled drawers.

"You came alone."

"Yes."

"That is preferable."

Doctor Vossamer turned and walked toward the rear of the building.

Marianne followed.

"Have you undertaken ordinary talking treatment?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"On and off. Seven years."

"Useful?"

"At first."

"And after that?"

"It became rehearsal."

Doctor Vossamer glanced back.

"When did it become rehearsal?"

They passed through a narrow corridor where framed medical certificates had browned behind glass. At the end was a door with a brass plate.

ASSISTED RECOLLECTION SUITE

The room beyond surprised Marianne.

She had expected a surgery, perhaps a laboratory. Instead she found something close to a parlour. There were two chairs angled toward one another. A low table. A standing lamp with a green glass shade. A screen painted with reeds and cranes. On the wall hung a clock with no numbers.

Near the window stood a sealed cabinet containing three glass cylinders.

The cylinders were filled with fog.

Marianne stopped.

Doctor Vossamer closed the door behind them.

"You use it."

"Yes."

"I thought atmospheric assistance was a phrase."

"It is."

"But you mean the fog."

"I mean treated condensate from verified ground level formation, diluted and stabilised."

Marianne looked at the glass cylinders.

The fog inside them did not move like steam. It thickened in layers. A faint green colour gathered near the bottom of each vessel, then withdrew, then gathered again.

"Is that safe?"

"No."

Doctor Vossamer crossed to the low table and opened a file.

Marianne waited.

Doctor Vossamer looked up.

"No. I can control the dose and the time. Nothing else."

"How often do you lose control?"

"Twice. Both sessions ended early."

That should have ended the consultation.

Marianne knew this. Octavia would have stood up. Any prudent woman would have stood up.

Instead, Marianne took off her gloves.

Doctor Vossamer watched the movement.

"You are still interested."

"Yes."

"Sit."

Part Two: The Green Lamp

The first hour was ordinary enough to be disappointing.

Doctor Vossamer asked questions. Marianne answered them. The questions were not tender, which helped.

Date of birth. Family situation. Present employment. Sleep. Appetite. Fear responses. Sensory triggers. Particular objects that caused distress. Smells. Phrases. Rooms. Weather. Men with heavy boots. Men who spoke softly after breaking something. Doors locked from the outside.

Doctor Vossamer wrote very little.

At last she said, "What do you want removed?"

Marianne had prepared for the question.

"The force of it."

"Not the memory."

"No."

"You wish to remember events without being returned to them."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Marianne looked at the green lamp.

"Because they keep happening."

Doctor Vossamer nodded once.

"People can know exactly what happened and still wake at the same hour," Doctor Vossamer said. "They can know whose fault it was and still stop at the same door."

Marianne looked at her.

"Yes."

"That is the part I am trying to loosen."

"The binding?"

"The recollection arrives, and your body follows it. I am interested in the interval between the two."

Marianne leaned forward before she had decided whether to hope.

Doctor Vossamer opened a drawer and removed a pair of small brass instruments joined by a black cord. Each instrument ended in a glass bead.

"Have you heard of bilateral stimulation?"

"Yes."

"Good. We will use a related procedure. You will follow two moving points of light while recalling a selected scene. A very small quantity of fog will be introduced into the lamp. The fog sometimes creates a gap. I use the gap."

"How?"

Doctor Vossamer gave her a dry look.

"Mrs Calderwood, if I knew how in a manner that would satisfy a scientific board, I would not be operating in a derelict hydropathic house behind a locked gate."

Marianne laughed once.

The sound startled her.

Doctor Vossamer did not smile.

"There are consent forms."

"I expected there would be."

"You should read them."

"I will."

"There are risks."

"I expected those too."

Doctor Vossamer took the forms from a drawer, glanced at the printed date as though it had been supplied for her benefit, and passed them across.

The print was close and neat. Marianne read every line. She signed at the bottom of each page.

Adverse effects may include nausea, dissociation, altered sensory association, memory disturbance, changes in sleep or appetite, and effects not yet classified.

"Present fixation," Marianne said.

"Rare."

"What does it mean?"

"The patient becomes overly attached to immediate stimuli. It usually resolves."

Marianne read the final clause again.

Effects not yet classified.

Doctor Vossamer took back the papers.

"Do you wish to proceed?"

"Yes."

"Which scene?"

"The pantry."

Doctor Vossamer paused.

"Why that one?"

"It has the most doors."

The treatment began at twenty minutes past five.

Doctor Vossamer lowered the blinds. She took one of the cylinders from the cabinet, fixed it beneath the green lamp, and opened a silver valve by less than a quarter turn.

At first nothing happened.

Then the light inside the shade thickened.

Green spread through the shade slowly, though the lamp did not brighten. The screen and walls blurred while the chairs, Marianne's gloves and the seams in the carpet became sharper. She felt the pressure of her shoes and heard the

old building settle around them.

Doctor Vossamer sat opposite her and lifted the brass instruments.

Two green points appeared in the glass beads.

"Follow the lights. Do not move your head."

Marianne fixed on the left bead, then the right.

Left. Right.

"Bring up the pantry."

Left. Right.

"No need to speak."

Left. Right.

She saw the kitchen first.

Only the lower half of the kitchen returned: flagstone floor, chair leg, the black stove with its ash pan open, a piece of onion skin near the table, her own twelve-year-old hands pressed against the pantry door from inside. She had been put there because her father believed she had stolen money from the blue jar. There had been no money in the jar for three weeks. Her mother had taken it for coal and said nothing.

Left. Right.

Her father's boots crossed the kitchen.

Left. Right.

She smelled beer, cold fat, damp wool.

Left. Right.

The latch did not lift. The belt struck the outside of the door.

Once.

Twice.

Marianne waited through several seconds of line noise.

Then his voice.

"You think I don't know what you are?"

Marianne gripped the arms of the chair.

"Stay with the lights," Doctor Vossamer said.

"I can't."

"You are."

Left. Right.

The door shook. The child inside it did not cry. Crying would bring the belt closer. She had known that. Even then she had known how to make herself into less.

Left. Right.

The green light deepened.

The pantry door became clearer than it had ever been in memory. The scratched paint. The dark around the keyhole. One bent nail near the hinge. A small smear where jam had dried and been wiped away badly.

Left. Right.

Then the door receded without opening, as if the kitchen were a picture and someone had pulled it away from her face. The sound went with it. The belt. The boots. The voice. All of it became smaller.

Marianne breathed.

Doctor Vossamer said, "What do you notice?"

"It is further away."

"Good. Keep following."

Left. Right.

The pantry became smaller still. It remained, but no longer surrounded her.

For a moment, Marianne saw the scene with almost scholarly clarity. A child in a cupboard. A man outside. A mother somewhere not intervening. A house containing three kinds of fear and no exit suitable for a child.

A sad arrangement.

That was all.

Then the strangest thought came to her.

Poor girl.

The thought did not feel compassionate. It felt misaddressed. As if the child behind the pantry door belonged to a case file, a photograph, someone else's winter.

Doctor Vossamer's lights stopped.

Marianne blinked.

The room returned. The screen. The green lamp. The old clock without numbers.

Her face was wet.

She had not felt herself crying.

Doctor Vossamer closed the valve beneath the lamp.

"How is the scene now?"

Marianne searched for it.

The pantry appeared at once. The door. The smell. The belt.

But it did not take her.

"It happened," she said.

"Yes."

"It isn't happening."

For the first time in years, memory had behaved itself.

Doctor Vossamer sat back.

"The first pass is complete."

Marianne looked at her own hands.

They were steady.

"When can we do another?"

Doctor Vossamer watched her for several seconds.

"Not today."

"I can pay."

"That was not my reason."

"I know."

"You will go home. You will eat something plain. You will write down any changes in sleep, appetite, temperature, dreams, and emotional recognition. You will not make important decisions for forty-eight hours."

"Emotional recognition?"

"If you look at something and know what you ought to feel but cannot feel it, write that down."

Marianne put on her gloves.

"Is that likely?"

"No."

Doctor Vossamer answered too quickly.

Part Three: The Mercy of Distance

That night, Marianne slept for nine hours.

She woke at half past seven with daylight on the curtains and no sense of being late for an emergency.

For several minutes she did not move.

The room above the stationer's shop was narrow, neat, and cold. A basin stood under the window. Her work dress hung from a hook on the wardrobe door. There were three books on the chair, all unfinished. On the washstand lay a packet of cream record cards bought from the shop downstairs. Marianne had ruled each one into four fields: DATE, OCCURRENCE, RECOLLECTION, RESPONSE.

Marianne sat up.

No dream.

No shouting from downstairs.

No door.

She waited for gratitude.

Something like it came, but faintly, as if from another room.

She took the first card.

DATE: Friday morning

OCCURRENCE: Waking

RECOLLECTION: Pantry available but distant

RESPONSE: Slight delay. Hands steady.

Then she dressed and went to work.

The municipal records office occupied the basement of the town hall, which smelled of paper, coal smoke, ink, and damp coats. Marianne had always liked it. Old records had no interest in surprise. They sat where they were placed until summoned. Births, deaths, permits, debts, complaints, licences, transfers. Proof that life could be reduced to entries if one was sufficiently patient.

Her supervisor, Mister Leontius Harrow, looked over his spectacles when she arrived.

"You appear rested."

"Yes."

"That is unusual."

"Yes."

He waited for a fuller answer. Marianne did not provide one.

At eleven, she carried the 1912 drainage register to the front desk for a builder who had come in about an old culvert. The man had wide shoulders, rough hands, and a voice like a chair dragged across stone.

"Quicker, miss. I'm losing half a day."

Ordinarily, Marianne's chest would have tightened. No one would have seen it, but inside the old mechanism would have started: heavy voice, male impatience, a desk between them, no clear exit.

This time she looked at him and saw only a man with mud on his cuff.

"The register is here," she said. "The fee is sixpence."

"I paid last time."

"Then you were undercharged last time."

He stared at her.

She stared back.

After a moment he took out the coins.

At luncheon, Marianne walked to Octavia Bellweather's house and ate broth with bread.

Octavia watched her from across the table.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Do not do that."

Marianne buttered another piece of bread.

"It worked."

Octavia's face changed.

"How?"

"I can remember the pantry. It no longer enters me."

"What do you remember when you think of it?"

"The fear. I think."

"Are you happy?"

Marianne considered the question.

"I slept."

"That is not happy."

"No. It is better."

Octavia leaned back.

"I don't like it."

"You don't need to."

"No, but you brought it here."

Marianne set down the knife.

"I came for luncheon."

"You came to be observed and deny that observation is necessary."

Marianne almost smiled.

"You are becoming difficult."

"I have always been difficult. You were simply too distressed to enjoy it."

Marianne recognised the irritation as Octavia's form of kindness. She registered it accurately. The warmth that should have answered did not arrive.

That evening she completed a second card.

OCCURRENCE: Luncheon with Octavia Bellweather

RECOLLECTION: Shared history intact

RESPONSE: Affection present as fact, not sensation. May be fatigue.

The second appointment took place five days later.

Doctor Vossamer read the cards, then looked at the date on the first.

"How long since the first session?"

"Five days."

The answer was already in front of her. Doctor Vossamer made no acknowledgement of that.

"Emotional delay," she said.

"Yes."

"Affection present as fact."

"Yes."

"Do you find that distressing?"

Marianne sat opposite her in the treatment room. The fog cylinders waited in the cabinet. The green lamp was unlit.

"No."

"Do you think you ought to?"

"Yes."

"That distinction matters."

"I assumed so."

Doctor Vossamer squared the cards against the table and set them down.

"I recommend waiting two weeks."

Marianne looked at the cabinet.

"Why?"

"Because early relief can be mistaken for cure. The mind reorganises around absence. We must see what structure emerges."

"I have spent years emerging."

"Mrs Calderwood."

"No."

Doctor Vossamer stilled.

Marianne heard her own voice and was surprised by its firmness.

"No more waiting."

"You are not obliged to continue."

"I know."

"You are not obliged to stop either. That is what makes this dangerous."

Marianne looked at the green lamp.

"The pantry is quiet. I want the staircase."

"Which staircase?"

"My husband's house."

Doctor Vossamer said nothing.

"He liked to stand at the top when I came in. If I was late, he stood there. If I had spent money, he stood there. If I had spoken to a neighbour too long, he

stood there. He did not need to come down."

"And you wish to desensitise that scene."

"I wish to walk up a staircase without checking the landing."

Doctor Vossamer's expression did not change.

"Very well."

The second session was harder.

The staircase receded slowly, as if the hall resisted the treatment. Marianne followed the green lights and saw the narrow hall of her husband's house, the umbrella stand, the wallpaper with brown flowers, the weak gaslight, the shadow at the top of the stairs.

Left. Right.

His name was Theophilus Grange.

She did not like remembering the name, because it had a soft beginning and a hard end. Theo when pleased. Theophilus when injured. Mister Grange in public. A reasonable man. A quiet man. A man who never raised his voice where others could hear.

Left. Right.

"Where have you been, Marianne?"

Left. Right.

"At Mrs Bellweather's."

Left. Right.

"Again?"

Left. Right.

The lamp deepened.

The hall stretched thin. The wallpaper flattened. The shadow at the landing became a shape. A man. A tired man with his hand on the banister, preserving power because he had no other talent of consequence.

Then even that became smaller.

Marianne watched him from a distance.

Poor man, she thought.

This alarmed her.

She did not wish to pity him.

Doctor Vossamer said, "What do you notice?"

"I feel sorry for him."

"That may occur."

"I don't want it."

"The procedure reduces intensity. It cannot separate hatred from the rest of the attachment."

"So is love."

Doctor Vossamer did not answer.

The lights moved again.

Left. Right.

The staircase diminished.

He shrank to a tired man standing at the top of a staircase with one hand on the banister.

When Marianne left the Clarendon Rooms, twilight had gathered on Lower Salthorpe Road.

The coastal tram was late.

A green mist lay in the gutter across the road.

Marianne stood under the shelter and watched it.

Before the treatment, she would have moved away. Everyone moved away from ground fog when it came inland, even in small amounts. It was not always dangerous. That was what the notices said. Avoid unnecessary exposure. Report unusual behaviour. Do not touch condensed material. Do not allow children or animals into affected areas.

The fog was thin, no higher than the curb.

It collected around a cigarette end. Covered it. Uncovered it. Covered it again.

Marianne felt no fear.

She knew fear would be appropriate.

She completed another card before bed.

Part Four: The Place Where Pain Had Been

By the fourth treatment, Marianne followed the same routine every day and felt little while doing it.

She rose at seven. Washed. Dressed. Ate what was necessary. Worked accurately. Returned home. Filed a card. Slept.

The nightmares did not return. Neither did several other things.

Music no longer troubled her, which was a mercy. Church bells no longer made her count exits. Heavy boots behind her on pavement were only heavy boots. A locked door was a locked door.

Octavia came to the room above the stationer's shop one evening and found Marianne sorting old letters into three piles.

"What are you doing?"

"Discarding."

Octavia looked at the piles.

"Those are from me."

"Yes."

"Why are they in the discard pile?"

"They refer to periods I no longer find useful."

Octavia picked up the top letter.

"I wrote this the week after you left Theophilus."

"I know."

"You stayed with me for two months."

"Yes."

"Does that also no longer seem useful?"

"It was useful at the time."

"At the time?"

Marianne tied the discard pile with string.

Octavia put the letter down carefully.

"You sound like a clerk describing a demolished shed."

Marianne looked up.

"I don't mean to be unkind."

"I know. I wish you were."

"Why?"

"Because then I could be angry with you."

Marianne considered this.

Octavia's eyes were bright, and her fingers tightened around the handle of her bag. Marianne looked at the hand, then at the three neat piles of letters on the table. The arrangement pleased her more than it should have.

"I am still fond of you," Marianne said.

Octavia flinched.

"Fond."

"Yes."

"How fortunate."

"Would you prefer another word?"

"I would prefer the woman who knew one."

Marianne touched the string around the letters.

"That woman was in pain."

"Yes."

"And you miss her."

Octavia's face hardened.

"No. I loved her."

Neither woman spoke after Octavia said it.

Marianne looked at it, as one might look at an object set down unexpectedly.

"I understand," she said.

"No, you don't."

Octavia left without taking tea.

After supper Marianne filed another card.

OCCURRENCE: Octavia left without tea

RECOLLECTION: Cause and sequence intact

RESPONSE: Distress recognised, not shared. Absence not unpleasant. Attachment terms becoming approximate.

At the next appointment, Doctor Vossamer read the entry twice.

"You should stop."

Marianne sat with her hands folded.

"Are you refusing treatment?"

"I am advising cessation."

"On what ground?"

"Continuity."

"Mine?"

"Yes."

Marianne looked at the lamp.

"I feel better."

"You feel less."

"Those are not opposites."

"No. That is why I am advising caution."

Marianne leaned forward.

"When I came here, I checked landings before entering rooms. I counted footsteps. I woke before dawn because a door had once been locked. Those things have stopped. Do not ask me to praise the chains because I no longer speak warmly enough about them."

Doctor Vossamer's eyes sharpened.

"Relief is not the same as continuity."

"I prefer it."

Doctor Vossamer was silent for several moments.

"What scene next?"

"My wedding."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know anymore why I married him."

Doctor Vossamer stood.

"I will not treat that memory."

Marianne went still.

"Why?"

"Because you are no longer reducing trauma. You are dissolving consequence."

"Good."

"No."

Marianne stood.

"Then I will find another practitioner."

"There is no other practitioner."

"I doubt that."

Doctor Vossamer walked to the cabinet and locked it.

"Do you know why this method remains unofficial?"

"Because official men are timid."

"Because patients return too eagerly."

Marianne said nothing.

"They come for relief. Then for simplification. Then absence."

"Have you treated them?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

Doctor Vossamer placed the key in her pocket.

"They became easy to injure."

"I am harder to injure now."

"No. You are harder to warn."

The room seemed colder.

Marianne put on her gloves.

"I would like my notes."

"They are clinical records."

"They are mine."

"Not entirely."

Marianne looked at her.

Doctor Vossamer held her gaze.

For the first time since the first treatment, Marianne felt something immediate.

Anger.

It rose cleanly. The irritation came cleanly, without heat or memory attached: a simple objection to obstruction.

"I paid you."

"Yes."

"You used my memories."

"Yes."

"You do not get to keep them."

Doctor Vossamer did not answer.

Marianne left without another word.

Outside, Lower Salthorpe Road lay under a low evening sky. The tramlines shone. The wind carried salt from the marsh.

Halfway to the stop, Marianne turned back and went around to the rear of the building.

The service gate was locked. Beneath the nearest window, the coal hatch stood a finger's width open. Marianne pulled until the rusted catch gave with a low crack, then climbed into the scullery.

No one came.

The building was darker than she expected. Doctor Vossamer must have shut the front rooms. Marianne moved through the corridor by memory. Past the tiled bath. Past the weighing chair. Past the glass jars.

At the treatment room door, she paused.

There were voices inside.

Doctor Vossamer's voice.

And another.

A man.

Marianne leaned closer.

The man was speaking softly.

"But will she come back?"

Doctor Vossamer said, "Almost certainly."

"You told me the same of the boy."

"The boy had no wish to be free of anything. His mother brought him. That produces poor outcomes."

"She is different?"

"She has discipline. That is more dangerous."

Marianne put her hand on the door handle.

The man said, "And profitable?"

Doctor Vossamer said nothing.

Marianne opened the door.

Doctor Vossamer stood by the cabinet.

Beside her was a man Marianne had not seen for eight years.

Theophilus Grange had grown heavier in the face. His hair had thinned. He wore a dark suit too narrow across the stomach and held his hat in both hands. At the sight of Marianne, he smiled with surprise before he remembered what expression ought to follow.

"Marianne."

She looked at him.

Marianne's shoulders tightened when she saw him. The old hall should have returned. The old hall should have returned. The stairs. The gaslight. The careful placement of his hand on the banister. Her body should have prepared to flee or submit or survive.

It did not.

He was a man in a badly fitting suit.

That was all.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Theophilus glanced at Doctor Vossamer.

"I was concerned."

Marianne looked at Doctor Vossamer.

"You told him I was here."

"He wrote after your first session," Doctor Vossamer said.

"And you answered."

"Once."

Theophilus shifted his hat between his hands. "A mutual acquaintance had already mentioned your improvement."

"My improvement."

"You have been unwell for a long time, Marianne."

"No."

"Distressed, then."

"Yes."

"And I always hoped you might find peace."

The sentence was so smoothly false that Marianne almost admired it.

Doctor Vossamer said, "Mrs Calderwood, this is not part of treatment."

"No," Marianne said. "It is part of commerce."

Theophilus lifted his hands.

"I did not come to quarrel."

"You rarely did."

He looked wounded by that. Wounded was one of his better masks.

Marianne turned to the cabinet.

"I came for my notes."

Doctor Vossamer stood in her way.

"You are not well."

"I am extremely well."

"No."

Theophilus took a step toward her.

"Marianne, listen to the doctor."

He said it in the old stairway voice.

At that, something in the lamp flickered.

It was not lit.

Still, the green shade darkened from within.

Doctor Vossamer saw it. Her face changed.

"Step away from her."

Theophilus stopped.

Marianne looked at the lamp.

Inside the green glass, fog had gathered.

There was no cylinder attached.

Theophilus said, "What is that?"

Doctor Vossamer moved toward the lamp. Too late.

The room filled with a smell of wet iron and reeds.

Marianne heard a door open somewhere inside herself.

The space behind it held no terror. It was empty.

The fog slid from beneath the green shade, circled Marianne's shoes and crossed the carpet toward the cabinet.

Doctor Vossamer whispered, "No."

Theophilus moved to the door.

Marianne watched the green deepen in the keyhole. The cabinet door eased open.

Inside were dozens of files.

The fog entered the shelves and touched the paper. Names appeared and vanished through the green breath.

Cassandra Valehouse. Beatrice Moravian. Eleanor Whitstable. Leontine Ashbury. Marianne Calderwood.

Doctor Vossamer reached for the nearest file.

The fog climbed her wrist.

She made a sound Marianne had not expected from her.

Fear.

Theophilus left. His shoulder brushed the doorframe, and his footsteps receded along the corridor.

Marianne took her file from the cabinet.

The fog moved aside from the paper, as if the file had already changed hands.

Doctor Vossamer stood with her hand half raised. Her fingers had gone pale.

"Do not read it here," she said.

"Why?"

Doctor Vossamer looked at the open cabinet. "Because I do not know what the files will do."

Marianne opened the file.

There were the consent forms. Session notes. Observations in Doctor Vossamer's precise hand.

High tolerance. Rapid detachment. Strong verbal ordering. Second pass produced movement after verbal recall ceased. Direction unclear. Further exposure contraindicated.

Marianne read the final line twice.

Do not assume reduction.

She turned the page.

There was one more note, dated before the first appointment.

Collateral history supplied by T. Grange. Interested party requests reduction of adversarial fixation concerning marital conduct. Fees guaranteed.

Sequence returned with such force that Marianne gripped the file. Theophilus had reached the Clarendon Rooms before she did. Doctor Vossamer had received his version of Marianne first.

Marianne closed the file.

Doctor Vossamer said, "I did not follow his requested outcome."

"You took his account and confirmed I was here."

"Yes."

"Then you stopped late."

The fog reached the floorboards.

From somewhere inside the building came the sound of a child laughing, then a woman sobbing, then a man saying a name over and over until it became only noise.

The files in the cabinet stirred.

Doctor Vossamer looked suddenly old.

"Leave now."

Marianne tucked the file under her arm.

"Will you?"

"I cannot."

"Why?"

Doctor Vossamer looked at the green lamp.

"I have no life before these rooms that I can still enter."

The fog rose behind her.

For one instant, Marianne saw a young woman in a bath chair under a glass veranda, her wrists tied with linen, her eyes fixed on the marsh. Then it was gone.

Doctor Vossamer said, "Go."

Marianne went.

This time she left through the front door.

Theophilus Grange was standing in the drive.

"Marianne."

She walked past him.

"Wait."

She did not.

"I should not have written to her."

"No."

"Then you were careless, not cruel."

He said nothing.

"But not innocent."

The fog lifted over the edge of the ditch.

Theophilus saw it and stepped back.

Marianne turned toward the tram stop.

Part Five: The Claim

The Clarendon Hydropathic Rooms burned that night. The official report named faulty wiring in the rear treatment suite. Doctor Vossamer was not found. Theophilus Grange left Mariborough before the inquest. He wrote one letter to Marianne. She recognised the hand and burned it unopened over the kitchen sink.

Octavia Bellweather came three days after the fire.

Marianne let her in.

The room above the stationer's shop had changed. The old letters were gone. The books remained. A grey index box stood open on the table, its cards arranged by date. Beside it, one envelope lay face down, its back torn open.

Octavia removed her gloves slowly.

"You are alive."

"Yes."

"I heard about the fire."

"Yes."

"Were you there?"

"Yes."

Octavia closed her eyes briefly.

"I see."

Octavia looked at the envelope.

"You kept one."

"The address was useful."

Octavia nodded once, as if struck somewhere no bruise would show.

Marianne made tea.

They sat opposite one another by the window. Below, the stationer's boy stacked brown paper in the display. A woman crossed the street holding a parcel against the rain.

Octavia said, "Do you remember me?"

Marianne looked at her.

"Yes."

"That was not meant as an insult."

"I know."

"Do you remember staying with me?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember why?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember what it felt like?"

Marianne watched steam rise from the cups.

"No."

Octavia's face tightened.

Marianne wanted to want to comfort her.

"I know I loved you," she said.

Octavia looked away.

"That is not the same."

"No."

"Do you mind?"

Marianne considered lying because social peace still had uses, even though shame had become difficult.

Then she decided against it.

"No."

Octavia nodded.

"That is what I thought."

Rain began against the window. A practical rain fell, hard enough to clean signs and send clerks walking faster.

Octavia said, "What will you do?"

"I don't know."

"That frightens me."

"Does it?"

"Yes."

Marianne accepted this.

Octavia leaned forward.

"Marianne, pain warned you sometimes. You don't have that warning now."

"Doctor Vossamer said something similar."

"She was right."

"She also accepted money from Theophilus."

"They can be right and still be cruel."

Marianne almost smiled.

"That sounds like you."

"It is me."

For a moment, Marianne's chest tightened and she wanted to reach for Octavia.

Marianne looked at Octavia.

Octavia saw it. Her own face changed with quick, painful hope.

Then the pressure faded.

"I am sorry," Marianne said.

Octavia stood.

"No. You aren't."

The words were accurate.

That made them worse.

Octavia took up her gloves.

At the door she stopped.

"Don't come because you think you ought to. Come if you actually want to."

After she left, Marianne drew a fresh card from the box.

OCCURRENCE: Octavia visited

RECOLLECTION: History intact

RESPONSE: She grieved. My chest tightened when she spoke sharply. The feeling faded. I remember our history but did not want to comfort her.

She paused, then added a final field beneath the others.

POSSIBLE LOSS: Past events affect me only while I deliberately recall them.

In the following weeks Marianne stopped preparing for later days. She forgot promises unless she read them, neglected friendships unless someone appeared in front of her, and at work began treating dates as labels rather than sequence. Mister Harrow sent her home early after she reordered an archive by the physical condition of its ledgers instead of year and department.

"I made an error," she told him.

"You do not make errors."

"I have begun."

On the tram, Marianne recognised the blue door at Caledonia Street and counted the nine steps to the first landing, then the seven to the second. She did not stand. By the time she understood that she should have left the tram, it had

crossed the canal and continued south.

Past the last row of houses.

Past the rusted sign for Lower Salthorpe Road.

When she looked up, the Clarendon gates were visible through the rain.

The tram stopped.

No one else got down.

Marianne stepped onto the road.

The gate hung open.

She entered.

The fountain in the drive was full of ash coloured water. The veranda glass had shattered. The tower still stood, though the upper windows were blind holes. Rain moved through the ruins with soft authority.

Marianne walked to the rear of the building.

The treatment room had no roof.

Charred beams crossed the floor. The green lamp had melted into a twist of glass and metal. The cabinet was gone. Paper ash lay in the corners where rain had not reached.

In the place where Doctor Vossamer had stood, a low drift of green fog rested on the boards.

It should not have remained there.

The fire had been weeks ago. The room was open to weather. Yet a low sheet of it remained beneath the open roof.

Marianne stood in the doorway.

"I came back," she said.

The fog did not move.

"I don't know why."

Rain ticked against broken glass.

Marianne stepped into the room.

The fog parted around her shoes.

At once she saw the pantry, present again without surrounding her.

Then Octavia's spare room: yellow curtains, a chipped jug, the blanket folded twice because Octavia knew she felt cold even when she denied it.

The rest arrived without order. The blue scarf she once owned. Her mother's kitchen. Octavia laughing with a plum stone between her teeth. Theophilus at the landing. Doctor Vossamer's hand on the valve. The boy missing the tram. The cream letter. The first night of sleep. The burning file. The moment in the treatment room when anger had risen clean and bright.

She saw each memory clearly but felt no connection between them. Together they described her life, yet they still seemed to belong to a case file rather than to her.

Marianne lowered herself onto the surviving chair.

Its upholstery was burned at the edges.

The fog rose to her knees.

A voice spoke from the room. It belonged to none of the people she expected. It was her own.

"Again," it said.

Marianne closed her eyes.

The green darkness behind them filled with doors.

The fog remained still.

Marianne opened her eyes.

"No," she said.

The word sounded weak.

So she said it again.

"No."

The fog moved.

A thread of it rose from the floor and touched her mouth.

For a moment, she tasted everything.

Coal dust. Tea. Blood. Rain. Old paper. Onion skin. Octavia's lavender soap. Theophilus's beer breath. Doctor Vossamer's disinfectant. Damp wool. Burned wood. Salt.

Then came carbolic soap, wet linen around her wrists and rain striking a glass roof she had never stood beneath.

Marianne gagged and bent forward in the burned chair. She cried with both hands over her face as the pantry door, Octavia, the discarded letters and Doctor Vossamer's treatment hurt again. The pain returned with the memories she had tried to separate from it.

When it was over, the light above the roofless room had begun to fade.

The fog had thinned.

Marianne stood. Her legs shook, her throat burned and her hands were black with ash from the chair arms. The ruined room looked solid again.

At the doorway, she looked back.

Something pale lay in the ash near the melted lamp.

A page.

She picked it up.

Most of the writing had burned away. Only the final line remained, in Doctor Vossamer's hand.

Further exposure contraindicated.

Marianne folded the page and put it in her coat pocket.

Then she walked to the tram stop.

The first tram did not come.

The second was late.

She waited in the cold and felt it.

At Caledonia Street, she climbed the stairs to her room, removed her wet coat, and sat at the table.

She took out a clean sheet of paper.

Dear Octavia,

I remember the yellow curtains.

I remember what I did. I have started this letter three times. I still don't know what I am trying to say.

She stopped, crossed out nothing, and continued until her hand cramped.

Before folding the letter, she drew a fresh card from the index box.

STATUS: Unowned recollection

DETAIL: Glass veranda, linen restraints, rain overhead

She looked at the final field on the card.

SOURCE:

Marianne left it blank.

The Laughing Room

Part One: Bexhill

Arthur Keene knew he had lost them when the cough got the biggest laugh of the night.

It came from the fourth row, a dry little bark from a woman in a red scarf, just after his line about train sandwiches. The line had never been brilliant, only reliable. It had carried him through provincial theatres, charity galas, panel show warm-ups, one royal lunch and three divorces if one counted other people's.

That night it landed with the soft, terminal sound of a glove dropped onto carpet.

Then the woman coughed.

The room laughed. Not at him, exactly. The cough had interrupted a joke that was failing, and the interruption had surprised them more than the line.

He stood beneath the lights and smiled.

"You see?" he said. "Even tuberculosis has better timing than I do."

A few people laughed. The woman in the red scarf looked alarmed.

Arthur continued.

He did twelve more minutes because the contract required a full hour and he had never left a stage early. He told the one about hotels putting decorative cushions on beds so that guests could begin every evening by doing unpaid work. He told the one about ageing.

"Age is just a number," he said. "Unfortunately mine has started answering the phone."

That used to work.

Tonight it produced a small, loyal murmur from the front row and nothing behind it.

At the end, they clapped harder than they had laughed. Arthur recognised the applause audiences gave an old performer when they wanted to thank him for earlier years.

Backstage, he sat in the dressing room and watched his stage smile fade in the mirror.

The theatre was in Bexhill, though it could have been any coastal venue that still booked him because older audiences remembered him and municipal programmes preferred familiar names. Cream walls. Red seats. A bar that smelt of white wine and damp carpet. Photographs of better nights in the foyer, including Arthur himself twenty-seven years earlier, collar open, eyes bright, one hand raised as if calling the century to order.

Now the same face looked back at him under poor bulbs.

He had not been destroyed. Destruction would at least have ended the act. Instead, theatres continued to book him and audiences continued to applaud.

His old manager came in without knocking.

Bernard Crewe had represented Arthur for thirty-one years and dressed as if still hoping the BBC might call during lunch. Grey suit. Maroon scarf. Shoes polished beyond reason. He closed the door with care.

"Well," Bernard said.

Arthur waited.

"You held them."

Arthur looked at him. "They stayed because they had paid and left their coats downstairs."

Bernard placed a paper cup of tea on the dressing table.

"You're tired."

"I'm not tired."

"You are. You're angry too, but that's not new."

Arthur looked at the cup. Tea in theatres always tasted as if it had passed through a committee.

"What did I get?" he asked.

Bernard did not answer quickly enough.

"Don't smooth it," Arthur said.

"Two stars in the early edition."

"Who?"

"The Herald."

"Local?"

"No."

Arthur nodded. That hurt more than if it had been local. Local reviewers still used phrases like "much-loved" and "a welcome return". National reviewers were paid to identify decay before the subject had finished dying.

"What did it say?"

Bernard removed his glasses and wiped them with a cloth.

"That you remain an assured technician."

"Dear God."

"That your timing is intact."

"Put that on my stone."

"And that the material no longer appears to know the world it is addressing."

Arthur looked at himself in the mirror.

"The material," Arthur said. "Convenient."

Bernard put the cloth back in his pocket.

Arthur leaned back in the chair. Somewhere beyond the wall, the audience was leaving. He could hear the low corridor movement of coats, greetings, plastic cups dropped into bins. A woman laughed properly at something in the bar. A real laugh. Sudden, cracked, without permission.

Arthur wanted that sudden, unforced laugh from the bar more than he wanted the applause he had just received.

"Cancel Worthing," he said.

"I won't do that."

"Then cancel me."

"You have three weeks booked."

"Then unbook them."

"Arthur."

"I'm not doing this. I'm not walking out night after night so people can be decent at me."

Bernard put his glasses back on.

"There are ways of adjusting."

"Adjusting."

"Yes."

"To what? Assisted living?"

"To the audience you have."

Arthur laughed. It was short and unpleasant.

"There it is."

"There what is?"

"The little room you've built for me. Nostalgia shows. Radio clips. Interviews about the old clubs."

"You could do worse."

"I am doing worse. That's why you're here."

Bernard sighed.

"You can't keep doing the same set in smaller and smaller rooms."

Arthur stood.

"They were mine."

"Yes," Bernard said. "They were."

That was the end of it.

Arthur's career was not over. He still had three weeks of bookings, radio invitations and theatres willing to sell his name. He now saw that Bernard

intended to reduce the rooms and soften the reviews until neither man had to admit that the work was failing.

"Leave me," Arthur said.

Bernard's face changed.

"Tonight?"

"Professionally."

"Don't be absurd."

"I'm not."

"You cannot dismiss me because one room was difficult."

"It wasn't difficult. It was honest."

Bernard stared at him. For a moment Arthur thought he would plead. Instead the older man nodded once, with a dignity Arthur found almost unforgivable.

"I'll send over the contracts in the morning."

"Good."

Bernard went to the door.

"Arthur."

"What?"

"You were brilliant once. That is not nothing."

Then he left.

Arthur sat back down and looked at the photograph of himself in the mirror behind him. Young Arthur, twenty-seven years earlier. Quick, alive, mean enough to be loved. He had thought then that the worst thing would be to fail.

He had been wrong.

The worst thing was to continue after the room had forgiven you.

Part Two: Celia

Two days later, Celia Markham called.

Arthur had not spoken to Celia in eight years. They had come up through the same rooms, though she had arrived later and risen faster. For a while she had been everywhere: late-night programmes, Sunday papers, festivals, panel shows where she sat sideways and demolished men with better agents. Then she had vanished. There were rumours. Drink, nerves, debt, a failed film, a lawsuit, something about her brother. Arthur had never asked.

Now she was back and celebrated, reviewed with the breathless astonishment usually reserved for young people and the recently dead. Her new show had sold out the Lyric twice and was moving to the West End.

Arthur had seen a recorded clip. Celia stood in a black dress before a full room, older than he remembered, face sharper, voice lower. The joke in the clip was not especially good.

The laughter was enormous.

"Arthur," she said when he answered. "You sound murdered."

"How kind of you to check."

"I read the Bexhill thing."

"Then I've been murdered twice."

"They used the phrase 'assured technician'. That's when you know they've brought the shovel."

"It was decent of them to admire the corpse's posture."

Celia laughed. He could not tell if it was real.

"I hear Bernard's gone."

"News travels."

"News limps, darling. Gossip travels."

Arthur moved the phone to his other ear. He was sitting in his kitchen in Hampstead, though the Hampstead part had become more theoretical each year. The house had been expensive when he bought it and impossible now,

which made every crack in it feel like a judgement.

"What do you want, Celia?"

"I want to give you a number."

"I have numbers. Box office, blood pressure, tax arrears."

"A manager."

"No."

"Yes."

"I've just got rid of one."

"That's why I'm calling."

"I'm not changing handlers like a bad dog."

"He doesn't handle. He restores."

Arthur was silent.

"Ah," Celia said. "You've heard of him."

"I've heard stories."

"Everyone has."

"Dorian Field."

"Yes."

Arthur stood and looked through the kitchen window at the small garden. Rain had collected in the birdbath. A plastic bag moved in the hedge with the mild persistence of something trying to escape.

"He brought you back," he said.

"He helped."

"From what?"

"From where I was."

"You've told me a place, not a reason."

"No."

Arthur waited.

Celia breathed softly down the line. There had always been something unsentimental about her, even when drunk. Especially when drunk.

"He won't flatter you," she said. "He'll tell you when a joke is dead."

"Then he sounds unbearable."

"He is."

"And what does he want?"

"Work."

"I work."

"No. You repeat."

Arthur tightened his grip on the phone.

"You called to help?"

"I called because nobody else will. Bernard would keep you safe until nobody remembered why you had needed safety. Dorian won't."

"That isn't the advertisement you think it is."

"It is exactly the advertisement."

Arthur looked again at the rain in the birdbath.

"You're happy with what he did for you?"

Celia did not answer at once.

"I'm working," she said.

"I didn't ask what you're doing."

"No."

A car passed outside. Wet tyres hissed along the road.

"What happened?" Arthur asked.

"With what?"

"With you. Before."

"I stopped hearing them."

"The audience?"

"Yes."

"And now?"

Arthur heard Celia breathe before she answered.

"Now I hear them all the time."

There was something in her voice then. Fear came close to it without quite arriving.

Arthur should have let it go.

Instead he said, "Give me the number."

Part Three: Dorian

Dorian Field's office was in a narrow street off Chancery Lane, above a shop that sold antique legal prints. There was no name on the bell. Arthur climbed two flights of stairs lined with framed playbills: comedians, singers, conjurors, all smiling from cheap paper, all dead or revived.

Dorian opened the door himself.

He was younger than Arthur expected. Mid-fifties perhaps, though his hair had gone white without making him look older. He wore a dark suit and no tie. His face was lean, watchful, almost kind until one looked too long. Arthur would notice, over the weeks that followed, that Dorian never laughed. He smiled occasionally, at precise moments, but the sound itself never came.

"Mr Keene."

"Arthur."

"Of course."

The office had no receptionist. No awards. No clutter. A desk. Two chairs. Shelves of box files. A window looking down into the street where barristers hurried between rain and lunch.

Dorian gestured to a chair.

Arthur sat.

"I saw Bexhill," Dorian said.

That was fast.

"Unlucky you."

"It was not unlucky."

"No?"

"No. It was accurate."

Arthur felt heat move through him.

"Most people wait five minutes before opening the wound."

"I find wounds become less useful once they are dressed."

Arthur almost liked him.

Dorian sat opposite.

"You know what is wrong."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"Then why am I here?"

"And yet you keep accepting dates."

Arthur looked around the office.

"Celia said you restore people."

"Celia likes theatrical language."

"You don't?"

"I prefer exact words."

"Then exact me."

Dorian leaned back.

"You are not too old. That is irrelevant. You are old, professionally, like many successful performers. The problem is that your act still expects the world to meet it halfway. Once, the room did. Now it doesn't."

"The room changed."

"Yes."

"So did I."

"Less than you think."

Arthur looked at him.

"Is that meant to hurt?"

"If it hurts, that's your problem."

Dorian opened a file. Arthur recognised the paper. Reviews, sales figures, tour dates, seating plans.

"You still know how to enter silence. But your material has become a set of closed rooms. The audience can admire the architecture. They cannot live there."

"I can write."

"Can you?"

Arthur did not answer.

Dorian closed the file.

"You're watching yourself work. Stop doing that."

"I listen."

"No. You monitor."

Arthur smiled despite himself.

"What do you suggest? Clubs? Workshops? Young comics explaining pronouns to me?"

"No."

Dorian reached into a drawer and removed an envelope.

"There is a cottage on the coast. Seven nights. No phone. No recordings. No notebooks older than the day you arrive. You will write there."

Arthur looked at the envelope but did not take it.

"I've done retreats."

"This is not a retreat."

"What is it?"

"Seven nights. No audience. No telephone."

"That sounds like death."

"For some men," Dorian said, "it is."

Arthur took the envelope.

Inside was a key, a train ticket, and a single sheet of paper with directions written in black ink.

He recognised the coast from the names. They were near the forbidden reaches: low country, estuary mud, villages with warning signs at the edges, places where the green fog appeared in weather reports with evasive language.

Arthur looked up.

"No."

Dorian waited.

"I'm not going to some fog village to commune with my relevance."

"Then don't."

"That's your pitch?"

"My pitch is that you are free to continue as you are."

Arthur put the envelope on the desk.

Dorian did not touch it.

"Celia went there," Arthur said.

"Yes."

"And?"

"She wrote."

"And came back transformed?"

"She came back able to work."

Arthur thought of Celia in the clip, the room breaking open around a joke that did not deserve it.

"What happened to her audience?"

Dorian smiled faintly.

"That is the first good question you have asked."

"What is the answer?"

"You are not ready for it."

Arthur laughed.

"There it is. Mystery. Very good. Do I sign in blood?"

"No. You sign here."

He pushed a contract across the desk.

Arthur read enough to know it was normal: commission, representation, termination, expenses. No mention of coastal huts, green fog, or whatever private superstition Dorian sold to the desperate.

At the bottom, Dorian had placed a fountain pen.

Arthur thought of Bernard. Of Bexhill. Of the woman in the red scarf, telling him afterward that she had always loved him.

"If this is a trick," Arthur said, "I should know now."

"Would that stop you?"

Arthur looked at the pen.

It should have.

He signed.

Dorian took the contract, blotted it, and placed it in the file.

"One more thing," he said.

Arthur stood.

"What?"

"Do not try to be funny there."

Arthur looked at him.

"Then what do I do?"

Dorian folded his hands.

"Don't chase the line. Write down what you actually hear."

Part Four: Gull House

The cottage stood at the end of a track beyond the last village.

It was called Gull House, though Arthur saw no gulls when he arrived. Only mud, reeds, a low wall of wet stone, and the long exposed back of the coast stretching out beneath a colourless sky. The train had taken him as far as Cresswell Junction. A taxi had taken him farther with increasing reluctance. The driver stopped twice to ask if Arthur had the right address.

"People don't stay out there," the driver said.

"I'm people."

"Not after October."

"It's March."

"Same principle."

The cottage had two rooms downstairs, one bedroom above, and a stove that gave off more smell than heat. There was a desk by the front window. On it Dorian had left a ream of paper, three pencils, a box of matches, two tins of soup, and a note.

No telephone. No radio. No old material. No rehearsing. Listen.

Arthur stood in the doorway with his suitcase and said, "Pretentious prick," to no one.

No one laughed.

That was the first relief.

He made tea. The water tasted faintly of metal. He unpacked. He walked the boundary of the property and found a ditch at the rear, a footpath beyond it, and farther still the grey flats spread out under the falling tide. Warning posts stood at intervals where the land became uncertain.

DANGER SOFT GROUND FOG DRIFT AREA KEEP TO MARKED PATHS

The green fog was not present that afternoon. Ordinary mist lay pale and uncoloured beyond the reeds. Arthur had expected something more theatrical. Instead there was only mud and weather, which had no obligation to perform.

He returned to the cottage and sat at the desk.

For the first hour he wrote nothing. For the second, only titles: You Had To Be There. The Cough.

Then: I knew I was finished when the cough got the laugh. He crossed it out. Too neat.

Then: The young think the old don't understand the present. This is unfair. We understand it perfectly. We just preferred several earlier versions.

The premise was clear, and Arthur could hear where an agreeable audience would laugh.

He tore up the page.

At dusk, the fog came in low from the flats.

Arthur watched it gather in the ditch behind the cottage. It was not like the London fog of old films, all drama and lamplight. It moved close to the ground in greenish strips, resting against stones, rising slightly where the grass grew longer. It did not cover the world. It lay in separate bands.

The cottage cooled.

Arthur lit the stove and ate soup from the pan. He thought about calling Dorian, then remembered there was no telephone. He thought about walking back to the village, then looked at the window and did not.

That night, he dreamed of laughter, the dream containing only the sound of it, with no audience attached.

It began far away, beyond the flats, or under them. A low body of laughter, almost affectionate. He could not hear the joke. That troubled him even in sleep. Laughter without a joke was either madness or applause.

In the morning he wrote for four hours and produced nine pages of unusable material.

At lunch he read one aloud.

Silence.

The words remained on the page.

"You're right," Arthur said. "All dreadful."

The wind moved under the door.

On the third day, he stopped writing jokes and began writing descriptions of rooms.

The back room at the Red Lion in 1978, where a man in a butcher's apron had laughed so hard he knocked over two pints and became part of the act for eighteen months afterwards.

The theatre in Sheffield the night his father died. He had gone on anyway. The laugh that night had been enormous, tender, almost indecent. He had not told them his father was dead. They had known something was.

By evening he was crying without much feeling.

That annoyed him.

"Very artistic," he said to the room.

The room did not reply.

At midnight he woke.

Someone was laughing outside.

Arthur sat up in the bed. The cottage was dark except for a weak green line under the curtains. He listened.

There it was again.

One laugh.

A woman, perhaps. Or a boy. Short, surprised.

Then another, farther off.

Arthur got out of bed and went to the window.

The fog lay across the track and the ditch and the lower part of the garden wall. It was brighter than it had been, not luminous so much as present. He could see the posts beyond the path, dark stems rising from the vapour.

The laugh came again.

This time it was closer.

Arthur opened the window.

Cold entered the room at once. The air smelt of salt, mud, and old coins.

"Hello?"

The sound stopped.

Arthur waited.

Then, from somewhere in the fog, a man laughed. The laugh joined him, companionable and close.

Arthur knew the difference.

He closed the window and stood in the dark until his feet became numb.

The next morning he wrote quickly. At first he wrote lines, shapes and premises that seemed to arrive before thought.

A room laughs when it senses that someone else will go first.

That was not funny. He wrote it down anyway.

Then:

I used to think I wanted a better joke. What I wanted was a worse conscience.

He put down the pencil.

By the fifth day, the pages had changed.

Some of the lines were good. Arthur marked those with a tick. Some merely sounded like jokes because they had the right number of words. He marked those too. The awful ones he left alone.

"Marriage," he read aloud, "is like a foghorn. Loud at night, and mostly there because somebody is lost."

From outside, something laughed.

Arthur froze.

It had been a poor joke. Perhaps the joke could be saved, but it was poor: late-night material that should have produced at most a sympathetic puff from a woman who liked him already.

The laugh outside was large.

It came from several throats at once.

Arthur went to the window.

The garden was empty.

The fog rested along the ditch.

Arthur stepped back from the window.

"No," he said.

No answer came.

"No," he said again, but he was holding the pencil.

On the sixth morning he tried to remember the butcher at the Red Lion. He could still see the apron, the spilled beer, the red face tipped back in laughter. But the man's laugh itself was gone. The feeling had been removed rather than forgotten. Arthur could remember that it had mattered to him. He could no longer remember why.

He sat with that for a while.

He should have packed then.

Instead he sharpened a pencil.

On the seventh morning, a car arrived.

Dorian Field stood at the gate in a dark overcoat, clean shoes already ruined by the track. He did not knock. He waited until Arthur opened the door.

"You look ill," Dorian said.

"I've been enjoying the facilities."

"Have you written?"

Arthur pointed to the desk. Pages lay in several piles. Some neat. Some crossed through. Some covered in lines written over other lines until they had become nearly unreadable.

Dorian entered and picked up a page.

Arthur watched him read.

"Well?" Arthur said.

Dorian put the page down.

"This is not finished."

"I wasn't aware I'd booked a tutor."

"But it is alive."

Arthur laughed.

"Is that the word?"

"It will do."

"What is this place?"

"A cottage."

"Don't do that."

Dorian looked at him.

Arthur felt the week behind his eyes. The silence. The fog. The laughter outside the window. The awful jokes that had sounded, for a moment, not awful.

"Something laughed," he said.

"Yes."

"You know that."

"Yes."

"What was it?"

Dorian walked to the window and looked out toward the flats, and did not answer for a while.

"I don't fully know," he said. "The room produces a response. I know how to book it, seat it and sell tickets around it. I stopped pretending that amounted to understanding."

"That's a good line. It still isn't an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

Arthur sat at the desk. He was suddenly tired enough to sleep for a month.

"Celia heard it."

"Yes."

"And the others?"

"Some."

"What happened to them?"

"They worked."

"That's all?"

Dorian turned.

"What else did you want from a career?"

Arthur did not answer.

Dorian gathered the pages into a folder.

"You will open in London in three weeks."

"No."

"Yes."

"I don't have an hour."

"You have enough."

"It isn't funny."

Dorian placed the folder under his arm.

"Arthur. That has never been entirely your decision."

Part Five: The Alder Room

The first show back was at the Alder Room, a small theatre behind a hotel that served better wine than its sightlines justified.

Arthur had played it before in several phases of his life: rising comic, established name, difficult genius, television face, veteran, return booking. The room had a low ceiling and a strange intimacy. When it was with you, it felt like a conspiracy. When it was not, it felt like a family meal after someone had read the will.

Dorian had invited no press.

"Why not?" Arthur asked.

"Because I don't want anyone else in there tonight."

The audience was full but not sold out. Arthur noticed that at once from the wings. Enough empty seats to make failure plausible. Enough bodies to create warmth.

He knew how to read a crowd before speaking. He had spent his life doing it. Three men from finance, already over-laughing at private jokes. Two older women with arms folded, suspicious of gratitude. A woman in red near the aisle.

Arthur looked again.

The scarf and posture resembled Bexhill. The face did not.

Dorian stood beside him.

"Don't chase them," he said.

"I know how to walk on stage."

"Tonight you do not."

The lights changed.

The small introduction played.

Arthur went out.

For three seconds, the applause was ordinary.

Then he began.

"I knew I was finished when a cough got the biggest laugh of the night."

The room laughed.

A true laugh. Immediate, a little startled, not huge. Arthur felt it move through him with such relief that he nearly forgot the next line.

"I was annoyed, obviously. But fair is fair. The cough had new material."

More laughter.

He relaxed, only enough to continue.

For twenty minutes, the set worked in patches. The patches joined. Some jokes failed; others found their feet halfway through. Arthur altered lines as he went, as he had always done when alive to a room.

He felt, for the first time in years, that the air in front of him had weight and movement.

Then he told the foghorn joke.

"Marriage is like a foghorn. Loud at night, and mostly there because somebody is lost."

The laugh was enormous.

Too enormous.

It struck the room all at once. Front, back, balcony, staff by the door. Arthur waited for it to peak and fall.

It did not fall.

It widened.

He stood at the microphone, smiling the old professional smile, and felt something cold move behind his ribs.

The joke was not worth that laugh.

He had spent forty years knowing roughly what a line had earned. This one had not earned that.

At last the laughter stopped all at once.

Arthur continued.

"What I like about ageing is the dignity. For example, I now make a noise when I sit down that was once only available to haunted houses."

Good laugh.

Reasonable laugh.

He went on.

Afterwards, Dorian came backstage.

"Well," Arthur said.

"Yes."

"That foghorn line."

"Yes."

"Why did they laugh like that?"

"Because they wanted to."

"It isn't good enough."

"Perhaps you have become a poor judge of what is good."

Arthur looked at him.

"Don't patronise me in a dressing room. I was patronised by better men before you had stationery."

Dorian smiled faintly.

"Then judge by outcome."

"That's for politicians."

"And successful performers."

Arthur removed his jacket. His shirt was damp under the arms.

"I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it."

"That is where you're wrong."

Dorian picked a fleck of lint from his sleeve.

"No," he said. "That is where you are old-fashioned."

The reviews came after the third show.

Somebody had leaked. Or Dorian had arranged it. Arthur did not ask because he knew and did not want the contempt of the answer.

Arthur Keene Finds His Teeth Again.

The Herald, which had buried him in Bexhill, called the new hour "a remarkable and disquieting return to form".

The rooms grew fuller.

At first he enjoyed it. Before he questioned the laughter, he slept better, stood straighter and enjoyed being recognised in restaurants again. People stopped saying, "My father loved you," which was the worst form of mourning.

Dorian booked more dates across the country: Brighton, Bath, Cambridge, York, back to London.

Arthur noticed the same faces recurring in different cities: a woman in red, a pale young man alone in the fourth row, three men laughing together before he had earned it.

"You're imagining an audience," Dorian said.

"That's my job."

"You mean you are imagining a pattern."

"That is also my job."

"Then imagine one that helps."

The laughter changed by degrees.

It came too quickly at first, then too evenly, arriving with a force unrelated to meaning. He altered rhythm. The laugh adjusted. He paused before lines. It waited with him. He tried stepping on it. It rose under his words and carried them.

Once, in Leeds, he forgot a line.

The audience laughed anyway.

Arthur stood in the silence after it and felt his scalp tighten.

"I've not said anything yet," he told them.

They laughed harder.

He should have stopped then.

Instead he said, "That's the future of comedy. Remove the comedian. Much more efficient."

The laugh became applause.

A standing ovation followed.

In the hotel that night he opened the folder from Gull House and read the pages again. Some were good. Many were not.

He read aloud: "My mother said laughter is the best medicine, which explains why she died untreated."

Something laughed from inside the radiator, a small, trapped sound.

He checked out before dawn.

Part Six: Celia Again

By winter, Arthur Keene was being called essential again.

He hated the word. Essential meant critics had found a way to forgive themselves for leaving. He appeared on radio programmes where presenters spoke of a new darkness in his "middle period," as though describing a composer rather than a man who had once impersonated estate agents for a living.

He smiled for photographs, accepted praise, and learned which interviewers expected gratitude before they had asked a question.

Dorian watched from control rooms and green rooms with the concentration of a manager checking whether a dangerous machine was still earning its hire fee.

The hour acquired a title: The Room Was With Him.

Arthur objected.

"It sounds like a memorial."

"All titles do eventually," Dorian said.

The tour sold out.

The audiences changed further.

Or Arthur's hearing did.

He could no longer tell.

In Manchester, he tried an experiment.

Halfway through the set he abandoned the new hour and reached for jokes from 1986 about answering machines and smoking sections on planes. They had worked when those things were still new enough to surprise an audience.

The room laughed. Properly, as if the jokes were new.

He moved to the front of the stage.

"Listen," he said.

The room quieted, and for one clear second he had the people themselves. Faces. Breath. The old living risk returned without Dorian or the fog arranging it for him.

He pointed at a man in the second row.

"What did I say just now?"

The man blinked. Someone laughed.

"No. You. What did I say?"

The room laughed before the man could answer.

"Stop," Arthur said.

They laughed harder.

"No, really. Stop."

The laugh rolled back to the rear wall and returned larger.

Arthur felt panic then, pure and humiliating. Panic had no craft. It did not time itself. It did not wait for the next beat.

He stepped away from the microphone.

The laughter followed.

Afterwards, Dorian was waiting in the dressing room.

Arthur closed the door.

"What are they?"

"Audiences."

Arthur stared at him.

"No audience laughs when told to stop."

Dorian looked at him.

"Every audience does."

Arthur poured whisky into a paper cup. His hand shook.

"Celia knew."

"Celia suspected."

"What happened to her?"

"She adapted."

"Is that what you call it?"

Dorian did not answer.

Arthur drank.

Dorian glanced at the bottle.

"You should be careful."

"I should have been careful in 1974. Everything since is detail."

"You are becoming sentimental."

"I am becoming surrounded."

Dorian was silent for a moment.

Then he said, "You wanted them back."

"I wanted to be funny."

"No," Dorian said. "You wanted the laugh back."

Arthur looked at him.

"Of what?"

"That they still laugh."

"And what is the real word?"

"Permission."

Arthur remembered Gull House. The laughter in the fog. The pages that were not funny until something answered them.

"What did you do to me?"

"I took you to a place that listens."

"And what listened?"

Dorian put on his gloves.

"I don't know. Gull House is only where I first heard it."

"That is not enough."

"It is all you paid for."

Arthur threw the paper cup at him.

It struck the wall beside Dorian's shoulder and dropped to the carpet.

Dorian did not move.

"Cancel the tour," Arthur said.

"No."

"I said cancel it."

"You can cancel your appearances. The tour will continue."

"With whom?"

Dorian looked at him.

Arthur felt the blood leave his face.

"You wouldn't."

"No," Dorian said. "I would not need to."

For several seconds, neither man spoke.

From the corridor outside came a burst of laughter. Stagehands perhaps. Or the support act. Or no one.

Arthur sat down.

"I can stop," he said.

Dorian took his hand from the door.

"Of course."

"I can walk away."

"Yes."

"But?"

Dorian opened the door. "You already know the rest."

Dorian left.

Arthur remained in the dressing room until the cleaner knocked.

After Manchester, he tried to stop writing.

This proved impossible. Ideas arrived at their usual pace, which made them harder to distrust. A line while shaving. A phrase at breakfast. The mind had always behaved like that. Comedy was partly illness, partly trade.

But now every line came with its own laugh attached.

He could hear it before he spoke: sometimes as sound, sometimes only as pressure in the chest, the bodily memory of response. He would think a line and feel the room receive it.

He stopped going out.

Dorian sent contracts. Arthur did not sign them.

Dorian sent revised contracts. Arthur burned them in the kitchen sink.

A proof sheet arrived from the printers a week later: the Imperial poster, his name struck through in soft pencil and Celia Markham's pencilled beneath it. Arthur left it beside the unsigned contracts for four days.

Celia Markham came to see him in January.

She arrived wearing a green coat and no make-up, older than the posters allowed. Arthur made coffee. Neither of them drank it.

"You look terrible," she said.

"You look expensive."

"I am."

They sat in the front room. Rain tapped against the window. Arthur had covered the mirror above the mantel with a towel because he had grown tired of catching his own face listening.

"You called me," Celia said. "Three times."

Arthur looked at the covered mirror. "I thought I was drunk."

"You weren't."

Arthur looked at her.

Celia removed her gloves.

"You hear them now."

"Yes."

"All the time?"

"Most."

"It fades," she said.

"No it doesn't."

"No," she said. "It doesn't."

He laughed once.

"Why did you send me to him?"

"Because you asked without asking."

"That's tidy."

"It's true."

"I was failing."

"Yes."

"You could have let me."

Celia looked at the covered mirror.

"I could have let myself."

Arthur studied her face. On stage she had looked renewed. Here she looked occupied.

"What happens if you stop?" he asked.

Celia folded her gloves in her lap and did not answer at once.

She touched the hollow of her throat.

"You feel it before you say the line."

Arthur thought of every theatre he had ever known.

"And then?"

"Then you work again."

"Because you want to?"

"Because it's worse when I stop."

Arthur stood and went to the window.

A schoolboy passed outside, hood up, laughing into his phone. The sound reached Arthur faintly through the glass. Normal laughter. Stupid, passing, alive.

He envied it so much he almost wept.

"I'm going to do one more," he said.

Celia closed her eyes.

"Don't."

"One. I want to give it nothing and hear what comes back."

"I said that too."

"I need to know."

"No," she said. "You want to be the one who ends it."

Arthur turned.

"What did you do?"

"When?"

"At the end."

Celia looked at him for a long time.

"I didn't end."

Part Seven: Bernard

The final show was at the Imperial.

Dorian had booked it months before, when Arthur was still pretending control. A single night. London. Full house. Cameras arranged but not announced. Critics in good seats. Old friends in worse ones. Bernard in the dress circle, because Arthur had sent him a ticket and then regretted it.

The dressing room was too large for one man.

Arthur arrived early and sat without turning on the main lights. His suit hung from the wardrobe door. His notes lay on the table. He had not brought the Gull House folder. He knew the hour without paper now. More accurately, the hour knew him.

At seven, Dorian entered.

"You are early," he said.

"So are you."

"Managers arrive before disasters."

"Is that meant to be funny?"

"No."

Arthur smiled.

Dorian looked at the covered notes.

"You don't have to do this."

"That's new."

"It is also true."

"Why?"

"Because you think tonight settles it." Dorian rubbed his thumb along the edge of the table. "It doesn't."

Arthur stood and dressed.

Dorian watched him.

"I saw Celia," Arthur said.

"I know."

"Of course you do."

"She worries."

"She should."

"About herself?"

"About everyone."

Dorian considered that.

"Yes," he said. "That is one of her difficulties."

Arthur buttoned his shirt.

"What do you get from this?"

"My commission."

"No."

Dorian looked at him in the mirror.

"What answer would satisfy you?"

"None. But I'd enjoy watching you choose the lie."

For the first time, Dorian seemed tired.

"Full rooms," he said. "Preferably paid."

Arthur turned.

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"You feed people to rooms because you like them?"

"I do not feed people to anything."

"Then what do you do?"

"I book the rooms. Sometimes I send people somewhere first."

"Gull House."

"The hut is incidental."

"The fog?"

Dorian was quiet a moment too long.

"I don't know," he said. "The room behaves differently when the fog is here."

That was the first time all night he had not sounded certain.

Arthur waited, but Dorian did not continue.

Outside, through the wall, came the first heavy murmur of the audience taking their seats.

Arthur felt it pass through him.

"Listen to them," Dorian said.

"I'm trying not to."

Dorian glanced toward the wall. "They are already in their seats."

Arthur put on his jacket.

"Good."

At ten minutes to eight, Bernard came backstage.

He looked older than he had in Bexhill. Or Arthur had begun counting age more honestly since then. The maroon scarf remained.

Dorian left them alone.

For a moment neither man spoke.

Then Bernard said, "I wanted to wish you luck."

"Luck is for new acts and burglars."

"Yes."

Arthur adjusted his cuffs.

"You look well," Bernard said, then winced. "Sorry. Habit."

"Keep it. We haven't time to find a better lie."

Bernard glanced at the notes.

"I've heard things."

"Reviews?"

"No. Things."

Arthur looked up.

"From whom?"

"Stage managers. Promoters. People who stand at the back."

"The nation's conscience."

"They say the laughter is strange."

Arthur sat.

"Did you come to warn me?"

Bernard was quiet for a moment.

"I came because I should have fought harder."

"That's kind, Bernard, but I fired you."

"Yes."

"And I would have fired you again."

"Yes."

"So there we are."

Bernard took a step closer. His face had the look of a man who had rehearsed something and lost his place in it.

"Arthur."

"What?"

"It was enough," Bernard said. "What you did. It was enough."

Arthur looked at him.

Arthur looked down at his cuffs.

From the stage came the sound of the support act finishing. Applause. Warm, ordinary, enviable.

Arthur said, "Was it?"

"Yes."

"Then why doesn't it feel like that?"

Bernard had no answer.

A stage manager knocked and opened the door.

"Mr Keene. Two minutes."

Arthur nodded.

Bernard held out a hand.

Arthur took it.

For thirty-one years Bernard had booked rooms, managed fees, protected him from fools, lied when necessary, told the truth badly, and stayed too long. His hand was dry and cold.

"I was brilliant once," Arthur said.

Bernard's eyes filled.

"Yes."

"That was something."

"It was."

Arthur released his hand.

Then he went to the stage.

Part Eight: The Imperial

The Imperial held twelve hundred people.

Arthur felt each one before he saw them.

The applause began as he walked out, and at first it was only applause. He stood in the light, raised one hand, and waited. He had always waited well. Young comics rushed applause because they feared silence. Arthur had learned to let welcome spend itself.

Tonight it did not spend.

It built.

He stood at the microphone until the applause became cheering, then laughter, then applause again. They had not heard a word and already they were answering.

Arthur looked into the dark beyond the first rows.

He could not see individual faces. Only mouths. Pale shapes. Teeth.

"Good evening," he said.

The audience laughed before he had said anything worth recognising.

Arthur smiled.

"No, that wasn't it."

More laughter.

He took the microphone from the stand.

"I should say at the outset that if you've come for a triumphant late-career statement, you may need to lower your expectations. I lowered mine years ago. Much easier on the knees."

They laughed.

He began the hour.

For the first fifteen minutes, he performed well. Better than well. His timing was exact. His voice carried the old softness under the acid. He could feel the room rise and fall with him. It knew him. It loved him. It had no mercy.

Then he changed the set.

He had planned where to do it. After the hospital parking bit. There was a laugh there long enough to hide a turn.

He let the laugh run.

Then he said, "I'm going to tell you something true."

The room quieted.

Arthur heard Dorian somewhere in the wings, standing perfectly still, listening.

"I went to the coast because I wasn't funny anymore."

A few people laughed, uncertain.

"No," Arthur said. "That isn't the joke."

Silence.

No one laughed. Arthur could hear the audience breathing, and for one moment he believed they might listen.

"I went to a cottage on the edge of the fog belt. I wrote bad lines. Very bad lines. I wrote, 'Marriage is like a foghorn.'"

The audience laughed.

Arthur raised his hand.

"No. Stop."

They laughed harder.

"I said stop."

The laughter grew.

He stood very still.

"All right," he said softly. "Then have it."

He told the worst jokes he knew.

A better line came to him first. Clean, cruel, perfectly timed. He knew exactly where it would land.

For one second he wanted to say it.

He let it die.

"My uncle was so unlucky he got haunted by a ghost with better offers."

The room convulsed.

"I went to a seafood restaurant. The service was shellfish."

The laugh came before he had finished wincing.

Arthur continued.

The people were gasping from exertion, forcing out wave after wave of laughter, forced and willing at once. A woman in the front row had both hands over her mouth. A man beside her was crying. The three men two rows behind him laughed in perfect time, heads tilted at the same angle.

Arthur felt sweat run down his back.

"Why did the chicken cross the road?" he said.

The room waited.

Arthur leaned toward the microphone.

"It didn't. It merely changed markets."

The laughter was violent.

He dropped the microphone.

The sound of it striking the stage cracked through the room. For half a second, the laughter stopped.

Arthur stepped away from the stand.

Without the microphone, his voice was smaller, human.

"Please," he said.

A few people in the front heard him.

Their faces changed. A woman lowered her hands from her mouth. For one second Arthur saw her trying, with all the dignity left in her, not to laugh.

Then someone in the balcony laughed.

The laugh fell into the room like a match.

The others caught.

Arthur backed away.

The laughter rose again, but now it was not only theirs. It came from behind the curtains, from the flies above the stage, from the boards under his shoes.

The theatre seemed to remember every laugh ever placed inside it: drunken laughter from the bar, the sharp kind meant to hurt, laughter after jokes and before pain, and the loose grateful noise of people who had come in from the rain and wanted the dark to answer.

Arthur laughed.

At first he laughed from disbelief, then fear. A moment later his diaphragm jerked in time with the audience.

He pressed both hands to his chest.

"No," he said, laughing.

The audience roared.

"No."

The word vanished.

He tried to take the breath before the next line.

It did not come.

That was the first rule. Breathe before the turn. He had taught it to boys in club cellars and ignored it in himself for forty years.

The room took the beat for him.

In the wings, someone moved.

Dorian, perhaps. Or Bernard. Or a stagehand. Arthur could not see.

He sank to one knee.

The sound filled his ears until he could no longer hear his own breathing.

He thought of the first room above the Red Lion. Smoke, beer, twenty people, one butcher laughing honestly because Arthur had found something neither of them knew until that second. He thought of Bernard outside a club in 1982, saying, "They'll know you soon." He thought of Celia, not ended. He thought of Gull House, the fog waiting under the door.

He tried to say, "I was funny."

No sound came.

The room laughed for him.

Arthur Keene died under the lights at 9:17 p.m. For several seconds, the audience mistook his collapse for a pause.

The curtain came down three minutes later.

The laughter continued behind it.

Part Nine: The Notices

The notices appeared the following morning.

They were respectful, then admiring, then possessive. Arthur Keene had died, several wrote, as many comedians claim they would like to die: on stage, under lights, before a full house, with laughter rising around him.

Clips from earlier in the tour circulated widely. The final performance was not released. A statement from the management cited respect for the family, though Arthur had no close family and had once described respect as "the thing people discover when profit needs a chair."

Celia Markham cancelled two weeks of performances.

Bernard Crewe gave no interviews.

Dorian Field issued a short statement.

Arthur gave himself completely to the room. His absence will be felt.

The Imperial remained closed for three nights.

On the fourth, a musical opened there to excellent business.

Audience members later disagreed about the final minutes: some said Arthur had stayed in control until the end, others that the collapse was part of the act, a few that they had known something was wrong but could not stop laughing. A woman in the front row insisted she had tried to stand and found her legs would not obey her until the curtain fell.

The official report recorded cardiac failure. This was not disputed.

In the weeks that followed, people left flowers outside the stage door, old tickets, once a paper cup from a club where Arthur had played in 1979. Rain filled it, then green water gathered at the bottom, though there was no moss nearby and no paint had run.

By spring, young comedians had begun telling stories about the Imperial: that certain lines worked there that worked nowhere else, that bad jokes could be heard laughing to themselves in the dressing rooms.

They said if you stood alone on the stage after midnight and asked whether anyone was in, the dark would answer with the soft, gathering sound of a room preparing to be pleased.