

ANHEDONIA



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I. The Life That Should Be Enough

01 - Saturday

At six fourteen, Daniel found that he had finished everything he had meant to do.

The groceries were put away. The towels had dried. He had tightened the screw beneath the kitchen drawer so that it no longer caught against the drawer below it, and for a while he had opened and closed both, enjoying the separate, competent movements. Now he stood with the screwdriver in his hand, trying to remember where it belonged.

From the bedroom, Mara said, "Does this look like something you wear to ask for money?"

She was wearing black trousers and a green shirt he liked. One cuff was turned back; the other hung over her wrist. She held up two earrings, then lowered one.

"Who are you asking?"

"People who already have it."

"Then yes."

"Useful. Thank you."

He put the screwdriver on the kitchen counter and went to look properly. There was a tote bag on the bed containing her overnight things and a paperback with a receipt tucked into it. She was going to a benefit for the community arts organization where she worked, then staying with her sister in Long Beach. In the morning they would take their mother to lunch. He had been invited to all of it. He had chosen a night at home with the mild pleasure of a man protecting time for himself.

"The small ones," he said.

"Too small?"

"You'll be wearing that badge. The big ones will hit it."

She held an earring against her neck and turned toward the mirror.

"This is why I married an engineer."

"There were other reasons."

"There was the parking."

He took the earring she had rejected and put it in the little dish on the dresser. The dish was shaped like a fish and had a chipped tail. They had bought it together somewhere neither of them could now agree on. He thought a shop near her father's hospital. She insisted they had owned it years before her father got sick.

She was searching in the tote.

"What?"

"My notes."

"Printer."

"Right."

He brought her the folded sheet. There were three short paragraphs on it, covered in revisions. Beside the last, she had written *slow down*.

"Read it to me," he said.

"I've read it to you."

"You changed it."

She looked at the clock, then took the paper. He sat on the edge of the bed. The speech concerned a Saturday program that had outgrown its borrowed room, the cost of keeping it open through the summer, a girl who had started drawing everyone's shoes because she did not yet like drawing faces. Mara reached the girl's name and stopped.

"Too much?"

"No."

"It feels like I'm selling her."

"Does she know you're telling it?"

"She said I could. Her mother said I could. I showed them."

"Then tell it."

She read the last paragraph more slowly. He could hear where she had taken his advice from the night before and where she had sensibly ignored it. When she finished, he wanted her to do well. The feeling was simple and available to him. He reached for the loose cuff and folded it back to match the other.

At the door she asked what he was going to eat.

"There's chicken."

"There's chicken if you cook chicken."

"I understand the sequence."

She kissed him, adjusted the tote on her shoulder, and went down the stairs. He listened until the outside gate struck its latch. Then he remembered the screwdriver.

He put it away.

* * *

He cooked the chicken in the heavy pan, with lemon and the last of the thyme. While it rested, he ate a piece of skin from the edge. It was hot enough to hurt his fingers and tasted exactly as he had hoped. He salted the rice, cut a tomato, and carried his plate to the table.

Across the courtyard, someone had propped a bicycle upside down on a balcony. A man in reading glasses was turning one pedal with his hand. The wheel spun, slowed, spun again. Daniel had seen him often enough to nod to him at the mailboxes but did not know his name.

His phone lay beside the plate. He turned it facedown.

There was nothing difficult waiting for him at work. A timing update had gone through on Thursday, and Friday's review had ended eleven minutes early. For two weeks his team had been trying to determine why a corridor kept lengthening pedestrian waits after the evening rush. The fault had been in how an old sensor's missing reports were being interpreted. He had found it. Someone else had fixed it. No one had needed to stay late.

He had slept well. He had gone to his morning meeting and helped return the chairs to the cupboard afterward. A new man had asked how long he had, and Daniel had said a little over four months. Saying it had given him a small, private satisfaction. He did not have to round upward or explain an exception.

He ate the tomato last, wiping the juice with a piece of chicken he had saved for it.

There was more rice in the pot. He considered taking some, decided he was full, and washed his plate. Then he washed the pan before the fat could set. He wiped the stove. The whole meal, including preparation and cleaning, had used less than an hour.

He went into the living room.

For several weeks he had been saving a film for an evening alone. Mara did not like the director, whose characters, she said, needed jobs and firmer mattresses. Daniel had defended him, though he could no longer remember on what grounds.

He found the film and dimmed the lamp.

A woman arrived at a house beside the sea. She carried her suitcase through several empty rooms. There was an elderly man at the kitchen table. They spoke about someone who had died. Daniel watched the light moving on a water glass and thought it was beautiful. Then he wondered how long the film was.

He brought up the progress bar. Nine minutes had passed.

He put the remote down.

The woman went outside. Wind moved through grass. He knew he was meant to settle into the pace, and for a few moments he did. He had once been good at this. In college he had gone alone to afternoon screenings and emerged into daylight with the gratifying sense that he had been somewhere other people had not. Now he found himself thinking about the people who had made the film: the cold crew waiting just out of frame, the person responsible for continuity, how many times they had carried the suitcase back to the car.

He checked his phone without remembering picking it up.

No messages.

He paused the film so that he would not miss anything. On the screen, the woman stood with her mouth partly open, about to say something he had already stopped wanting to hear.

There were other films. He returned to the menu and moved through them. Each offered a place, a face, some manageable trouble. He opened the description of a thriller and recognized it halfway through. He had seen the whole thing. He could remember the basement and nothing that had brought anyone there.

He turned the television off.

The living room appeared in the dark glass: lamp, couch, his bare legs beneath his shorts. It was seven thirty-eight.

* * *

He could read.

On the low shelf beside the couch were books he had bought because he wanted to read them, and books he had bought because buying them briefly restored his confidence that he was someone who read. He chose one about water in the American West. There was a bookmark on page eighty-six, an envelope from the dentist.

He began a paragraph about a reservoir, reached the bottom of the page, and went back to the top. On his second attempt he understood the paragraph. He turned the page and checked how many remained in the chapter.

Outside, a child was refusing to come indoors. The refusal was composed of a single vowel, sustained with impressive breath. A woman answered in a low voice. The child stopped, listened, and began again at the same pitch.

Daniel smiled. He wanted to tell Mara. He could almost hear her defending the child's position.

He picked up his phone and typed, *How's the money extraction?*

He deleted it. She would be preparing to speak, or speaking, or trying to remember the names of people who expected their names to be remembered. He put the phone down and read another page.

There were ways to handle an evening like this. He knew them. Eat something. Leave the apartment. Call someone before there was a reason to make the call difficult. He did not resent the advice. It had helped on other evenings, and some mornings, and once during an hour in a parking lot when he had called a man he scarcely knew and listened to a detailed account of a dishwasher installation until he could drive home.

Tonight he had eaten. He had been around people that morning. He was neither especially tired nor angry. His body felt fine. His body seemed prepared to go on feeling fine for a very long time.

He put on shoes.

At the gate, he met the man from the balcony carrying the bicycle by its frame.

"Any luck?" Daniel asked.

The man looked at him.

"Saw you working on it."

"Oh. It's my daughter's. Brake rubs."

"You fix it?"

"I made it rub on the other side."

Daniel laughed and held the gate. The man maneuvered the handlebars through, thanking him twice. A strip of pink tape hung loose from one grip. Daniel watched him lower the bicycle gently into the back of an old hatchback, placing a towel between the frame and the bumper.

He turned toward the boulevard.

The air had cooled, though the stucco walls still gave off heat when he passed close to them. Someone was watering behind a hedge. At the corner, roots had raised two slabs of pavement and the city had painted the edges yellow. He stepped over them without looking down.

He liked this neighborhood. He and Mara had stayed in the apartment through three rent increases, two noisy upstairs tenants, and a year in which every conversation seemed to end with the possibility of moving. They could walk to things here. They had a table that fit the window. On clear winter mornings, from one particular place in the street, you could see snow on the mountains beyond the signs and wires.

The light changed. He crossed with a young couple carrying a sleeping child between them, the child's cheek flattened against the man's shoulder. The woman had one hand on the small bare foot that stuck out beneath his arm. Daniel glanced at them longer than he intended, then looked ahead.

A restaurant had put little battery lamps on its outside tables. Two women were sharing fries. One was talking with both hands while the other watched her, smiling before she reached whatever was supposed to be funny. Farther down, a man alone was cutting a

large sandwich into halves. He aligned the halves, considered them, and began with the smaller one.

Daniel walked past the bookstore. It was closed. A handwritten card beneath a novel said the bookseller had stayed awake until three finishing it. He leaned close enough to read the first paragraph through the glass, but the displayed copy was shut.

He could go for coffee. Coffee would leave him awake. He could order tea, which would mean sitting somewhere with a cup of tea, performing the public version of what he had just failed to do at home.

At the next intersection he stopped, though the walk signal was on. There was no place he was trying to reach. The realization embarrassed him, as if someone watching from a car might have noticed.

He crossed anyway.

* * *

His phone vibrated outside a dry cleaner.

Mara had sent a photograph of her place card beside a bread roll. Beneath it: *They put me next to the foundation guy who calls us scrappy. Tell him scrappy costs more this year*, Daniel wrote.

Her answer came quickly.

Stealing that.

Then: *What are you doing?*

Walking. Made chicken. Started that film you hate.

Which of the nine thousand?

Dead father. Coastal house.

Oh god. Enjoy.

He stood smiling at the phone. Behind the dry cleaner's window hung a row of shirts in translucent bags, each with a paper square at the collar. A little motor turned an advertisement for alterations. He waited for another message, although there was no reason for her to send one.

He could write that he was having a strange evening. She would understand enough to ask a question. If he said he was restless, she might step outside and call. He pictured her standing near a service

entrance, holding the phone against her ear while staff carried trays past her. He did not want that. He wanted her inside, using his joke, getting through the part about the girl who drew shoes.

He sent a heart and put the phone away.

On the way home he bought a small tub of ice cream. He spent some time deciding between coffee and pistachio. The cashier asked if he wanted a bag, and he said no, then wished he had said yes because the tub was cold against his palm.

At home he ate three spoonfuls standing by the sink. The pistachio was good, richer than he expected, with a little salt at the end. He put the tub in the freezer. He could have more later.

It was eight forty-six.

He went to the bathroom and washed his face. In the mirror he looked like a man who had washed his face. Water had darkened the neck of his shirt. He dried it with the corner of a towel, which did very little, and went back to the living room.

The book lay open on the arm of the couch. He picked it up to avoid losing his place and then realized he had already lost it. He inserted the envelope and closed the cover.

For a while he stood in the middle of the room.

The refrigerator started. A car door shut outside. He could hear a television upstairs, followed by the brief, hard sound of something being dropped on the floor. None of this bothered him. He would have welcomed something that bothered him in a way he could locate.

He lay down on the couch. Then he sat up because lying down at this hour felt like surrendering the evening, and he had wanted this evening. He had been looking forward to it since Wednesday. At work, between messages and the corridor review and a call that had become two calls, the prospect of these hours had seemed almost luxurious.

Now he had them. He could do anything he liked within the ordinary limits of his life, and he could not get beyond the choosing.

He opened a music app. The first song was one he loved. He listened through its introduction and moved to another. Then another.

He recognized the little intake of breath before a singer began, and skipped it before she could.

He set the phone on the cushion beside him.

"Come on," he said.

He was not sure whether he meant get up or stay still.

* * *

There was a meeting at nine, twenty minutes away. He looked at its address. He had been there twice. The room was too cold and the man who made the coffee filled the urn as if he were punishing it. Both times, Daniel had felt better afterward.

He could arrive late. No one would mind.

He imagined sitting in the circle and saying that he had eaten a nice dinner and gone for a walk and now did not know what to do. No one would laugh. This made it harder, somehow. They would give his small difficulty their full attention. Someone would recognize it. Someone would say something useful, and he would thank them, and afterward he would come home.

His thumb rested against the edge of the phone.

He could call Luis, who had given him his number after the morning meeting weeks ago. Luis answered calls while doing other things. Daniel liked this about him. It reduced the feeling of having convened an emergency. Once Luis had spoken to him from a hardware store and interrupted a serious account of shame to ask an employee where they kept the wall anchors.

He opened their messages.

The last was from Thursday: a photograph of a dog asleep with its head inside a running shoe. Daniel had responded with a question about ventilation. Luis had written, *He makes his choices*.

Daniel typed, *You around?*

He looked at it. It was a perfectly ordinary message. He did not need to know what he would say next.

He sent it.

Then he put the phone on the table and went to take the clean towels from the dryer.

There were four bath towels and two hand towels. He folded them carefully, aligning the worn edges. A length of dark hair had wound itself into the binding of one. He worked it free and dropped it in the bathroom bin.

When he returned, there was no answer yet.

He understood that Luis had a life. He had seen photographs of his children. One was learning to drive; the other was still at an age when every school assignment required the parents to buy a particular kind of cardboard. Nine minutes without an answer meant nothing.

Daniel picked up the phone to check whether it had been nine minutes.

It had been four.

He began to think about using with a weariness that made the thought seem less dangerous than it was.

He knew where it led. He could supply the next morning in detail: the sour mouth, the inventory, the effort of remembering what he had said and to whom. He thought of telling Mara. He thought of not telling her, and the days of extra attention that would follow, the questions answered too promptly. He had done all of this before. There was no part of it he needed to investigate.

No, he thought.

He got up and drank a glass of water.

The answer held while he drank it. He rinsed the glass and left it upside down beside the sink. He could go to bed early. People did. They had evenings that failed to become anything and they went to bed.

He turned off the kitchen light.

In the dimness, the rest of the apartment seemed to have been prepared for someone who had not arrived. His book waited. The film waited. There was ice cream, music, clean linen, the good chair by the window. He had supplied the place with things he liked over many years. He knew why each was there.

He turned the light back on.

* * *

Later, he would have difficulty deciding when he had made the decision. There were several moments he could choose, and each would put the responsibility a little farther from the others.

For now he was only holding his phone.

There was a name he had deleted months ago. The number remained in an old conversation he had not deleted, because at the time deleting the contact had felt sufficient. He remembered doing it at this table with Mara asleep in the next room. He had felt clean and practical. He had gone to bed afterward and put an arm around her.

He found the conversation.

The last exchange was logistical, almost offensively dull. It could have concerned a borrowed drill. He scrolled upward, saw dates he did not want to see, and returned to the bottom.

He put the phone down.

There was still time to call someone. There would be time after a message, too. Sending a message did not require him to do anything else. The distinction presented itself with the calm precision of one of his own useful thoughts.

He picked the phone up.

He did not want the long, blurred hours he remembered from drinking. He did not want to talk until morning or be interesting to strangers or wake up somewhere else. What came to mind was brief and familiar, something whose effects he remembered as ending quickly. He let that brevity occupy his attention. It left little room for what he knew about beginning again when it ended.

He typed a greeting.

Before he sent it, a notification from Mara appeared at the top of the screen.

Done. Didn't rush. They laughed at scrappy.

He opened her message. There was a photograph taken by someone sitting close to the front: Mara at a lectern, one hand raised, the green sleeve turned back. She was looking beyond the camera. He enlarged the image. She looked pleased and a little fierce, caught in the act of saying something she meant.

Knew you'd be great, he wrote.

He wanted to add something about the picture, something that would make clear he had really looked. He could not find it immediately, so he sent what he had.

Then he returned to the other conversation.

The greeting was still there.

He sent it.

For almost a minute there was no response. He felt exposed and foolish. Perhaps the number belonged to someone else now. Perhaps there would be no answer until tomorrow, when he would be grateful. He could already imagine the gratitude, and for a moment he wanted it.

Three dots appeared.

The reply was brief. Daniel answered it. Then another question came, and he answered that too.

He remained at the table while the arrangements were made. Once he looked up toward the window, where his own face floated faintly over the dark courtyard. He lowered his eyes.

A message from Luis came through.

Hey. Just got out of a movie with the kids. Can call in ten?

Daniel read it twice.

His first impulse was to say yes. It was so immediate that his thumb moved toward the keyboard before he stopped it. He pictured Luis in the parking lot, children asking for food, one hand cupped over his free ear. He would answer. Daniel knew he would answer.

In the other conversation, someone was waiting for confirmation.

He wrote to Luis, *All good. Just saying hi. Enjoy the kids.*

Then he confirmed.

He placed the phone beside the empty fruit bowl. He had forgotten apples at the store. Mara had written them on the list, and he had come home without them. Tomorrow he could go out before she got back.

He wiped a small sticky mark from the table with his thumb. He took the dish towel from the oven handle, wet a corner, and wiped the mark properly. Then he checked the phone.

Twenty minutes.

He pulled out a chair and sat down to wait.

02 - Again

The twenty minutes took thirty-seven. During the last ten, Daniel stood at the kitchen window, watching for a car he would not recognize.

He could hear people arriving home. The gate opened and struck its latch; footsteps crossed the courtyard beneath him. Once he moved toward the door before checking his phone. The footsteps continued up to the third floor.

He had become capable of waiting. This did not occur to him until he was downstairs, holding the gate for a man in a gray sweatshirt who had no reason to come through it.

"You Daniel?"

He nodded.

The exchange took less time than his conversation about the bicycle. The man was distracted by a voice in an earbud. He said something Daniel took as a goodbye, but when Daniel answered, the man looked briefly confused.

Upstairs, Daniel locked the door. He turned the lock quietly, although no one was asleep.

He put what he had bought on the kitchen table. Then he went into the bedroom to change out of the shirt with the damp collar. It was dry now. He changed it anyway, choosing an old one he wore to bed, and put his shorts in the hamper. The preparation had acquired a domestic seriousness. He wanted water within reach. He wanted the curtains closed. He wanted to find the right music before he began.

For the first time that evening, choosing music was easy. There was an album he remembered listening to years ago, in another apartment, during a period he usually compressed into the phrase *before things got bad*. He found it immediately.

The first track began with the sound of a room: a chair moving, someone clearing a throat. He had forgotten that. He sat on the couch and listened for the piano.

He could still put everything away.

The thought came without force. He acknowledged it, as he might acknowledge a route his navigation had suggested after he had already passed the turn.

Then he used.

* * *

The ketamine changed the room before it changed how he felt about the room.

Distance became unreliable. The table looked both close enough to touch and as if it belonged in an adjoining apartment. The small noises inside the music grew distinct. He could hear the pianist release a pedal. His own hands seemed to have been placed in his lap by someone attentive to his comfort.

He had wanted this to happen. Remembering that helped him tolerate the unfamiliarity of it.

For a while, the concern that had occupied him all evening was unavailable. He could recall having been dissatisfied, but to examine it would have required assembling a person with a Saturday evening to spend. He could not quite complete the assembly. There was music, and the sensation of fabric beneath his fingers, and a lamp whose shade gave off more light along its seam.

He followed the seam upward.

Something in the music seemed about to resolve. He waited. The pianist returned to a phrase, altered it, left it unfinished. Daniel had the impression of understanding an intention too large to remember afterward. He wanted to remember it anyway.

Then the lamp was a lamp. He could feel where the edge of his phone pressed against his thigh. The pianist was still playing, but Daniel had begun to wonder which track this was.

He moved the phone to the table.

His mouth was dry. He drank from the glass he had set out and spilled a little on his shirt. The wet patch annoyed him. He had just changed his shirt.

He sat back and tried to determine whether he had enjoyed himself.

There had certainly been a difference. For a time, he had been somewhere sufficiently unlike the living room to be relieved of what he had wanted from it. But he could remember very little that he would have chosen to remain inside. There had been an uncomfortable moment with his hands. There had been the lamp. The music had suggested something it had not delivered.

Perhaps he had been waiting too hard. Perhaps the first time back, after months away, was bound to be awkward. He had spent the whole experience checking whether it was happening.

He looked at what remained.

He would know how to meet it now.

* * *

The second time, he tried closing his eyes.

At first he could see the window through his eyelids, a faint rectangle left by the streetlight. Then even that became hard to place. He stopped following the music. His thoughts seemed to continue somewhere he could overhear them without being responsible for their completion.

When he opened his eyes, his head had slipped sideways against the couch. His neck hurt. He straightened it cautiously and waited for the room to settle.

He had missed part of the album.

He moved the playback to the beginning of a track he recognized. He was certain this was where the good part had been. But the track began in a way he did not remember, and he wondered whether he had chosen the wrong recording.

He checked. Same album. Same cover, a woman standing in an overexposed doorway.

His glass was empty. He could get more water when he felt steadier. For now, he watched a droplet move down the inside of the glass and stop above the thick base.

This was the part he had forgotten: the time between. He remembered wanting, and the sudden relief of a change beginning. The intervals had not survived with the same clarity. They were full of small administrative tasks. Find the phone. Straighten the blanket. Work out whether the sensation in his stomach meant hunger. Wait until standing was unremarkable again.

Eventually he went to the kitchen. He held the empty glass beneath the faucet before turning it on, then laughed once at the orderliness of this precaution.

The rice was in the refrigerator. He opened the door and looked at it. Beside it sat a jar of olives, half a lemon in a dish, the container of yogurt Mara bought and he used without replacing. He took out an olive. It tasted aggressively of salt and vinegar. He ate a second, hoping to make the first less startling.

From the living room, the album ended.

He closed the refrigerator and stood in the kitchen with the water running.

After he turned it off, he could hear the apartment upstairs. Someone was walking from one end to the other, then back again. A normal Saturday night was continuing a few feet above his head. He pictured the room up there with unreasonable specificity: a half-folded throw, a laptop plugged in at the wrong end of the couch, a person looking for a charger they had moved themselves.

He carried the water back.

There was a message from Mara saying she had reached her sister's. She had sent it some time ago.

Going to sleep soon, he wrote. Glad it went well.

He read the message after sending it. The words seemed more culpable than the things on the table. Mara would see them, put her phone away, and go to sleep with an understanding of the evening he had supplied.

He could correct it. She was probably still awake.

Instead he restarted the album.

He made several rules over the next few hours. Each applied to what he would do after the thing he was doing now.

He would stop when the album ended. He would not restart the album. He would go to bed after he drank the water. He would sit for a while without anything and see how he felt.

He did sit. He placed both feet on the floor and watched the dark television. A faint reflection of the lamp moved when he shifted his head. He tried to recover the way it had looked earlier, when the seam in its shade had seemed to warrant his attention.

The shade was crooked. He got up and straightened it.

By then he knew that another return would leave him in the same place. He had enough evidence. But the knowledge concerned the end of an experience, and he was thinking about its beginning.

He used again.

Once, coming back, he found he had been crying. There were tears at his temples and an unpleasant pressure behind his nose. He tried to remember what had moved him. Nothing came. He wiped his face on the clean part of his shirt and felt embarrassed, although he was alone.

Later he opened the conversation with Luis. The last message was his own reassurance: *All good. Just saying hi. Enjoy the kids.*

He did not send another. He closed the conversation because looking at it made him feel worse. Then, almost immediately, he looked again.

The room had become untidy in a way that would take only a few minutes to correct. Two glasses on the table. A cushion on the floor. His old shirt, which he had taken off without putting on another. These were familiar things. He had often woken to some arrangement of them and reconstructed a night by how far each object had traveled from its usual place.

He wanted the evening to be over. He also wanted something from it before it ended.

In the kitchen cupboard was a bottle of wine they had kept for guests. He knew it was there. He had known for months, through dinners and difficult afternoons and evenings when Mara drank a

glass elsewhere and came home smelling faintly of it. The bottle had not occupied him then. He could reach past it for a serving bowl without negotiating.

Now he took it down.

He stood with it on the counter while he found the opener. A part of him objected with surprising specificity. Drinking would be another thing to tell people. He had already used; that was true whether or not he drank. But tomorrow he could still say he had not drunk.

He imagined making the distinction aloud and disliked the man who would need to make it.

He pulled the cork.

The first mouthful tasted sour. He swallowed, waited, and had another. He did not bother finding music to accompany it. He sat at the table and scrolled through news without opening any of the articles.

At some point he went to bed. He remembered plugging in his phone because it would be inconvenient to wake to a dead battery. He remembered moving to his own side, though the whole bed was empty. The rest came to him in the morning as a sore jaw and the knowledge that he had slept in his clothes.

* * *

At eight eleven, sunlight struck the corner of the dresser.

Daniel lay still while the previous night returned. There were no surprising messages to discover. He remembered the exchange at the gate, the lamp, the wine. He remembered telling Mara he was going to sleep. His phone confirmed that she had answered with a heart.

He was thirsty. He had a headache, but it was smaller than he had expected. He could stand. In the bathroom he looked tired and a little puffy around the eyes, as he sometimes did after a long flight.

The modesty of the damage frightened him briefly. Then he used it to feel better.

He showered, opened the living room curtains, and put his shirt in the hamper. He washed the glasses. The remaining wine went

down the sink. He collected what was left from the night and took it, with the bottle, to the outside bins. When he came back upstairs, the table was clear.

He made coffee and toast.

On his phone, the morning meeting was still listed as starting at nine. He could make it if he left soon. He did not need to prepare a speech. He could sit down and say what had happened.

Instead he ate the toast slowly, because his stomach felt uncertain and it seemed sensible to give it time. At eight fifty-seven he rinsed the plate. At nine six he told himself there were later meetings.

Mara called while he was wiping crumbs into his hand.

"Hey," she said. "You up?"

"Yeah."

"Did I wake you?"

"No. Having coffee."

In the background, her sister said something about a reservation.

"One o'clock," Mara said away from the phone. Then, to him, "My mother's decided she wants the place by the water. Which she hated last time."

"Maybe she wants to check."

"That's what I said."

He could hear Mara smiling. He put the crumbs in the bin and brushed his palms together.

"How was the rest of it?" he asked.

"Good. Really good, I think. That woman from the foundation wants to see the program. Actually come on a Saturday. I'm trying not to get ahead of myself."

"You should. Get ahead of yourself a little."

"I am. I'm being unbearable about it."

He wanted to hear more. He also wanted her to stop speaking so he could work out how to tell her. Both wishes made him silent.

"How was your night?"

"Quiet."

The word arrived easily. He had not planned it.

"Did you finish your miserable movie?"

"No."

"Nobody ever does. That's how they get away with it."

He made a sound she could take as laughter.

Her mother wanted to go back to her sister's after lunch, Mara said, so she would probably stay through the afternoon. Home around six. Did he need anything?

He looked at the empty fruit bowl.

"No. I'll go to the store."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you."

Afterward he remained by the counter, holding the phone. He had made it possible to go on with the day without telling anyone. He could feel the available hours spreading out before him.

* * *

By late morning, he had arrived at an explanation of the night that made it seem almost useful.

He had expected something the ketamine no longer gave him. He had confused a remembered effect with a remembered period of his life. Possibly he no longer liked intoxication at all. Recovery had changed him, even if he had failed to recognize the change. The entire exercise might have demonstrated that.

The wine complicated this explanation. He decided it had been an attempt to sleep.

He sat at the table and considered whether other kinds of intoxication would disappoint him in the same way. It seemed an interesting question. Once it had become interesting, the possibility of answering it began to feel separate from the events of the night before.

He could already hear how it would sound to someone else. That irritated him. He had not lost the ability to ask a legitimate question because he was the sort of person who would misuse the answer.

There was a dispensary a few blocks beyond the grocery store. He had walked past it often, noticing its frosted windows and the potted plants outside. He had not been inside for more than a year.

At the grocery store he bought apples, yogurt, and bread. He chose each apple by turning it in his hand. A soft patch on one made

him put it back. It was reassuring to remain capable of these small judgments.

He went farther down the street before turning home.

Inside the dispensary, a young woman asked how his weekend was going. There was no reason to give her an unusual answer. He bought a cannabis edible and carried it home in the bag with the groceries.

At the apartment he put everything away except what he intended to use. He checked the time. There were several hours until Mara returned. He ate some bread, still thinking of himself as someone proceeding carefully, and then took the edible.

He would stay home. He would pay attention. He would establish whether being altered was actually something he enjoyed.

He opened a note on his phone and wrote the time.

* * *

For a while he felt nothing except foolish.

He sat by the window with the book about water and read two pages. The prose was clear; the problem it described was interesting. He could follow it perfectly well. He wondered whether he should have tried reading in this chair the night before instead of on the couch.

Then he noticed that he had begun holding his face very still.

He relaxed his mouth. The sensation of relaxing it occupied him. His tongue seemed to take up more room than usual, and he became aware of every swallow. He put the book down and looked outside.

Across the courtyard, laundry hung over a railing. He watched a sleeve lift and fall. For a moment the movement was funny, though he could not have said why. He smiled. Then he wondered whether he had smiled visibly enough for someone across the courtyard to notice.

He moved back from the window.

The effects continued to build. He had expected a familiar looseness, a change in emphasis that might let him watch a film or listen to an album all the way through. Instead his attention fastened to whatever he least wanted to inspect. His heartbeat. The last thing

he had said to Mara. Whether the refrigerator had always made that sound.

He opened the note on his phone. Beneath the time, he wrote, *Too much.*

The phrase looked absurdly inadequate. He deleted it, then put it back. He spent some time deciding whether the capital T made it look more serious than it was.

He wanted to lie down, but first he wanted water. He went to the kitchen and forgot whether he had already filled a glass. There was one beside the sink. It might have been from the morning. He rinsed it and filled it, then carried it with both hands to the couch.

He knew this would pass. The knowledge was complete and of little immediate use.

His phone vibrated. A photograph from Mara: her mother beside an enormous plate of food, looking suspicious of whoever had chosen to record it.

He tried to think of a reply. Every possible sentence seemed to disclose him. He settled on a heart, then worried that a heart without a joke was unlike him.

He put the phone facedown.

For a long time he lay with his eyes closed and one foot on the floor. When he opened them, much less time had passed than he expected. Later, when he opened them again, the light had moved across the room and his hand was numb beneath his cheek.

He sat up too quickly and waited through a wave of nausea.

Five twenty-three.

The water glass was still nearly full. His book had slid facedown onto the floor. He picked it up, smoothed the bent pages, and found the dentist's envelope under the chair.

He had wanted a different day. Now most of the day was gone.

* * *

Mara came home carrying her tote and a paper bag of food her mother had insisted they take.

Daniel heard the gate, then her key in the lock. He had changed his clothes. His hair was wet from a second shower. He was sitting

at the table because waiting on the couch would have looked like what he had been doing.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

She set the food down and leaned toward him. He stood too late; their kiss landed awkwardly at the corner of his mouth.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Tired."

She looked at him for a moment, then went to put her bag in the bedroom.

He heard the little dish move on the dresser. She was taking off the earrings. She had worn them through lunch, he supposed. He had not noticed them in the photograph.

"My mother ordered enough for six people," she called. "Then she told us neither of us eats properly."

He looked inside the paper bag. Two cardboard containers, a plastic cup of sauce, several paper napkins folded around cutlery. Something smelled of garlic.

Mara came back barefoot, holding her water bottle.

"Did you have dinner?"

"No."

"We could just heat that up."

"Mara."

She stopped unscrewing the bottle.

He had rehearsed several openings while she drove home. One acknowledged the facts immediately. Another asked her to sit down. All of them had included some indication that he understood the significance of what he was about to tell her. Now he could remember none without hearing the rehearsal.

"I used last night."

She put the bottle on the counter.

"What?"

"Ketamine. And then I drank."

She looked at the table, as if the things might still be there.

"Here?"

"Yes."

"By yourself?"

"Yes."

She pulled out the chair opposite his but did not sit down.

"Are you high now?"

He had hoped she would ask whether he was all right. He could have answered that without adding anything.

"I took an edible today."

Her hand stayed on the chair.

"Today."

"Earlier. I slept for a while."

"When I called you?"

"No. After."

She sat down.

He began to explain that the previous night had been unpleasant, that he had wanted to understand whether the problem was specific to what he had taken. Halfway through, he heard himself arranging the events into something with a purpose. Mara was looking at him steadily. He stopped.

"I thought you'd stopped yesterday," she said. "For a second, when you told me. I thought you were telling me about something you'd stopped."

"I have stopped."

"You were asleep."

He looked down at his hands.

There was nothing loud in her voice. She asked whether he had driven. No. Whether anything was left in the apartment. No. Whether he had spoken to anyone. He said he would call Luis.

"Have you spoken to anyone?"

"No."

She picked up her water bottle and drank. He waited for her to tell him what would happen next. He was aware of wanting instructions and ashamed of how useful they would be.

"You said you had a quiet night."

"I know."

"I was going on about the fundraiser."

"You should have been. It went well."

"I know it went well."

He nodded. He had made even that sound like something he was allowing her.

Through the open window came the scrape of a chair from another apartment. Somewhere a pan struck a stove. People were making dinner.

"What happened?" she asked.

He could tell her about the film. The walk. The book he had tried twice. He could offer the night as a series of reasonable efforts followed by a failure whose cause they might identify together. He knew how to tell it so she would understand that he had tried.

"I was restless," he said.

"Did you want me to come home?"

"No."

That answer was immediate, and true. He had wanted her to have her evening. He had wanted the photograph at the lectern, the successful joke, the visit from the foundation. He had also wanted the hours alone that would let him do what he had done. He could not find a way to put those wishes beside each other without asking her to bear the contradiction.

"I texted Luis," he said.

"Last night?"

"Before."

She looked at him differently for a moment, and he knew what he had let her assume.

"He got back to me," he added. "I said I was fine."

He did not tell her how close he had come to accepting the call. He did not tell her that the first relief had arrived while he was choosing music, before he had taken anything. Those details seemed both important and self-serving. He kept them, unsure which was the reason.

Mara stood and opened the paper bag.

"I'm hungry," she said. "I need to eat before we keep doing this."

"I can heat it."

"Let me."

He stayed seated while she found a plate. She opened the kitchen drawer and paused when it slid without catching.

"You fixed it."

"Yesterday."

She took out a fork and closed the drawer.

He watched her transfer food from one container to the plate. He had imagined losing her in the large, definitive ways people described when they explained how they had finally stopped. What he had done tonight was make her come home from something good and examine his face. She would remember the photograph she had sent and wonder what he had been doing when he answered. Tomorrow, when he said he was fine, she would have to decide what work the sentence required of her.

He took out his phone and opened the conversation with Luis.

I wasn't fine last night, he wrote. I used. I need to talk.

He sent it before he could improve it.

At the counter, Mara waited for the microwave. Her speech was still in the tote beside the bedroom door. He could see the folded edge sticking out, the corner worn soft from being held.

"Do you want some of this?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Get a plate."

He got up and took one from the cupboard. She divided the food, keeping the larger portion, and handed him the rest.

They sat at the table. The food was good. He could taste the lemon and garlic, the char along one edge. He waited for hunger to make the next mouthful necessary.

Across from him, Mara began to say something, then shook her head.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. A thing my mother said."

"Tell me."

She moved a piece of food with her fork.

"I can't remember how it started."

He knew she remembered. He waited anyway, holding his fork above the plate, until she began to eat again.

03 - Doing Well

On Monday, the office accepted him without adjustment.

His badge opened the downstairs door. The elevator carried him to the fourth floor, where someone had left a box of pastries beside the coffee machine. He took a paper napkin and then, remembering he had already eaten, put it in his pocket. At his desk, the screen woke to the document he had been editing on Friday.

The last sentence needed a verb.

He supplied one, read the paragraph again, and saved it.

Luis had called on Sunday while Daniel was washing the dinner plates. Daniel had dried his hands and gone into the bedroom, then returned to the kitchen because closing a door seemed wrong. Mara had taken her laptop to the living room. He could see the back of her head while he told Luis what he had taken and when.

Luis had listened. At one point his younger child had asked where the tape was, and he had said he did not know, then muted himself to say something longer.

"Sorry," he said when he came back. "I'm here."

Daniel apologized for the message on Saturday.

"I wish you'd let me call."

"I know."

"I'm glad you did now."

They agreed to meet before the Monday evening meeting. Daniel also sent a message to Dr. Shah, the psychiatrist he had been seeing through the outpatient clinic. She had an opening on Wednesday. He accepted it, entered it in his calendar, and then checked that it appeared there.

Now it was Monday morning. There were six new messages about a corridor review and one from payroll about a correction that did not apply to him. His body felt slower than usual, but his work was still available. He opened the review.

At nine thirty, Nina leaned around the partition holding a mug by its rim.

"You seen the new summary?"

"Looking at it."

"Apparently we've made everyone very happy."

The dashboard showed the results of a timing trial along a bus corridor. Vehicle delay was down. Bus reliability had improved. Pedestrian waiting time, represented by a narrow green bar, had fallen slightly.

"Who's everyone?" Daniel asked.

"That's the question."

She put her mug on his desk and pulled over an empty chair. Someone from the accessibility office had forwarded complaints about one crossing. The summary suggested that the crossing had improved along with the rest of the corridor. The complaints said it had become harder to use.

Daniel opened the underlying report. Nina watched him scroll.

"The sensor problem?" she asked.

"Different location."

He found the waiting-time measure. It began when someone pressed the button and ended when the walk signal appeared. The trial had shortened one stage of the crossing and shifted the next stage to favor buses approaching from the south.

He opened the intersection diagram.

There was a refuge island between the two halves of the road. Each half had its own button and its own walk signal. In the summary they were separate observations.

"It's counting two waits," he said.

"There are two waits."

"There's one person."

Nina leaned forward.

For someone starting on the west side at the wrong moment, the new timing allowed a quick trip to the island, followed by most of a cycle standing there. The average wait at each button looked acceptable. The time it took to get from one side of the road to the other could be substantially worse.

"Can we show the whole crossing?" she asked.

"We can reconstruct the possible sequences. We can't say which one every person got."

"Fine. Show what we know."

He liked Nina for this. She could tolerate an incomplete answer if its edges were visible.

They worked through the timing plans. His attention settled. He forgot the napkin in his pocket, the message he needed to send Mara, the fact that he had been awake at four trying to decide whether Sunday or Monday counted as his first day. There was a particular problem on the screen. When he changed one assumption, a different result appeared, and he could determine whether it was a better account of what happened at the intersection.

At eleven, they had a chart Nina could take to the review. The correction did not undo the bus improvements. It made the pedestrian cost visible.

"That'll be popular," she said.

"We could leave the bar green."

"I'll make the complaint text green too."

He laughed. She took her mug and went back to her desk.

For several minutes afterward, he felt good. He had helped. A question had become answerable because he knew how to look at it.

Then the task was finished. He opened the next message and read it twice.

* * *

At lunch he went outside with a sandwich. The office courtyard had three tables, two in full sun and one beneath a shade sail that had loosened at a corner. He chose the shaded table. A dry leaf kept scraping back and forth under the leg of the chair beside him.

Mara had written, *Let me know what time you'll be back.*

He answered with the time the meeting ended and how long it would take to get home. He added that Luis would be there. Then he deleted the addition, worried it sounded like evidence, and put it back because it was information she might want.

Her reply was a thumbs-up.

He had once been able to receive that symbol without examining it.

Across the courtyard, two colleagues were arguing about a television series. One had watched the final episode without his partner and was considering watching it again without admitting he knew the ending. They were treating this as a serious logistical problem. Daniel smiled, then felt he had intruded on a category of dishonesty he was no longer entitled to find amusing.

He finished the sandwich. There were twenty-three minutes left of the lunch break he had given himself. He could go back upstairs. No one required him to sit outdoors.

Instead he stayed long enough to be certain he had tried.

* * *

Luis was waiting beside the meeting-room entrance, picking a label off a bottle of water.

He was a broad man with a habit of leaning against things that did not seem built to hold him. Tonight it was a narrow railing beside three concrete steps. He straightened when Daniel approached and pulled him briefly into a hug.

"You eat?"

"Yes."

"Something today, or just at some point?"

"A sandwich. Lunch. I've got dinner at home."

"Okay."

Luis went back to the label. A small piece came off beneath his thumbnail.

"How's Mara?"

"I don't know yet."

"Yeah."

Daniel had prepared a fuller account of the weekend. Standing on the steps, he could not find a place to begin it. He asked about Luis's children instead.

"The little one's building California."

"All of it?"

"In a shoebox. Due tomorrow. Apparently we've known about this for a month."

"How far along?"

"We have the box."

Daniel laughed, and Luis finally got the label off in one wet piece.

Inside, the chairs were arranged in an uneven circle. A woman Daniel recognized was moving two apart so that someone using a walker could get through. He helped shift the next chair. She thanked him without looking up.

He sat beside Luis, who smelled faintly of laundry detergent. Across the room, the man who had asked about his sober time on Saturday was pouring coffee.

Daniel watched him find a lid that fit the cup.

When the meeting began, he listened to the opening words with the peculiar alertness of someone waiting for his name to be called. No one called it. He would have to choose a moment himself.

A woman spoke about visiting her brother in the hospital. A man had lost a job he had expected to keep. Another man said he was doing well and found that frightening because he kept waiting to discover what he had missed. Daniel could have spoken after any of them. Each pause filled before he used it.

Eventually the room was quiet long enough that waiting became conspicuous to him, though probably to no one else.

"I used over the weekend," he said.

His voice sounded ordinary. That helped him continue.

He gave the short version. Saturday night, then Sunday. He had told his wife. He had called Luis. He was here.

People listened. No one looked surprised in a way that either comforted or offended him.

"I'm trying to understand what happened," he said. "There wasn't a fight. Work's fine. I had the evening to myself. I'd been looking forward to it."

He could hear himself preparing to distinguish his problem from the familiar ones. He disliked that before he had done it.

"I know how that sounds."

The woman with the walker shifted one foot. Someone set a cup on the floor.

"I did the things I'm supposed to do. Most of them. I mean, I was doing them before Saturday. And they helped. My life is better."

He stopped. If he continued, he would have to explain how a better life could still have become an evening he could not bear. He imagined the woman's brother in the hospital, the man clearing his desk after losing his job. He knew no one had asked him to compete with them. He was doing that himself.

"I got bored," he said finally.

The word reduced the whole evening to something a child might announce from the back seat of a car.

"And I made it worse."

He thanked the room and looked down.

Later, another person spoke about a Sunday afternoon spent walking through a supermarket without needing anything. Daniel lifted his head. The man did not mention him. He described buying a melon he had let go bad on the counter because cutting it seemed like too much trouble, then being furious with himself when he threw it out. Several people laughed with recognition. Daniel did too.

For a moment, he wished he had told them about the ice cream.

* * *

Afterward he helped stack chairs. The man from Saturday took the chair Daniel had just folded and set it on the rack.

"Glad you came back," he said.

"Thanks."

That was all. Daniel had braced for something more and did not know where to put the unused effort.

Outside, Luis checked his phone.

"We need blue paint," he said.

"For the ocean?"

"I hope so."

They walked toward the parking lot. Daniel said the meeting had helped.

"Good."

"I don't think I explained it very well."

"You can have another go tomorrow."

He looked at Luis, uncertain whether he was joking.

"I'm serious. You don't have to get it all into the one."

Luis's phone rang. He glanced at it, then let it ring.

"Take it," Daniel said.

"They can wait a minute."

They stood beside Luis's car. The back seat contained a sweatshirt, a reusable shopping bag, and a cardboard rectangle large enough to be a problem.

"On Saturday," Daniel said, "when you said you could call. I nearly said yes."

"I wish you had."

"I know. I'm not saying—"

"I know you're not."

Daniel put his hands in his pockets. The unused napkin was still there. He worked its folded edge between his fingers.

"It felt easier once I'd decided," he said. "Before I took anything. Just knowing the evening was going somewhere."

Luis nodded slowly.

"Tell Shah that."

"I will."

"And next time, let me bore you on the phone."

The phone rang again. This time Luis answered.

"Blue," he said. "I know. I'm on my way."

* * *

Mara had eaten when Daniel got home. She had left a bowl covered with a plate on the stove. He warmed the food while she finished an email at the table.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Good. Hard."

She nodded and went back to the email. He took his bowl to the other end of the table. For a few minutes the only sounds were his fork against the bowl and the keys beneath her fingers.

"The foundation visit's happening," she said.

"That's great."

"A week from Saturday. Now I have to keep everyone from turning a regular session into a performance."

He asked who was coming. She told him, and he asked another question about whether they would need the larger room. He knew enough about the organization to follow her answer. They had talked about these rooms for years: who had the keys, which one overheated, how the dance class next door sometimes made quiet work impossible.

She closed the laptop.

"I keep thinking about your message," she said.

"Which one?"

"That you were going to sleep."

He set down his fork.

"You didn't need to send that."

"I know."

"I wasn't asking you to report in. I told you I'd got to my sister's, and you made up a thing you were doing."

"I wanted you to stop thinking about me."

She looked at him.

"For the night," he added.

"I had stopped. I was at my sister's."

He could feel an explanation forming. He wanted to tell her about anticipation, about how making the arrangement had organized the evening before the drug did anything. There was something there that mattered, and if he could explain it accurately they might spend a few minutes considering the problem together instead of sitting on opposite sides of what he had done.

"I think the relief starts before the substance," he said. "There's a change when you know something's going to happen. You get an expectation, and then ordinary things become bearable because they're leading toward—"

"Daniel."

He stopped.

"What happened when you wrote the message?"

He looked at the bowl. A grain of rice clung to the inside above the food line.

"I didn't want you to call."

She waited.

"I didn't want to have to stop."

"Okay."

She did not say it kindly or unkindly. She was putting a fact somewhere she could find it again.

He began to apologize. She let him finish. Then she asked whether he had arranged the appointment, and he told her about Wednesday.

"Do you want me to come?"

He wanted to say yes because then she would hear him trying. He wanted to say no because there were things he might say to Dr. Shah that would hurt Mara simply by being said in front of her.

"I think I should go on my own this time."

"All right."

She opened the laptop again, then closed it without typing.

"I'm still going to my class on Thursday."

"Of course."

The words came too quickly. Her ceramics class met in the evening. He had picked her up twice when she had stayed late to finish something, and once she had brought home a small, heavy bowl she disliked so much that he had claimed it for his keys.

"I'm telling you because I caught myself deciding not to," she said.

"You should go."

"I know."

He nodded.

They sat for a while without repairing the conversation. Then Mara asked if he was finished with the bowl, and he said he would wash it himself.

* * *

Dr. Shah's waiting room had a photograph of an empty beach above a plant that had grown sideways toward the window. Daniel

had looked at the photograph often enough to recognize the small figure near the water. At first he had thought it was a post.

On Wednesday he arrived early. He had brought a list, because he did not trust the way he described things without one. The list contained what he had taken, the times as well as he could reconstruct them, and three sentences about the evening before.

He reread the sentences while a printer worked behind the reception desk.

When Dr. Shah called him in, she asked how he was feeling now. He answered with a summary of Monday and Tuesday. She waited until he had finished, then asked how he had slept.

They went through the practical questions first. What he had used. Whether there was anything left. Whether he had used again. His current medications, his physical symptoms, the people he had contacted. She asked directly whether he had wanted to hurt himself.

"No."

"At any point?"

"No. I wanted to get through the evening."

She made a note. They discussed what support he could use over the next several days. He told her about the meetings, Luis, Mara's class on Thursday. Dr. Shah asked what he had arranged for that evening. He had arranged nothing yet.

"I can ask Luis about dinner," he said.

"Ask him today."

Then she put the pen down.

"Tell me about Saturday before you contacted anyone."

He had expected this and still began with the groceries.

She let him tell it. The screw in the drawer. Mara's speech. Cooking. The film, the walk, the book, the ice cream. Described aloud in a room where time was being reserved for it, the evening sounded almost pleasant.

"Some of it was," he said, before she asked.

"Which parts?"

"Talking to Mara. Dinner. I helped someone with a gate. That was fine. I wasn't numb."

"You don't have to have been numb."

"But I could enjoy things."

"I'm hearing that."

He leaned back. Her office chair had a loose armrest; it shifted when he put weight on it. He had noticed it months ago and never mentioned it.

"How long has this been happening?" she asked.

"Saturday?"

"The feeling you're describing."

He looked at the list. It did not include a useful date.

There had been stretches in the past four months when he thought it was improving. Some weeks he slept better. Some days a conversation or a task held him long enough that he forgot to assess himself. Before these four months there had been other periods of abstinence, and during some of those he had waited for the same thing to change. Before that, his memories were harder to sort. There had been too much use mixed into everything. He did not know which feelings belonged to which cause.

"Years, possibly. Not all the time."

She turned to her screen. They reviewed what he had told her at earlier appointments and what they had tried: adjustments that had helped his sleep or reduced his anxiety, one medication he had stopped because its side effects had become intolerable, the routines he had sustained more reliably this time. None of it had happened as neatly as the sequence on the screen suggested. Some changes overlapped. Some apparent improvements lasted only until his next visit.

"You've often said you were doing better," she said.

"I was."

"In what ways?"

"I was showing up. I wasn't lying about where I'd been. I could get things done."

"And the hours when there wasn't something you had to get done?"

He pressed a thumbnail into the folded edge of his list.

"I thought those were meant to get better on their own."

She nodded, not in agreement but to keep him talking.

"Or that I was meant to learn to appreciate them. I have a good life. I know what's in it."

"Knowing that hasn't settled this."

"No."

He heard how small the answer was after all his qualifications.

For a moment he considered explaining the pedestrian crossing. He had spent Monday finding a mistake in what counted as an improvement, and the resemblance seemed useful. Then he imagined himself halfway through the intersection diagram while Dr. Shah waited for him to return to his own life.

"I'm good at being someone people don't have to worry about," he said. "When I'm sober. I can do that part."

She did not rush to reassure him that people cared about more than that.

"What would you want to be different?"

He looked toward the window. On the roof of the building opposite, a worker was kneeling beside a metal housing. A second person held a panel upright against the wind. Daniel watched them adjust their grips.

"I'd like to want the time I have," he said.

Dr. Shah waited.

"Not every minute. I know that's unreasonable. But some of it before it's gone."

* * *

She brought up the possibility of an assessment with a team that worked on persistent difficulties with reward and motivation. The referral used the word *anhedonia*.

He repeated it.

"I thought that meant you couldn't feel pleasure."

"That's part of what they'll ask about. I don't want to decide what fits from one conversation, especially right after this weekend."

"You think I'm depressed."

"I think there are questions we haven't answered."

He looked at the screen when she turned it slightly toward him. There was a department name, a clinic address, a paragraph about assessment. The language was broad enough that he could see himself in it and broad enough that he distrusted the recognition.

"What would they do?"

"First, take a much closer history. They'll want to know what changes when you're abstinent and what persists. What you look forward to, what you enjoy once you're doing it, what you can stay engaged with. They'll review what you've already tried."

"And then?"

"Then we talk about what they find."

He had wanted a treatment name. Something he could look up in the elevator. He disliked himself a little for how quickly he had moved past the prospect of being understood toward the prospect of being changed.

"Okay," he said.

She began the referral. He watched her type, aware that his account of an evening was becoming an object other people would read.

Before he left, she asked him to contact Luis about Thursday and confirmed when she would see him again. The referral would proceed alongside the work they were already doing. He agreed. He had not meant to suggest that a new appointment could replace any of it, though he could see how easily he might let it.

At reception he paid and accepted a printed confirmation. There was no diagnosis on the paper. Only the date of his next visit, the amount charged, and his name spelled correctly.

Outside, he stood beside a planter and called Luis.

"Thursday?" Luis said. "I can do early. I've got pickup at seven."

"Early's good."

They chose a place. Daniel entered the dinner in his calendar before leaving the planter.

* * *

The assessment office called on Friday while he was revising the corridor report.

Nina had persuaded the review team to keep the pedestrian chart. They wanted another version with fewer annotations, and Daniel was trying to decide which explanation could be removed without changing what the chart appeared to say.

He took the call in an empty conference room.

The scheduler offered him an appointment two weeks away. She would send forms. Some questions might overlap with things he had already told Dr. Shah; he should answer them anyway. He wrote down the date on a sticky note, although the appointment was arriving on his phone as she spoke.

"And what would you say is the main reason for the visit?" she asked.

"I was referred by Dr. Shah."

"Yes, I have that. Just in your own words."

Through the glass wall he could see Nina at his desk, leaving a marked-up copy of the report. She spotted him and raised the pages to show him, then set them down. He nodded.

"Difficulty enjoying things," he said.

The scheduler typed.

He waited, dissatisfied. That was too easy for the sentence he had spent the week trying to say.

"I can enjoy them," he added. "Sometimes. It's more that I keep wanting to be finished."

The typing stopped, then resumed.

She read the words back to him without improving them.

"Yes," he said. "Put that."

04 - A Quiet Evening

The form asked whether he would enjoy sitting quietly after a meal.

Daniel had answered the questions above it without much difficulty. He liked a warm bath. He enjoyed seeing familiar faces. The smell of bread could still make him hungry. He had paused over a question about a beautiful landscape, imagining first the view and then himself standing in front of it, wondering when it would be reasonable to leave.

Now there was the meal, and the sitting afterward.

He read the sentence again. It did not specify company. It did not say whether he could read, or listen to something, or get up to clear the plates. The choices ran from strong agreement to strong disagreement. There was no box for asking what else was happening.

Mara was on the couch with her laptop. The foundation visit had gone well, though there was no money yet. She was preparing the additional material they had requested, moving between a budget and photographs of children's work. Every so often she enlarged one of the pictures and sat back to look at it.

"What does sitting quietly mean?" he asked.

She looked up.

He read the question aloud.

"Sitting quietly," she said.

"But doing what?"

"That might be the question."

He looked at the screen.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't know. What's the rest of it?"

"That's all of it."

She put the laptop aside and came to stand behind him. Her hand rested briefly on his shoulder as she leaned toward the form.

He wanted it to stay there and did not move, as if movement might remind her to take it away.

"Just put what you think," she said.

"I keep qualifying everything."

"Then qualify it when you see them."

She went back to the couch. He selected disagreement. It felt excessive. There were surely occasions when he had sat quietly after a meal and enjoyed it. There must have been hundreds.

He tried to remember one that had happened recently. While he was trying, the screen dimmed.

* * *

The appointment was on Friday morning, nearly three weeks after the relapse. In the interval, he had gone to work, gone to meetings, eaten dinner with Luis twice, and attended another appointment with Dr. Shah. He had not used. Some evenings were easier than others. On one of the easier ones he had helped Mara choose photographs for the foundation, and they had disagreed about a blurred picture of a child holding up a drawing. He thought the blur made it unusable. Mara thought the child's expression made it the only picture they needed.

She had included it. He had been glad.

None of this seemed to belong on the form, which he had submitted the night before with the sensation of having described someone less complicated than himself.

The assessment clinic occupied two floors of a medical building set back from the street. In the lobby, a woman was trying to persuade a parking machine to recognize a ticket she had already paid for. Daniel stopped beside her and turned the ticket around. It worked. She thanked him with a degree of feeling that made him suspect she had been there a long time.

Upstairs, the receptionist asked him to confirm his date of birth. He did. She asked whether he had completed the questionnaires. He said he had, although there were parts he wanted to explain.

"You can tell the doctor."

He sat down with his coat across his knees.

There were six other people in the waiting room. One was watching something on a phone without sound. A man near the window had closed his eyes. Beside him, a woman was opening and closing the fastening on a cloth bag, making a small tearing noise each time. No one looked sufficiently different from the people in his office to explain why they were all here.

When his name was called, he stood too quickly and dropped the coat.

The person waiting in the doorway let him pick it up.

* * *

Dr. Chen had already read Dr. Shah's referral. She was a psychiatrist, she told him, and worked with the clinical team evaluating disorders of reward and motivation. Today would be a long interview, followed by some tasks with one of the assessors. They would probably need more than one visit.

"I know you've told parts of this before," she said. "I'm going to ask again."

Her desk was crowded with things that had practical uses: two keyboards, a mug of pens, a small stack of folders, a box of tissues with a pair of glasses on top. She moved the glasses so he could reach the tissues. The gesture made him wonder what she expected him to say.

They began with the history.

It took longer than he had anticipated. She wanted to distinguish one period of abstinence from another, one medication from the medication he had taken alongside it, an improvement he remembered from an improvement someone else had reported. At first he supplied years. Then approximate months. Eventually they worked backward from where he had lived and what job he had been doing.

"That was the apartment with the broken elevator," he said.

Dr. Chen looked up.

"Sorry. That's how I remember it."

"That's fine. How long were you there?"

He found an old address in his phone. She waited while he searched, without trying to turn the search itself into something revealing.

He had once gone almost a year without using. The period had ended badly enough that the preceding months had become, in memory, a preparation for the ending. Dr. Chen wanted those months back. Had he been able to enjoy things? Had he started activities on his own? Had he stayed with them? What had Mara noticed?

He could answer the first question more easily than the others.

"We went to the desert that spring," he said. "I liked that."

"What did you like?"

"Being there. The light. We found this place to eat that looked terrible from the road."

"And when you came home?"

"I went back to work."

She waited.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't remember those days as well."

They returned to the present. He described his work, the things he could still become interested in, the pleasure of solving a problem that had occupied him for several days. He told her he was able to concentrate. He did not want a difficulty with attention entered in the record as an inability to think.

"I'm not proposing that," she said.

"I know. I just want to be accurate."

"So do I."

She glanced at the screen and asked him about the questionnaire.

He was relieved to have something specific to dispute.

"The question about sitting after dinner," he said. "I didn't know what it meant."

"What were you unsure about?"

"Whether there was anything to do."

She wrote that down.

He watched the pen move.

"That makes me sound ridiculous."

"It helps me understand your answer."

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

"I can tell you a meal was good. I can tell you I like being with my wife. I'm not inventing those things afterward. I feel them at the time."

"But?"

"I'm also waiting."

"For what?"

"That's the problem. If there were something I wanted to do, I could do it."

She asked him for a recent example, and he began again with the Saturday. He had told it often enough now that certain details arrived in a fixed order. He tried to interrupt the order so it would not become a story he could recite without remembering.

"The chicken was good," he said. "I keep coming back to that. It sounds stupid, but if you ask whether I enjoyed dinner, the answer is yes. And when it was over, I needed something else immediately."

"Were you hungry?"

"No."

"Anxious?"

"Eventually."

"Sad?"

He thought about this.

"I got sad about it. After a while."

Dr. Chen put her pen down. Somewhere outside the room, a cart rattled over a threshold. She waited for it to pass.

"When you say you were waiting, did it feel like an absence? Or was there a pressure to do something?"

"Pressure."

"And how did it change over the evening?"

He rubbed one thumb along the seam of his trousers.

"It got harder to pretend I was choosing what to do next."

* * *

The tasks took place in a smaller room with a desk facing a blank wall. An assessor explained the instructions, asked him to repeat part of them, and adjusted the height of the chair.

He watched symbols appear on a screen. He made choices between smaller and larger rewards that required different amounts of effort. Sometimes he was asked how much he expected to enjoy something, and sometimes how much he had enjoyed it. The separation became irritating. By the time a question appeared, he had begun wondering whether his answer would resemble the previous one.

There were pleasant images, neutral images, sounds he was meant to rate. A photograph of a crowded beach made him think about finding a place to leave his shoes. He gave it a low rating and worried that this would be interpreted as a symptom instead of a reasonable response to the beach.

During a break he asked whether he was doing the tasks correctly.

"You're following the instructions," the assessor said.

"But you can tell if someone's trying to produce a particular result?"

"Are you trying to produce a particular result?"

"I'm trying not to."

She nodded as if that was a difficulty she had encountered before. She offered him water and told him the next section would take about twenty minutes.

He found the tasks easier than the questions. He wanted to perform them well even when performing them well had no obvious meaning. When a sequence became predictable, he felt a small satisfaction. Then it changed and he began looking for the next pattern.

Afterward, he told Dr. Chen this.

"That's useful," she said. "It's one reason we don't take a score from a room like this as a description of your whole life."

They arranged for him to record brief reports at different points during the following week. What he was doing, how engaged he felt, how much effort remaining with it required. He would also bring a fuller treatment history. With his permission, they would obtain records from the clinicians he had seen before Dr. Shah.

He agreed to all of it.

Outside, he found a message from Mara asking how it had gone.

More next week, he wrote. They're being thorough.

He considered adding that he had found the tests interesting, then decided he did not want to explain why that worried him.

* * *

The reports arrived at inconvenient moments, which was probably part of their purpose.

One found him standing in a supermarket line, holding a bag of onions against his chest because he had neglected to take a basket. One interrupted a conversation with Nina that he was enjoying. Another appeared while he was looking at his phone in the living room, having abandoned a book a minute earlier.

He learned how easy it was to improve an answer by changing its reference point. If he reported on the conversation just finished, he was doing well. If he reported on the instant in which the question arrived, he was irritated. If he reported on what he expected the rest of the evening to be like, he was already somewhere else.

He tried to follow the instructions.

On Tuesday, Mara came home late from a planning meeting and found him answering a prompt at the kitchen table.

"Do you have to do that now?"

"I'm supposed to."

"Okay."

He finished quickly and turned the phone over. She was taking food from the refrigerator.

"Sorry. What happened?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to say hello."

He got up and kissed her. She put a hand against his chest, holding him there for a moment before stepping away to find a plate.

He did not know how he would have rated that moment. He was glad no question arrived.

By the next Friday, he had a week of answers and a list of corrections to them. He had also located records of two treatments he had remembered less accurately than he thought. One had lasted longer;

the other had ended for a reason different from the one he usually gave.

He brought the corrections on paper.

Dr. Chen read them. She asked several questions, made a note beside one, and left the rest on the desk between them.

"What are you expecting me to tell you today?" she asked.

"Whether this is anhedonia."

"Would that answer be enough?"

"No."

He smiled a little. She did too, then turned toward the screen.

* * *

She showed him his reports first. There were stretches of engagement. Work tasks, conversations, an afternoon he had spent helping Luis move a cabinet. There were also long intervals in which remaining with whatever he had chosen felt effortful and brought little anticipation of anything worth continuing for.

The chart made a pattern visible. It did not tell him why it existed.

Dr. Chen said as much before he asked.

"The diagnostic terms cover several things we need to distinguish," she said. "We're still working on that with you. You have pleasurable responses. You also describe a persistent difficulty finding enough in ordinary activity to stay involved with it. Those observations can both be true."

"And they could still change if I stay sober."

"Yes. We need to follow that. We also have your history from longer periods of abstinence, and your response to previous treatment. This didn't first appear four weeks ago."

He looked at the stretches marked on the screen. Helping Luis with the cabinet had taken most of Saturday afternoon. Luis had underestimated its weight and overestimated the space in the hallway. They had laughed a great deal, some of it from fatigue. Daniel remembered the afternoon warmly. He also remembered the relief of having a task that made leaving difficult.

"What do you do for it?" he asked.

Dr. Chen went through the approaches they would review with Dr. Shah. He recognized much of what she described. He tried not to show his disappointment, then remembered that concealing his responses was making the work harder.

"I'm worried about doing all of it again," he said.

"I'm not asking you to repeat something just because we didn't supervise it. We need to understand what happened when you tried it."

"All right."

She paused, then opened a different page.

"There's also a treatment this service evaluates people for. I want to explain it because, depending on the rest of the review, it may be relevant. We haven't established that you're a candidate."

He sat a little straighter.

On the screen was a drawing of a head in profile. Fine lines descended into shaded regions, joined a curved route behind the ear, and continued toward a device beneath the skin near the collarbone.

He had seen drawings like it. He had not expected one to appear in a conversation about his evenings.

"An implant," he said.

"Yes."

She let him look.

"The program is called Adaptive Salience Restoration. ASR. It was developed for severe anhedonia that hadn't responded adequately to other treatment. It's an invasive stimulation system. Sensing and stimulating contacts, on both sides, with the control unit here."

She indicated the small shape below the shoulder.

He was looking at the lines inside the head.

"Deep-brain stimulation."

"A particular adaptive form of it, yes."

"For addiction?"

"That wasn't its original purpose. Some of the people being evaluated now have substance-use histories. In your case, we'd be considering the persistent symptoms, with addiction care continuing alongside it."

He nodded. His attention had become unusually steady.

Dr. Chen enlarged the drawing. The lines were not perfectly symmetrical. He found himself wanting to know why, and recognized the comfort of a question whose answer would have nothing to do with whether he deserved to be better.

"What does it measure?" he asked.

"Patterns in the recorded activity that help us estimate the state we're trying to treat. We calibrate that against tasks, observation, and your reports. It doesn't measure boredom directly. It doesn't know what you're thinking about."

"And it stimulates when the estimate crosses a threshold."

"Within a more constrained model than that, but broadly. The stimulation depends on the activity it's sensing. It isn't just running the same pattern all day."

"What's the target? Reward?"

"Supporting engagement when the signals that would normally sustain it are too weak. There are several networks involved. The treatment aims to strengthen a response that's already beginning, so an ordinary stimulus has a better chance of continuing to matter to you."

He looked from the drawing to her.

"Matter how?"

"Enough to keep attending to it without the same pressure to abandon it."

The room became very quiet to him. He could still hear the ventilation and, beyond the door, someone speaking on a phone. He was aware of both sounds without needing to identify the words.

Dr. Chen was still talking.

"That isn't the same as making everything pleasurable. The target isn't euphoria. It also doesn't give us a way to manufacture a particular interest or make you care about a person you don't care about."

"It amplifies something."

"That's a reasonable way to begin thinking about it."

"Something that has to be there."

"Yes. The absence of a response isn't something we can solve by turning the stimulation up. We need a usable endogenous signal."

He understood the constraint. It made the rest of what she was saying easier to believe.

He thought of the pianist releasing the pedal. The detail he had heard while intoxicated was present in the recording when he was sober. He had heard it before. It simply had not given him enough reason to stay through the next phrase.

"So I could still dislike something."

"Yes."

"I could still be bored."

"Yes."

"But I might not need to get away from it."

She took a moment before answering.

"You might find more to remain engaged with. Whether you ought to remain in a particular situation is a separate question."

He barely registered the second sentence. He was back at the table with his empty plate, before he had begun trying to use up the night.

* * *

"What do people actually say?" he asked.

"About treatment?"

"When it works."

Dr. Chen moved the diagram aside. Beneath it was a page of ordinary text. She did not read from it.

"Some describe being able to finish an activity without repeatedly needing something else. A patient told us he could listen to his daughter explain a game. He'd always wanted to be the father who listened. He could manage it before treatment. Afterward, he said he became curious about what happened next."

Daniel looked down at the papers he had brought.

"Another talked about folding laundry. She didn't love folding laundry. But it stopped costing her the rest of the afternoon."

"What do you mean?"

"She used to need a long negotiation with herself before she could start, and a reward large enough to justify having done it. After treatment, she folded it and went on with her day."

He had folded towels on Saturday. He remembered the hair wound into the binding, how carefully he had removed it. He had done the task correctly. The difference she was describing lay somewhere the finished towels could not show.

"And when they aren't doing anything?"

"What are you imagining?"

"An evening. Nothing planned. Nobody needs anything from you."

She did not answer immediately. He was grateful she was not going to give him another task.

"For some patients, those periods become more tolerable. There's enough spontaneous engagement with what's around them that they don't experience the same aversive emptiness."

He heard *enough* and stopped needing most of the other words.

The kitchen after dinner. A window with someone's bicycle beyond it. Mara in the next room, or not in the next room. A few hours that belonged to him and did not have to be converted into anything else.

They had built a machine for the empty Saturday night.

"Daniel?"

He looked up.

"I want to be careful about what you're hearing."

"I understand."

"Tell me."

He began to describe sensing and stimulation. She let him finish the first sentence.

"What are you hoping it would do for you?"

He looked again at the drawing of the head. The lines entered tissue. They would have to pass through the skull. He had understood this from the moment she said *implant*, but now it seemed to arrive by another route, one that involved lying down while other people prepared to do it.

"I'd like to get to the end of dinner," he said, "and not feel that I've been left with a problem."

Dr. Chen nodded.

"That's something we can assess. It isn't a result I can promise you."

She explained that surgery, programming, and follow-up were substantial commitments. There were risks from implantation and risks from stimulation, including changes in mood or behavior they would have to monitor closely. The settings could be adjusted or stimulation stopped, but that did not make the operation reversible in the casual sense of the word. Eligibility required more work. So did deciding whether a possible benefit was worth what he would be taking on.

He listened. He asked how often patients came back, who could change the settings, what would happen if the system stopped working. Her answers were specific in some places and provisional in others. She told him which questions belonged with the neurosurgeon if they reached that stage.

When she asked if he wanted the information to read at home, he said yes before she finished.

* * *

He left with a folder, though most of its contents had also been sent to him electronically. The physical copy contained a diagram much like the one on the screen. He kept the folder closed in the elevator.

On the way down, a man in hospital scrubs was telling someone on the phone that the garage was under the building, not behind it. He said this three times, patiently. Daniel watched the floor numbers change.

Outside, he called Mara.

"Is now okay?"

"I've got about five minutes. How was it?"

He moved away from the entrance to let a wheelchair pass.

"There's a treatment they want me to learn about."

"What kind?"

He had intended to begin with what it did. He could hear the account arranging itself into the sequence most likely to make her understand his excitement before she understood his fear.

"An implant," he said. "Brain stimulation."

She said nothing.

"They haven't said I qualify. There are more assessments."

"Surgery?"

"Yes."

He could hear a door close at her end.

"I thought this was testing," she said.

"It is. This is one possibility."

"One possibility they're actually considering for you?"

"Possibly."

He disliked the word as soon as he said it. He was making her ask for each solid piece of information.

"Chen thinks there's enough in my history to keep evaluating me for it," he said. "She was clear it's not a recommendation yet."

Mara took a breath.

"Can we talk when you're home?"

"Of course."

"Send me what they gave you."

He did, standing beside the entrance with the folder against his ribs. For a few seconds he watched the message after it had gone through, as if he might still alter the way she would receive it.

* * *

That evening, Mara spread the pages over the table. She had printed the information again at work and marked two passages in blue.

Daniel sat beside her. He had read everything on his phone during lunch, then found the technical summary included with the material and read that too. There were things he did not understand. He had enjoyed not understanding them, knowing that another paragraph might help.

Mara touched the diagram near the collarbone.

"This stays there?"

"Yes."

"And these go into your brain."

"Yes."

He wanted to explain how thin the leads were. He had no reason to think their thinness would answer what she was asking.

She moved to a page about follow-up and read a paragraph she had already underlined. He waited. Then she returned to the description of what treatment was intended to do.

"This part," she said. "About staying engaged. Is that what you've been trying to tell me?"

"Some of it."

"When we're together?"

He looked at her hand on the page. There was a shallow scratch beside her thumbnail, a trace of clay caught at its edge.

"Sometimes."

She nodded once.

"It happens when I'm by myself too."

"I know."

"It doesn't mean I don't want to be with you."

"I'm trying to understand what it does mean."

He began with the distinction between enjoying something and wanting to continue. Halfway through he realized she had understood it already.

"I can be glad you're there," he said, "and still be looking for a way for the evening to change. I hate that. I don't always even know I'm doing it until I notice I've picked up my phone."

She looked toward the couch. They had spent much of their marriage on that couch or its predecessor. Talking, reading, waiting for a delivery, watching things they would forget. He could not tell which evening she was thinking of.

"And you think this would help."

"It might."

"You sound more certain than that."

He rested his palms on the table.

"I want it to."

She turned another page. He let her read without explaining what she would find there.

Later they ate at the cleared end of the table. The folder remained beside them. There was no decision to make yet, though he could feel how much of one he had begun making in the office, while Dr. Chen was still describing what the device could not do.

After dinner, Mara went to wash her hands. Daniel stayed seated. The bowl in front of him was empty. He could see into the living room, where the book about water lay on the shelf and the lamp cast its familiar oval of light. Nothing had changed in his ability to remain there.

He reached for the folder.

Then he left his hand beside it and waited for Mara to come back.

05 - What Counts as Better

The old records arrived on a Tuesday, with several pages belonging to a man Daniel did not know.

He noticed because the man had three children. For a moment he wondered whether he had opened the wrong file entirely. Then his own name returned at the top of the next page, followed by an account of an appointment he could remember only after reading it.

He called the office that had sent the records. Someone apologized, told him they would send a corrected copy through the portal, and asked him to delete the first one. He did. The brief error stayed with him. He had been prepared to believe almost anything in the document until it gave him children.

In the corrected version, he was cooperative, articulate, appropriately dressed. His thoughts were organized. At one appointment he reported improvement. At another he reported continued difficulty. A medication he remembered as useless had helped him get out of bed earlier. One he remembered taking for a long time had been discontinued after several weeks.

He sat at the kitchen table with the file open, trying to remember whether he had been mistaken then or was mistaken now.

Mara came in carrying a basket of laundry.

"Anything useful?"

"Apparently I was appropriately dressed."

She looked at his shirt, which had a small hole beside the collar.

"Things change."

He laughed. She set the basket on a chair and began folding.

"They want to know why I stopped the second one. I remember the side effects. The note says I wanted to see how I did without it."

"Both."

"You remember?"

"You weren't sleeping. Then you decided you didn't need it because you were getting so much done."

He read the passage again.

"That was the one before."

Mara stopped folding.

"Was it?"

They looked at the dates together. She was right about the sleeplessness and wrong about when it had happened. He was right about the side effects and had forgotten how long he had kept taking the medication after complaining about them. Neither account was as simple as the account they had carried separately.

She took up the shirt again.

"Do you need me to write something?"

"They'll ask you themselves."

"Okay."

He wanted to tell her what mattered: the months when he had done everything asked of him, the treatments he had stayed with after he had stopped believing in them, the good days that had never quite joined up. He wanted her to go into the room with those months arranged in the same order as his.

Instead he moved his computer so she could put the folded clothes on the table.

* * *

The review took most of the next three months.

At first each appointment seemed likely to be the one that produced an answer. Later he learned which questions belonged to which people and stopped expecting the person checking his memory to tell him whether he could have surgery. There were scans, interviews, repeat assessments, calls to clarify an entry in an old record. A clinician he had not seen in years had retired; the records had gone somewhere else. Daniel spent part of a lunch break locating them while a colleague ate soup across the table.

Meanwhile he stayed sober.

He sometimes worried that improvement would disqualify him. Then he would have a difficult evening and feel ashamed of the brief usefulness it acquired. He told Dr. Chen about this.

"Keep telling us about the good periods too," she said. "We need those."

There were good periods. The foundation awarded Mara's program enough money to pay two additional teaching artists for the summer. It did not solve the problem of space, and the award came with reporting requirements she described at length. Still, she opened the email twice during dinner to make sure it continued to say what it said.

Daniel bought a cake on his way home the following day. He asked the bakery to write the organization's name on it and then had to spell it over the phone while walking through the office. The writing came out crowded at one edge. Mara said it looked like the children had done it, which made it better.

They ate too much. He listened while she planned how to tell the instructors. For part of the evening, the assessment disappeared from the table without either of them putting it away.

The next night he found himself scrolling through old photographs because he could not settle on anything else. In a picture from the desert, Mara was standing beside their car with her hair across her mouth. He remembered taking it. He did not remember whether he had been happy when he did.

He entered both evenings in the reports.

At work, Nina began putting meetings in the slots he still had free. He had told her he was being evaluated for a medical procedure and had not said what kind. She did not ask. Once, when he apologized for another morning away, she pointed to the shared calendar.

"You've made it very easy to know where you aren't."

He thanked her. The next day he stayed late to finish something that could have waited until morning.

* * *

Mara's interview was scheduled after his, with a gap between them so they would not have to exchange chairs in the doorway.

Dr. Chen had explained why she wanted to speak to them separately. Daniel understood. He had also spent the drive imagining what Mara might say when he was not there to add context.

In his own interview, he was asked again what would count as improvement.

"Less pressure to change what I'm feeling," he said.

"What would we see?"

"I'd finish things."

"You finish a lot of things now."

"Things I choose. A book. An evening."

He disliked the last phrase as soon as he heard it. It made the evening sound like another assignment.

"I wouldn't be so interested in finishing," he said.

Dr. Chen waited while he worked on that.

"I could read ten pages and be glad I'd read them. If I stopped, it would be because I wanted to do something else. Not because I'd become aware of every minute I was spending."

"How would your day be different?"

He gave her the examples he had been carrying since the first conversation about ASR. Cooking without needing a reward afterward. Listening without repeatedly returning his attention by force. Being alone without turning the whole apartment into a selection of things he had already rejected.

She asked which changes mattered most. He kept wanting to say all of them.

"That sounds modest," he said eventually. "But I don't think it is."

"It's a substantial change you're hoping for."

"Would it count if I didn't do more?"

"Tell me what you mean."

"If I didn't read more books. Or get promoted. If I just minded my life less."

She made a note.

"That would matter. We'd also want to know what you were doing, what you were neglecting, whether other things had changed in ways you didn't like."

"But I wouldn't need to become more productive to justify it."

"No."

He leaned back. He had not known he was waiting to be told that.

Later she asked what he would do if the treatment failed. The question irritated him because he had been trying not to imagine it. He gave a reasonable answer about continuing care, reviewing the settings, reassessing options. She asked how he thought he would feel.

"Angry."

"With whom?"

"You, probably."

She nodded.

"Myself. For believing in it."

He looked at her desk, at the glasses now resting beside the keyboard.

"I know you haven't promised."

"Knowing that might not keep you from being angry."

It was the first thing she had said that made him feel she expected to remain his doctor if this went badly. He had been imagining failure as a room from which everyone else quietly withdrew.

* * *

He waited downstairs during Mara's appointment.

The café had a long window facing the drop-off lane. A driver in a dark car kept moving forward a few feet as other vehicles arrived, then reversing to reclaim the space. Daniel watched three versions of this before opening the article he had saved.

He could not read it. He pictured Mara describing him, and then pictured himself listening to her describe him. Both pictures left out Dr. Chen.

When Mara came down, she looked tired. She bought coffee and a cheese sandwich, then asked whether he had eaten. He had not. She pushed half the sandwich toward him.

"How was it?" he asked.

"Long."

He waited for more. She unwrapped her half and took a bite.

"You don't have to tell me."

She looked at him while she chewed.

"I know."

Outside, the dark car finally left.

"She asked me what better would look like," Mara said.

"Me too."

"What did you say?"

He gave her a shortened version. She listened without interrupting, pressing a loose corner of the wrapper flat with one finger.

"And you?" he asked.

"I said I wanted to stop listening from the other room."

He set down the sandwich.

"For what?"

"I don't know. Whether you've gone out. Whether you've stopped moving. Whether it's a normal quiet or a quiet I should ask about."

He knew she worried. He had not known it had become something she did while answering email or washing her face.

"I don't do it all the time," she said.

He nodded too quickly, accepting the reduction she had offered him.

"But I do it."

"What did Chen say?"

"That the implant couldn't tell me whether to trust you."

He looked out at the lane. A man was helping someone into the passenger seat of a car, holding the door against its tendency to swing shut.

"I suppose it couldn't."

"I know it couldn't. I wasn't asking it to. She asked what I wanted."

"Right."

Mara drank some coffee. He could feel the conversation beginning to turn into another occasion on which she clarified the difference between his symptoms and what he had done with them. She must have felt it too.

"I said other things," she said. "I said you still make me laugh."

He looked back at her.

"Don't look so surprised."

"I wasn't."

"You are now."

He smiled. She picked a piece of bread from the wrapper.

"And I said I wanted you to have some relief. Even when I'm not there to benefit from it."

He wanted to take her hand. She was holding the coffee in one and the sandwich in the other, and he let the wish remain unperformed.

* * *

The appointment with the surgeon was on a morning when the whole city seemed to be looking for parking.

By the time they reached the office, Daniel had worked himself into an argument about the garage's signs. Mara let him finish, then handed him the questions they had written together.

"Those first," she said.

The surgeon, Dr. Alvarez, spoke with less hesitation than Dr. Chen, but the certainty stayed within the limits of what he was describing. He knew where the hardware would go. He did not claim to know how Daniel would feel about his life afterward.

He showed them Daniel's scans. The familiar diagram had become a set of images with Daniel's name attached. He could see the boundary of his skull, the spaces within, the slight asymmetries that had always been there without his needing to know about them.

"That's mine," he said.

Alvarez glanced at him.

"Yes."

It had not been a question, but Daniel was grateful for the answer.

They discussed the operation and recovery, the implanted leads and control unit, the visits afterward. Alvarez described bleeding and infection, the possibility of neurological injury, the possibility of additional procedures. Daniel had already read the words. Hearing

them from the person who would perform the operation gave them weight without making them easier to picture.

He asked about the chance of harm, then about the limits of the estimates. Alvarez answered and distinguished the risks of the procedure from the uncertainties of this particular treatment. Mara asked what she should expect when Daniel came home. She took more notes than he did.

"When does the treatment start?" she asked.

"The operation puts the system in place. The clinical team will explain the sensing and programming schedule in detail. You shouldn't expect to leave the hospital with the problem solved."

"He'll expect that even if he says he doesn't," she said.

Daniel turned toward her, ready to object, then looked back at the scans.

"I might," he said.

Alvarez waited until he had written that down on his own list: *Not immediately.*

At the end, Daniel asked what happened if he decided against it.

"We don't operate."

"I mean after everything. All this."

Alvarez put the model he had been holding back on the desk.

"The evaluation isn't a debt."

For several seconds Daniel could not think of another question. The hospital had occupied so much of their time that he had begun to experience proceeding as the proper conclusion to work already done.

Outside, Mara asked if he wanted coffee.

"I want to walk for a bit."

They went in the direction opposite the garage. There was a nursery squeezed between two larger buildings, with plants extending onto the pavement. Mara stopped beside a tray of small pots. Daniel stood with her while she read the labels.

She chose nothing. They continued walking.

* * *

The message about Oakland came that evening.

Mara was at the table when he returned from the bedroom. She turned the laptop toward him, then turned it back before he could read it.

"Let me explain first."

He sat down.

"Ruth's project has its building."

He remembered Ruth: a former colleague of Mara's, now working with an arts organization in the East Bay. There had been a conversation about a permanent center, studios that programs would not have to borrow by the hour, enough storage that teachers could leave work unfinished and come back to it. Daniel remembered a photograph of a warehouse with clerestory windows.

"The warehouse?"

"No. That fell through. It's a former school. I showed you."

He had a dim memory of looking over her shoulder while answering something on his phone.

"Right."

"The lease is signed. They're putting the funding together for the fit-out. The program director position should open later this year."

"And she wants you to apply."

"She wants to know if I'm still interested."

He heard *still*.

They had discussed moving before. The first time the project had been too uncertain; Mara had agreed. The second time he had recently stopped using again, and keeping their routines intact had seemed sensible. He remembered the relief of her saying they did not have to decide yet. He had not thought of that conversation as her declining something.

"Are you?" he asked.

"Yes."

She answered without softening it. He was glad, then frightened, then irritated by the fright because she had done nothing to cause it beyond answering his question.

"What about the grant here?"

"The grant belongs to the program. It pays people to teach. It doesn't require me to stay forever."

"I didn't mean forever."

"I know."

She turned the laptop so they could both see. There were photographs of empty classrooms, a courtyard with weeds coming up between the paving stones, a room with high windows and a long sink. Mara pointed to the sink.

"Do you know how much time we spend carrying water between rooms?"

"A lot?"

"A ridiculous amount. We organize the whole afternoon around which activities need water because the room with the sink is booked for tutoring until three."

She moved to a floor plan. There would be places for younger children, older students, adults. The classes could meet over months instead of being broken into short sessions that fit whatever space happened to be available. They wanted someone to build the program with the people who would use it, before every room acquired a rule about what was allowed there.

He listened. The prospect changed her voice. She interrupted herself to find a photograph, then apologized for interrupting herself, which made him laugh.

"It looks good," he said.

"It could be."

"You'd be good at it."

She looked at him as if deciding whether to accept that as the whole response.

"Thank you."

The floor plan remained between them.

"The follow-up," he said eventually. "If I do this, I have to be here."

"For a while."

"We don't know how long."

"There isn't a job to apply for yet. I'm not asking you to move next month."

He nodded. He could feel himself preparing a list: his work, her mother, their friends, the expense, the clinic. Each item was real.

Listing them now would make it difficult for her to finish telling him about the rooms.

"What do you want to tell Ruth?" he asked.

"That I'm interested. That I want to keep talking."

"Okay."

"And I want us to keep talking."

He looked at the photographs again. He could imagine himself in the courtyard, waiting for Mara to finish work, enjoying the late light on the old school windows. It was easier to imagine than the process of getting there.

"Can we get through the treatment first?"

Mara leaned back.

"We've said that before."

"I know. This is different."

He heard how quickly he had made the claim. He was asking the thing they had not yet tried to guarantee the difference between this postponement and the others.

"There's a recovery period," he said. "Then the programming. I don't want to make a decision about moving while we're still finding out what normal looks like."

"I don't either."

"So afterward."

She tapped one finger against the edge of the computer.

"When they can tell us what the ongoing appointments look like. We talk then. Even if everything isn't settled."

"Yes."

"And I'm telling Ruth yes now. To being interested."

"Yes."

She began her reply. He stayed beside her while she wrote it, reading only when she asked him whether a sentence sounded too formal. It did. She deleted three words.

When she sent it, he felt relief. They had made an agreement. He let himself rest in that fact without examining how much of the agreement depended on a version of him he was still trying to arrange.

* * *

Dr. Chen called after the case review.

He took the call in the same conference room where he had booked the first assessment. Someone had left a diagram on the whiteboard. Most of it had been erased, leaving two boxes joined by an arrow and the word *pending* beneath them.

The team was willing to offer him treatment. She explained the basis for the decision: the persistence and severity of his difficulties across time, including periods of abstinence; the documented treatments that had not brought sufficient relief; the assessments they had completed; the support and follow-up he had agreed to maintain. The recommendation included continuing his work with Dr. Shah and the recovery support already in place.

He wrote down phrases although she said she would send the summary.

"So I qualify."

"Yes. You meet the program's criteria. That makes this an option you can choose. It doesn't settle whether you should."

He looked at the whiteboard.

"I want to."

"We can schedule the next conversation. I'd like you to have the written recommendation first."

After the call, he stayed in the room long enough to read his notes. He had written *yes* in the top corner and underlined it twice.

Back at his desk, Nina asked whether he needed to be somewhere.

"No."

"You've still got your coat on."

He looked down. He had put it on to take the call, as if privacy were somewhere outdoors.

He took it off and hung it over the chair.

* * *

That week he told Luis he had been approved.

They were eating at the place they had settled on for early dinners, where Luis could see the clock above the kitchen without turning around. Daniel described the evaluation and the recommendation.

Luis asked when the surgery would be. Daniel said they were working that out.

"How do you feel?"

"Good. Scared."

"That sounds about right."

Daniel moved a piece of food through the sauce on his plate.

"Do you think it counts?"

"What?"

"As being sober. If there's something in my head changing how things feel."

Luis took a drink before answering.

"Are you asking me what people at the meeting will say?"

"Partly."

"Some people will have opinions. They usually do."

"What's yours?"

Luis looked at him.

"I don't know enough about what they're putting in. I know you've told your doctors about Saturday. You've told Mara. You're telling me. That's different from the last time you arranged to feel different."

Daniel nodded, then shook his head slightly.

"It's still what I want."

"Of course it is."

He had expected either reassurance or suspicion. Luis seemed willing to let the desire exist without deciding what it proved.

"I'd like you around," Luis said. "That's my interest in it. If you do it, let me know when you need a ride."

He checked the clock and began finishing his food.

Daniel watched him for a moment, then asked how the cabinet was working out.

"Too big."

"We knew that before we moved it."

"Now we know it in the room."

* * *

At the consent visit, Daniel read the documents slowly enough that the coordinator offered to leave and come back.

He said that would help.

Mara was beside him with her bag on her knees. They had been through the questions with Chen and Alvarez. Daniel could explain the intended benefit, the alternatives, the uncertainties, what the operation would require. He had asked about the unflattering possibilities as well as the hopeful ones. He had heard that the treatment might fail, that it might help in ways smaller than the ones he imagined, that changes he welcomed could arrive alongside changes he did not.

Still, the pages kept becoming paper. Paragraphs to be read before the place where he signed.

He went back to the beginning of the section on follow-up.

"You've read that," Mara said.

"I know."

She put her bag on the floor.

"Do you want more time?"

"I've had time."

"You can have more."

He looked at her. She was frightened. He had been so occupied by the effort of showing that he understood his own fear that he had sometimes mistaken hers for a question he had not answered properly.

"I want to do it," he said.

She nodded. He waited for her to say she wanted it too.

"I'm here," she said.

He took her hand. It was cool from the room. They sat that way until the coordinator knocked and came back in.

There were a few practical points to confirm. A date. The person taking him home. Which appointments had already been booked and which would follow. Then the question, put directly to him, of whether he wished to proceed.

He said yes.

The pen was heavier than he expected. He held it over the signature line for a moment and became aware of the ordinary pressure

of his feet inside his shoes. Later there would be a morning in a hospital. There would be healing, visits, adjustments. He could imagine inconvenience. He could imagine pain more easily than he could imagine an uneventful evening that did not need to end.

Beyond those things, he pictured himself at the table with Mara's photographs of the school. He would have slept. He would be able to look at the rooms without first calculating what leaving would cost him. He would ask her where she wanted the tables, how many students she hoped to take, whether there was space for the work they would leave unfinished. He imagined that man listening without effort and answering generously.

He wanted to reach him. He wanted, with an urgency he recognized, to let him take over.

Daniel signed his name.

Mara checked the date on her phone and entered the appointment while he handed back the pen.

II. Enough

06 - Installation

Mara had to take his wedding ring off.

He could turn it, but the last part of his knuckle had swollen in the heat, and pulling harder only made the skin gather in front of it. He had been told to leave jewelry at home. He had remembered the instruction while locking the apartment and decided he would do it in the car. In the car he had been looking at the route, although Mara knew where to go.

Now she stood beside the bed in the preparation area, working the ring slowly over his finger.

"Stop helping," she said.

He relaxed his hand.

The ring came free. She put it in the small zipped pocket inside her bag, pressed the pocket once, and closed the bag. He watched all of this with an attention he wished he could have applied to something useful earlier in the morning.

It was not yet six. Beyond the curtain, a person was answering the same questions he had just answered. Name. Date of birth. What procedure they were expecting. The person sounded sleepy and impatient, as though the questions were preventing them from reaching a more comfortable place to sleep.

Daniel was wearing a gown that tied in places he could not see. His clothes were in a bag beneath Mara's chair. He had chosen a shirt that buttoned down the front because someone had suggested it, and he was pleased to have followed at least one instruction completely.

A nurse came in and adjusted something beside the bed. She asked him to confirm his name again. He did.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine."

Mara looked at him.

"Frightened," he said.

"Anything you still want to ask?"

He looked at the list on his phone. There were no questions left that would become more answerable before the operation.

"No."

The nurse told him who would come to see him next. He liked knowing the sequence. It gave him a short section of the morning he could understand.

When she left, Mara took out her phone and checked a message. He wanted her to put it away. He also wanted her to have something to do besides look at him.

"Work?"

"My sister. She says she's up."

"Tell her she can go back to sleep."

"She knows."

Mara typed a reply. He looked at his bare finger. The skin beneath the ring was paler and slightly flattened. He rubbed it once with his thumb.

"Did you send Nina the handoff?" she asked.

"Yesterday."

"Then stop thinking about it."

"I wasn't."

She smiled without believing him.

He had left a long document describing everything that might need attention while he was away. Nina had thanked him and then told him, in writing, not to answer questions nobody had sent him. He had read that message several times. He could no longer tell whether the care in it embarrassed him or made him want to cry.

Alvarez arrived with another member of the team. They went through what would happen. The anesthesiologist came afterward and reviewed the plan they had discussed, including his substance-use history and pain management. Daniel listened for any indication that the history made him an unusual inconvenience. The questions remained practical. What he had taken, what he currently took, what had happened with previous anesthesia.

He answered. There was nothing to improve by answering elegantly.

When it was time, Mara stood so quickly her bag slid from her lap. She caught it by one strap.

He wanted to say something that would be sufficient for the possibility of not having another chance to say it. Everything he could think of sounded borrowed from a life much shorter and more dramatic than theirs.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you."

She kissed him carefully because of the things attached to him. Then they were moving, and he was trying to keep her in sight past the curtain, though there was no reason she should stand there after he had gone.

* * *

The operating room was busy before he entered it.

People were completing tasks he could not identify. A screen displayed images he recognized as his own. Someone introduced herself near his left shoulder; someone else was moving a cable away from a wheel. There were folded materials on a tray whose purpose he preferred not to infer.

They helped him move. The surface beneath him was narrower than he expected.

He had imagined that, at the last moment, he would become intensely aware of the choice he had made. Instead he was aware of the position of his elbow. He asked whether he could move it. Someone helped him find a more comfortable place.

The anesthesiologist spoke to him. He tried to retain the face above the mask, thinking he might want to remember the person who had been there.

Then a woman was telling him the operation was finished.

He understood the sentence before he understood where he was. His throat hurt. Something was pressing against his head. He tried to turn and was told to stay where he was for a moment.

There should have been an interval. He knew there had been one. He could not find any part of it.

"All done," the woman said again.

He wanted to ask what *all* included. What he managed was, "Water?"

She answered, but he lost the middle of what she said. Then she was asking him a question. He tried to concentrate. The room had edges that became clearer when he kept his eyes still.

He knew his name. He knew where he was. The date required more effort than seemed fair.

"Good," she said.

He was absurdly grateful.

* * *

He remembered Mara arriving twice.

The first time she was beside him, wearing the same clothes she had worn that morning. This seemed unlikely. Enough had happened that she ought to have changed. He asked whether she had eaten.

"Yes."

"What?"

"A sandwich."

He nodded. It was important that she had eaten, though he could not have explained what danger this particular fact had averted.

The second time, she was sitting in a chair with her bag on the floor. The light had changed, or they were in a different room. He asked whether she had eaten.

"Still yes."

"Sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry."

His head ached in a broad, shallow way that made it difficult to separate the ache from the pressure of the dressings. There was a more definite soreness below his collarbone. When he moved his shoulder, he discovered the path between them.

He looked down. Part of him was covered in a way he associated with injuries other people had received by accident.

"It went okay?"

"Alvarez said it went as planned."

He watched her mouth while she spoke, trying to remember the exact wording.

"As planned."

"Yes."

He wanted to feel the meaning of that. What he felt was thirst and an increasing need to move his legs.

A nurse came in, checked him, asked about the pain. Daniel considered giving a lower number than the one that had first occurred to him. He had already discussed this tendency with Shah. Remembering the discussion did not remove it.

He gave the first number.

The nurse checked the medication chart. No one looked disappointed in him.

Later he asked whether the device was on.

Mara glanced toward the doorway.

"They checked everything during the operation. Chen's team will explain the rest."

"I know."

"You asked."

He closed his eyes. She was right. He had wanted her to give him a different answer from the one they had been given repeatedly before surgery.

When Alvarez came, he described the placement and the checks they had completed. Daniel followed most of it. Mara asked him to repeat the part about the next scan.

"The hardware is in place," Alvarez said. "The treatment settings come later."

Daniel nodded.

Alvarez did not ask whether he felt happier. This seemed so sensible that Daniel nearly laughed.

* * *

The hospital night was divided into intervals too short to make a night.

Someone came to check his observations. Someone asked him to move his feet, follow a finger, answer questions he had answered earlier. The bed made a small mechanical adjustment that he could feel but not interpret. He slept, woke, remembered where he was, and slept again before deciding whether remembering was a relief.

At one point he needed help getting to the bathroom.

He had imagined dependence in the form of a difficult conversation, or Mara rearranging her week, or the cost of repeated appointments. He had not spent much time imagining waiting beside a bed while someone made sure he was steady enough to take the next step.

The nurse stood near him without making the nearness conspicuous.

"Take your time."

He wanted to explain that he was usually capable. He recognized the uselessness of the information and said nothing.

When he returned, he had to wait while the bedding was straightened. He stood in the loose gown with his hands at his sides. The room's television was on without sound. A presenter smiled beside an image of food.

He looked away.

In the morning, he was given breakfast and found himself interested in the toast because eating it required planning around his sore throat. He took small bites, drank, waited. For a few minutes the next action was simple.

He wondered whether the interest meant anything.

Then a crumb caught at the back of his mouth and the question ceased to matter.

* * *

Before he left the hospital, someone from Chen's team came to check the system and review the next appointments. She placed equipment beside the bed, confirmed his details, and watched information appear on a screen.

Daniel could not see it properly.

"What are you looking at?"

She turned it enough for him to see.

"Device checks. Contact measurements. We're making sure we can communicate with it as expected."

There were numbers, labels, a small diagram. He searched for something that might be recognizably his.

"Can it tell what I'm feeling now?"

"No."

He knew that. He had asked a question he would have corrected in someone else.

She went through what would happen after the initial healing period: recording sessions, calibration, cautious changes, more observations. The adaptive treatment would not begin as a finished program waiting for a switch. His reports would be part of the work.

"Try not to turn every hour of recovery into a test," she said. "You've had surgery. Pain, sleep, the medication, being here—all of that matters."

He said he understood. He was already wondering how he would know when to start testing.

Mara had written down the instructions for home. They reviewed them together with the nurse, including who to call if something worried them. Daniel watched Mara ask a question about one of the dressings. The nurse answered her directly. He felt left out, then ashamed of feeling left out of an answer he needed someone else to remember.

Getting dressed took much longer than it had in the morning before surgery. Mara held the shirt while he found a sleeve. He tried to turn too far toward her and stopped.

"Slowly," she said.

"I am."

Neither of them believed this.

He sat on the edge of the bed while she buttoned the shirt. At the bottom, one side was longer than the other. She looked at it, sighed, and began undoing the buttons.

He laughed first. Then she did.

* * *

Los Angeles was very bright.

He had spent so much of the past few days looking at pale surfaces that the colors outside seemed almost badly adjusted. A delivery truck beside them had oranges painted across its doors. He looked at the oranges, then at the driver eating from a small paper packet.

Mara took a corner gently. He was grateful and irritated by noticing that he was grateful.

At home, the stairs occupied him. He took them at a pace that let him pretend the pace was his preference. Mara carried both bags. At the door she waited while he found the key, although she had hers in her hand.

Inside, someone had moved the low table farther from the couch. The charger was plugged in where he would not have to reach behind anything. A clean glass stood beside it.

"Your sister?"

"She came yesterday."

"That was nice."

"You can tell her."

He sat down carefully. The apartment smelled of warm fabric and the food Mara's sister had put in the refrigerator. The lamp was still crooked by a degree no one but him would notice. He looked at it and left it alone.

For the first hour, being home was enough. He knew where things were. When he closed his eyes, the sounds continued from their familiar directions.

Then he wanted to get up, and getting up hurt. He wanted to read, but the lines would not hold his attention. He wanted to sleep, but he had slept too much during the day. Mara asked if he wanted something to eat, and he said he did not know in a tone that made the question sound unreasonable.

"I can heat something when you do," she said.

She went to the kitchen. He heard a container being moved, the refrigerator closing.

"Soup," he called.

"Okay."

He sat waiting for the soup, disappointed in ways he could not defend. Nothing had gone wrong. The disappointment had arrived anyway.

* * *

He made a chart on the second day home.

He had been given a simple record for symptoms and medication. He added columns for sleep, appetite, concentration, and what he called *subjective engagement*, then changed the last heading to *interest* because Mara had looked at it without saying anything.

The first morning took him twenty minutes to record. He could not decide whether waking at five and dozing until seven counted as two additional hours of sleep. Mara said to write that he had woken at five and dozed until seven.

"I'm trying to make it comparable."

"To tomorrow?"

"To anything."

She was standing at the counter with her own calendar open. He had interrupted her twice to ask how he had seemed the night before.

"I don't know how interested you were," she said. "You were watching a show. Then you went to sleep."

"Did I look comfortable?"

"You asked me to move the pillow."

He entered a number and deleted it.

Later he told her that recovering from surgery and waiting for a psychiatric treatment created a difficult attribution problem. There were too many things changing at once. She let him explain this for some time before putting down the mug she was drying.

"I need you to tell me whether the pillow is wrong," she said. "I can't tell you what kind of person you are this morning."

"That isn't what I'm asking."

"It's starting to feel like it."

He looked at the chart. He had asked her to supply observations because she could see him from outside. It had seemed considerate to make her care useful.

"I'm sorry."

She nodded, still holding the towel.

He wanted to explain why he was doing it. The explanation would have required her to keep standing there.

"The pillow's too high," he said.

She brought him a thinner one. He thanked her and closed the computer.

* * *

Luis arrived with food in containers that did not belong to him.

"Some of these have to go back," he said. "I've been told which. I'll ask again."

Daniel was on the couch. He started to get up, and Luis told him not to make the visit an event.

Mara showed him where things were and went to change for her class. It was the first time since Daniel had come home that she was leaving for something that was neither an errand nor work. Daniel had said he was glad she was going. Now he watched the bedroom door, wanting her to come back out so he could ask when she expected to return.

Luis put the food in the refrigerator.

"Want anything heated?"

"Not yet."

"Okay."

He sat in the chair beside the couch. For a moment they regarded each other.

"You look tired," Luis said.

"I've had brain surgery."

"That'll do it."

Daniel smiled.

Mara came out with her tote. She told them when she would be back and kissed Daniel near his temple, in a place she had learned was not tender. He reminded her where she had left the piece she wanted to take to the studio.

"Already in the bag."

"Right."

After she left, Luis asked whether Daniel wanted to watch something. Daniel said he did not mind. Luis found a baseball game and turned the volume down.

He knew very little about baseball beyond what he had absorbed by being near people who watched it. Luis explained something about the pitcher, then stopped when Daniel's eyes closed.

"Keep talking," Daniel said.

"I'm running out of knowledge."

"That's never stopped you."

Luis laughed. The sound made Daniel's head hurt a little, though he would not have wanted Luis to make it smaller.

They watched without much conversation. Luis's phone rang; he took the call in the kitchen and argued with one of his children about whether a missing assignment counted as missing if it was on the teacher's desk. Daniel could hear both his patience and its limits. He was relieved to be near a problem nobody would ask him to solve.

When Luis came back, Daniel asked what inning they were in.

"You've missed two."

"Was I asleep?"

"A little."

Daniel adjusted his feet on the cushion. Luis turned the game up one notch.

* * *

At the first postoperative clinic visit, Daniel saw the incisions more clearly than he wanted to.

He had looked in the mirror at home, but always at an angle that left some of the work hidden. In the examination room, a photograph was easier to see. The clipped areas, the healing lines, the altered arrangement of hair. It was his head, taken seriously by other people.

The clinician examined him and said the healing was progressing as expected. Daniel asked about the tenderness below his collarbone and the tight sensation when he turned his head. She examined those areas too. He found it difficult to distinguish wanting reassur-

ance from wanting information, so he asked each question as if it were technical.

She answered what he had asked and then asked how he was managing at home.

"Fine."

Mara did not look at him this time. He supplied the rest himself.

"I'm uncomfortable. I'm impatient. I keep trying to work out if I feel different."

"Different how?"

"Better."

They reviewed the next visit with Chen's team. There would be recording, more tasks, supervised adjustments. The system was not yet providing the adaptive treatment they had discussed.

"I know," he said.

She gave him a moment.

"It feels like it should count for something," he added.

He was looking at the photograph. There was the plain evidence of what he had allowed them to do.

"You're getting through the surgical recovery," she said. "That's what we're looking at today."

He nodded. He did not ask her to make it larger than that.

Before they left, Mara asked about washing his hair. The clinician checked the healing areas again and went over what was appropriate for him now. Mara listened, then asked a practical question about how they would manage it with their shower. Daniel let them finish. He wanted clean hair with a directness that made every other hope briefly irrelevant.

* * *

They waited until evening, after he had rested.

Mara brought an old towel from the cupboard, then went back for a second. In the bathroom, she moved bottles from the edge of the tub and put them on the floor. He stood in the doorway feeling too large for the room and insufficiently useful in it.

"I can do most of it," he said.

"Probably. We'll see."

They arranged themselves awkwardly. He had to change position once because the first way pulled at his chest. Mara tested the water, adjusted it, tested it again. He watched her bend over the tub and noticed that one of the knees of her jeans was pale from wear.

She put a towel around his shoulders.

"Tell me if anything hurts."

"Okay."

The first water reached the back of his head. He had been holding himself rigid. He became aware of the effort when his shoulders began to lower.

"All right?"

"Yes."

She worked slowly, careful around the healing areas, moving the hair with her fingertips. There was no efficient way to do it. Each time she needed to reach something, he tried to anticipate the movement and got in her way.

"Stay there," she said.

He stayed.

Some water ran behind his ear. She caught it with the towel before it reached his collar. The smell of the shampoo was familiar enough that he had stopped noticing it months or years ago. Now it was close to his face.

He closed his eyes.

The water stopped. He heard Mara put something down, then shift her footing. Her hand returned to steady his head. He wanted to apologize for needing her, which would make her tell him he did not need to apologize. He had asked enough of her for one evening.

"A little cooler," he said.

She changed the water.

"There?"

"There."

He could feel her attention in the pauses, the places she avoided, the way she waited for him to settle before beginning again. Once she touched a tender spot and he drew in a breath. She stopped immediately.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Just there."

He showed her without opening his eyes. She worked around it.

When she had finished rinsing, she turned off the water and let him remain where he was for a moment. A pipe knocked inside the wall. Somewhere beyond the window, a car was trying to start.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

She helped him straighten. He sat with the towel over his shoulders while she blotted the ends of his hair. There were wet marks on her shirt. He pointed to one, and she looked down.

"Occupational hazard."

He smiled. She put the damp towel over the edge of the tub and found the dry one.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome."

She rested the towel lightly around his head. He held one end while she dried the other side, and when she needed the part he was holding, he handed it to her.

07 - The First Useful Hour

He was looking at a picture of a pear when they first applied stimulation.

There were six pears on a white plate. One had a brown mark near the stem. He had already rated the picture twice, once for how pleasant he found it and once for how much he wanted to keep looking. The questions had become familiar enough that he no longer confused them.

Leah, the specialist working beside Dr. Chen, watched a screen Daniel could not see. She had introduced herself at the first recording session and had spent part of that session finding out why a piece of equipment would not connect. He liked that she had been visibly annoyed by it. Until then, everyone had seemed to possess more patience than he could reasonably hope to acquire.

"Anything?" Chen asked.

He considered the pear with the mark.

"I don't think so."

"That's fine."

He waited for the answer to become less fine. It did not. Leah made a note, and the picture changed to a narrow street with washing hung between the buildings.

He wondered whether he had missed the moment through insufficient attention.

It was several weeks since surgery. His hair had begun covering the clipped areas. He could wash it himself, and most of the soreness had retreated into particular movements he still forgot to anticipate. He had put his wedding ring back on after Mara found it in the zipped pocket of her bag. She had been looking for something else. There had been no ceremony, only her holding it out and saying, "Here."

He was still on leave from work. The days contained appointments, short walks, prescribed exercises in patience that he had not been prescribed by anyone. He had completed recording sessions, answered questions, watched his own reports become entries beside traces of electrical activity. Nothing on the screen had resembled an evening in his apartment.

Now Leah said they would pause for a few minutes.

"Did it do anything?" he asked.

"We delivered the test pattern," she said. "You didn't report a noticeable effect. That's what we know so far."

"And on there?" He nodded toward her screen.

She turned it slightly. There were traces, marked intervals, labels he had seen before without retaining.

"We can see changes in the recording. Some of what happens during stimulation is interference from the stimulation itself. We have to separate that out before we interpret it."

He leaned forward, grateful for something technical to attend to. Chen asked him to sit back in the chair.

"Comfortably," she said. "You don't have to supervise."

He sat back. The photograph of the street remained on the other screen. He wondered where the person who owned the washing machine had put it.

* * *

The first programming visit lasted most of the morning.

There were changes he could not detect and one he noticed as a brief, unpleasant tightness in his face. He told them immediately. Leah stopped the test, and the sensation passed. They checked him, waited, and made notes. That setting was put aside.

Daniel found the sensation reassuring in a way he did not want to admit. Something in his head had answered. He was careful not to call that an improvement.

Between tests, Chen asked about his sleep, his mood, whether his thoughts seemed unusually fast, whether anything felt difficult to put aside. Sometimes the questions came when he was trying to

decide how he felt about a sound or an image. He began to resent the need to assess the experience before he had had much of it.

"I don't know," he said more sharply than he intended.

Chen glanced up.

"I'm trying to tell you. I don't know if I'd notice something this small when I wasn't being asked about it."

"We'll need to find that out too."

She suggested a break. He had expected encouragement to concentrate harder. Instead Leah stopped what she was doing and went to refill her water bottle.

Daniel ate a biscuit from a packet he had brought. It was dry, and he wished he had chosen something else. The disappointment felt so ordinary that he almost reported it.

By the end of the appointment, they had a set of observations and no change he could describe with confidence. They would review the recordings before the next session. He left with the same head, now tired from trying to examine itself.

Mara was waiting downstairs. She had brought work and was still answering a message when he sat beside her.

"How was it?"

"Long."

"Anything?"

"I don't know yet."

She put the phone away.

"Do you want lunch?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

He closed his eyes.

"Could you decide?"

She touched his knee, then stood.

* * *

At the next visit they tried a program that used a limited part of what the device had learned to recognize in his recorded activity.

Daniel asked to see the estimate. Leah showed him a display that changed while they talked. He watched it rise and fall, then tried to make it move by thinking about something he disliked.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He told her.

She smiled.

"That's why I usually keep this facing me."

The pattern was one source of evidence. It had been selected using his recordings, his performance on the tasks, his reports. It could be wrong. An interval he described as disengaged might resemble something else in the signal, and some of what looked useful in the clinic might not remain useful at home.

He knew this kind of problem. He asked how they would identify a false detection.

"With more than that display," Chen said. "Including what you tell us."

"So I could feel better and the estimate could still say I was doing badly."

"Yes. Or the other way around."

He looked at the moving line once more. He had hoped it might eventually relieve him of the need to be a reliable witness.

They enabled the limited program and continued the session. He performed tasks, rested, spoke with Chen. There was no sensation he could identify as electricity, no distinct arrival of pleasure. At one point he noticed a bird landing on the ledge beyond the window and followed it until it flew away. He could have done that before.

They left the program active for a home trial, with instructions he could refer to, scheduled check-ins, and a way to record anything he wanted the team to review. The settings were theirs to adjust. He had no slider he could move until the afternoon improved.

In the car, Mara asked whether it was working now.

"It's running."

She glanced at him.

"Sorry. Yes. The program is on. Whether it's helping is what we're finding out."

"Okay."

Traffic stopped near the entrance to the freeway. He watched a man in the next lane reach behind his seat, fail to find whatever he wanted, and try again. A small hand appeared from the back and passed him a blue cup.

Daniel smiled.

Then he looked inward to see whether the smile had felt different and lost the rest of the scene.

* * *

The first evening was poor evidence for anything.

He wanted to choose an activity he had previously found difficult and discover that it had become easy. The choice itself took nearly half an hour. He rejected the book about water because he had made too much of it. He considered the film, then imagined himself watching the progress bar. Music seemed likely to make him listen for changes in the music instead of changes in himself.

Mara was sorting receipts at the table.

"Come help me," she said.

He sat down. She gave him a pile of small slips and asked him to separate materials from food. There were enough ambiguous purchases that he needed to ask questions. He enjoyed discovering that a charge he took to be for lunch was for a bucket of glue.

They finished. He felt no different afterward, except slightly more informed about how much it cost to keep twenty children supplied with paper.

When he said he was disappointed, Mara looked at the sorted piles.

"I'm not."

"I know. I just thought—"

"I know what you thought."

She gathered the receipts and thanked him. He tried to accept the thanks at its actual size.

That night he woke twice. The next morning he entered the sleep in the record, then added that he had been disappointed the previous evening. He nearly omitted the receipts because they had been pleasant in a way he could not attribute to treatment.

He put them in.

* * *

The laundry was on the bed when he went to look for a clean shirt.

Mara had brought it from the dryer before leaving for work. They had divided the task without discussion: she carried the basket while his chest was still tender, and he put things away if he was home. On other days he had moved the pile from one side of the bed to the other so he could lie down.

He found the shirt. Beneath it was one of Mara's, inside out, with a sleeve drawn halfway into itself.

He turned it right side out.

There were towels, underwear, two pairs of jeans, a sheet that had collected several socks in one corner. He shook the socks free and began matching them. One pair was nearly identical except for a small colored stitch at the toe. He held them together, separated them, and found their partners.

He folded the towels on the cleared part of the bed. A washcloth had become trapped inside a pillowcase. He smoothed the pillowcase and set the washcloth beside it. When he came to Mara's black shirt, he checked the shape of it before deciding whether it went in a drawer or on a hanger.

On the radio in another apartment, someone was being interviewed about a dispute he did not understand. He could hear the rise and fall of the voices without needing the words.

He put his clothes away, then carried the towels to the cupboard. His chest pulled slightly when he reached toward the upper shelf, so he used the lower one. He returned to the bedroom for the sheet.

The bed was clear.

He stood beside it, holding the last folded thing, and wondered where his phone was.

It was in the living room. He had left it there when he went to find the shirt.

He had not resisted looking at it. He had not made an agreement to finish the laundry first. He had come into the bedroom, picked something up, and continued.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

The feeling that arrived then was large enough to make him distrust it. His eyes stung. He looked at the folded sheet in his lap and tried to remember the previous minutes accurately, before the discovery changed their meaning.

There had been no exceptional pleasure. The towels had felt like towels. The mismatched socks had briefly annoyed him. He had not wanted the task to go on longer than it needed to. But he had been there for it, and being there had not required a second activity running alongside the first.

He put the sheet away.

In the living room, he picked up the phone and opened a message to Mara.

I folded the laundry.

He read it. She would thank him, which was a reasonable response and not the one he was asking for.

He added, *I think something was different.*

Then he waited before sending it. He wanted to talk to her. He could tell her when she came home.

He saved the observation in the clinic record instead, using more words than the event seemed able to support.

* * *

At the check-in, Chen asked him to describe the laundry without comparing it to how he wished the rest of his life would feel.

He laughed.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You said it might mean you could travel again."

He had. He remembered saying it now.

They went back to the shirt and the socks. She asked whether he had been unusually energized, whether he had continued cleaning afterward, whether he had felt a pressure to complete other tasks.

He had made lunch and watched part of a program he did not like. He had turned it off.

"How did that feel?"

"Like turning off a bad program."

"And afterward?"

"I did something else."

She asked what. He had called his pharmacy about a prescription and become irritated by the time it took to reach a person. She wrote that down too.

They reviewed the device recording alongside his report. There was activity they expected to see under the current program, but it could not tell them that he had folded towels. His estimate of when he had begun was approximate. The benefit was something he described, not something Leah could point to in a trace and name for him.

He found this frustrating for about a minute. Then he realized it left the afternoon intact.

"We'll look for whether it repeats," Chen said.

"You don't want to change anything?"

"Not on the basis of one good period."

He had wanted her to make the good period longer by whatever means had made it happen at all. Instead they agreed to keep the program steady and gather more ordinary days.

* * *

Some of those days were ordinary in ways he resented.

He spent a morning getting irritated by a problem with a bill. He abandoned an article. He ate a peach that was hard near the stone and mealy everywhere else. At a restaurant he and Mara had chosen because it was close, the music was so loud that he watched her mouth to understand what she was saying.

"Do you want to go?" she asked.

He did. They left before ordering and ate sandwiches on a bench farther down the street.

For a while he had wondered whether leaving meant the treatment was failing. Then Mara said she could still hear the bass in her teeth, and he stopped trying to claim the experience as his alone.

Other changes were difficult to announce.

He waited through a long light while Mara drove them home from an appointment. He watched a city worker remove a strip of tape from a sign, working at one corner until there was enough to pull. When traffic moved, Daniel was curious whether the strip had come away in one piece. He turned his head slightly to see. Then the sign passed out of view and he let it.

One morning he ate breakfast without setting the phone beside the plate. He still checked it afterward. Nothing about this would have attracted the attention of a person entering the kitchen.

At dinner, Mara told him about an argument between two instructors over whether the children should be allowed to paint over their earlier work. He knew both instructors. Usually he could have predicted where she was going and begun arranging his response before she reached the end.

This time he asked what the child whose painting had started the argument wanted to do.

"Keep half," Mara said.

"Which half?"

"That's what we were trying to find out. She kept turning it around."

He laughed. Mara continued, showing him with her hands how the painting had been rotated on the table. He could follow the argument without converting it into a question about rules. He wanted to know which part the child had kept.

Mara told him. Then she looked at him for a moment.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing."

He nearly asked whether he seemed different. She began another part of the story, and he let her.

* * *

The program was adjusted after the second week of the home trial.

Daniel had reported several periods when incidental sounds became difficult to leave alone. The refrigerator, a voice in the courtyard, the dry click of Mara's trackpad. They were not louder. He could hear them distinctly enough to keep attending to them after he wanted to return to something else.

He had delayed reporting it for a day because he liked the laundry, and the meals, and the moment in which he had realized he was actually curious about a child's painting. He was afraid that describing a problem would make the team undo all of it.

When he admitted this, Chen asked him to give them the unwanted changes as promptly as the welcome ones.

"I know."

"You don't have to preserve the first setting that helped."

He looked at Leah, who was reviewing the times he had marked.

"Can you tell it which things matter?"

"Not in the way you mean," Chen said. "The system has no opinion about the refrigerator. We have to use the recordings and what you report to improve where and when it responds."

Leah showed him the part of the detection rule they intended to make more restrictive. They were changing one part of the program, then observing before doing more. He followed the explanation and still wanted to know whether the laundry would remain possible.

"We'll keep asking about that," Chen said.

For the next few days he listened for the refrigerator so actively that he could not decide whether the adjustment had helped. Eventually he forgot to check. He noticed that only when completing the evening report.

The useful periods continued. Not every hour, and not always when he had prepared something worthy of them. Once he had an easy twenty minutes cleaning crumbs from the cutlery drawer and then could not settle into a conversation he had been looking forward to. He told the team. He told Mara he was having trouble listening, and she asked whether he was tired.

He was.

The explanation was so available that he had missed it.

* * *

He told Mara about the laundry one evening while they were putting fresh sheets on the bed.

He had mentioned it before, but as an item in the progress report he gave her after appointments. This time he tried to tell her what it had been like to finish and discover he had not spent the task trying to be somewhere else.

She held two corners of the sheet and waited for him to take the others.

"I know you've folded laundry before," she said.

"That's what makes it hard to explain."

They shook the sheet out. It settled crookedly, and she pulled her side toward her.

"I wasn't making myself do it. But I wasn't fascinated by it either."

"Okay."

He tucked the edge beneath the mattress, more slowly than he would have before surgery. The movement still pulled if he did too much at once.

"It didn't cost anything afterward."

She looked up.

"Usually I feel as though I've earned something. Even when I've done almost nothing. I fold things and then I need to stop being the person who just folded things."

"And this time?"

"I put them away."

Mara smoothed the sheet beneath her palms.

"That sounds good."

He nodded. He wanted her to understand the size of it without having to enlarge the event.

"It was," he said.

She came around the bed and put her arms around him. He rested his face against her hair. She no longer had to calculate so many places where touching him might hurt.

For a moment he was tempted to ask whether she was relieved. He could feel how readily the conversation could become an assessment of what he now offered her.

She squeezed him once and stepped back to find the pillowcases. He found one underneath the duvet and handed it over.

* * *

By the next review, there were enough reports that the change no longer depended on his account of a single load of laundry.

He was still sleeping unevenly on some nights. The physical discomfort was diminishing. He continued to go to meetings and speak with Shah. The team was careful about what could be assigned to which change, but Chen no longer spoke of the useful periods as isolated possibilities. There was a pattern worth continuing to work with.

He asked whether she thought it was working.

"You're reporting less effort staying with ordinary activities, across several settings. Some of that is showing up in the other measures too. Yes, I think we're seeing a benefit."

He sat quietly after she said it.

He had expected to want a stronger statement. Instead he wanted to hear the same one again.

They discussed returning to work gradually, once the surgical team was satisfied with his recovery. There would still be visits, programming changes if needed, and reports. He wrote down the next appointment. Then he realized he had written it beside the previous one rather than checking for a message containing the date.

He had stopped expecting every visit to be the last necessary step.

"What would you say has changed most?" Chen asked.

He looked at the list he had brought. It was shorter than the lists he used to bring because several items now seemed too similar to record separately.

"Yesterday afternoon," he said.

"What happened?"

"Not much."

She waited.

He had made lunch and put the plate in the sink. There had been laundry again, less of it this time. He had read part of a chapter, then opened the window because the room was warm. At some point he had sat in the chair beside it. A delivery arrived downstairs. Someone called up to ask which apartment. He answered because he knew the name on the parcel.

He could reconstruct the events. What he could not locate was an interval in which the afternoon had become a thing he needed to get through.

"I had about an hour," he said. "Maybe more. I only know because I'd looked at the clock before lunch."

"An hour of what?"

He thought about this.

"I wasn't keeping track."

Chen wrote something down. He let her write it without asking what words she had chosen.

* * *

That afternoon, he came home alone in a car Luis had arranged because Mara could not leave work. The driver spoke briefly about the traffic, then asked whether Daniel wanted the radio on. Daniel said either was fine. The driver left it off.

At the apartment, he put his keys in the heavy bowl Mara had made and went to the kitchen. There was rice in the refrigerator and part of a tomato. He heated the rice, cut the tomato, and took the plate to the table.

The meal was ordinary. He thought it needed something, found the salt, and decided it was better. Halfway through, he remembered he had not sent Mara a message about the appointment. He wrote that Chen thought the change was real and that he would tell her the rest at home.

Mara replied with a heart.

He looked at it for a moment, then put the phone down.

After he ate, he stayed at the table. From there he could see the book on the shelf and the light moving slowly along the opposite

wall. He wanted to read, though not urgently. The plate was still in front of him. He could wash it first or leave it until later.

He picked up the last slice of tomato with his fingers and ate it.

08 - Company

Mara began telling him a story from the bathroom and was still telling it when she came into the bedroom, holding a bottle she could not open.

"Which Helen?" he asked.

"My mother's Helen. From the walking group."

"The one with the dog?"

"They all have dogs."

He held out his hand for the bottle. She gave it to him and sat on the bed.

Helen had persuaded Mara's mother to go away for two nights. They were taking the train up the coast, staying in a hotel Helen knew, and apparently keeping this from Mara's sister because they did not want her to organize it for them. They had told Mara, who was now trying to determine whether being entrusted with the secret meant being responsible for its consequences.

"Has she booked anything?" Daniel asked.

"Everything. She's booked everything. She even booked a restaurant."

"Your mother?"

"I know."

He got the cap loose and handed the bottle back.

"When did this happen?"

"I found out last night. Apparently they've been planning it for weeks."

Mara put some lotion in her palm, then continued speaking with her hands held apart, unwilling to interrupt the story long enough to use it. There had been an exchange about luggage. Helen traveled with a small case. Mara's mother thought a woman who could fit everything she needed in a case that size was not being truthful about her needs.

Daniel laughed. Mara began laughing too, before she reached the part about what Helen had said in reply.

He waited for her to get it out.

It was a small pleasure, watching her try to repeat a sentence that kept making her laugh. He had seen her like this many times. He remembered meeting her sister early in their relationship and learning that both women became almost silent when something was very funny, their shoulders moving while they attempted to recover enough breath to explain themselves.

Mara finally told him. The sentence was less funny than the effort had been, which made them laugh again.

Then she looked at the lotion still sitting in her palm.

"God."

She rubbed it into her arms. He turned toward the chair for his shirt.

"There's more," she said.

He sat back down.

* * *

His return to work began with short days and a desk someone had cleaned more thoroughly than he ever did.

The dust had gone from behind the monitor. So had an old cup and a collection of notes whose purposes he could no longer recall. Nina had put the notes in an envelope instead of throwing them away. On the outside she had written, *Potentially important archaeology*.

He opened it. There was a phone number without a name, three measurements he could not place, and a reminder to ask someone called Paul about something called the exception. He set the envelope in a drawer.

People came by to say they were glad he was back. They asked how he was feeling, accepted the answer, and told him about work. He had worried that he would be required to deliver a satisfying account of the procedure. Most people seemed grateful not to need one.

By the third morning, his absence had begun to close over.

Nina stopped beside his desk on her way out to lunch.

"I'm going to the place with the terrible chairs."

He knew which one she meant.

"I'll come."

"You're allowed terrible chairs?"

"They didn't specify."

They walked slowly enough that he did not need to say he was still building up his energy. Outside the restaurant, Nina picked a table with one chair in the shade and let him take it. He noticed and did not thank her in a way that would make her regret it.

They talked about the office until the food came. Then Nina turned her phone facedown and said her father had bought a printer.

"That sounds manageable," Daniel said.

"It prints on discs."

"Actual discs?"

"He has a project."

Her father had been converting old family recordings, then making copies for relatives who no longer owned anything that could play them. He had designed labels. The labels included dates, locations, and estimates where he was unsure. Nina's uncle had objected to one estimate, and now the two brothers were trying to determine which Christmas contained an argument neither would admit to remembering.

"Can't they look at the file?"

"It was a tape."

"Right."

"You can hear their mother in the background saying that somebody has moved the chairs. Apparently that's a clue."

He asked what the recordings were like.

"Mostly terrible. Wind. Someone telling someone else where to stand. Long stretches with the lens cap on."

"Do they keep those?"

"He keeps everything."

She ate a few bites before continuing. Daniel had known that her father lived nearby, that he had retired, that Nina spent some

Sundays with him. He had assembled those facts into a complete person without asking what the person did on a Tuesday.

"The best one is my mother trying to teach him to dance," she said.

"Who's filming?"

"My aunt. She's laughing too hard to keep them in the picture."

"Does he get it?"

"No. And then it becomes an argument about whether he wants to get it."

Nina was smiling at something Daniel could not see. He wanted to see it. He asked whether she had the video on her phone, and she spent a minute finding it.

The recording was short and badly lit. A woman in a blue dress counted aloud while a man tried to move backward without looking at his feet. Someone behind the camera began to laugh. The picture lurched toward a wall, then returned to the dancers, who had stopped moving. The woman was still holding the man's hand.

Nina watched Daniel watch it.

"She's furious," he said.

"She's delighted. That's how she looks when she's delighted with being furious."

He asked to see it again.

On the walk back, Nina told him that her father had offered to make discs for everyone in her department. She had told him they were busy enough.

"I'd take one," Daniel said.

"Don't encourage him."

She said it fondly. He did not need to decide whether she meant it.

* * *

On Monday evening, someone knocked a cup of coffee beneath the folding table just as the meeting ended.

Daniel was already carrying his chair to the rack. He put it away, as he usually did, then came back to help move the table. A man he knew by sight had gone to look for a mop. The coffee spread

toward the leg of an upholstered chair that belonged to the building and was not supposed to be used by the group.

Daniel lifted the chair clear.

"That's the expensive one," the man said when he returned.

It was covered in a brown fabric that had worn smooth along both arms.

"You can tell."

"We're allowed to recover, but not in that chair."

Daniel laughed. The man grinned and put a bucket down.

His name was Sam. Daniel knew it from the meetings, though they had never introduced themselves outside the room. Sam was the man who had once spoken about going to a supermarket without needing anything and buying a melon he had let rot. Daniel remembered the melon much more clearly than he remembered other things Sam had said about his life.

The mop left a wet fan of coffee behind it.

"This is making more coffee," Sam said.

They found paper towels, absorbed most of the spill, and used the mop again. While Sam rinsed the bucket, Daniel wiped the table and put the spare cups back in their sleeve. Most people had left. Luis had gone early to collect one of his children.

Sam came back with a key on a large wooden tag.

"You heading off?"

"In a minute."

"There's a place around the corner. Coffee's better than the floor variety."

Daniel checked the time. He had told Mara when the meeting would end, but they had no plans afterward. He sent her a message that he might be a little later.

At the café, Sam ordered tea.

"You advertised coffee," Daniel said.

"I don't have to use every facility."

Daniel bought decaf and a piece of cake too large for the plate. Sam said he did not want any, then accepted a fork when Daniel brought one.

They began by talking about the meeting. Sam mentioned something the speaker had said, and Daniel tried to remember the exact wording. They disagreed about it and then realized they had been listening to different parts.

After a while, Sam asked how he was doing after the surgery.

Daniel had told the group enough that people knew there had been an operation. He explained a little more now. Sam listened, looked briefly at the place near Daniel's hairline where a scar was still visible, and returned to his face.

"And it's helping?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Good."

Daniel waited for the question about how it worked. Sam cut off a corner of the cake.

"Were you off work?"

They talked about that. Daniel asked what Sam did and learned that he edited instructional videos for a company that trained people to use warehouse equipment. Much of his work involved removing pauses from people who had been selected for their expertise rather than their ability to explain it.

"You must know how to drive everything by now."

"I know how to cut from a warning to a man nodding."

He had worked from home since long before Daniel did. His wife had moved out the previous year, and the second bedroom was now his office again. He said this while scraping a little icing from the plate. Daniel began arranging a careful response.

"Do you still speak?"

"Too much about some things. Not enough about others."

Sam took another bite, then frowned at the cake.

"This is incredibly sweet."

"You don't have to keep eating it."

"I'm investigating."

Daniel laughed, then became quiet. He had used that word, or one close to it, to account for things he should not have done. Sam had no way of knowing. The joke did not require his private history to become part of it.

"What's the second bedroom like?" he asked.

"Small. I can touch the wardrobe from the desk."

"That sounds inconvenient."

"The worst part is that I still get dressed for work. Then I sit beside the rest of my clothes."

They stayed until an employee began turning chairs upside down at the far end of the café. Daniel had finished the coffee some time earlier. Sam had eaten nearly half the cake.

Outside, they exchanged numbers. Sam told him to send a message if he was going to the Thursday meeting.

"I usually am," Daniel said.

"Then there you go."

* * *

On Thursday, Sam was late and said very little afterward. Daniel had expected them to go to the café again. Sam said he needed to get home and left before the chairs were stacked.

Daniel felt foolish for having expected anything. He took his time putting a chair away, then reminded himself that people could be tired on Thursdays without having made a decision about him.

On Friday afternoon, Sam sent a photograph of a plate with several burnt shapes on it.

Dinner. Thoughts?

Daniel enlarged the image.

What was the intention?

Potatoes.

Then no.

Sam called a minute later. He had been working through lunch, forgotten something in the oven, and then remembered it only because a man in the video he was editing said, "Never leave equipment unattended."

"Did you keep that bit?"

"I resented it."

They talked while Daniel walked home from the bus stop. He was still working reduced hours and felt a little ashamed of ending the day while other people remained at their desks. Sam, who had

been working since before Daniel got up, said he envied him and did not apologize for it.

"I'll send you my appointment schedule," Daniel said. "You can pick a few."

"I'd rather work."

At the apartment, Daniel put down his bag and continued talking. Sam had ordered food. He described an argument with his wife about a bookcase neither wanted but neither thought the other should throw away. Daniel suggested taking photographs of it and offering it online.

There was a short pause.

"We know how to get rid of a bookcase," Sam said.

"Right. Sorry."

Sam sighed.

"It's fine. I keep proposing solutions too. Apparently we're talking about something else."

"Are you?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think she just wants the bookcase."

Daniel leaned against the counter, smiling. He could feel the appeal of an explanation, the small satisfaction of placing another person's trouble in an intelligible category. He did not need to take it that far. Sam was still telling him about the conversation.

They agreed to meet after the Monday meeting if neither had another plan. Sam's food arrived. Daniel could hear him negotiating through the door with a driver who had brought a drink he had not ordered.

"Free drink," Sam said when he returned.

"Enjoy your evening."

"You too."

After the call, Daniel noticed he had remained standing in the kitchen long enough for the room to become dark. He turned on the light and began thinking about dinner.

* * *

Mara brought home a tall ceramic object that was narrower at the bottom than seemed wise.

She placed it on the table and stepped back.

"Well?"

It was glazed in a gray that became green where the surface curved. Along one side, the glaze had gathered into a thick, uneven line. The opening at the top was small enough to admit perhaps three stems.

"I like it," Daniel said.

"You don't have to."

"I do."

"Don't you want to know what it's for?"

He looked at it again.

"I assumed you'd tell me if there was danger involved."

She smiled and turned it slightly.

"It's for being that shape."

"Then it's doing very well."

He asked how she had made the narrow part. She explained, using her hands to show him where the clay had almost collapsed. Once she began, there was a whole account of the piece he had not known existed: the first attempt, the decision to cut it down, the argument she had had with herself about whether to smooth the irregularity or leave it.

"I keep making things you can put something in," she said. "Bowls. Mugs. It feels like an excuse."

"An excuse for what?"

"For spending time on them. At least you get a bowl."

He looked at the object. He had initially imagined finding flowers for it. He let that plan go.

"Where do you want it?"

They tried the shelf, where it disappeared among the books, then the windowsill, where Mara worried about the curtain. They put it on the low table. It made the table look less temporary.

"There," she said.

Daniel stepped back beside her. The heavy bowl she had made earlier still held his keys near the door. He liked seeing a second thing in the apartment that had come from the same hands without belonging to the same purpose.

"I had a terrible time with the instructor," she said.

"About this?"

"About something he said last week. I didn't tell you."

"What did he say?"

She sat on the couch and told him. It was a small dispute, complicated by the fact that she liked the instructor and thought he had meant well. Daniel began by taking her side too strongly. She corrected him, and he listened to the correction.

The piece remained on the table between them. As the light changed, its color changed too.

* * *

Over the following weeks, Daniel learned things he had once mistaken for repetition.

Nina's father had begun adding subtitles to the family recordings. He was using them to identify people who had walked out of frame, and to correct statements made by relatives who were no longer available to defend themselves. Sam's wife had taken the bookcase. Sam had helped carry it downstairs and then been angry for the rest of the day, though he could not settle on whom to be angry with.

Mara's mother went on the train trip. There was a problem with the room, then a satisfactory new room, then a photograph of the two women at lunch in which Helen's small suitcase occupied a chair of its own.

Daniel remembered to ask about these things because he wanted to know what happened. Sometimes he forgot. Sometimes he asked at the wrong moment and received a short answer. Nina once told him she could not talk about her father because she was trying to finish something, and Daniel went back to his own desk without deciding that his interest had been a mistake.

He continued to see Luis. Their dinners were less concerned with whether Daniel was getting through the week. Luis could complain about his own week without first establishing that Daniel had enough room to hear it. He talked about a dispute at work for twenty minutes, then stopped and said, "That was probably more than you needed."

"I'm still unclear about who moved the meeting."

"So am I. That's half the problem."

Daniel laughed. He asked about the other half.

None of the conversations resembled the sensation he had once tried to recover by playing the same music again. They gave him things to remember that continued beyond the moment of hearing them. He could wonder about the bookcase on a walk to lunch. He could see a ridiculous suitcase in a shop window and know whom to tell. At times the apartment seemed fuller before anyone came home.

He was not always good company. He interrupted. He corrected a detail Mara had not considered important and found himself defending the correction long after he understood that he should stop. At a meeting, he became impatient with a man who repeatedly lost his place and then felt ashamed of the impatience, as if treatment had made him responsible for never having it again.

But he could come back. More often now, he could notice that he had left a conversation while the other person was still in it and find his way to what they were saying.

* * *

One evening Mara fell asleep on the couch while Daniel was reading.

She had meant to answer an email. The laptop was open beside her, with a sentence unfinished in the window. Her head had tipped back against the cushion. One hand rested on the trackpad as though she had been interrupted rather than overcome by sleep.

He moved the laptop to the table. She woke enough to say, "I'm not asleep," and then went back to sleep.

He covered her feet with the throw.

The room was quiet. He read for a while, though he lost the thread once and returned to the start of a paragraph. From the courtyard came a conversation he could not hear clearly enough to follow. He closed the window partway so it would not wake her.

When she woke, she looked at the clock and groaned.

"How long?"

"About forty minutes."

"You should have woken me."

"You looked tired."

She sat up, rubbing her face. He handed her the laptop.

"I had a sentence," she said.

"You still have most of it."

She read it, deleted part, and typed something else. Then she looked across at him.

"This is nice."

He was careful not to answer too quickly.

"What?"

"Being here."

He felt an immediate, almost painful pleasure. For a moment he wanted to ask her how different it was, how long it had been since she had felt this way, whether she had been waiting for him to become someone she could sleep beside in the early evening.

She was still looking at him. He could turn what she had said into a question she would need to answer carefully, or he could let her have said it.

"Yes," he said.

She put the laptop aside without finishing the email and moved closer. He lifted his arm so she could sit against him. Her hair caught beneath his elbow; she pulled it free, and he apologized. They rearranged themselves until neither was holding an uncomfortable position for the sake of the other.

He kissed her. She kissed him back, then laughed because his book was sliding off his knee and he had tried to catch it without moving his mouth.

He let the book fall.

* * *

On Sunday, Sam came over for lunch.

The invitation had been Daniel's. He had checked with Mara first and then sent the message without trying to determine whether Sam would hear it as an obligation. Sam asked if he could bring anything. Daniel said bread. Sam arrived with two loaves because

the first bakery had disappointed him and he had decided to verify the result elsewhere.

"We're doing comparisons now," he said.

Mara took both bags and asked whether he wanted coffee.

They had met briefly outside a meeting once, but Daniel was surprised by how little introduction they needed. Sam asked about the ceramic piece, received the answer that it was for being its shape, and nodded as if this clarified everything.

"I've got a chair with the same arrangement," he said. "You can't sit in it."

Mara laughed. She wanted to know why he kept it. He began to explain.

Daniel went into the kitchen to finish the food. He could hear them from there, first Mara asking a question, then Sam giving an answer longer than the question seemed to require. He checked the pan, lowered the heat, and took plates from the cupboard.

For several minutes they talked without him. He liked the sound. He was not responsible for keeping the conversation alive, and leaving it briefly had not ended his place in it.

He carried the food to the table. Mara moved the bread to make room. Sam was telling her about a landlord who had tried to repair the chair by removing the part that made it a chair.

"What part?" Daniel asked.

"The back."

"Then it's a stool."

"That was his position."

They ate. The first loaf was better than Sam had expected, the second less good, and he became annoyed at the loss of a clear conclusion. Mara preferred the second. Daniel tried both again and declined to adjudicate.

After lunch, he began clearing plates. Sam helped until Mara asked him to finish the story about the training video with the missing ladder. He stayed at the table and continued. Daniel rinsed the plates in the kitchen, listening through the doorway.

He missed something that made Mara laugh.

"Wait," he called. "What happened?"

Sam started to repeat it, but Daniel turned off the water and came back before he did.

09 - Good Work

The third report ended with the same sentence as the first two.

Normal operation restored.

Daniel scrolled back to check the dates. Different weeks, different technicians. The reports concerned a signal controller near the end of a corridor his team had been reviewing. Each visit had followed a complaint about unusually long waits on the side street. Each technician had found the equipment working, checked the active plan, made a correction, and left the intersection operating normally.

Then someone had complained again.

The latest case had been assigned to him because it was not urgent and he was still returning to a full workload. His manager had called it a good one to get his hands back into. Daniel had expected to resent the consideration. Instead he had opened the first attachment and continued until he reached the third.

There was no satisfying failure in any of them. No broken part, no impossible reading. The controller was following instructions. The instructions had apparently been corrected three times.

He opened the fourth report.

Nina walked past with a folder held between her teeth because both hands were occupied by coffee. She put one cup on his desk and took the folder from her mouth.

"That's been through everyone."

"I'm beginning to see why."

"There was another one last year. Might be in the old system."

"Same intersection?"

"I think so. Ask Rosa."

He wrote the name down.

"Thanks for the coffee."

"You're welcome. Don't drink mine. It's terrible on purpose."

She went back to her desk. He took a sip and returned to the fourth report.

* * *

By then he could work a full day without needing to lie down afterward.

He still had appointments. The programming had settled enough that the visits were farther apart, though no one had declared the treatment finished. He was learning which sensations near the hardware belonged to healing and which belonged to the fact that he could now feel a shape beneath skin that had once been smooth. Sometimes a shirt rubbed there. He changed shirts. The problem did not require an interpretation.

At work, the afternoons had become less distinct from the mornings. He ate lunch, came back, and continued. He still preferred some tasks to others. He did not enjoy scheduling meetings or discovering that someone had changed a file without updating the version note. But he could finish reading a note before deciding that its writer had wasted his time.

That was how he found Rosa's name.

The old case contained a scan of a handwritten sheet. Most of it repeated the typed summary, except for a line near the bottom that had been omitted from the searchable record.

Plan at arrival differs from plan at previous departure.

He enlarged the scan. The last word could have been something else, but the sentence made sense.

Rosa answered on the second call. He knew her voice from a few meetings but had never worked with her directly. She supervised one of the field crews and sounded as if he had caught her between two places.

"That cabinet again?" she said.

"You remember it."

"I remember getting sent back."

He read her the line.

"Departure," she confirmed. "We'd leave it right, then somebody would put it back."

"Did you find out who?"

"Nobody was doing it, according to everybody."

She had work orders to finish before she could look for her notes. Daniel said he would send what he had and wait for her to have time. She told him not to send the whole case history. She already had enough copies of it.

He sent the relevant pages and the dates he was trying to reconcile. Then he opened the plan archive.

It was the sort of work he had once made easier by promising himself a more interesting task afterward. The archive contained old naming conventions, duplicate attachments, records moved from systems whose authors had assumed everyone knew what the abbreviations meant. He found a plan titled *FINAL* and another titled *FINAL_REVISED*. Neither was current.

He wrote down what each referred to. He did not feel clever. He felt occupied.

At noon he stopped to eat. When he came back, the list was still there, and he knew where to continue.

* * *

The intersection had been part of a resurfacing project several years earlier.

During the works, a temporary timing plan had given more time to the main road while one lane was closed. When the contractor finished, the field crew restored the ordinary plan. The construction ticket was closed. The cabinet passed its checks.

In the central scheduling record, the temporary assignment remained.

It did not have a useful name. It had a number, an old location identifier, and a note referring to an attachment that had not survived the move to the newer system. The intersection appeared under its current identifier elsewhere. Both records looked reasonable until Daniel put them beside each other.

He did that, then stopped himself from announcing it.

An abandoned record did not establish that anything still used it. He traced the assignment through the schedule history. On

ordinary days, the controller ran the expected plan. After certain service restarts, the central system reconciled its records with the field equipment and put the temporary plan back. It was a valid plan. Nothing had failed in a way that would produce an alarm.

He compared the restart times with the complaints. The relationship held for the cases with complete logs. There were gaps in the older records. He marked those as gaps.

Rosa called while he was doing it.

"I found a photo," she said. "Of the settings when we got there the second time."

"Can you send it?"

"Already did."

It arrived sideways. He turned it and read the plan number.

"That's it," he said.

"That's what?"

He explained what he had found. She asked him to go over the part about the old identifier again.

"So we were fixing the cabinet."

"And the schedule was restoring the other plan."

"Helpful."

He smiled. She did not.

"I've had people go out there who had other work. More than once."

"I know."

"I'm not saying it's your fault."

"I know."

He looked at the reports again. He had been pleased with the explanation. Rosa had been paying for its absence in afternoons.

They agreed on what they still needed to verify. She could meet him at the intersection the following morning. He checked his calendar and said yes.

* * *

The cabinet stood beside a narrow strip of soil containing a tree and several objects the tree had not produced.

Rosa was there first, talking to another technician. She wore a cap with no logo and carried a notebook whose cover had been softened by use. Daniel recognized her only after she said his name.

"You look different without the conference-room lights," he said.

"Everyone does."

She introduced the technician and showed Daniel where he could stand without being in the way. He stayed there while they checked the controller against the records he had brought.

The main road carried a steady stream of cars and buses. On the side street, a van waited with its indicator flashing. Behind it, a driver began edging toward the other lane and then abandoned the idea. The light changed. The first few vehicles cleared the intersection; the last had to wait again.

Daniel had seen the delay in the reports. Standing beside it, he could watch people make small decisions about whether the wait was nearly over. A cyclist put a foot down, lifted it, then put it down again. A man crossing the far side stopped in a patch of shade and shifted a bag from one hand to the other.

None of it looked extraordinary. It happened over and over.

Rosa checked something on the display, then asked him to read back a number from his sheet. He did.

"Matches."

They were not changing the schedule that morning. The correction would go through review, and the field team would verify it afterward. Daniel had brought the wrong printout of one attachment and had to retrieve the current version on his phone. Nobody treated this as evidence that he should have stayed in the office.

While the technician finished, Rosa showed him how the old construction note appeared in the field record. It was present, but several steps away from the page the crew used for the complaint. The record did not tell them that a central assignment remained active.

"I would have checked it if it said," she told him. "But it doesn't say."

He asked what would have made the note useful. She showed him.

On the way back, he bought water at a small shop near the bus stop. The woman behind the counter had watched them at the cabinet.

"Is that getting fixed?" she asked.

"We think we've found the problem."

"They said that before."

"I know."

She gave him his change. He did not try to explain why this time should be different.

* * *

It took longer to retire the assignment properly than it had taken to discover it.

The change needed a review of what else referenced the old identifier. There were questions about the archive and about whether removing the assignment would affect another schedule. Daniel answered what he could and sent the rest to people who knew the relevant parts. He wrote the explanation twice: once for the people approving the correction and once for the field team, who needed to know what they would see afterward.

Nina read the first version.

"You've made this sound very calm."

"It is calm. Nothing's on fire."

"I remember your opinions about this system."

"I still have them."

She handed back the pages. There were three marks in the margin. He made two of the changes and explained why he thought the third would obscure the distinction between the two records. She agreed.

The correction was applied during an approved maintenance window. It was checked in the field and checked again after the reconciliation that had previously reinstated the temporary plan. The ordinary plan stayed in place.

Daniel waited through several more days of operation before asking to close the case. He also searched for the same kind of duplicate assignment elsewhere. There were several candidates,

most of them harmless old records. Two needed someone to look more closely.

On Friday, Rosa sent a brief message.

Still right.

He saved it with the case notes, then felt slightly foolish for having saved something so informal. It was useful confirmation. He left it there.

* * *

His manager asked him to come by before lunch.

Martin's office was small enough that opening the door required the visitor to step around a chair. He had tried moving the chair several times and returned it to the same place. A row of binders behind him contained projects that had once been expected to eliminate the need for binders.

"Good work on the recurring case," he said.

Daniel thanked him.

"Rosa's happy. She expressed it as a complaint, but I can translate."

"They've spent a lot of time out there."

"I know."

Martin opened a list on his screen. There were other recurring faults and unexplained departures from expected operation. Some had been closed more than once. Some were waiting because the people with enough knowledge to investigate them were busy with projects that had deadlines and sponsors.

"I'd like somebody to own this," he said.

"The queue?"

"The work. With time assigned to it. Not whoever happens to have an afternoon."

He was offering Daniel responsibility for a reliability review, initially for three months. Daniel would work with the field teams, examine the repeat cases, and establish a way of closing them that included checking whether they stayed closed. Martin could assign a junior analyst and protect part of Daniel's schedule. There would

be a review afterward to decide whether the arrangement should continue.

Daniel read the list.

"How much of my time?"

They discussed it. The proposal was practical. It made use of things he knew, gave him access to people he needed, and provided enough authority that he would not be asking favors for every small step. He suggested a change to how cases were selected, so that the loudest complaint did not automatically become the first item. Martin asked him to write it down.

"Are you interested?"

"Yes."

He answered before remembering the other proposal.

Martin remembered it for him.

"It will affect your time for the neighborhood pilot."

"I know."

"I can't promise both."

Daniel looked back at the list. Each line referred to something already in service, already costing somebody time. He could begin with any of three cases without needing to persuade a committee that the problem existed.

"Let me look at the pilot this afternoon," he said. "I'll tell you Monday."

"Fine."

Martin turned to his calendar, and the conversation moved on to the analyst's availability.

* * *

The neighborhood pilot lived in a folder Daniel had created before the relapse.

Its title had changed several times. The version he opened was called *Whole Journey Review*, with a date that now seemed surprisingly old. Nina's comments appeared down the side. He had answered most of them. The unanswered ones concerned who would do the work.

The proposal began with a simple dissatisfaction: the city knew a great deal about individual intersections and much less about the journeys people actually made through several of them. Someone walking from a bus stop to a clinic could lose time in three separate places without any one measure looking especially bad. A route that worked for Daniel could be exhausting for someone who needed a place to sit, or inaccessible to someone who could not manage a particular curb.

He wanted a small team to follow a set of ordinary journeys with the people who made them, then test changes across the route rather than treating every crossing as an isolated question. The traffic models would still matter. So would the field records. There would also be accounts from people whose trips had been poorly represented by both.

He had made it more modest each time he revised it. Fewer routes. A shorter observation period. A smaller first trial. He could remember being angry while writing one of the sections, the pleasure of making the language so plain that dismissing it would require someone to say directly what they were dismissing.

Now he read that section and found the anger disproportionate to the paragraph.

The paragraph was still right.

He changed a sentence that repeated something in the introduction. Then he opened the budget and remembered why he had left it unfinished.

There were staff hours he could not conjure. Participation needed to be paid. The work would cross boundaries between teams that did not share a manager, a budget, or a definition of when a project was done. His small trial was only small if somebody else supplied the time.

He read Nina's last comment.

Can we take this in before the next planning round?

That round had passed while he was being evaluated. The next one was approaching.

He put a question mark beside one cost and saved the file. Then he noticed a message from the analyst Martin had mentioned, asking for background on the recurring cases.

He sent the background. It took the rest of the afternoon to select the useful material and explain the gaps.

At five, he went home.

* * *

Mara was pleased about the offer.

She asked what the work would involve, then listened while he described the temporary plan and the duplicate record. He kept trying to shorten the account because he could hear how much history was necessary to make one small error intelligible.

"I'm following," she said.

"You don't have to be."

"I asked."

He finished the story. She was cutting vegetables, moving the pieces into a bowl with the flat of the knife. He washed what she handed him.

"So the people who kept going out there weren't missing it," she said.

"They were fixing what they could see."

"That must feel good. To find it."

"It does."

He meant it. He had not spent Friday imagining work he would prefer to be doing. There had been a problem, a group of people, a sequence of things they could accomplish. At the end he had come home with enough attention left to wash vegetables and hear about Mara's day.

"What about your other thing?" she asked.

"The pilot."

"The routes."

He explained the timing, the resources, Martin's offer. The explanation sounded better aloud than it had in his office. He would learn useful things from the reliability work. He might find people who would later support the pilot. There was no point designing a

new review process while they were failing to maintain what they already had.

"Are you disappointed?" Mara asked.

He considered it.

"Not particularly."

She set the knife down.

"You were so interested in it."

"I still think it's good."

"That's different."

"I know. But this is good too."

She nodded and picked up the knife again.

"It sounds like it."

He waited, expecting her to qualify the agreement. She asked him to pass the colander.

Over dinner she told him about a room-booking mistake at work. He listened. Later they watched something together, and when it finished he did not open the computer to make up for the hours he had spent away from it.

* * *

On Monday, he told Martin yes.

The title in the follow-up email was longer than anything they had said in the office. Daniel read it, smiled, and began arranging the first session with the analyst and field representatives. The work required less ceremony than the email suggested. They needed to agree on which records were trustworthy, who could obtain the others, and what they would do when the records disagreed.

Nina stopped by after lunch.

"You're taking the repeat cases."

"For the next quarter."

"Congratulations, I think."

"Thank you, I think."

She pulled over the spare chair.

"Do you want me to keep a slot for the pilot discussion?"

He had forgotten she had spoken to someone about it.

"With planning?"

"They said we could come in. Nothing promised. Just a conversation."

"When?"

She told him. He could have made the time. The meeting itself was not the difficulty. Going in would require him to decide what he was asking for and be prepared to keep asking afterward.

"I don't think I can give it what it needs right now."

Nina looked at the list of cases on his screen.

"This will keep expanding."

"That's why it needs someone."

"I agree."

They sat quietly for a moment.

"I don't want to pitch something we can't staff," he said. "And I don't want to use the proposal to imply that fixing the existing system is beneath us."

"You don't have to do that to make the proposal."

"No. I know."

He could feel himself speaking as though she had criticized the work. She had helped him do it. She had carried the diagram of the pedestrian crossing into a room where nobody had asked for another diagram.

"The case last week mattered," he said.

"Yes, it did."

He looked at her.

"I'm enjoying this."

"Okay."

"I didn't used to enjoy this part."

Nina nodded. She knew there had been a medical procedure. He had told her a little more since returning, enough to explain the continuing appointments, though she had not asked him to connect it to his decisions at work.

"You don't owe me the pilot," she said. "I just need to know what to tell them."

"Not this round."

She repeated the words and made a note in her calendar.

After she left, he opened the proposal again. There were sentences he still liked, observations he still believed, a small plan that could become useful if they gave it time. Nothing in it embarrassed him. Nothing required him to renounce it before he went back to the work he had chosen.

He closed the file.

* * *

That afternoon, the analyst brought him a set of records for a fault that appeared only after rain.

Her name was Celia. She had been told he knew how to read the older maintenance sheets. He told her he knew who to ask when he could not.

They spread the printouts over the spare table. Most were legible. One had been scanned with a fold across the date, and Celia had tried to reconstruct the missing number from the sequence of work orders.

"I put a question mark," she said.

"Good."

He asked what she thought was happening. She gave him an account that was plausible until they reached a visit on a dry day. He pointed to it. She reconsidered, then found another note that complicated his objection. They moved the pages into a different order.

For a while neither spoke. There was enough in the records to warrant looking again, and neither had yet found the detail that would tell them where.

Celia turned a page toward him.

"Does that say water?"

He leaned closer.

"Might be meter."

They looked at it together. He reached for the next sheet to see whether the same handwriting appeared there.

10 - The Empty Saturday

He remembered the other Saturday while draining the pasta.

Steam rose against his face. He moved back, shook the colander, and set the empty pot on the stove. There was no particular reason for the memory to arrive then. He had cooked alone many times since. Tonight he had also finished the shopping, put away the towels, and found himself with nothing he needed to do before morning.

Mara was in Long Beach. She and her sister had gone to see a play, and she was staying the night because they wanted to go to a flea market early. Daniel had been invited. He did not want to see the play badly enough to spend the whole weekend around it, and Mara had accepted this without the small hesitation he had once learned to look for in her face.

Before she left, she had asked whether he would mind if she came home with a chair.

"Where would it go?"

"That depends on the chair."

"Does it have a job?"

"I haven't met it yet."

He had told her to send a photograph. She had kissed him and taken the overnight bag from its place by the door.

Now he tipped the pasta into the pan with the sauce. It had taken longer than he expected because the garlic had burned on his first attempt. He had thrown it away, washed the pan, and started again. The second time he stayed beside the stove.

He put food in a shallow bowl and carried it to the table.

The apartment was warm. Across the courtyard, a television showed changing patches of blue against a wall. Someone had hung a towel over the railing, and one corner moved in the small current of air between the buildings.

He ate.

The sauce was good, though he had made too much of it. He used a piece of bread to finish what remained in the bowl. Then he sat with the bread bag beside him, deciding whether he wanted another piece.

He did not.

The memory was still available. He could recall the other dinner, the care he had taken, the reasonable sequence of things that had failed to become an evening. He remembered standing in the living room with no idea whether sitting down would help. The pressure had seemed to come from everything at once. Even the objects he liked had become demands he could not satisfy.

He looked toward the living room now.

The lamp was on. Mara's ceramic piece stood on the low table, its gray-green side catching a little light. Beside it lay a book he had started that week, with a receipt marking his place. He could read it. He could leave it where it was.

He took the bowl to the sink.

* * *

The handle on the saucepan lid had been loose for several days.

He noticed it while drying the dishes. The handle turned slightly under his fingers, leaving the screw on the other side almost stationary. He put the lid on a towel and went to find the screwdriver.

The repair took less than a minute. He held the handle with one hand and tightened the screw with the other, stopping when it was firm. Then he washed the lid because he had rested the tool against the inside.

There were other things he could repair. One hinge on the wardrobe door needed attention. A small patch of paint beside the bathroom light switch had been damaged when they removed an adhesive hook. He looked at neither. The lid had been in his hand; now it was finished.

He put the screwdriver away and returned to the living room.

It was not yet eight. He noticed the time because he was deciding whether to call his mother, then remembered she was away with

friends that weekend. He had already spoken to her on Friday. There was no need to produce another conversation.

He sat on the couch and opened the book.

It was a novel Sam had lent him after describing it so badly that Daniel had become curious. A man was traveling to a city where his brother had died, but the brother had apparently used a name no one in the family knew. Sam had said the book was funny. So far Daniel had found it mostly cold and faintly unpleasant, though there was a woman at a hotel desk whose impatience he enjoyed.

He read for a while. Outside, someone was talking loudly on a phone. He closed the window a little. When the voice continued to carry, he stopped reading until the person moved away.

The interruption irritated him. Then it ended.

He went back a few lines and found his place.

Eventually he reached a chapter break. He set the book down without checking how much remained. He could tell Sam he had begun to like it, but he wanted to know whether that was still true after the next chapter.

His phone was in the bedroom. He had put it on charge when he came home from the store. He went to look at it and found a photograph from Mara: her sister holding a program upside down, apparently unaware she was being photographed.

We are cultured, Mara had written.

He sent a reply about the program and asked whether they had eaten. She said they had and told him where. The restaurant name meant nothing to him. He asked whether it had been good, and she sent a photograph of a plate she had already finished.

He smiled and left the phone on charge.

* * *

For part of the evening, he did very little.

He opened the window again. The person with the loud voice had gone. A faint smell of someone else's cooking reached him, then disappeared before he could identify it. The courtyard light came on, making the upper windows look darker.

He sat in the chair beside the window with one leg tucked beneath him. After a few minutes the position became uncomfortable and he put both feet on the floor. He could hear a child laughing somewhere upstairs. A cupboard closed. Water ran in a pipe.

He had expected, if treatment worked, to discover more in these things. More texture, more beauty, something sufficiently elaborate to justify attention. Sometimes that happened. He could become interested in the way light moved across a wall or the small variations in a repeated sound. Tonight the courtyard was an ordinary courtyard. He had seen it from this chair for years.

He remained seated.

There was nothing he was waiting to arrive. He had no obligation to make the minutes into a better account of themselves. When he began thinking about Monday's work, he followed the thought far enough to remember a question he wanted to ask Celia. He wrote it on the back of an envelope, then put the envelope beside his bag.

The evening did not become work.

He returned to the chair and watched a moth move around the courtyard light. It disappeared above the fixture and returned on the other side. He lost track of it when another insect entered the same patch of light.

At some point he thought, quite distinctly, that he was alone.

The thought brought no instruction with it.

He missed Mara a little. He wondered whether she was enjoying the play or sitting through something she would later describe at length because it had disappointed her in an interesting way. He could imagine her sister leaning close to make a comment she ought to have saved for the interval.

He would hear about it tomorrow.

There had been evenings when tomorrow felt like a place he had no practical way to reach. It existed at the far end of hours he could not imagine enduring without changing their nature. He knew, even then, that other people experienced the same hours as a modest amount of free time. He had treated their ease as a skill he had failed to learn.

Now he was sitting by a window. He could not identify the skill he was using.

His eyes filled suddenly. He pressed the heels of his hands against them, then lowered his hands because that made them hurt.

He was not overcome by the courtyard or grateful to the moth. He was thinking of all the evenings he had spent getting through an evening. How much work had been involved, and how rarely the work had looked like anything from outside.

He cried for a minute or two. Then he blew his nose and drank some water.

He did not feel the need to make the crying last.

* * *

Later, he put on an album he had not listened to in years.

He chose it because he remembered liking it, not because it belonged to a period he wanted to enter again. The first track was less interesting than he remembered. He skipped it. The second had a bass line he recognized immediately, and he stayed for that.

He lay on the couch with the volume low. Halfway through, he became aware that he was thinking about something else. He returned to the music without starting the track again. He had missed part of it. The part still playing was available.

His phone sounded from the bedroom. He went to answer it.

Mara had written that the play was over, her sister wanted food again, and she would call in the morning.

How's your night?

He began to write a long answer. He wanted to describe the chair and the window and the absence of the thing he had once tried so hard to explain. But she was outside a theater with her sister. She had asked him an ordinary question.

Good. Pasta, book, music. Fixed the saucepan lid.

She replied, *Hero*.

He told her to have a good night and meant that she could continue having it without attending to his.

The album had ended when he returned to the living room. He considered putting on another, then realized he was tired.

He checked the door, turned out the lamp, and took the water glass to the kitchen. There were a few crumbs on the table. He left them until morning.

In bed, he read another page of the novel before putting it down. He was not sure what time he fell asleep. There was no last difficult interval he would need to remember afterward.

* * *

Mara came home the next afternoon without a chair.

"I met several," she said. "None was right."

She had bought a small framed print instead, a dark rectangle of trees above a pale field. Daniel held it against the wall where she pointed, then moved it higher, then lower, then back to the first position.

"I need to see it from the kitchen," she said.

He waited while she went to look.

"There?"

"Maybe. We'll leave it against the wall for a while."

He set it down on the shelf.

They ate the leftovers he had saved. She told him about the play. It had been good except for a final speech that seemed designed to tell the audience what they had already understood. Her sister had liked the speech, and they had argued about it over a second dinner neither had needed.

"What did you do?" Mara asked.

He gave her the same list he had sent in the message.

"And?" she said.

"That was it."

She looked at him, waiting.

"It was really good."

"The book?"

"The evening."

He told her about sitting in the chair. He left out the crying at first, then put it back because otherwise he was giving her the edited version of what had mattered.

She reached across the table and took his hand.

"Oh, Daniel."

He looked down at their hands. He had not wanted her to be sad.

"It wasn't bad."

"I know."

"I don't think I've ever—"

He stopped. That was too large. There had been easy evenings before, and he did not want to erase them to account for this one.

"I wasn't earning it," he said. "I hadn't had an especially good day. Nothing had happened."

She held his hand a little more tightly.

He could hear that what he was describing might sound like a small event. He no longer needed to make it sound larger. Mara was listening. He had been there. The hours had belonged to him, and he had spent them without needing to get rid of them.

* * *

At the follow-up, Chen showed him the results from the latest assessment beside the earlier ones.

He had become accustomed to modest changes explained with careful qualifications. This comparison was substantial. His reports described less pressure to abandon ordinary activities, more interest that lasted beyond its first moment, fewer stretches in which he found himself unable to settle into anything. The change had persisted across workdays and weekends. He was sleeping reasonably well, maintaining his relationships, and continuing his recovery care without returning to substance use.

There were still differences between the measures. One had moved less than he expected. He asked about it, and Chen explained what that measure captured. He understood, then found he did not need it to agree with everything else.

"You're pleased," she said.

"Yes."

He was smiling. He had not noticed until she said it.

"Tell me what the numbers miss."

He told her about Saturday. When he finished, she asked whether being alone had felt like a test.

"Not when I was doing it. I remembered the other night, but I wasn't trying to reconstruct it."

"And now?"

"Now it feels important."

She nodded. They discussed the other things she needed to know: unwanted changes, sleep, restlessness, whether he was taking on more than he could manage. He described the new responsibility at work and the hours it required. He was leaving on time. He still became tired. He had stopped mistaking every tired evening for a reversal of the treatment.

They kept the program as it was and agreed on the next interval of follow-up. She reminded him that he could contact the team sooner if something changed. He knew how, and for once he was not already planning which question would justify doing so.

"What would you call the change?" she asked.

He looked at the comparison again.

"Recovery."

The word surprised him by arriving without an apology.

"What does that mean to you?"

"I have something to come back to."

Chen waited.

"Before, when I stopped using, I got my life back in pieces. Work. Trust, sometimes. Being able to remember what I'd done. Those things mattered. They still do."

He rubbed his thumb along the edge of the chair.

"But I kept waiting for being there to become worth it. I thought I was meant to prove I could wait indefinitely."

"And now?"

"I like being there."

He did not mean every hour, every task, every version of himself. He knew she knew that. He let the sentence stand.

* * *

He left the clinic with no new instructions beyond continuing what he was doing.

Outside, he called Mara. She was between meetings and had time for the short version. He gave it to her.

"So they're leaving it alone?"

"For now. Longer gap before the next visit."

"That's good."

"It is."

There was a pause. He could hear movement at her end.

"I've got something to show you tonight," she said.

"Good something?"

"I think so."

He walked toward the bus stop, passing a man sweeping dry leaves away from the entrance of a shop. The leaves gathered, scattered slightly, gathered again. He watched long enough to avoid stepping through the pile.

At the stop, he looked up when each bus approached instead of watching its estimated arrival move around on his phone. The wait was not especially interesting. He did not require it to be.

He had a good afternoon at work. Celia had found the missing attachment for one of the older cases. They read it together, changed the order of two tasks, and sent a question to the field team. Nothing was finished by the time he left, but he knew what they would do next.

On the way home he bought fish for dinner because Mara liked the way he cooked it. He remembered lemons before he reached the checkout.

* * *

The Oakland position was open.

Mara showed him the posting while the fish was in the oven. It had appeared that morning. Ruth had sent it directly, though the application would go through the same process as everyone else's. The organization had secured the initial program funding and was ready to appoint someone to lead the center.

Daniel read the description. He recognized phrases from the conversations they had had months earlier: sustained access, room for unfinished work, programs shaped with the people who would use them. There were also the ordinary responsibilities of a director. Budgets. Staff. Schedules. Reports. It was not a job made entirely of the parts Mara enjoyed.

She pointed to a paragraph about developing the first year of programming.

"That's the part I'd want to talk to them about. They've left it open enough to do properly."

"It looks good."

"There's a better salary range than I expected."

He read the figures. They were not enough to make the decision obvious, but enough to prevent money from dismissing it immediately.

"When would they want someone?"

"They're allowing time for the search. And the building work. It's in there."

She moved the page to show him.

He read it twice. There was time to finish his initial reliability assignment, time to plan the follow-up, time to discuss how his work might change. He had expected the dates to provide a problem he could point to. Instead they provided room in which a decision would have to be made.

"You're thinking of applying."

"Yes."

He looked toward the oven. The timer had several minutes left.

"I thought we were going to talk first."

"We are talking."

"I mean about moving."

"Applying isn't moving. I'd need to find out what they're offering. They'd need to decide whether they wanted me."

He nodded. The steps were reasonable. He did not like how readily they arranged themselves toward a place he did not want to go.

"I thought things were good," he said.

"They are."

"Here."

Mara looked at him.

He had intended to raise practical questions. His mother-in-law lived nearby. They had friends. His team had given him work he liked and colleagues who trusted him. The clinic knew him. Their apartment was expensive, but moving would be expensive too. None of these reasons had been invented for the conversation.

He could have listed them. Instead he heard himself say, "Why would we disrupt this just when it's finally good?"

Mara took her hand off the computer.

"Just when it's good for you?"

"For us."

"It is good for us. I'm not saying it isn't."

"Then I don't understand."

She looked back at the posting. There were several lines he had not read because he had been looking for the dates.

"I still want the job."

The answer seemed incomplete to him. He waited for the rest, for the explanation that would make wanting it more important than the life they had spent so much effort recovering.

The timer sounded.

He got up to take the fish out. He had cooked it correctly. The skin was crisp and the flesh separated under the edge of the fork. He set the pan on the stove and stood looking at it while the timer continued to sound.

Mara reached past him and turned it off.

"We said we'd talk when the appointments settled," she said.

"They aren't finished."

"You told me today was good news."

"It was."

"I was happy for you."

He turned toward her.

"I know."

"I'm still happy for you."

She went to get plates. He wanted to tell her he was happy for her too, but he could hear the difference between being glad that someone might want her and wanting her to have what she wanted.

They served the food. He brought the lemon to the table and cut it into wedges. Mara said the fish was good. She ate a little before returning to the laptop.

"I want to apply," she said. "I want you to read the whole thing."

He pulled the computer toward him.

Outside, the courtyard light had come on. The same rooms held the same lamps, the same pieces of furniture. He could still feel the ease of Saturday in the apartment around him. He had not exaggerated it. The treatment had not failed because they were having this conversation.

Mara sat opposite him, waiting while he read.

He reached the paragraph about developing the first year of programming. She had already shown him where to look. He began it again.

III. Reasons to Leave

11 - After Treatment

Mara asked him when the Saturday program had moved into the larger room.

"Permanently?" Daniel said.

"We've never had it permanently."

"When you started getting it regularly."

She nodded. She was working on her application, with an old annual report open beside her résumé. Daniel had come into the bedroom to put away his shoes. Now he stood holding them while he tried to remember the year.

"Before the fire drill."

"Which fire drill?"

"When nobody knew where the children's coats were. You called me from outside."

"That was the old room."

"Then afterward."

She gave him a look.

"I'm narrowing it down," he said.

He found the photograph on his phone. Mara had sent it to him because one child had lined up everyone's shoes along a wall after an activity, including the teachers' shoes, and no one could leave until he was satisfied with the arrangement. The larger room was visible behind them. Daniel read her the date.

"That helps."

She made a note and went back to the résumé. He put the shoes in the wardrobe.

"Do you want me to look?" he asked.

"At this paragraph, if you have a minute."

He sat beside her. She had described expanding the program with the additional teaching artists, securing funding, increasing the number of sessions they could offer. The paragraph contained

several things he knew separately and had not seen assembled as work one person had done.

"You could take out 'helped to,'" he said.

"There were other people."

"You can name what they did. But you led this."

She read it again.

"I hate writing these."

"Everyone does."

"Some people seem very comfortable."

"Their documents are usually worse."

She smiled and changed the sentence. He pointed out a repeated word, then a place where a number would make the scale clearer. The work was simple and useful. For twenty minutes he was helping someone he loved describe something she had done well.

When they stopped, she rested her head briefly against his shoulder.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He went to make tea. While the water heated, he remembered what the document was for and felt as if a task he had finished had been quietly replaced by another.

* * *

She submitted the application on Wednesday.

He learned this when they met outside the grocery store after work. She was standing beside the entrance with her bag over one shoulder, looking at something on her phone. When she saw him, she put it away and kissed him.

"It's in," she said.

"Oakland?"

"Yes."

He nodded. A person carrying two large bags moved between them, and they stepped apart to make room.

"Today?"

"This afternoon."

She looked pleased, nervous, relieved to have stopped revising. He recognized the combination. He had been waiting for it himself after proposals and interviews. He wanted to give her the response she had come prepared to receive.

"That's good," he said.

She watched him for another moment, then took a basket from the stack.

Inside, they separated briefly. He went for vegetables while she found the things from her half of the list. He stood holding a bag of green beans and tried to determine what had happened without him.

She had told him she wanted to apply. He had read the posting. He had helped with the résumé. There was no missing piece of information he could fairly accuse her of withholding.

Still, he had expected another conversation before the act that made it real.

She found him beside the potatoes.

"These?" she asked, holding up a packet.

"Yes."

"You're upset."

"I'm thinking."

She put the packet in the basket.

"I thought we were still discussing it," he said.

"We are."

"But you've applied."

"Yes."

There was not enough room in the aisle for them to stand facing each other. Mara moved the basket to her other hand so a woman could reach past it. Daniel lowered his voice, though neither of them had been speaking loudly.

"Can we talk at home?"

"Of course."

He took the basket from her. She let him. They finished shopping with the attentiveness of people who wanted to avoid having to come back for anything they had forgotten.

* * *

At home, the groceries required putting away.

He liked having something to do with his hands and disliked the feeling that he was using the task to delay. Mara put the vegetables in the lower drawer. He found room for the eggs. The bread needed a place because there was still half a loaf from the weekend.

"I'm not accepting a job," she said, without looking up.

"I know."

"They might not even interview me."

"That isn't what I mean."

She closed the refrigerator and turned toward him.

"Then what do you mean?"

He had been organizing his reasons on the walk home. Work, the clinic, their families, money. Underneath them was a simpler objection he did not like the sound of.

"I don't want to move."

Mara nodded slowly.

"Okay."

"I thought that had to be part of whether you applied."

"It's part of what we'd decide if there were an offer."

"By then there'll be an offer."

"Maybe."

"You know what I mean. People will have put time into it. You'll have met them. You'll have started imagining being there."

She leaned against the counter.

"I've been imagining being there for a long time."

He looked down at the bread bag. He had folded its top over several times without closing it.

"I don't want to be the person who stops you taking something after you've got it."

"So you'd rather stop me finding out whether I could get it."

"That's not fair."

"What would be fair?"

The question sounded less like an accusation than a demand for an actual procedure. He could give her steps for making almost any decision until the steps required one of them to accept something they did not want.

"We decide whether moving makes sense for us. Then you apply."

"And if you decide it doesn't?"

"We decide."

"We haven't."

He put the bread down.

"You've already done it."

"Yes," she said. "I've sent an application."

For a moment they both seemed to be waiting for someone to restate the problem in words that would make the other person less unreasonable. The refrigerator began its low hum. Daniel could hear it without needing to attend to it. He wished the conversation had become easier to leave alone in the same way, then disliked the wish.

"I feel like you made a decision without me," he said.

"I did make this decision. I told you I wanted to make it. I haven't decided where you're going to live."

"Where you live affects where I live."

"I know."

She said it with a tiredness that made him think of how often the same sentence could be used by people acknowledging completely different things.

* * *

They moved to the living room because the kitchen had become too small.

Mara took the chair by the window. Daniel sat on the couch. The distance between them was greater than the room required. He moved to the nearer end, then wondered whether the movement looked calculated.

"I've just started something at work," he said.

"I know."

"It matters to me. They've made room for it. There's a team now."

"I'm not saying it doesn't matter."

"And the clinic is here. Chen's here. Shah. Luis. We've spent years making a life that supports me being well."

Mara listened. He continued because she was listening.

"Your mother's here. Your sister. You've got work you care about. The grant came through. There are people counting on you."

"Don't use my mother."

He stopped.

"She's a reason you might want to stay."

"She is. I know where my mother lives."

"I'm trying to look at everything."

"You're looking at everything I might miss. I've been looking at it too."

She moved one foot beneath the chair, then put it back. He noticed she could not find a comfortable position. He wanted to offer the couch and knew this was not the moment to make her comfort another task he could complete.

"It would cost more than moving," he said. "There's the deposit, finding somewhere, leaving this place. I might need a different job. Your salary wouldn't cover both of us."

"I haven't said it would."

"I can't assume I could work remotely."

"Have you asked?"

"I've only just taken responsibility for something. I can't go to Martin and ask how quickly I can leave."

"You could ask what would be possible."

He shook his head.

"That's already doing it. Already behaving as if we're going."

Mara looked out the window, then back at him.

"Everything that might tell us whether we could go counts as deciding to go. But doing nothing gets to be neutral."

"I didn't say neutral."

"Then what is it?"

"Keeping a life we both wanted."

She was quiet. He heard the certainty in what he had said and tried to recall when it had last been checked.

* * *

They had talked about moving before Oakland had a building or a job to offer.

There had been other cities, other possible lives. Most were late-night ideas they had enjoyed without expecting to act on them. They used to look at apartments in places they had visited, explaining away each impracticality in turn until they could almost imagine going. Then they would close the computer and go to sleep.

Ruth's first conversation with Mara had seemed to belong to that category. A center that might open, a job that might exist, work Mara would be good at if enough other things happened. Daniel had listened and asked questions. He remembered being encouraging. He had not thought encouragement committed him to any particular future.

"When we first talked about it," he said, "we didn't know whether it would happen."

"No."

"Then there was a lot going on."

"There was."

"I wasn't asking you to give anything up."

"You asked me to wait."

"Until we could think clearly."

"Until things were better."

He nodded. That had been the phrase, or close enough to it. He remembered the relief of being given time, the conviction that he could use it well enough to justify having asked.

"And then we waited through the assessment," she said. "Then surgery. Then programming."

"Those weren't arbitrary."

"I know. I was there."

Her voice rose on the last word. They both noticed. She took a breath before continuing.

"I'm not saying I should have gone off during your surgery. I'm saying I thought we were making it possible to have this conversation."

"We are having it."

"But you're treating it as something that threatens the result."

He could not deny that. He was thinking of Saturday, the quiet room, the unfamiliar ease of having hours ahead of him. He had only recently stopped feeling that his life belonged to other people's descriptions of what should be enough. Now that he could inhabit it, leaving seemed almost wasteful.

"I thought," he said, then stopped.

Mara waited.

"I thought if I got better, we might not need to."

She looked at him for a long time.

"I didn't want that job because you were ill."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"I thought some of wanting a different life might be wanting things to stop being so difficult here."

"Some of it was. I wanted that too."

She rubbed her forehead.

"I wanted you to get well. I wanted this place to stop feeling so frightening sometimes. And I wanted the job. Those were all things I wanted."

He watched her hand drop to her lap.

"I didn't know you thought one was going to take care of the others."

* * *

They stopped talking long enough to make food.

Daniel cut the vegetables. Mara put a pan on the stove. They moved around each other with the knowledge of two people who had occupied the same kitchen for years. Once she touched his back to let him know she was passing behind him. The touch was brief and familiar. He wanted to turn toward it, but she was carrying a hot pan.

They ate at the table. Neither was hungry enough for what they had made.

Mara asked whether he wanted the window open. He did. She opened it and returned to her chair.

"I'm allowed to like my life now," he said.

She set down her fork.

"Of course you are."

"It doesn't mean I've become complacent."

"I didn't say that."

"I know you didn't."

He heard himself supplying the accusation he had prepared to answer. He had read enough about the treatment, thought enough about what it might do to him, to have an explanation ready for a conflict Mara had not raised. It would be easier in some ways to argue about his brain than about whether he was willing to move.

"I'm afraid of losing this," he said.

She looked at him more softly. He was grateful and immediately worried that he had found the sentence that would make her stop asking.

"I believe you," she said.

"The people matter. The routines. It isn't just where the apartment is."

"I know."

"You can understand why I don't want to dismantle it."

"Yes."

He waited. She did not continue toward the agreement he wanted.

"I can understand it," she said again. "I can still want something that would change it."

He took a drink of water. The glass had become warm from the room.

"What if I can't?"

"Can't move?"

"Can't be well there."

Mara's face changed.

"You don't know that."

"Neither do you."

"No. I don't."

There was a silence. He could feel the question occupying all the space that had belonged to the things she wanted.

"I'm not threatening to relapse," he said.

"I didn't say you were."

"But that's what it sounds like."

She looked down at her plate.

"It makes it hard to answer."

He nodded. The fear was real. That did not keep it from doing something to her when he put it between them.

"I don't want it to be your responsibility," he said.

"Then we have to be able to ask what's possible. We can't just decide that any change is too dangerous."

He thought of writing to the clinic, asking about follow-up at a distance, finding out what could be transferred and what required him to return. He could do that without making the treatment less real. He did not want the answer if it removed one of the reasons to stay.

He put the glass down.

"I can ask about the appointments."

Mara nodded.

"Thank you."

The thanks hurt him more than he expected. It made the question look as small as it was.

* * *

Later, she began to cry while putting the food away.

It happened without a change in the conversation. They had been discussing containers. She was holding a lid against the wrong box, and when he took it from her to find the one that fit, he saw that her face was wet.

He put the lid down.

"Mara."

"I'm tired."

He reached toward her. She shook her head, not violently, just enough that he stopped.

"I'm tired of having to make this sound unselfish."

"I haven't called you selfish."

"I know. I'm doing it."

She wiped her face with the heel of her hand.

"I keep explaining who it would help. The students, the staff, the community. All of that matters. But I also want the room. I want to be the person who gets to decide what happens in it. I want to find out if I can do it."

He could picture the room. He had looked at the photographs, imagined waiting for her there. In the hospital, before signing, he had imagined a future version of himself who would hear her wanting something and respond generously. He had expected generosity to arrive with relief, as though the two were parts of the same treatment.

"I think you can," he said.

"Then what am I allowed to do with that?"

"Allowed isn't—"

"I know."

She turned away, opened the refrigerator, and stood in front of it without putting anything inside.

"I'm saying it badly."

"You don't have to say it perfectly."

"It feels like I do."

He closed his mouth. She put the container on the shelf and shut the door.

"You have what you want," she said. "You want me to want it too."

He flinched.

"That isn't everything I want."

"I know. That was unfair."

She stayed by the refrigerator. He stayed beside the sink.

"I want you to be happy," he said.

"I know you do."

"Here."

She nodded, and he heard the difference the last word made.

For a while neither spoke.

Then Mara asked, "Is there any version of me wanting to go that would be enough for you to consider going?"

He thought about the salary, the start date, whether his work could be done partly from elsewhere. Those were questions he could

investigate. She had asked about something that would remain after they were answered.

"I don't know," he said.

She closed her eyes briefly.

He wanted credit for not pretending. He could see that honesty had given her information she had hoped not to receive.

* * *

They went to bed at different times.

Daniel stayed in the living room after Mara said goodnight. He did not feel the old pressure to alter the evening into something else. He was unhappy in a specific way, about a conversation he could remember and choices he could name. The distinction did not comfort him much, but it was there.

He opened a message to Chen's office and asked how follow-up would work if he lived in the Bay Area. He specified that he was not planning an immediate move. Then he removed *immediate*, because it seemed designed to make the possibility smaller, and wrote that he and his wife were discussing it.

He sent the message.

There were other things he could ask about. He did not ask them that night.

He looked at apartments for ten minutes and noticed he was opening the ones that made moving look foolish: too expensive, too far from the center, smaller than where they lived. He closed the search before he could assemble the results into evidence.

In the bedroom, Mara was awake. She moved a little to make room when he got into bed, though there was already room.

"I asked the clinic," he said.

"Okay."

"They won't answer tonight."

"I know."

He lay on his back. The bedside light caught the edge of the wardrobe door and the sleeve of a shirt he had left hanging from its handle.

"I do think you'd be good at it."

She did not answer immediately.

"I heard you the first time."

There was no cruelty in it. She sounded exhausted.

He turned off the light he had left on beside the bed.

* * *

The next morning, Mara had an acknowledgment from the search committee.

It was automatic, she told him. It meant only that the application had arrived. She said this as she was packing her bag for work, without inviting reassurance about what would happen next.

"Did you send examples of the program?" he asked.

"They asked for a statement and the résumé. Examples come later, if they want them."

He nodded.

"Could I read the statement?"

She looked at him.

"It's already sent."

"I know."

She considered him for a moment, then forwarded it to his phone.

After she left, he sat at the table and opened the attachment.

The statement began with a girl who had spent several sessions making an object she would not identify. Mara described what the teachers had tried, what they had assumed, and the point at which the girl finally asked for a place to leave it where no one would move it before the following week. The object had not been the problem. The room was used by three other programs, and nothing could remain on a table overnight.

Daniel remembered being told part of this. He had suggested a better storage system. There was nothing wrong with storage systems. Mara had spent the rest of the statement describing what became possible when a program could promise a child that her work would still be where she had left it.

He read to the end.

Then he went back to the first paragraph, looking for the girl's name. Mara had not included it.

He began a message asking whether she had ever found a place for the object. He stopped before sending it. He wanted to hear the answer when she had time to tell him, and he knew how easily one attentive question could become his private proof that he had done enough.

He put the phone beside his work bag and finished getting ready.

The statement remained open when he picked it up again. He saved a copy with its original title, *Why I Want This Role*, and left for work.

12 - Within Tolerance

The complaint had been closed because the equipment worked.

Daniel read the response before listening to the attached message. A field check had found the pedestrian button registering requests. The signal sequence matched the approved plan. The measured wait fell within the expected range for that location and time of day.

The resident had called again.

"I didn't say it was broken every time," she said in the recording. "I said sometimes it doesn't take. And even when it does, I'm still waiting at the other two. Could someone call me instead of sending the same thing?"

She gave her name as Irene Valdez. The message ended with a telephone number, spoken once, then repeated more slowly.

Celia had put the case on his list because it had come back twice. She stood beside his desk while he listened.

"Three crossings," she said. "Only one in the original case."

He opened the map. There was a bus stop, a library, a broad road, a smaller road that joined it at an angle. The highlighted intersection sat between two others. He could see several ways to get from the stop to the library. The shortest on the map did not look like the simplest to walk.

"Have we got the other calls?"

"Different case numbers. I've linked them."

He thanked her and wrote down the number.

Irene answered while someone was speaking to her in the background. She asked Daniel to wait. He heard her say that the man from the city was calling and that she would come through when she was finished.

"Go ahead," she said.

He introduced himself again and explained why he was calling.

"Are you the person who checks the button?"

"I work with the people who do."

"Then please tell them to come when I'm there."

He began to explain how the inspection had been arranged, then stopped. She had not asked why the previous visit had happened without her. She was asking for a different next visit.

"What time are you usually there?"

She told him. Tuesdays and Thursdays, a little before three. She helped with an adult reading group at the library. The group began at three, but she came early because the room needed setting up. Since the stop had moved, she had been leaving home earlier too.

"How much earlier?"

"A bus earlier."

"Do you know roughly how many minutes?"

"It depends whether it comes."

He looked at the map again. He had been about to convert her answer into the kind of number he already knew how to use.

"Can I meet you there on Thursday?" he asked.

"At the stop?"

"Yes."

She agreed, then asked him to describe himself. He said he would have a blue folder.

"All right. I'll look for the folder."

* * *

The bus arrived with Irene standing near the front door, one hand on a rail and the other holding a canvas bag against her knee.

Daniel had reached the stop early. He watched her get down, pause to adjust the bag, and look along the pavement. He raised the folder. She came toward him.

"You're younger than I thought."

"I'm sorry."

She smiled briefly.

"No need."

The stop had been moved from the near side of an intersection to a position beyond it as part of a corridor change. There were good

reasons in the planning file. Buses cleared the junction more reliably. The stop no longer blocked a turn. Service was faster on average.

The library was now behind them, on the opposite side of the main road.

"Show me how you go," Daniel said.

She led him back toward the crossing. She walked steadily, without the pace he would have used alone. He had to keep noticing the difference so he did not drift ahead.

At the first button, she pressed and waited for the acknowledgment. It came. She looked at him with a small expression of annoyance, as if the equipment had chosen to behave for a guest.

"Sometimes it doesn't," she said.

"I believe you."

"They believed me last time too."

They waited. The bus they had arrived on passed through the next light and disappeared. Cars moved in groups, then stopped, then moved from another direction. A cyclist came up beside them, put a foot down, and looked at the signal.

When it changed, Irene began crossing. Daniel stayed beside her. At the far end, she stepped out of the path of the other pedestrians and let two people pass before continuing around the corner.

The second wait was shorter. At the third, they arrived just after the opportunity to cross had ended.

"This one," she said.

She shifted the bag to her other hand. He offered to carry it.

"I'm all right."

They stood in the sun beside a locked utility box. Across the street, the library's entrance was visible beyond a low wall. Daniel could see a person carrying a stack of chairs through the doorway.

"That's why I come early," Irene said. "He puts them in rows. We need to sit around the tables."

She made the complaint with affection, then returned her attention to the signal.

Daniel recorded the times without turning the walk into a demonstration of his watch. By the time they reached the library, they had

spent much more time waiting than walking. None of the individual waits was outside the range he had seen in the reports.

Inside, the man with the chairs greeted Irene and asked whether her visitor had come for the group.

"He's with the traffic," she said.

"Good luck to him."

Daniel helped move two chairs to a table. Irene began taking books from her bag. There were loose sheets tucked into several of them, with names and notes written in the margins.

"There's a crossing farther down," he said. "Have you tried that way?"

She looked at him.

"Yes."

"I'm not suggesting you should. I'm trying to understand the alternatives."

"It's farther. Then I have to come back uphill. This is the way I can do."

He wrote that down without asking her to make it more precise. At the door, she asked what would happen next.

"We'll look at the button again. I'll also review the timing across the route."

"When?"

He gave her a day on which he would call, rather than a day on which he would have an answer. She repeated it, then went back to the tables.

* * *

The button fault took two more visits to reproduce.

Rosa arranged for someone to meet Irene on a day she was making the trip. The request failed to register while both of them were there. Further checks found an intermittent connection that had passed the earlier inspection. The repair was straightforward once they had located it.

Daniel called Irene afterward. She had already spoken to the technician.

"He was very good," she said. "He stayed until we'd tried it again."

"I'm glad."

"The other part?"

"We're still looking."

He could hear papers moving at her end. She said she had to go and thanked him for calling when he said he would.

The thanks stayed with him. It had required so little beyond remembering the promise.

He and Celia went through the route data. They separated the time spent on the bus from the time required to reach the library after leaving it. The corridor summary reported the first well and the second poorly. The relocation had saved small amounts of time for many passengers. For some people going to the library and nearby services, it had added a sequence of waits the summary did not treat as a single experience.

"The crossing times are all within tolerance," Celia said.

"Individually."

"Yes."

She put her pen down and looked at the map.

"We've got the same problem from before."

He knew which one she meant: the crossing on the earlier corridor review, the two waits counted separately while one person stood through both. He had been able to make that cost visible in a chart. This case extended past a chart into the placement of a stop and the priorities of several teams.

They found a limited adjustment they could recommend without remaking the corridor. Under some conditions, it would improve the chance of progressing from the second crossing to the third without another full wait. It would not help someone who reached the second crossing at a different point in the sequence or needed more time between the two.

They tested the proposal, documented the limits, and took it for review. There were questions, a small revision, another check. The adjustment was approved.

On a Thursday after it went live, Daniel walked the route again with Irene.

The button registered. They got through the second crossing and reached the third while they could still begin crossing. At the library, she looked back down the street.

"That was better."

He felt a clean pleasure in hearing it.

"It won't work like that every time," he said.

"No. I understand."

She shifted the books against her side.

"Will it be like that if I'm slower?"

He explained the limitation. She listened, then said she would see how it went.

That evening he entered the result in the case notes. He used the word *improved*, then added the conditions under which the improvement had been observed.

* * *

The larger review was harder to describe without making it sound like several projects.

There was the stop location. There were opportunities to change how crossing requests were served. There was a stretch of pavement where people had nowhere to rest and little shade. There were routes people stopped attempting, which meant the counts gave no indication of their absence. Some of these questions belonged to Daniel's team, some to transit, some to people who worked on the street itself.

Nina looked at the map and asked him to open the pilot proposal.

"It's the same idea," she said.

"A particular instance of it."

"Which is useful."

He opened the file. Much of it remained current. The staffing assumptions did not. The people he had once imagined working on it were now assigned elsewhere, including him.

Nina read through the scope and suggested starting with this route and a few related trips rather than the original set.

"We already have a resident who's willing to show us what happens."

"We need more than one."

"Then we ask more than one."

He could hear how he sounded. He was turning the next step into a defect in the present evidence. Still, the evidence did have limits.

They made a list of what a trial would require. Staff time for observations, time from the field teams, participation from transit operations, a way of compensating residents for the work they were asking them to do. They would need permission to test changes that might make an existing performance measure worse. A cost could not be made to disappear merely by deciding to count it differently.

"Martin needs to see this," Nina said.

"He will."

Daniel had a reliability review with him the following week. He would raise it there, with the local result and the wider questions distinguished clearly.

Nina asked whether she should come.

"Let me see what room there is first."

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded.

* * *

At the review, Martin was pleased with the repeat-case work.

There were fewer reopened cases in the small set they had examined, and the new verification notes made it easier to see whether a correction had held. Celia had found a way to link field photographs without duplicating them across several records. Rosa had sent comments, some appreciative and some not. Daniel went through all of them.

Then he brought out the library route.

Martin listened. He asked whether the equipment fault had been fixed. Daniel said yes. He asked whether the timing adjustment had been checked. Yes, with limitations. Daniel described those and moved to the proposal for a broader trial.

"How much of this can we do inside your current work?" Martin asked.

"The records, some observation. Not the full trial."

"And if we move you onto it?"

Daniel looked at the schedule. Someone else would have to take responsibility for the cases he had just described. Celia could continue parts of the work, but she needed support for decisions she was not authorized to make. The field teams had made room for them. Those commitments were real.

Martin asked whether Daniel wanted to recommend changing the allocation.

He could have said yes. That would have begun an argument about priorities, first in this room, then in other rooms with people whose improvements he would be asking to complicate. It would have required work he knew how to do and disliked doing: shortening a careful account until it could fit a meeting, hearing the shortened version misunderstood, repeating himself without becoming contemptuous.

He thought of the quiet concentration of the previous afternoon, sitting with Celia over records until a pattern began to emerge. He wanted to return to that work.

"I'd like a firmer estimate first," he said.

"All right. Bring that. I can ask about a joint review slot, but I need to know what we're offering."

They discussed what the estimate would include. The conversation was constructive. Daniel left with tasks, no refusal, and no date by which anyone had to decide.

When Nina asked how it had gone, he said Martin was open to it.

"What happens next?"

"I need to tighten the resource estimate."

"When?"

He looked at his calendar.

"I'll make time next week."

* * *

That week, the clinic answered his question about Oakland.

Some appointments might be handled remotely. Others would require him to return or establish care with a team able to support the particular system. A transition would need planning. They offered to discuss it at his next visit and asked what timeframe he and Mara were considering.

He forwarded the answer to her without summarizing it. She read it and said they should find out more if she was invited to interview.

"Yes," he said.

They were being careful with each other. There were good meals and quiet conversations. He had read her application statement and asked about the girl's unfinished work. Mara had told him that they found a place for it in a locked cupboard, but the girl had wanted to come early to check it before the class began. He listened without proposing another cupboard.

On Friday, Mara asked about the library case while they walked home from getting food.

"You helped her?"

"A little. The button's fixed. Sometimes she gets through the crossings faster."

"That sounds useful."

"It is."

He described the larger problem, then the estimate he needed to prepare. She asked him something about the bus stop. He explained the reasons for moving it. She understood them more quickly than he had expected.

"So there are people it's better for," she said.

"A lot of people."

"And some it's worse for."

"Yes."

She nodded. There was no simple objection he could answer on behalf of his work.

At home he intended to spend half an hour on the estimate. He opened the file, added two notes, and received a question from Celia about a case they were presenting on Monday. He answered

it. Then they exchanged several messages about an attachment that changed their interpretation.

By the time they finished, Mara was ready to eat. Daniel closed the computer.

The estimate remained open beneath the other window.

* * *

Irene called the following Tuesday.

She had made the journey on the later bus for the first time since the adjustment. The bus had been delayed. She had reached the first crossing just as the sequence changed and then waited at all three.

"I was late," she said. "Not much. But somebody else had to start."

Daniel looked at the notes from their successful walk.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not asking you to apologize. Should I go back to the earlier bus?"

He could not guarantee the trip on the later one. He told her that. She said she had thought as much.

"The button is still working," she added. "That part's good."

"Thank you for telling me."

"And the rest?"

He described the review he was preparing. He was careful not to give the impression that a decision had been made. While he spoke, he heard how little his answer differed from the one he had given before.

"All right," she said. "You have my number."

Afterward he listened to the first recorded complaint again. There was nothing in it he had failed to understand. He had met her, walked the route, fixed a fault, obtained an adjustment, and kept notes precise enough that no one could reasonably accuse him of promising more than he had done.

He could also continue in exactly this fashion for months.

He opened the estimate. There were still two staff commitments he had not asked anyone to make. He drafted an email about

one, reread it, and decided the request should contain a clearer description of the trial.

He went back to the description.

* * *

Nina sent her request for a joint review on Thursday morning.

Daniel was copied on it. So were Martin, the corridor planning lead, and the transit contact who had worked on the stop relocation. Nina summarized the observed route, the limits of the local adjustment, and the information they did not yet have. She asked for a meeting to define a small trial and identify who could contribute staff time.

The estimate was explicitly provisional. Daniel's work was credited. No one had been told he had agreed to lead anything.

He read it twice, then went to her desk.

"I was putting this together."

"I know."

"We haven't resolved the staffing."

"That's one of the things I'm asking them to discuss."

She moved a document away from the edge of her keyboard so he could put down the copy he had printed.

"You could have told me."

"I told you yesterday I was going to ask for the meeting."

He remembered. She had stopped beside his desk while he was talking to Celia. He had said that sounded good and returned to the record on his screen. He had understood the intention without registering that it would become an action before he finished his own preparation.

"You did," he said.

Nina waited.

He looked at the email again. There were phrases he would have changed. One claim needed a qualification she had placed in the following paragraph rather than beside it. None of that made the request misleading.

"I don't want this to undermine the work we've done," he said.

"Then bring the work. Explain what it fixed."

"And what it didn't."

"Yes."

She was not trying to make the case larger by making his contribution smaller. He knew that and continued to feel displaced.

"I said I would do it."

Nina leaned back.

"You've got things you're doing. So have I. I could make this request, and I made it."

He looked toward his own desk. Celia was waiting with a file. There was work there he could do well, in the company of someone who wanted him to help her do it.

"I'll send you the latest notes," he said.

"Thank you."

He returned to his desk and sent them before opening Celia's file.

* * *

The meeting was not a victory.

One person could attend only the first twenty minutes. Another wanted to know why this route had been selected ahead of others. Transit had concerns about losing the gains from the stop relocation, and the street-design representative had no unassigned budget for physical changes. Nina asked what could be tested without assuming the stop had to move back. Daniel described the timing adjustment and where it ceased to help.

His patience was useful. He explained the distinction between a registered request and the wait after it had registered, then explained it again when someone joined late. He did not resent the second explanation. A misunderstanding was corrected before it became part of the minutes.

They agreed to a scoping session and a short period of additional observation if staff could be released. Nobody authorized a trial that day. Nina offered to coordinate the next conversation. Martin asked Daniel to supply the existing records and return with a recommendation about the time the team could contribute.

Daniel said he would.

Back at his desk, he found a message from Rosa about a different repair. It had held through the condition that used to make it fail. He read the confirmation and felt pleased.

The pleasure disturbed him only because it arrived so easily beside the unfinished work. He did not have to refuse one feeling to know what the other case required. Yet knowing had not made him act.

He thought of asking Chen whether the treatment could account for that. Then he remembered versions of himself, years before surgery, making careful preparations for difficult conversations he never had. He also remembered anger that had carried him through meetings he would otherwise have avoided. Both histories were his. Neither gave him a clean answer.

He opened Irene's case.

The equipment fault was closed, appropriately. The timing adjustment was documented. The broader access issue had been linked to the new review. He read the sequence and found it accurate.

Then he called her.

She listened while he explained the meeting. She asked whether she should keep taking the earlier bus. For now, if she needed to be certain of arriving in time, he could not recommend relying on the later one.

"All right," she said.

He asked whether she would be willing to speak to the people doing the observations. She said yes, provided they came on a Tuesday or Thursday and did not make her late for the group.

He wrote that down.

After the call, he added the condition to the handoff for Nina. Then he looked once more at the phrase in the old response: *within tolerance*.

He could explain exactly what it meant. He opened his calendar to find time for the recommendation he had promised, and began moving the easier work aside.

13 - The Person They Prefer

Jo had made too much food and wanted everyone to understand that this was Alex's fault.

"He said they might be hungry."

"They might," Alex said.

"There are four of us."

"I've counted."

Daniel put the bag of pastries on the counter. Jo looked inside, then at Mara.

"Thank you for bringing food. We were nearly out."

They had known Jo and Alex for most of their marriage. Jo had worked with Mara years earlier, before the organization moved into its present rooms. Alex taught high school science and had the habit of waiting through an answer as though he suspected there might be a better one behind it. They lived in a small house with a paved yard they called the garden, although almost everything growing there was in a pot.

Daniel liked the house. He knew where the glasses were. The bathroom door needed to be pulled toward you before the lock would turn. There was a chair nobody chose until all the other chairs were occupied, though Alex insisted it was his favorite.

They had not eaten there since before the operation. Jo had suggested dates twice during Daniel's recovery, then told Mara to call when an evening would be welcome. Now they were here, and the delay had not become something they needed to apologize for.

Alex offered drinks. Daniel asked for sparkling water. Alex opened it, handed it over, and went on explaining why the bread in the oven was not ready.

"I thought dinner was ready," Jo said.

"Dinner is ready. The bread has a different schedule."

Mara leaned against the counter and began telling Jo about the play she had seen with her sister. Daniel had heard the account twice. He enjoyed the additions she made for Jo: a description of the person in front of them who had kept nodding at the least convincing speeches, the precise way her sister had folded the program when she decided Mara was wrong.

Alex took him outside to show him a plant.

"Is it meant to look like that?" Daniel asked.

"Nobody will tell me."

It was tall, with several leaves turned brown along one edge. Alex had received conflicting advice about water, light, and whether moving a plant offended it.

"Jo says put it in the ground."

"There isn't any ground."

"That's what I said."

They stood considering the paving. From inside came the sound of Mara laughing. Daniel looked toward the open door, then back at the plant when Alex began to explain how he had acquired it.

* * *

Dinner began late enough that nobody was inclined to examine whether the bread justified the wait.

They sat outside beneath a light Alex had attached to the wall. It was too bright until Jo put something over part of it. Then she could not see her plate properly and took the covering away. They moved the table a little instead.

The food was good. Daniel took another serving when Jo offered it. He was not keeping a portion of his attention on when the meal might end. He could feel this if he looked for it, but he did not keep looking.

Jo had joined a choir. She had meant to join a less serious choir, she said, but a friend had brought her to the wrong rehearsal, and she had found it difficult to leave once someone gave her a folder.

"You could have said you were in the wrong place," Mara said.

"They were so pleased I'd come."

"You've been going for two months," Alex said.

"Now it would be much worse."

The choir director had asked everyone to record a passage at home. Jo had made several attempts and then sent a recording in which most of what could be heard was Alex, from the next room, asking whether she was recording.

"Did you listen before you sent it?" Daniel asked.

"To the beginning."

"That's where I asked," Alex said.

She made a face at him. He made it back, more extravagantly, and Mara began laughing in the nearly silent way Daniel knew.

He laughed too. Jo went to get her phone because the director's reply was better than she could describe. The reply was perfectly polite. Its politeness made the recording, which she also played, worse.

They listened twice.

Later Alex told a story about a student who had disputed the wording of an assignment and then completed a much harder assignment to prove the objection was valid. Daniel recognized the kind of student before Alex finished. He might once have turned the story toward the problem with assessments. Tonight he wanted to know whether the student had got the grade.

"Yes," Alex said. "And then I had to spend the next lesson explaining why everyone else couldn't do the same thing."

"Could they?"

"Probably. Don't tell them."

An aircraft passed low enough that they stopped speaking. Daniel watched it move beyond the edge of the roof. When the sound had diminished, Jo resumed a sentence she had begun before it came.

He remembered what she had been saying. He did not need the interruption to release him from it.

* * *

After dinner, they stayed at the table.

There were things to clear, but Jo had put a hand on Alex's arm when he began collecting plates. They could do it later. Someone

would want more bread. Someone would discover they had room for another mouthful of something.

Daniel had room. He ate the last piece of bread with a little sauce from his plate and asked Jo about the choir's first performance. She described it with enough apprehension that he offered to attend.

"Don't say that casually," she said. "I'll send you the date."

"Send it."

Mara looked at him. He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

For much of the evening, Oakland had not been in the space between them. Jo knew about the application; Mara had told her before they arrived. She had asked one question about the timing and accepted the answer. Daniel had been grateful without knowing whether Jo was being discreet or simply had other things she wanted to discuss.

Alex stretched his legs beneath the table and looked across at him.

"It's really good to have you here like this," he said.

"Full of bread?"

Alex smiled.

"You know what I mean. You're so much easier to be around these days."

He said it warmly, with the confidence of someone identifying a piece of good news everyone could share.

Daniel held the smile a moment longer than it belonged on his face.

Jo looked at Alex.

"I mean you seem comfortable," Alex said. "You used to seem as if you were waiting for us to finish."

"I probably was."

Daniel heard the words come out lightly. He had made them sound like a joke, and Alex accepted the opportunity to smile again.

"I'm glad you're doing well. That's what I meant."

"I know."

Mara's hand found his knee beneath the table. He did not move toward or away from it.

Jo asked whether anyone wanted coffee. Alex went inside to make it. The interruption was ordinary enough that it would not need to be remembered as one.

Daniel helped carry the plates. At the sink, Alex said, "That came out badly."

"It's all right."

"I wasn't trying to—"

"I know."

He did know. Alex had meant to tell him that his improvement was visible, that the evening was good, that they were glad to be sharing it. Daniel had been happy to receive versions of the same news from clinicians and colleagues. He had brought some of it home to Mara as evidence.

He rinsed a plate and passed it over.

When they went back outside, Mara was telling Jo about the ceramic piece. Daniel joined the account, describing how they had tried it in several places before putting it on the low table. He wanted the rest of the evening to be real. It was. He enjoyed the coffee, the conversation, the pastry he shared with Mara because neither of them wanted a whole one.

At the door, Jo hugged him and reminded him about the concert. He told her he would come.

* * *

Mara drove home.

For the first few minutes, they talked about the food. Daniel thought Alex had been wrong about the bread. It had been worth waiting for. Mara said Jo would never permit that judgment to become official.

Then there was a quiet stretch of road, and he said, "Do you prefer me this way?"

Mara kept her eyes on the street.

"I wondered when you were going to ask."

"That sounds like you have an answer."

"It sounds like I know you."

He looked out the side window. Closed shops passed in short runs of light and darkness. He had asked a question large enough that almost any answer would leave part of it untouched.

"Do you?"

"Can we talk when we're home?"

"You can say yes."

"I'd like to be able to look at you when I say whatever I say."

He nodded. She could not see the nod clearly, so he said okay.

At the next light, he remembered how he used to experience waiting in a car after a dinner. The evening would seem both unfinished and exhausted. He would want another place, another sound, something to distinguish the remaining hours from the ones already spent. Now the car was quiet and the quiet was bearable, even with the question inside it.

He could not decide whether that made him feel better or worse.

* * *

At home, Mara took off her shoes and sat at the end of the couch.

Daniel put the pastries Jo had insisted they take in the kitchen. He came back and sat in the chair. He did not want the conversation to begin with him pressed against her, making it harder for her to move if she wanted to.

"I had a good time," he said.

"So did I."

"Before he said it."

"And afterward?"

He thought about the coffee. Jo's account of trying to sing while someone beside her sang a different note with absolute confidence. Mara wiping a small piece of pastry from his sleeve.

"Yes."

She nodded.

"I don't want it to turn into an evening when everyone was secretly relieved I'd been repaired."

"That isn't what it was."

"How do you know?"

"Because I was there."

He looked at her.

"You know what I mean."

"I know what you're afraid it means. I don't think you get to replace the whole evening with that."

He leaned back. The chair gave a small creak beneath him.

"But you are relieved."

"Yes."

The answer hurt even though he had required her to give it.

Mara watched his face and did not take it back.

"I'm relieved you aren't suffering in the same way. I'm relieved when we can go somewhere and I don't have to wonder how long you can stand being there. I like talking to you and feeling that you want to hear the end."

"So yes."

"Yes to those things."

"You prefer the person I am with it on."

"Daniel."

"That's what we're saying."

She put both feet on the floor.

"We're saying I like some things that have changed. You're asking me to choose between two complete people, and I've only been married to one."

He had an answer about preferences and personality. He could describe why changes in what mattered to someone were not incidental changes. The explanation was correct enough to occupy them for an hour. He could see how it would protect him from asking the smaller question beneath it.

"Was it that hard?" he said.

Mara looked down at her hands.

"Sometimes."

He waited.

"There were nights I wanted to stay at a dinner and knew you wanted to go. I'd start helping with the plates early so leaving would look natural. Then in the car you'd ask why I was quiet."

He remembered asking. He had thought she was tired, or angry about something he could put right if she would name it.

"You didn't say."

"Sometimes I did."

"I don't remember."

"I do."

He looked toward the kitchen. The pastries were still in their paper bag, grease beginning to darken one corner.

"I wasn't trying to make it difficult for you."

"I know."

She sounded sad, not exasperated. He found the sadness harder to answer.

"I was having a difficult time too," she said. "I don't want to have to make that disappear so you can be sure I loved you."

He pressed his palms against his knees.

"I'm not asking you to do that."

She waited, and he heard how close he had come.

* * *

They were quiet for a while.

Mara got up to put the pastries in a container. He watched her fold the bag, then unfold it because something remained inside. There were two pieces of bread Alex had added without telling them.

She held them up.

"Evidence," she said.

He smiled despite himself.

When she returned, she sat in the same place.

"I miss things too," she said.

His attention sharpened. He tried not to make the interest look like relief.

"What things?"

"Going out for no reason. When it got late and we'd decide we needed pie from somewhere that took forty minutes to reach."

He remembered. There had been a diner they liked mostly because it was open when other places were closed. The pie was inconsistent. They had learned which booth was directly beneath

the cold vent and chosen it several times anyway because they forgot until they sat down.

"We can still do that."

"I know."

"We could go now."

She looked at him, almost smiling.

"We've just come home with a bag of pastry."

"That didn't used to stop us."

"No."

He could picture them driving with the windows partly open, arguing about where to go after they were already on the road. Some of those nights belonged to periods when he was sober. Some did not. He began trying to sort them, to establish which memories he could present without qualification.

"There was the time we ended up at the beach," he said.

"Which time?"

"You had those shoes you couldn't get the sand out of."

"I have never owned shoes I could get all the sand out of."

"The blue ones."

She remembered. They had taken their pie in a box and eaten it badly, without enough forks, sitting on a low wall because the sand was colder than they expected. Mara had put both feet against his leg to warm them. He remembered being annoyed by how cold they were and delighted that she assumed he would make room.

"That was good," she said.

He nodded.

"I liked that you'd get an idea," she continued. "That we didn't always have to decide whether it made sense before we left."

"And now I don't."

"Now you're happy at home. Which is good. But sometimes I come home restless, and you suggest we make something nice and sit down."

He recognized the suggestion. He had been making it with affection, offering her the kind of evening he had learned to enjoy.

"Do you tell me you want to go out?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I don't know what I want until we're doing it."

She was speaking about something small, without trying to turn it into Oakland. That made it possible for him to hear her, and made it harder to decide where hearing should end.

"Maybe I needed to get away from things more then," he said.

"Maybe."

"That was part of what was wrong."

"It could also be fun."

He looked at her. She was allowing both statements to remain, and he could feel his wish to make one disprove the other.

"You miss me needing to leave."

"I miss us going somewhere. That isn't exactly the same thing."

"But if that was where it came from—"

"I don't know where every good night came from."

She sounded tired now.

"I remember the beach. I also remember sitting in a parking lot while you wouldn't tell me where you wanted to go, and every suggestion I made was wrong. I don't want that back."

He remembered a parking lot, then another. He was not sure which one she meant. He did not ask her to locate it more precisely.

* * *

He got up and went to the window.

The courtyard light was on. A bicycle leaned against the lower railing, its front wheel turned toward the gate. He could not see whether it was the same bicycle he remembered from the night of the relapse. The resemblance was enough to make him distrust the tidy sequence his memory offered: before, after, better, worse.

Behind him, Mara moved on the couch.

"I don't know what you want me to say," she said.

He kept looking outside for a moment, then turned.

"That you don't love me because I'm easier."

Her face changed.

"I don't."

He waited for the rest, and she saw that he needed it.

"But being easier to be with gives us more chances to do things I love. Like tonight. Like you listening to Jo and deciding you wanted to hear her sing. I don't want to pretend that doesn't matter."

"The implant made that possible."

"It helped. Jo still had to join the choir."

He almost laughed. She had not meant it as a joke.

"You still had to ask her about it," she said. "I don't know how to divide up the credit. I don't spend dinner trying."

He sat down again, this time on the couch, leaving space between them.

He could defend the treatment against objections nobody in the room had made. He could point out that sobriety changed him, that years of use had changed him, that the person he imagined as original had already been revised by everything he had lived through. He believed all of it. The belief did little for the fear that the people closest to him had been waiting for an alteration they could not politely request.

"Did you want me different all that time?"

Mara looked at him carefully.

"I wanted things to be different."

"That sounds careful."

"I'm trying to be careful. It's you."

He lowered his eyes.

"I wanted you to tell me the truth. I wanted you to want to be alive in the life we had. I wanted evenings when I could be tired without worrying about what you'd do with the hours after I went to bed. Sometimes I wanted you to stop explaining yourself and hear me."

She paused.

"I still want that last one."

He nodded, then realized she had said something she meant now, not something he could acknowledge as history.

"What haven't I heard?"

"That I had a good time tonight. That I love you. That some things are better and some things still need talking about. I can't

turn all of that into a verdict on whether they should have put the device in."

"I'm not asking for a verdict."

She looked at him.

He rubbed his forehead, keeping his hand clear of the place that remained sensitive near the scar.

"I might be."

* * *

They did not go out for pie.

Mara was tired, and Daniel did not want to make a demonstration of being capable of something she missed. He brought the bread from the kitchen and put it in the freezer. She brushed her teeth. When he came into the bedroom, she was looking for the charger that had slipped behind the bedside table.

He found it for her. She thanked him.

For a while they lay awake without speaking. He could hear a car returning to the building, then the gate. Mara turned onto her side facing him.

"I'm glad you're better," she said.

"I am too."

He wanted to qualify it. He did not, because the qualification would have concealed how much he meant it.

She touched his arm. He put his hand over hers.

There was no person he could go back to who had not caused difficulty, no earlier life in which every appetite had deserved to be followed. There were also things he had loved in that life which did not become worthless because he had suffered in it. He could remember the cold pie and the parking lots. He did not know how to keep the first without returning to the second, or whether the choice even worked that way.

Mara's breathing slowed. He remained awake for a while longer, feeling the warmth of her hand where he had left it.

* * *

Alex sent a message the next morning.

I said that badly last night. I'm sorry. I was trying to say it was good to see you enjoying yourself. We loved having you both.

Daniel read it while the kettle heated. He considered a reassuring answer large enough to absolve Alex of having noticed anything. Then he wrote that he understood and had had a good time.

Both statements were true. He sent them.

Mara came into the kitchen and asked whether there was coffee. He told her Alex had written. She asked what he had said, and Daniel showed her the message. She read it and handed the phone back without telling him what it ought to settle.

After breakfast, he opened the clinic portal.

He began with the question he had almost asked after the meeting at work: whether the treatment could make it easier to remain in circumstances he would previously have wanted to change. He described the work he was enjoying, the proposal he had delayed, the conflict about moving. Then he added that his mood and day-to-day life were still much better. He did not want concern to erase improvement any more than improvement had erased concern.

He reread the message. There was nothing about Alex in it.

He added a sentence about the dinner, deleted it, and tried again.

Other people are noticing changes they like. I like them too. I'm having trouble knowing what to make of the things I no longer want.

He requested an appointment and sent the message.

Then Jo's concert date arrived in a separate conversation. It was on a Thursday. He checked his calendar before replying that he and Mara would talk about it. He wanted to go. Even now, he wanted to hear what the choir sounded like.

14 - A Successful Patient

The questions before the appointment produced much the same answers as the questions before the last one.

Daniel could enjoy things. He could begin activities without a prolonged negotiation with himself. He could remain interested in a conversation, anticipate seeing people, spend time alone. His sleep varied, but there was no particular change. He had not used.

He answered carefully, resisting the temptation to make one response worse so the form would register the reason he was coming back.

At the end, there was a space for anything else the team should know. He wrote that the message he had sent still described his concern. Then he reread the message and wondered whether it did.

It was easier to identify what he did not want from the appointment. He did not want to be told that he had mistaken relief for a problem. He did not want to lose the relief. He did not want a physician to take one side in a disagreement with his wife.

He had nevertheless included Oakland in the first paragraph.

Mara came into the bedroom while he was putting on his shoes.

"Do you want me there?"

"I don't think so. Not for this one."

She nodded. They had discussed it the night before, but he understood why she had asked again.

"I'll tell you what she says."

"Okay."

"I'm not going to ask her whether we should move."

Mara looked at him for a moment.

"I wouldn't expect her to know."

He smiled a little. She touched his shoulder as she passed him and went to get ready for work.

* * *

Leah checked the system first.

There had been no recorded fault, no unexpected change to the program, nothing to suggest the settings differed from those they had agreed on. Daniel had not expected a fault. Still, he found himself disappointed by the lack of an object they could all look at together.

She asked whether the difficulty with incidental sounds had returned. It had not. He described the evenings, the work, the changes other people noticed.

"More comfortable," she said, checking what he meant. "But concerned about what you're comfortable with."

"Yes."

She wrote that down without turning it into a symptom he recognized.

"Can you see whether it's responding more often than it used to?" he asked.

She showed him the summary. There were variations. None provided a simple explanation of the weeks he was describing.

"The amount of stimulation isn't a measure of how content you are," she said. "These records help us check what the system did. We still need to understand what happened around it."

He knew that. He had known it before implantation, before the first programming visit, before every request to see a display that might contain an answer he could not supply.

Leah turned the screen back toward herself.

"Chen's read your message. We'll go through the options with her."

While they waited, he asked how the device's record distinguished an ordinary pause from the state they were trying to treat. Leah explained the limits of the estimate again, with more detail than before. He could follow it now. The familiarity was satisfying.

He was enjoying the conversation about whether the treatment made it too easy to remain in conversations.

When Chen came in, he told her this. She smiled, then asked whether the enjoyment bothered him.

"No. That's part of what makes this difficult."

They began with the things that had improved.

Daniel felt, briefly, as if he were being invited to withdraw the complaint. Chen asked for specific examples, and he gave them. The evening alone. Meals. Sam's calls. Work he could finish without needing to recover from having done it. He described the dinner at Jo and Alex's, including the fact that he had continued enjoying himself after the remark.

"I don't want to pretend that wasn't good," he said.

"Neither do I."

She read something on the screen, then asked about the less welcome changes. He told her about the pilot, the way he had kept preparing to ask for a review until Nina asked without him. He was now contributing to the work. He had sent Martin a recommendation for staff time. But taking that next step had seemed harder to justify than continuing with the cases already in front of him.

"Harder to justify to whom?"

"Myself, mostly."

"Did you think the review mattered less?"

"No."

"Did you feel less able to do it?"

"Not able. Willing."

He paused.

"That isn't quite right either. I said I was willing. I kept saying it."

Chen waited while he tried again.

"I could see reasons to wait that I would have found infuriating before."

"Were the reasons wrong?"

"Some were good. We didn't have the people. We didn't have all the information. There was other work that needed doing."

"And some?"

"I could have got the information by asking. I kept preparing to ask."

He described the resident and the library route. Chen listened without trying to map every part of the account onto the treatment.

He was grateful for that until he finished and she still had not offered a map.

"Could this be a side effect?" he asked.

"It could be related to treatment. We should take that possibility seriously. We also need to be precise about what has changed."

"I used to get fed up."

"And now?"

"Now there's enough to like about what I'm doing that I can go on doing it."

She nodded.

"That overlaps with what we were trying to achieve."

"I know."

He said it too quickly. She gave him a moment before continuing.

"It can be beneficial and still have costs. I'm not going to dismiss a cost because it arrived alongside an improvement."

He looked down at his hands. He had come prepared for a defense of the treatment. Her refusal to make one left him less certain of his own position.

* * *

Chen asked whether he felt less motivated across his life.

He did not. He was doing more things he had chosen, not only more things people expected. He had invited Sam to lunch. He had begun reading again. He had gone to see a film with Mara and not regarded the whole evening as a reward he needed to extract from the price of the tickets.

Had he become indifferent to consequences? No. Had Mara or anyone else noticed that he seemed emotionally absent? In some ways, they reported the opposite. Were there periods of unusual energy, confidence, urgency? He did not think so. They went through examples rather than letting his answer stand as a general impression.

By the time they finished, he felt he had provided a thorough account of why there was nothing to complain about.

"So I'm doing well."

"On several dimensions, yes."

"A successful patient."

Chen looked at him.

"You sound unhappy with that description."

"I don't know what it leaves out."

She turned the screen so he could see the summary she was working from. There were his scores, a brief account of his course, the current settings, notes about work and relationships. The improvement was real. He could recognize his life in it. He could also see how easily someone reading it would expect the appointment to be routine.

"It leaves out some of what you've come to discuss," she said. "That's why we're discussing it."

"Would you change the treatment because I've stopped being angry about things I still think are wrong?"

"I'd first want to understand whether you've lost a capacity you value, or whether you're having to find another way to act on what you value. Those may not be cleanly separable. We can still investigate."

"That sounds like a lot of room for interpretation."

"It is."

She said it without embarrassment. He wanted the uncertainty to be a temporary shortage of data. She seemed to be telling him that some of it would remain after they had better data.

He shifted in the chair.

"How dissatisfied am I supposed to be?"

Chen put down her pen.

"I can help you look at what a treatment is doing, including whether it's making it harder to pursue things you care about. I can't give you a target amount of dissatisfaction that would make your life right."

"But you have a target for engagement."

"We have treatment goals and imperfect measures of progress toward them. We chose those goals with you. We can revise them."

He looked at the screen again. He had wanted to sit through an evening. He could do that now. It would be unfair to pretend the

team had substituted that goal for some more important one he had clearly stated.

"I meant it," he said.

"I know."

"I still mean it."

She nodded and waited for him to go on.

* * *

He told her about Oakland.

He tried to describe the disagreement without making Mara sound ungrateful or himself sound unwilling to consider her life. The effort took so many qualifications that he stopped halfway through a sentence.

"I don't want to move," he said.

"And you're wondering whether treatment is part of that."

"Yes."

"Did you want to move before?"

He remembered looking at apartments in cities they had visited. He remembered being encouraging about Ruth's project when the project had been uncertain enough to demand nothing from him. He remembered asking Mara to wait.

"I thought I might. When things got better."

"Did she understand that in the same way?"

"Apparently not."

Chen did not respond to the edge in his voice.

"She thought getting better would make it possible," he added.

"I think I hoped it would make moving unnecessary."

Saying it here felt more culpable than saying it at home. Here he could hear that the disagreement had begun before there were leads in his brain.

"That doesn't mean the treatment has no bearing on it," Chen said. "But the timeline matters."

He looked at her sharply. She had anticipated the conclusion he was already preparing to resist.

"If I liked the idea of moving with less stimulation," he said, "would that tell us something?"

"It might tell us your feelings about it changed under those conditions. We'd want to look at what else changed, and over what period. It wouldn't tell us which decision you should make."

"Or which preference is mine."

"You'd be reporting both."

He looked away. That was true in a way that did not help.

"What if I'm only happy in my marriage because the device makes it easier to stay interested?"

Chen was quiet long enough that he could hear the words he had chosen. *Only. Makes.* He had not described Mara or a single thing they did together.

"Are you asking whether the treatment contributes to your experience of the marriage," she said, "or whether that contribution makes the marriage less meaningful?"

"Both."

"We can investigate changes in your experience. I don't have a clinical measurement that will certify the meaning of your marriage."

He felt a flare of irritation.

"I'm not asking you to certify it."

She did not argue. The silence gave him time to hear that he had come close to saying the same thing to Mara.

He looked back at the display. A collection of favorable measures. He had wanted them to support more than a statement about suffering and function. He had wanted evidence that he was recovering properly, that contentment with his work was wisdom rather than retreat, that being happy at home was a reason Mara ought to accept for remaining there. Then he had become frightened and wanted the same clinic to tell him which parts of that happiness he could distrust.

"I want to know what I'm allowed to rely on," he said.

Chen picked up her pen, then put it down again.

"I think we can help you get clearer about what changes with treatment. I don't think we can remove the need to decide what to do with what you feel."

* * *

They took a break.

Daniel went to the waiting area and got water. A woman was helping a man find a message on his phone. Each time she reached to show him, he tilted the screen away because he was trying to read it. They were both becoming impatient. Eventually she stopped reaching and asked him to read the first line aloud.

He did. They found the message.

Daniel drank the water and went back in.

Leah had returned. They discussed what a change to the program could and could not show. There were different ways of adjusting its response, and reducing treatment did not mean subtracting a fixed quantity of contentment. Effects might be delayed, mixed with expectation, or difficult to separate from sleep, work, and the knowledge that he was being observed.

"So it wouldn't be a clean experiment," he said.

"No," Leah said. "We can make it more informative. We can't make the rest of your life hold still."

He asked whether they could turn it off without telling him when. They discussed why a blinded comparison might answer some questions and complicate others, especially now that he was looking closely for a return of particular feelings. This appointment was not a plan for an unannounced withdrawal of treatment. Any comparison they undertook would need a clinical purpose they could state, a period of observation, and a way to respond if his difficulties returned.

"I want to know if I can still get fed up enough to do something," he said.

Chen asked for an example of doing something. They returned to the route review. It was easier than Oakland to describe in observable terms. He could request staff time, arrange an observation, bring a recommendation to Martin. He could also do those things under his current settings.

"That's the part I don't want to lose," he said. "The wanting to."

"Then we record that too. The effort, the interest, the urge to stop or change direction. We don't just count whether you completed a task."

He asked about the possibility of becoming restless again. They talked about the way restlessness had developed before the relapse, the people he could contact, the support he was already using. Shah would be involved. The team would arrange check-ins. They would not need to wait for a crisis to reconsider the comparison.

Daniel listened without bargaining away those parts of the plan. He did not want to turn suffering into a proof of authenticity. He could see, nevertheless, how easily he might begin treating the first difficult evening as important evidence he ought to endure.

"If I hate it," he asked, "does that mean I've learned anything?"

"Possibly," Chen said. "You don't have to continue hating it to make the information count."

They agreed to prepare a supervised period with reduced stimulation, after reviewing the plan with Shah and collecting a few more observations at the current setting. Nothing changed that day. Leah recorded the existing program so they would know precisely what they were comparing against.

Daniel looked at the version label on her screen. It was a set of characters with no opinion about the person it supported.

* * *

Before he left, Chen returned to the question of moving.

She was not giving him an answer about whether to go. She was clarifying what the clinic could say about care. There were practical ways to investigate a transition, though availability elsewhere would have to be confirmed. Some visits might still require returning to Los Angeles. He and Mara could discuss the possibilities with the coordinator once they had a more definite timeframe.

"You don't have to make that decision in order to ask what would be required," she said.

He nodded. Mara had said something close to that about his work.

He asked Chen whether she thought the comparison was reasonable.

"Yes, with the plan we've discussed. You're describing a possible cost you care about. We should examine it."

"You don't think I'm trying to find something wrong."

"I think you're trying to understand a change that has helped you. That can include finding problems. It can also include discovering that some problems aren't solved by changing the program."

He picked up the list he had brought. Several questions were still unanswered, though they had spent much of the appointment on them.

At the door he said, "I don't want to stop being a successful patient."

Chen looked at him for a moment.

"You don't have to protect that description from us."

He folded the list and put it in his pocket.

* * *

He called Mara from outside, but she could not talk. They exchanged messages about when they would be home. He wrote that they had discussed a comparison, that no settings had been changed, and that he would explain the plan that evening.

He had time before returning to work. He walked into a café he had passed on previous visits and ordered lunch. The room was crowded. A man at the next table was conducting a meeting through an earpiece and pausing between sentences to take bites of a sandwich.

Daniel found him irritating. He moved to a table farther away when one became free. The move improved lunch.

It would be possible, he thought, to make this another example. He could still dislike something, still get up, still leave an unsuitable place. He could collect examples until there were enough on either side to make whichever argument he needed that day.

He ate without writing it down.

Back at the office, Celia asked him a question about the observation schedule. He answered, checked something with Nina, and returned to his desk. There was work to do before any change in his treatment. He could not suspend every obligation while he tried to determine the origin of his willingness to meet it.

He sent the requested schedule. Then he read the clinical plan when it arrived, slowly, without making a second window for work beside it.

* * *

Mara listened to the account of the appointment while they sat in the living room.

He told her what Chen had said about possible costs, what they could compare, and what would remain uncertain. He described the support around the reduced-stimulation period. Mara asked practical questions first. When would it begin? How long were they considering? Who would he call if he felt worse? He answered what had been agreed and told her what was still being arranged.

"What are you hoping happens?" she asked.

"I don't know."

She looked at him.

"I know what I want to learn. I don't know which answer I want."

"Would either answer tell you what to do about Oakland?"

He took a breath.

"No."

She waited to see whether he would qualify it.

"It might change how I feel," he said. "But it won't decide for us."

Mara nodded. She seemed relieved by the answer and still unhappy about something.

"Tell me," he said.

"I'm afraid you'll feel awful. I'm afraid you'll feel awful and decide it's more honest."

"We talked about that."

"I'm talking about it too."

He stopped himself from explaining the plan again.

"I'm afraid of that," he said. "And of wanting to put it back before I've noticed anything except being uncomfortable."

She rubbed one hand along the seam of the cushion.

"I can tell you what I notice. I can't tell you which version is the correct one."

"I know."

This time he let the words mean that he had heard the limit, not that she could stop telling him about it.

Later she said the search committee had invited her to an initial video interview. It would be the following week. She had told them yes.

His first feeling was fear. The feeling came promptly, under the program he had spent the morning wondering about. He did not mistake its force for a new piece of information about the job.

"When?" he asked.

She told him. He offered to be out of the apartment if she wanted privacy. She said she would take the call at work, where she had arranged to use a room.

"Okay."

There was more he could have said. He did not try to use the proposed comparison as a reason to delay her interview.

* * *

Before bed, he opened a new document.

Chen had asked him to write down what he valued about his current life before changing the settings, along with the concerns he wanted to examine. He had taken notes on himself before. Usually he had done it in a state he expected to outgrow and written for the person who would eventually understand it better.

This time he put the date at the top.

He wrote about work he enjoyed and the people he wanted to keep seeing. He wrote that he wanted ordinary evenings to remain available to him. He did not want to return to the effort of surviving time that belonged to him.

Then he wrote that the route review mattered even when it did not make him angry. He wanted to be able to reconsider a decision without waiting for his current situation to become intolerable.

He stopped there for several minutes.

In the bedroom, Mara was laying out clothes for the morning. He could hear hangers moving along the rail, then the wardrobe door closing. A small part of him wanted her to come and read what he had written so she would know he had taken the conversation seriously.

He continued without calling her.

I do not want to move to Oakland.

He looked at the sentence. He could supply reasons beneath it, arrange them into a persuasive account, or apologize for them before anybody had asked. Instead he wrote the next thing he knew.

I want Mara to want to stay.

He saved the document with the date and closed it.

15 - Comparison

For the first few hours, the change consisted of knowing there had been one.

Leah had altered the program on Monday morning. Daniel had watched her confirm the settings, completed the observations they had arranged, and stayed while the team checked how he was feeling. He had felt much as he had on arrival: interested, a little apprehensive, irritated by a seam in the chair that pressed through his trousers.

The system remained active. They had reduced the stimulation delivered under the program rather than turned the device off. Leah reminded him that the change did not have to announce itself as a sensation. He remembered how long he had waited for the first improvement to become something he could describe.

Before he left, they confirmed the check-ins and the people he would contact if the familiar pressure returned. Shah knew the plan. So did Mara, Luis, and Sam. Daniel had disliked telling so many people, then disliked the implication that he could obtain useful information only if nobody knew what he was doing.

He went to work afterward.

The elevator was slow. He noticed its slowness, noticed himself noticing, and put the event in the record with a qualification about expecting to be impatient. By lunch he had qualified almost everything he had written.

At two, he completed an ordinary piece of work and felt pleased. At four, he had trouble getting started on the next thing. Neither event seemed new enough to claim.

When Mara asked that evening, he said there was nothing obvious yet.

"That must be frustrating."

"A little."

She smiled.

"There you go."

He laughed. For a moment they could make a joke about the comparison without having to establish what the joke proved.

* * *

On Tuesday, he stood up from his desk six times before lunch.

He had reasons. Water. Coffee. A question for Celia. A printout he could have read on the screen. He did not count the trips until the fifth, when he found himself at the coffee machine with a cup he had not finished.

The work was familiar. There was enough to do. He could see which case required attention and knew how to begin. What had changed, or seemed to have changed, was the space between reading a sentence and wanting to read the next one.

He opened the file about the library route.

The recommendation he had sent Martin was there, along with responses from two of the other teams. One could offer staff for an initial observation but not an ongoing trial. The other wanted a clearer account of how success would be assessed before committing anyone. Both had been reasonable requests when he first read them.

Now the second made him angry.

They had already explained why the existing measures were insufficient. They had supplied the route, the complaint history, the local adjustment and its limits. Another request to define success seemed like a way of making the people already waiting wait while the city perfected its description of waiting.

He began an email.

It was easy to write. The sentences came with a confidence he had missed. He asked how many more observations were required before the team could acknowledge that their current reporting excluded costs residents were already paying. He pointed out that the initial work would help define the measures, making it unreasonable to require those measures to be settled in advance.

He read the draft and felt awake.

Then Nina came to ask him about a different case. He answered, almost impatiently, and asked her to look at what he had written.

She read it standing beside him.

"That's not the number we're using anymore," she said, pointing to a sentence.

He checked. She was right. The figure came from the early summary, before Celia separated the route observations from the incomplete reports.

"The point still holds."

"Then use the current number."

He changed it. The corrected number supported a more limited claim.

Nina read the rest.

"The part about measuring it as we go is useful. I'd keep that. I wouldn't tell them they're refusing to acknowledge something they've agreed to come and look at."

"They've agreed to discuss coming."

"Yes."

He looked at her.

"That distinction matters."

"It does. So does the distinction between this person and everyone you're angry with."

She left him with the draft. He removed the accusation and kept the request for a dated decision about the observation. The result was less satisfying to read, though it was closer to what he wanted them to do.

He sent it.

In his note for the clinic, he wrote that he had felt more urgency about work and had acted on it. Later he added that Nina had caught an error before the message went out.

* * *

On Wednesday morning, the novel Sam had lent him became difficult again.

He had taken it to a café before a check-in call. There were twenty minutes available, and he meant to read. He got through two pages

and realized he was waiting for the call to make the interval worth sitting through.

The hotel clerk in the story was still funny. He smiled at a line, read it again, and thought about sending it to Sam. Then he put the book down.

Pleasure remained possible. Remaining with it required more work.

He disliked the neatness of the observation. It sounded like something he had learned to say in the clinic. He tried to describe the actual sequence instead: sitting down, reading, smiling, checking the time, looking for something on his phone he did not need to know.

When the call came, he reported all of it.

Chen asked about sleep, mood, cravings, and whether he had felt able to interrupt the restlessness. He had slept less well the previous night but was tired in the ordinary way afterward. He had not used and was not planning to. The coffee, the street, the conversation on the call still contained things he could attend to. He was not back at the Saturday he feared.

"I feel less padded," he said.

"What does padded mean?"

He described the email. How clear the problem had seemed, how much less willing he had been to accept another delay.

"And the correction Nina made?"

"Useful. I included it."

"How did it feel when she made it?"

He thought about the instant in which he had wanted her to be wrong.

"Like she was slowing me down."

Chen waited.

"She was slowing me down. I needed it."

They discussed whether to continue the comparison. There were costs already worth recording. He wanted a little more time, within the agreed observation period, and the team would review him again promptly. He understood that the plan could change if the

pressure became harder to manage. Chen asked him not to treat finishing the period as an achievement in itself.

He repeated that back to her without irony. He had begun to feel proud of tolerating the change, which made the reminder relevant.

After the call he returned to the novel. He read another page, then closed it and went to work.

* * *

The interview was on Thursday.

Mara left early to get settled in the room she had arranged. Daniel wished her luck while she was looking for her keys. He had put them in the bowl by the door, where they belonged, and she had been looking in her bag, where she remembered leaving them.

"Here," he said.

"Thank you."

He nearly told her that this was why the bowl existed. The sentence formed whole and petty in his mind. He did not say it. He was pleased with himself for not saying it, which seemed like more attention than a set of keys deserved.

At midday she sent a message that the interview had gone well. They had asked good questions. She wanted to tell him about it when she got home.

He read the message while standing in line for food. He felt glad, then afraid, then annoyed that the fear followed the gladness so reliably. He wanted to be able to choose the feeling that represented him and dismiss the others as noise.

For several minutes, the idea of leaving Los Angeles became unexpectedly attractive.

He could stop organizing his life around the same desk, the same tasks, the same set of people who remembered how he had been. He could work somewhere that did not already know what to ask of him. There would be a different apartment, different streets, enough unfamiliarity to require his attention.

He opened a search for work in the Bay Area. He found several roles he might be able to do and one that interested him immediately. He saved it without studying the requirements closely.

Then his food was ready. He sat outside and wrote a note.

Moving does not feel impossible today. I may have been treating comfort as evidence that I should stay.

He read it with satisfaction. It was a serious observation. It contained something he had needed to admit.

He added, *I want a change.*

Only after saving it did he realize that he had not thought about Mara's work while imagining the move.

* * *

She came home carrying a pastry someone at work had bought for her after the interview.

"It's been in my bag all afternoon," she said. "It's probably become structural."

Daniel cut it in half and put it on two plates. They sat at the table while she told him about the call.

There had been three people on the panel. Ruth was not one of them. One had asked what Mara would do if the initial funding was reduced after the first year. Another had asked how she would involve people who did not already think an arts center was for them. She liked that they had wanted examples of mistakes as well as successes.

Daniel asked what mistake she had described.

She told him about a program she had helped design years earlier, before they met, and a set of assumptions that had proved wrong. He listened, then interrupted to ask how much authority she would have over the budget.

"They're still working out part of that," she said. "I was going to tell you."

He let her finish. For a few minutes, the conversation was good. Her excitement was specific. He could see the work she wanted to do rather than a vacancy standing at a distance from their life.

"I looked at jobs up there today," he said.

She stopped with the fork halfway to her plate.

"You did?"

"There are some things I could do."

"That's good."

Her caution disappointed him. He had expected the news to make the evening change more decisively.

"I think we've been acting as if staying here is the only sensible thing."

"I haven't."

"I know. I mean I have."

"What changed?"

He wanted to say that he could see more clearly. He had been using the phrase to himself all afternoon. Now he remembered why they were making the comparison.

"I feel differently about it."

"Today."

"Yes, today. That doesn't make it meaningless."

"I didn't say it did."

He leaned forward.

"I think I've been too willing to let things continue because I can tolerate them. At work. Here. I don't want to spend the next ten years maintaining the same arrangements because none of them is unbearable."

Mara put her fork down.

"Here with me?"

"The apartment. The city. The way we do things."

"You put them together."

"Because they are together."

The sentence felt exact. He could feel the relief of saying something without rounding its edges. Mara sat back, and he interpreted the silence as recognition.

"I'm finally saying we could go," he said.

"You're saying you want to get away from everything."

"Is that necessarily wrong?"

"I don't know. It's different from what I've been asking."

He looked at the pastry. There was a smear of filling on the edge of her plate.

"When I didn't want to move, that was the problem. Now I'm considering it and that's a problem too."

"It isn't a problem that you're considering it."

"Then let me consider it."

His voice had risen. He could hear it, but the force seemed appropriate to how long they had been unable to say what they meant.

Mara looked toward the window, then back at him.

"I am," she said. "I'm not going to treat this as an agreement to move. We haven't made one."

"I didn't ask you to."

"You looked hurt when I didn't celebrate."

He wanted to deny it. She was right.

"I thought you'd be glad."

"Part of me is. Part of me is trying to hear what you're saying without turning it into what I want."

He found this answer intolerably careful. He had spent months giving careful answers. For once he felt able to move beyond them, and she seemed determined to keep him there.

"Maybe I'm just being honest."

Mara's face changed.

"You were honest when you told me you liked being at home."

"I was being treated."

"You still are."

He stopped.

"And I was there," she said. "You told me what that Saturday felt like. I believed you. I'm not going to help you decide it didn't count because you're angry tonight."

* * *

He stood and carried his plate to the kitchen.

The movement made him feel less trapped. He put the plate down too sharply and looked back to see whether Mara had noticed. She had. He wanted to say the sound had not meant anything, but explaining the sound would make her responsible for accepting his account of it.

"I'm trying to understand what changed," he said.

"I know."

"I've spent all this time feeling grateful. There are things I should have been angry about."

"There are things you can be angry about now. I'm asking you to stop talking to me as if I'm the person who kept you from noticing them."

He turned toward her.

"You liked it."

She went still.

He knew what he had done before she answered. He had taken an answer he had pressed her to give and brought it back as evidence against her.

"Yes," she said. "I liked having a good evening with you. I liked telling you things. I liked not being afraid every time you got quiet. I told you all of that."

"I didn't mean—"

"You did mean something. Don't make me guess it."

He rested his hands against the counter. He could feel the cool edge beneath his fingers.

"I'm afraid everyone will want it put back as soon as I'm difficult."

Mara looked down. When she answered, her voice was lower.

"I don't decide the settings. You and your doctors do. I can tell you when you've hurt me without that being an instruction to change your brain."

He nodded, but she was not finished.

"Tonight felt good to me at first. I wanted to tell you about the interview. Now I'm working out which parts of what you've said I'm supposed to believe tomorrow."

"I don't know either."

"Then don't call one of them the honest one yet."

He sat down again. The change in position did not reduce the feeling that they had reached something important. He still believed they had said things that needed saying. He could also see that Mara had become careful in a way he recognized from before surgery.

He had mistaken that recognition, for a moment, for being recognizable to her again.

* * *

They did not settle the conversation that night.

He apologized for using her relief against her. She accepted the apology and said she wanted to stop talking for a while. He wanted to continue until the parts that seemed newly clear to him were clear to her too.

He let her stop.

While she took a shower, he opened the current record and wrote about the argument. The first version said they had finally discussed the possibility that their life needed to change. He read it and saw how easily Mara's account would disappear from that sentence.

He added what she had said. He wrote that he had felt excited by the clarity of the conversation while she had become distressed. He put in the sentence about everyone wanting the settings restored. He did not improve its wording.

The account looked less like a discovery after that. It also looked more accurate.

He sent the report through the agreed channel and asked to discuss it at the next check-in. He spoke with Luis for a few minutes before bed. He said he was having a difficult evening and had become sharp with Mara. Luis asked whether he needed company. Daniel said no, then considered whether he had answered to protect the appearance of an experiment going well.

"Not tonight," he said. "Can I call you tomorrow?"

"Yes."

They arranged a time.

In bed he could feel how tired he was. Sleep still took a long time to arrive.

* * *

On Friday, Chen asked him to distinguish feeling more certain from having new information.

He described the job listings, the email at work, the conversation with Mara. She did not dismiss the content because he had become irritable. The project could need more urgency. Moving could be

worth considering. He could also be finding ordinary frustration harder to tolerate and giving the resulting urgency more authority than it deserved.

"I know you said that before," he said.

"What's it like to notice it now?"

He looked at the notes on his screen.

"Less obvious when it's happening."

They discussed the increased effort of remaining with things, his sleep, the argument, and how he was managing urges to change state. He was still able to eat, work, call people, and interrupt the restlessness. He was also spending more time planning how to occupy the next interval. Chen asked about that directly. He told her it was returning.

They agreed on a short interval until the next review and confirmed how he would reach the team sooner if needed. She offered to bring the review forward. He did not want to change the setting during that call. He wanted to compare the notes he had written before the reduction with what he was writing now, and they agreed he would do that before deciding whether to continue.

"You don't need a complete theory of yourself before we adjust treatment," she said.

"I'm beginning to suspect I won't have one."

She smiled, but did not turn his admission into reassurance.

After the call he opened the job listing he had saved. The role required experience he did not have and involved far more travel than he wanted. There might be other roles. The whole possibility did not disappear because this one was unsuitable.

He had nevertheless used it, the previous day, as evidence that there were things he could do.

He wrote that down.

* * *

He read the two sets of notes that afternoon.

The earlier one was quieter. He had described work he enjoyed, relationships he wanted to keep, ordinary evenings he did not want to lose. The sentences now sounded protective to him. He could

hear the wish to preserve a life in which difficult choices could be postponed without immediate suffering.

But there was also the sentence about the route review mattering even when it did not make him angry. He read it twice. The person who had written it had seen the problem. He had not been incapable of understanding what needed to change.

The newer notes were more forceful. The work needed a decision. Waiting had costs. He had been using the clinic, his job, and their apartment as reasons not to examine what Mara wanted. These were not inventions. He could support them with events that had happened before the program changed.

Beside them were complaints about the length of an email, the voice of someone in the café, the difficulty of making an evening begin. The same urgency moved through important and unimportant things. It did not identify them for him.

He opened the earlier document again.

I do not want to move to Oakland.

I want Mara to want to stay.

He had been ashamed of the second sentence when he wrote it. Now he could see something candid in it. It did not pretend that staying was the only rational choice. It recorded what he wanted from her.

In the new document he had written, *I want a change.*

He thought of Mara describing the interview while he searched for the moment to tell her about the job listings. He had made her long-standing ambition useful to his need for a different feeling. That did not make moving a bad idea. It did not make it her idea anymore, either, in the account he had begun giving himself.

He moved the windows beside each other. Each contained things the other was inclined to overlook. Each contained reasons to mistrust the other's confidence.

For a minute he imagined a third document that would adjudicate between them. He opened one, gave it the date, and stared at the empty page.

Then he closed it.

* * *

That evening, Mara asked whether he had spoken to Chen.

He told her what they had discussed and when they would review again. He did not summarize the argument as useful. He told her he had included the parts that had upset her.

"What did you learn from the notes?" she asked.

"I can make either version sound convincing."

"That doesn't surprise me."

He looked at her, and she smiled a little. He could hear affection in the remark without needing to defend himself against the rest of it.

"I still want to look at the possibilities up there," he said. "I don't want you to take last night as a promise."

"I wasn't going to."

"And I don't want you to take what I said before as a decision you have to live by."

She considered this. He resisted adding enough qualifications to make it safe for him.

"All right," she said.

He asked about a part of the interview he had interrupted. She told him that the panel wanted to hear more about how she would choose the first instructors. He listened. It took effort. Once he lost the thread and asked her to repeat a name. She did.

Later he returned to the two documents and added a note to the current one about the conversation. He could have written that he was able to listen. He could have written that listening had become harder. Both were true.

He left both sentences in.

IV. A Life He Participates In

16 - Someone to Call

By Sunday evening, Daniel had moved the same glass of water to three different rooms.

He found it on the dresser while looking for his phone. The phone was in his pocket. He took a drink, carried the glass back to the kitchen, and put it beside the cutting board on which he had laid out an onion without cutting it.

Mara was at the ceramics studio. Several people from the class were helping clear shelves for new work, then going out for dinner. She had told him on Friday. He had remembered, asked about it that morning, and meant it when he said he hoped she had a good time.

He had things to do. There was food. He had spoken with Luis at the time they had arranged on Friday and again briefly that afternoon. There was a review with Chen the next morning. Nothing had been left entirely to chance.

He put the onion back in the basket.

Cooking would take forty minutes. After that he would have cooked. He could already see the plate in the sink and himself standing beside it, looking for the next thing. Ordering food would shorten the process but leave more of the evening. He opened a menu on his phone, then closed it because deciding what to eat had become an obligation larger than the meal.

He knew this sequence. Knowing made him ashamed before it made him careful.

In the living room, he sat with the novel Sam had lent him. He read a page. A woman in the story had been waiting for a letter and was now refusing to open it. He wanted her to open it. He turned ahead, saw dialogue without understanding who was speaking, and returned to his place.

The room was warm. He opened the window. Outside, someone was watering plants, the stream striking the bottoms of pots with a hollow, changing sound. He listened for a few seconds and then became impatient with the idea that listening might be his task for the evening.

He wanted something to happen inside him.

The thought came without a particular substance attached. That was part of its familiarity. Before there was a plan there was the conviction that the present condition was a mistake he could correct. The book, the food, the call tomorrow: all these belonged to the condition. None offered the clean division he wanted between now and afterward.

He picked up the phone.

For a moment he did nothing with it. He could feel the availability of things he had agreed not to do. The knowledge was enough to alter the room. What had been an evening without a plan began to feel like the interval before one.

He opened his messages and found Sam.

Their last exchange concerned the novel. Sam had asked whether Daniel had reached the letter yet.

Nearly, he had written three days earlier.

He began typing that he was having some difficulty with the adjustment. It sounded like an invitation to discuss a technical problem. He deleted it and called.

* * *

Sam answered with a mouthful of something.

"Good time?" Daniel asked.

"Depends what you need."

Daniel looked at the onion basket.

"I don't want to be on my own tonight."

There was a rustling sound. Sam swallowed.

"All right. Have you taken anything?"

"No."

"Are you about to?"

"I haven't arranged anything. I'm starting to think about it."

"Where are you?"

"Home."

Sam asked whether he had eaten. Daniel said he had been deciding what to make.

"That means no?"

"Yes."

"I'm eating crackers over the sink. We can improve on both."

They settled on a place near Sam's apartment. Daniel could get there in about twenty minutes. Sam said he would leave in ten.

The arrangement seemed too slight for what Daniel had admitted. He had expected more questions, or a longer interval in which he would explain how the evening had become difficult. Now he had to put on shoes.

"Can you stay on while I get ready?" he asked.

"Sure."

He found his shoes beneath the chair. Sam told him that he had spent much of the afternoon watching the same man remove a battery from a warehouse vehicle. The man kept saying it weighed less than it looked, which was both unhelpful and, according to the person reviewing the video, untrue.

"Can you cut that out?"

"I've been asked to make it clear he never said it while preserving everything on either side."

Daniel pulled the laces tight.

"So you've had a good day."

"I've had a day with a battery in it."

At the door, Daniel stopped for the keys. He sent Mara a message saying he was having a restless evening and going to eat with Sam. He added that he had not used. He wanted to omit that sentence because it would alarm her. Omitting it would leave her to work out whether the other sentences were supposed to tell her.

He put the phone back to his ear.

"I'm going now."

"See you there."

Outside, the air was cooler than he expected. He walked to the bus stop. There were eleven minutes until the next bus. He felt an

immediate disproportionate resentment toward the number, then sat down.

He was still having the evening. There was simply somewhere to go in it now.

* * *

Sam was waiting outside the restaurant, reading a notice taped beside the door.

"What does it say?" Daniel asked.

"They're closing early next Tuesday."

"Will that affect you?"

"I'm trying to decide."

They went inside. The room had bright ceiling panels and tables wiped so recently that the first one they chose was still wet. Sam moved to the next. Daniel followed with the menus.

At the counter, Daniel could not choose. He knew what several things tasted like and wanted none of them in particular. Sam ordered a plate with chicken, rice, and vegetables. Daniel ordered the same, then felt irritated with himself for having made even this a demonstration of incapacity.

"I like it," Sam said when they sat down.

"What?"

"The chicken. You looked like I'd prescribed it."

Daniel laughed. The laugh was brief and ordinary, which made him want another one immediately.

Sam took two paper napkins from the dispenser. One came out torn.

"How bad is it?"

Daniel looked toward the counter.

"I keep thinking about how long everything will take."

"Tonight?"

"Everything tonight. Cooking. Reading. Getting through until bed. Then I think about getting through tomorrow the same way."

He explained that the system was still on, that the reduction had not returned him to an untouched condition, that the week had

contained useful observations as well as difficulty. Sam listened without interrupting. This encouraged Daniel to explain more.

He was describing the difference between wanting a change and believing the change was justified when Sam shifted in his chair.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"Nothing. I'm hungry."

Daniel stopped. Their food had arrived. The woman who brought it had said something he had answered without hearing.

"Sorry."

"You can keep talking. I'm going to eat."

Daniel picked up his fork.

The chicken was good. He could taste the charred edge and the sauce beneath it. He took several bites quickly, having failed to notice how hungry he was. For a little while, eating supplied a sequence that did not require him to invent one.

Sam asked about the appointment. Daniel told him when it was and said he thought he wanted the reduction to end.

"Have you told them?"

"Not that clearly."

"Might help."

Daniel opened the clinic's agreed contact channel and sent a short account of the evening, including the thoughts of using, the call, and where he was. He asked to discuss returning to the previous program at the review. He read it once before sending. There was no argument in it about what kind of person that would make him.

Sam was picking a piece of cabbage off his sleeve.

"I'm sorry to take over your Sunday," Daniel said.

"It wasn't going particularly well."

"The battery?"

"That too."

Daniel waited. Sam chewed for a while, then put his fork down.

"I looked at an apartment this morning."

* * *

The apartment was smaller than the one Sam lived in and enough cheaper to matter. It was on the second floor of a building whose

manager had described the windows as generous. Sam had taken this to mean large. They were ordinary windows. There were three.

"Generous in spirit," Daniel said.

"Apparently."

He had been making up the cost of living alone by accepting extra work. There was still work, but he had begun taking jobs he disliked and doing them at hours when he had promised himself he would stop. The bedroom beside the wardrobe had become both the reason he needed a second bedroom and the place where he earned enough to keep it.

The new place had one bedroom. He could put a desk in the living room. He had already spent part of the afternoon checking the floor plan, though the measurements on the listing disagreed with those the manager had sent.

"When do you have to decide?" Daniel asked.

"Wednesday, if I want to give notice without paying for another month."

"Can you afford the overlap?"

"A little. Not indefinitely."

Daniel began to work out questions about the rent, moving costs, light, noise. Sam answered two of them and then said he had made a spreadsheet.

"Right."

"It's a very good spreadsheet. It says move."

"But you don't want to."

Sam moved some rice into a small pile.

"I thought she might come back."

He said it quietly enough that Daniel leaned forward.

"Your wife?"

Sam nodded.

"I don't mean I sit there expecting a key in the door. We've talked. I know what's happening. But I kept the place. It didn't seem impossible while I was keeping it."

Daniel could think of several consoling things, all of which required knowing more than he did. He took a drink of water.

"Does she know you're looking?"

"I told her. She said the new place sounded sensible."

Sam smiled without pleasure.

"She also said I could use the boxes she'd kept from her move. Which is helpful. I understand that it's helpful."

Someone at the next table laughed loudly. Daniel glanced over and then back. Sam had started saying something else, and Daniel missed the beginning.

"Sorry. Say that again."

"I said I said yes to the boxes."

"Oh."

"So now I'm angry with her for something I agreed to."

He took another bite. Daniel waited for him to continue. Instead Sam asked whether the sauce near Daniel was hot.

Daniel passed it across.

They ate for a while. The account had not reached a conclusion. Sam had not asked a question Daniel could answer. He was sitting with his shoulders slightly rounded, trying a little sauce on the edge of his rice before committing more of it.

Daniel felt the wish to return to his own difficulty. He had called for help; some part of him was still waiting for the evening to concentrate properly on him. He looked at Sam's hands, the sauce bottle, the meal that was nearly finished.

"Did you like anything about it?" he asked.

"The apartment?"

"Apart from what it costs."

Sam considered.

"There's a tree outside the bedroom. You can see into it. Not just the top. Branches, birds, all that."

"What kind?"

"I don't know. A tree with a cheaper apartment behind it."

Daniel laughed. This time he did not need the laugh to lead anywhere.

* * *

After dinner, they walked to Sam's apartment.

Daniel had expected Sam to suggest a meeting or another place to sit. Instead he said he had not finished the work he needed to deliver in the morning, and Daniel was welcome to come over while he did it.

"I won't be entertaining."

"You've set a high standard."

"I know. It's a burden."

Mara had replied. She was glad he had called Sam. She could come home sooner if he needed her. He wrote that he would be at Sam's for a while and she should stay for dinner. He meant it, though he also wanted her to send another message.

The clinic's on-call clinician called as they reached the building. Daniel stood outside and answered the questions, moving away from the entrance when a woman came out carrying a bicycle. He described the thoughts without softening them into restlessness. No, he had not contacted anyone to obtain anything. Yes, he could stay with Sam. They confirmed what to do if the evening became harder and the appointment the next morning.

Sam waited on the low wall beside the steps, looking at his own phone. Daniel thanked him when the call ended.

"For standing here?"

"For the whole thing."

"Come upstairs before you expand it."

There were flattened boxes against the wall inside the apartment. Sam set his keys on top of them, where they slid down between the cardboard and the wall.

He shut his eyes.

"That's been happening all day."

"You could put them somewhere else."

"Thank you. That's the kind of thinking I needed."

Daniel held the boxes away while Sam retrieved the keys. They were both smiling when they stood up.

Sam made tea, then went into the small bedroom to finish the video. Daniel sat on the couch. There was a pale rectangle on the wall where the bookcase had stood, and beside it a framed print leaning against the baseboard. He remembered Sam telling him

about carrying the bookcase downstairs. At the time, the story had seemed to finish with its departure.

From the other room came a voice saying, "Before attempting to lift—" and stopping. Then the same words again.

Daniel picked up a magazine from the table. He looked at photographs of kitchens nobody appeared to have cooked in. He put it down.

For several minutes the pressure returned with enough force to disappoint him. He had called someone. He had eaten. He had listened sincerely to another person. He wanted these actions to have changed the evening completely.

"How's it going?" Sam called.

Daniel could have taken this as a question about the tea.

"Still difficult."

Sam rolled his chair backward until Daniel could see part of him through the doorway.

"Want to come in? There's another chair. It's covered in things, but they're movable."

Daniel moved a stack of envelopes and a folded sweatshirt. The chair was low. His knees rose higher than he liked, but he stayed.

On the screen, a man in a gray shirt rested one hand beside a battery. Sam moved the playback point and watched the man reach down. The footage cut to a closer angle. A sentence ended cleanly, though the movement did not quite match.

"Did you see that?" Sam asked.

"His hand jumped."

"Yes."

Sam tried another cut.

Daniel watched him work. At first he suggested things. Sam explained why two would not work and tried the third. It did not work either. After that, Daniel let him continue.

The man bent toward the battery again. Daniel shifted in the low chair. He could hear a television from another apartment and someone moving dishes below them. The room smelled faintly of warm equipment and the mint tea neither had drunk.

He remained restless. He was also beginning to see the problem with the footage.

* * *

At a little after nine, Sam sent the file.

"They'll want something else tomorrow," he said.

He turned away from the desk and stretched his arms. Daniel stood slowly, easing the stiffness out of one knee.

They carried the mugs to the kitchen. Sam rinsed his and set Daniel's in the sink without rinsing it, then went back for the biscuit plate. The small incompleteness of the task bothered Daniel. He rinsed his own mug and nearly put both in the cupboard before noticing they were wet.

"Do you want to measure the desk?" he asked.

Sam looked toward the other room.

"I know how big it is."

"For the new place."

"I measured it this afternoon."

"Right."

They stood in the kitchen. Daniel could feel himself trying to repay the evening with something measurable.

"I don't know what to say about moving," he said.

"You don't have to say anything."

"I can help, if you do."

"With the desk?"

"With whatever. The desk looks heavy."

"It is. I picked it while I was imagining being a different kind of person."

"What kind?"

"Someone with a large desk."

Sam leaned against the counter. He looked tired now that the work was finished.

"Can I call you on Tuesday?" he asked. "I'm going to look at it again. I'll probably still be going back and forth about it."

"Yes."

"You don't need to solve it before then."

"I'll try to leave some of it for you."

They agreed on a time. Daniel put it in his calendar while Sam watched, then stayed until the car he had ordered arrived.

At home, Mara was brushing her teeth. She came to the bathroom door with the toothbrush in her mouth and touched his arm. He stood with her hand there until she needed to go back to the sink.

He told her about dinner and about the video. He did not tell her what Sam had said about his wife.

"Are you all right now?" she asked.

"Enough to go to bed. I want to talk to Chen about putting the program back."

Mara nodded.

He could see the questions she might ask and the effort of leaving them for morning. He thanked her for offering to come home. She said she had had a good dinner. One of the people from class knew a place she had never been, though they had passed it many times.

He asked where it was. She told him. He recognized the striped awning, then the window where he had once seen a dog sitting on a chair like a customer.

"That place?"

"That place."

They got into bed. He did not fall asleep quickly, but he stayed beside her.

* * *

At the review, Daniel said he wanted to return to the program they had used before the reduction.

Chen asked what had led him to that decision. He told her about Sunday. She had read the report and the note from the call, but he went through the sequence again: the unfinished dinner, the phone, the bus, sitting beside Sam while he worked.

"Company helped," he said. "I was still waiting to feel different for a lot of it."

They reviewed the week as well as the evening. Sleep, work, the effort of listening, the urgency he had welcomed and the places it

had taken him. He did not withdraw the things he had noticed about his life. Chen did not ask him to.

"I don't want to keep paying this much attention to whether I can tolerate the next hour," he said.

It was a smaller statement than the one he had been preparing. It was enough for them to discuss the adjustment.

Leah checked the system and restored the previous program. They arranged follow-up and continued observation. Daniel sat for a while afterward, as he had before, with his feet on the floor and the chair pressing against the backs of his legs.

He felt relieved to have made the decision. He could not yet say what else had changed.

That afternoon, he still had trouble settling to work. At home he became impatient while a page loaded and then embarrassed that he was checking himself for impatience. He closed the record until the time he had set aside to fill it in.

On Tuesday, he ate lunch without getting up to look for something else halfway through. He noticed only when he carried the plate away.

Later he spent forty minutes on a maintenance case. The work had been absorbing. He was pleased by the result, then afraid of being pleased, then tired of monitoring a satisfaction he had wanted back.

The case was useful. It also occupied time he could spend on other work. Both facts remained available to him after he closed it.

At home, Mara was reading a message from Oakland. They wanted another conversation and had sent more information about the program's first year. She turned the screen toward him when he asked. There were staffing questions still unresolved, and a proposed schedule she wanted to discuss with them.

He felt the old wish that the opportunity would quietly become unsuitable. The feeling arrived in a room he was glad to be in, beside a woman whose shoulder was touching his.

He read the schedule.

His phone sounded with the reminder for Sam. He had put it in for ten minutes before the time they agreed, allowing for the

possibility that he would be in the middle of something. Now he was.

"It's time to talk to Sam," he told Mara. "Can you leave this open?"

She put the laptop on the table.

Daniel went into the bedroom and called. While it rang, he looked at the glass on the dresser. He had brought it back there at some point on Sunday. A shallow crescent of water remained in the bottom.

Sam answered.

"How are you doing?"

"Better," Daniel said. He was glad to be able to say it. "How was the second look at the apartment?"

"The tree's still there."

"Good start."

"The bedroom is smaller than I remembered."

Daniel sat on the edge of the bed. Sam began explaining where the furniture might go. Daniel pictured the room as he described it, revising the picture when he learned that the door opened the other way.

17 - Her Answer

When Mara called, Daniel was standing outside the office with a pear he had forgotten to eat at lunch.

"They offered it to me," she said.

He smiled before he thought about what she meant.

"Mara."

"I know."

"That's wonderful."

She laughed, a short, surprised sound, as if he had said something funny. He could hear traffic behind her and the warning tone of a crossing.

"Where are you?"

"Outside work. I went out to take the call. Then I kept walking."

"Have they sent anything?"

"The letter came just before they called. I've read it about four times."

He looked down at the pear. There was a brown patch near the stem that had not been there that morning. He shifted it to his other hand.

"Did they agree to the things you asked for?"

"Most of them. The setup hours, yes. The coordinator starts later than I wanted, but before the first classes. It's in writing."

"Good."

"They want an answer Monday."

Now he felt it. The happiness remained, but behind it the afternoon began to rearrange itself. There would be a date, a departure, conversations with people who did not know their life was changing.

"That's soon," he said.

"We've been talking about the terms all week."

"I know."

Two weeks had passed since the program was restored. He had been sleeping better. Work had become possible to finish without requiring another act of will every few minutes. Mara had gone to Oakland for a day, met the rest of the team, and walked through the old school with the person overseeing the building work. He had asked about the visit. He remembered her telling him that one of the rooms was larger than it looked in photographs.

He had known all this while continuing to imagine that they had time.

"I wanted to tell you first," she said.

He heard something tentative in her voice and wanted to remove it.

"I'm glad you did."

"I should go back in. They'll think I've left."

They agreed to meet at home. Before she ended the call, he told her again that it was wonderful. He meant it both times.

He stood outside a little longer. Then he ate the pear, turning it to avoid the soft patch, and went back upstairs for his bag.

* * *

Mara was home before him. She had changed out of her work clothes and opened the windows. Her shoes lay beneath the table, tipped toward each other.

He put his bag down and held out his arms.

She came into them quickly. Her face pressed against the side of his neck. He held her and felt her take a long breath.

"You got it," he said.

"I got it."

For a little while, that was the whole event.

Then she stepped back, wiping beneath one eye with a finger.

"I've been doing this all afternoon."

"Crying?"

"Nearly crying. It's inefficient."

He laughed. She showed him the letter on the laptop. The language was formal and largely dull. He liked seeing her name be-

neath the title. He read the responsibilities, the salary, the start date. Six weeks away.

"That gives you time to finish the current block here," he said.

"Just. I'll need to leave a proper handover. There are things nobody else has the whole history of."

"You could write that down."

"I'm going to."

He looked at her. She was smiling, but there was a small warning in it. He had already started finding solutions to work she knew how to do.

"Sorry."

"You're allowed one."

He finished reading. She waited beside him, one hand resting on the back of the chair.

"Do you want something special for dinner?" he asked.

"Yes. But can we talk first?"

He closed the letter, then opened it again because closing it seemed wrong.

Mara pulled out the other chair.

"I'm going to accept," she said.

He nodded. He had expected those words, though he had still been waiting for a question.

"I want you to come with me."

"I know."

"And I'm going if you don't."

He looked at the screen. There was a line about reporting to the executive director. He read it twice while deciding what his face should do.

"Have you already accepted?"

"No. I told them I'd reply Monday."

"But you've decided."

"Yes."

The room was quiet enough that he could hear a drawer close in the apartment below. He had been prepared for an argument about whether the offer was good enough, whether the start date could

move, whether they should wait for some other possibility. She had brought him her answer.

"I don't know if I can be ready in six weeks," he said.

"Then we need to talk about that."

He turned toward her.

"You make it sound simple."

"I don't think it's simple."

She moved her hand from the chair to her lap.

"I've been trying to work out how to say this without making it sound like I don't care what happens to us. I do. I want you there. I want a place that's ours. I also want to take this job."

"Even if I stay here."

"Yes."

She did not soften the word after saying it. He had an unkind impulse to make her say it again.

* * *

He stood to get some water. Mara said she would have some too.

In the kitchen, he filled two glasses and watched the level rise in the second after it was already full enough. He turned off the tap.

He could ask whether she still wanted to live with him. Whether the good months had been good enough. Whether she wanted the patient man who now listened or the restless one who had briefly wanted to leave everything. He could require her to tell him, once more, which parts of him she loved.

The questions had the familiar attraction of a test with no satisfactory result. If she preferred him well, he could feel chosen for the work the device did. If she missed something from before, he could resent being asked to recover it. And while she answered, the offer would remain on the table, awaiting a response to a different question.

He carried the glasses back.

"I'm hurt," he said.

Mara nodded.

"I thought you might be."

"Part of me wants you to take that as a reason."

"I do take it as a reason. It's one of the reasons this has been hard."

He sat down. The distinction was unwelcome and clear.

She reached across the table. He took her hand, though he felt briefly that accepting comfort might commit him to agreeing. Her fingers were warm. He knew the small rough place beside her thumbnail from where she worried at the skin.

"I don't want to lose you," he said.

"Neither do I."

He waited for reassurance she could not give. She stroked his thumb once, then let her hand rest.

"I'm not saying everything will work because we want it to," she said. "I don't know how it will be if you stay. I'd rather find out than keep waiting here and get angrier with you."

"Are you angry now?"

"Sometimes."

He nodded. After a moment, she added, "Sometimes I'm having a nice evening with you."

He looked at her, and she gave a small, tired smile.

The water was cold. He drank some. He could feel unhappiness spreading through an evening that, an hour earlier, he had hoped to celebrate. There was no need to give it another name. He wanted her here; she had told him she was going.

He did not know how to become glad about that. He could still remember being glad when she called.

"What was the room like?" he asked.

"Which room?"

"The one that was bigger than you expected."

She watched him for a moment.

"We don't have to do this now."

"I'd like to know."

Mara looked toward the laptop. Then she drew it closer and opened the photographs from her visit.

* * *

The room had a long sink beneath high windows. There were dark marks on the floor where furniture had stood for years. A ladder leaned against one wall, and beside it a man in work clothes had been caught looking down at something outside the frame.

"He's showing me where the water was coming in," Mara said.

"Was?"

"They've fixed it. I asked that too."

She moved to the next photograph. It showed the same room from the doorway.

"There's space down this side for drying racks. And those cupboards are staying. They wanted to take them out because the doors look awful, but the insides are fine."

"Who wanted to?"

"One of the board members. She's been raising money for the renovation. She wants people to see where it went."

"New doors?"

"Maybe. We haven't settled it."

He heard the *we*. Mara already knew someone there well enough to disagree with her.

The next photograph showed a small room with an office chair and three rolled mats on the floor.

"Your office?"

"No. Mine's less appealing."

She found a picture of a narrow space with a desk pushed against a wall. There was a printer on the floor and a paper sign taped above an outlet.

"What does the sign say?"

"Don't use this one."

"The printer?"

"The outlet. I checked."

He laughed. She enlarged the photograph so he could see the little window beside the desk. It looked onto the courtyard. Someone had begun clearing the weeds between the paving stones, leaving a clean strip that ended abruptly halfway across.

"I thought you wanted the big room," he said.

"I do. To work in. I don't need to answer emails in it."

She explained how the rooms would be used at first. There would be fewer classes than the board had initially proposed. She had argued for that in the final conversation. Some of the money could open doors; keeping them open through an evening, cleaning up, paying people to prepare and return messages required less impressive lines in a budget.

"Was that what you meant about setup hours?"

"Part of it. They'd budgeted for teachers from the moment the students arrive until the moment they leave."

"So everyone does the rest for free."

"Or I do it. Or it doesn't happen."

She said it briskly, without inviting him to admire her for having noticed. He asked what they had agreed to, and she told him. There were compromises she disliked. The coordinator would be part time at first. One room would remain unavailable longer than she had hoped. She had accepted those limits when she asked for others to change.

"What would you start with?" he asked.

"I don't entirely know yet."

He looked up.

"I have ideas," she said. "But there are people already doing things there. Ruth took me to meet a woman who's been running sewing sessions in a borrowed room. They make clothes, mend things, talk. She doesn't want someone turning up and telling her she's now part of a creative initiative."

"Reasonable."

"Very. She was suspicious of me."

"Did you win her over?"

"I don't know. We talked for twenty minutes."

Daniel smiled at the correction. Mara returned to the photograph of the large room.

"I keep thinking about the first week," she said. "People trying the wrong door. Someone furious because the time changed. A teacher discovering we don't have the thing they assumed every room would have."

"You're looking forward to that?"

"Not those parts."

She rested her chin on her hand.

"But I want to be there. I want to know what happens."

He looked at the room again. Until now he had mostly imagined it empty, waiting to reward her ambition. Her account filled it with people who would be inconvenient, grateful, unimpressed, and busy with things of their own.

He could picture her among them. The ease with which he could do so hurt more than the offer letter had.

* * *

They went out for dinner late enough that the first place had stopped taking tables.

Mara suggested another a few streets away. On the walk, she stopped outside a shop to look at a pair of shoes, then said she was not going to buy shoes because she had been offered a job.

"You could buy them because you like them," Daniel said.

"I don't like them that much."

They continued. At a crossing, she put her hand through his arm. He shortened his stride to match hers. They had done this so often that he could remember no occasion on which they had agreed it was how they walked together.

At the restaurant, they were given a small table near the kitchen. Each time the door opened, a patch of hot air reached them. Mara asked to move. The server found another table, and Daniel realized he would have sat in the heat rather than interrupt the evening with a request.

Mara ordered something she could not pronounce. She asked the server how to say it and repeated it badly enough that all three of them laughed.

After the food came, Daniel asked about her day in Oakland after the visit.

"Did you come straight back?"

"I had a few hours. I walked around. Ruth had to get home."

"Where did you go?"

Mara described a bookshop and a place where she had bought a sandwich she ate too quickly because she thought she had less time than she did. She had passed a studio advertising evening printmaking classes. There were pieces in the window, hung from clips, some with ink smudged beyond the edges of the image.

"I looked up their next block on the train," she said.

"Would you have time?"

"Maybe not at first. I'd like to."

He had imagined her new life as work and an apartment from which she would call him. It had not occurred to him to furnish the rest of her week.

"More classes after running classes all day?"

"Yes. Somebody else can have the keys. I can arrive late and ask where things are."

"You wouldn't arrive late."

"I might become that sort of person."

She took a bite, considered it, and pushed the plate slightly toward him.

"Try this."

He did. It was better than what he had ordered. She let him take another bite before drawing it back.

"What else?" he asked.

"About what?"

"Being there."

She thought for a while.

"I don't know. I'd like to walk to work, if I can find somewhere. I'd like to know a city well enough to have an ordinary Tuesday in it."

"You have ordinary Tuesdays here."

"I know."

He heard how it sounded after he said it.

"Sorry. I wasn't asking you to justify it."

"A little."

"A little."

She smiled, then grew quiet.

"I'll miss things. My mother. My sister. The class. You, if you aren't there. I'm not imagining I'll just start again without missing anything."

He nodded. He knew about her losses because he had catalogued them for her. He had known less about the class in the window, the cupboards she had defended, the person who might let her into a sewing session without yet trusting her.

She offered him the last bite of her food. He said she should have it. She did.

* * *

On Saturday afternoon they returned to the question of where he would live.

Mara had spent the morning at her current program, preparing for a display of the students' work. She came home with a strip of masking tape stuck to her trousers and a problem involving three pieces that could not safely be hung in the way their makers intended. She told him about it while removing the tape in little fragments.

He liked hearing about a problem whose existence did not depend on him. Then she changed her clothes and sat beside him, and the other problem was still there.

"I can't promise to move when you do," he said.

"Okay."

He looked at her.

"I'm not saying never."

"I heard you."

"I need to find out what would actually be possible with work. And treatment. I asked about the appointments, but I haven't followed through on the rest."

"I know."

He had hoped to present those things as obstacles. Saying them aloud made the unfinished inquiries audible too.

"Would you want us to try living in both places for a while?" he asked.

"I'd rather do that than turn down the job and wait for us to agree."

He rested his hands on his knees.

"It sounds like separating."

"It would be living apart."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes."

She leaned back. Neither of them spoke for a while.

"I don't want to tell people we're separating," she said. "I want to tell them I'm taking a job and you're staying here for now. If that stops being an honest description, we'll have to say something else."

He could not find reassurance in the last sentence. He could find no lie in it either.

"For now could get very long," he said.

"Yes. It could."

"I don't want to do that to you again."

"Then we'll need more than saying that."

He nodded. They would have to look at what two places cost, how they could see each other, when he would decide what came next. None of those questions could be answered by calling the arrangement temporary. They agreed to sit down with the numbers and their calendars during the week.

For the moment, they had agreed that she would go and that his uncertainty would not hold the start date open.

Mara rubbed her eyes.

"I wanted this part to feel better."

"Me too."

"I thought once there was an actual offer, maybe—"

She stopped.

"I'd want to go?"

"Maybe."

He was touched and then saddened by how much they had both expected a future event to do on their behalf.

"I wish I could give you that today," he said.

"I wish you could too."

She moved nearer. They sat with their legs touching. He put his hand over hers. After a while, she turned it palm up and fitted her fingers between his.

* * *

On Monday morning, Mara accepted the offer.

She had written the reply the night before. Daniel was getting ready for work when she asked him to read it for anything she had missed. He stood behind her chair, one sock on, and read the short message twice.

"You've put the start date in," he said.

"Yes."

"It looks right."

She moved the pointer to send and stopped.

"I'm nervous."

"About the job?"

"Among other things. What if I get there and I'm bad at it?"

He began to tell her she would not be. She looked up before he finished.

"You can't know that."

"No."

He rested a hand on her shoulder.

"I know why they asked you."

She covered his hand with hers, briefly, then sent the message.

For a moment nothing happened. The window closed. An older email occupied the screen, reminding her about an order of supplies for work here.

Then Mara stood up.

"I'm going to call my sister."

"Now?"

"She's awake."

She took the phone to the window. Daniel went into the bedroom for the other sock. He sat on the bed and pulled it on slowly, listening to the ring through the open door.

Her sister answered. Mara said hello, then waited through something he could not hear. She began laughing.

"No, listen," she said. "I have news."

He heard her say the title of the job. She said it easily now, without explaining the qualifications or the uncertainties that came with it. Her sister made a sound loud enough to reach him across the room, and Mara laughed again.

Daniel finished tying his shoes. He had time before he needed to leave. In the kitchen, he put bread in the toaster and took down two plates while Mara told her sister about the school.

18 - A Reason Is Enough

The first thing Daniel removed from the proposal was the word *minimal*.

He had used it to describe the effect on the maintenance team. The estimate beneath it assigned him time he was already spending on other work. Celia's hours appeared twice, under different headings. A field visit occupied one line, as if putting three people in the same place required only a place.

He corrected the hours. Then he deleted the adjective.

The observations Nina had arranged were back. Two afternoons, a small group of people making trips from the relocated stop, notes on the crossings and the destinations beyond them. It was enough to see that Irene's experience was not unique. It was not enough to describe everyone who used the corridor.

One person had reached the first crossing promptly and then lost the advantage at the third. Another took longer between them and arrived at a favorable point in the sequence. A woman traveling with a child had waited through an extra cycle because the child dropped something. There were passengers for whom the new stop was closer to where they wanted to go.

Daniel moved the accounts beside the timing records. The improvements from the earlier adjustment were visible. So were the trips it had barely helped.

He had read these pages before. Nothing new had happened overnight to make them more important.

Across the office, Celia was explaining a record to someone on the field team. He could hear her asking for the condition under which a check had been made. She had learned to ask that before asking whether it passed. He was pleased by the sound of her working.

On his own screen, an unopened message contained photographs from a recurring fault they had nearly resolved. He wanted to look

at them. He knew the case well enough that the photographs would mean something immediately.

He left the message closed and finished the recommendation.

* * *

Nina read it after lunch.

He sat opposite her while she moved through the document, stopping twice to check an attachment. She had drawn a small box on a sheet of paper and was adding things outside it.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Things this doesn't do."

"There's a section."

"I'm seeing if it matches."

The trial would cover the route from the stop to the library and the nearby services reached through the same crossings. Four weeks, within specified afternoon periods, following further checks and approval of the timing plans. They would test whether serving requests across the sequence differently could reduce the repeated waits without requiring people to hurry between signals.

The stop would stay where it was. The crossing intervals required for people to get across safely would stay intact. The trial would allow some traffic to wait longer elsewhere. Bus running times would be measured alongside the walks, rather than allowed to disappear from the account because they complicated it.

There was money in the revised estimate to pay participants. There were staff hours for observing, reviewing, responding to problems, and reporting what had happened. The amount was small compared with a construction project. It was large compared with the money nobody had yet agreed to give them.

Nina turned back a page.

"You've put yourself down to coordinate."

"Yes."

"Martin agreed?"

"I'm asking him tomorrow."

"And the repeat cases?"

"He'll have to reassign them."

She looked up.

"You should have a recommendation for that too."

"I don't get to choose who takes them."

"You know which ones can wait. He doesn't know them as well as you do."

Daniel nodded and made a note. He had hoped that offering his own time would be the part that counted as difficult. It also created work for other people.

Nina returned to her list.

"I can stay involved in the review. I can't keep arranging everything."

"I know."

"I'm telling you because I've picked up quite a lot of this while it was still something we were going to discuss."

He felt himself preparing to explain the circumstances of the past few weeks. She knew there had been medical appointments. She had covered one meeting and sent him the notes. The explanation would be true and leave her with the same work.

"I'll take the invitations and the minutes," he said. "And the requests for people's time. You'll get a draft before anything goes out under both our names."

"Good."

She drew a line beneath the list.

"Don't put shade in the summary as if you're providing any."

He read the sentence she indicated. He had mentioned the unshaded waits as part of the reason for the work. Near the end, the wording made the same problem sound like something the trial would solve.

He changed it while she watched.

* * *

Martin listened without interrupting until Daniel reached the staffing request.

Then he turned the page back.

"This is more than you sent me before."

"The earlier estimate didn't include enough follow-up."

"Why?"

Daniel looked at the two versions. He could explain how the scope had become clearer. He could also see the work he had left vague because putting it in made the request less attractive.

"I was trying to keep it inside time we didn't really have."

Martin made a note.

"What stops?"

Daniel showed him the list of repeat cases. Several could remain with Celia, provided someone reviewed decisions she could not authorize. Two needed experienced staff soon. Another set could wait, though waiting meant accepting the possibility of repeat visits to faults they had not yet understood.

Martin read the list carefully.

"I was going to recommend continuing your arrangement," he said.

"The reliability work."

"Yes. It's working. We can show that it's working. The field people know whom to call."

"I think we should continue it."

"So do I. I'm deciding whether we can continue it at the same level without you."

He leaned back. The chair creaked once beneath him.

"I can take the approvals for a while. I can get some senior time for the two you've marked. But the rest slows down. And I don't want you telling Celia she can call you whenever she needs, then doing two jobs badly."

Daniel had been about to offer exactly that. He crossed a sentence out of his notes.

"There'd be a handover."

"There would."

Martin looked at the trial estimate again.

"If we do this, somebody else may end up leading the reliability work. I'm not keeping the seat empty until you find out whether you like the other one."

"I understand."

"Are you sure? You've been good at it."

Daniel glanced through the doorway. From this angle he could see the spare table where he and Celia spread the old records. There was a particular satisfaction in putting the pages in order and having something cease to be mysterious. He had not exhausted it.

"I still like it," he said.

"Then tell me why this should come first."

He turned to the route observations. He described what the current correction could do and where it failed, the journeys absent from the corridor summary, the limited period during which they could use the people already willing to participate. He explained why another round of observations without permission to alter anything would leave them knowing more about a problem they were still not testing a response to.

Martin asked about three other routes. Daniel knew one and had seen only brief reports on the others.

"I'm not claiming this is the worst," he said. "We've got enough information to try something here. If we wait until we can rank every route, this won't happen."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"We report that. We'll still need to decide what to do about the access."

Martin read the requested allocation once more.

"All right. I'll support taking this to the joint review. That isn't approval to change the signals."

"I know."

"Put the handover dates in."

Daniel said he would. Before leaving, he told Martin that Mara had accepted the Oakland job. He would be staying in Los Angeles initially, but he needed a separate conversation about what work might be possible if he moved later.

Martin looked tired for the first time that morning.

"How much later?"

"I don't know yet."

"Then don't build another project that only works if you're here forever."

Daniel added that to the notes too.

Celia was quiet when he told her.

They were sitting at the spare table with the photographs he had finally opened. Water had marked the inside of a housing without collecting where the previous inspections had looked. Celia had matched the marks to an older photograph and wanted to ask the crew to check something specific.

"Martin will sign off?" she asked.

"On the decisions that need it. We'll go through the open cases together before the change."

"He's difficult to get hold of."

"We'll set times."

She looked at him.

"We had times before. Then something happened and he couldn't come."

Daniel remembered a meeting Martin had missed, then two others. He had been able to cover them because the work was his. He could not promise his absence would be solved by an entry in a calendar.

"I'll ask him to name somebody for when he's unavailable."

"Okay."

She turned one photograph around.

"I thought we were starting to get ahead of these."

"We are."

"Were."

He wanted to tell her the route mattered. She had linked Irene's complaints in the first place. She had helped make the timing records intelligible. She knew what it cost to wait at the crossings and was now asking what his decision cost here.

"Some of them will take longer," he said. "I've put that in the recommendation."

"That doesn't make them take less time."

"No."

They went back to the photographs. Her observation was good. He helped her frame the request so the crew would know what to check and why. For twenty minutes they worked much as they

always did, and he felt the impulse to preserve the arrangement by offering to look at things in the evenings.

Instead he asked her to put the reasoning in the case note. They would use it at the handover. She wrote slowly at first, then changed the order of two sentences and continued.

* * *

The joint review took place in a room with a screen that made the pale lines on Daniel's map disappear.

He had checked the file on his own monitor. Now the library seemed to float beside a road with no pavement. Nina found a higher-contrast version while he introduced the proposal.

The transit representative was a woman named Lidia who had worked on the stop relocation. She had attended the earlier scoping meeting and sent the questions that had prompted his angry draft. He recognized her name more quickly than her face.

She let him finish before speaking.

"What would you consider an acceptable increase in bus delay?"

He gave the proposed limits and explained that the details still required the operations review. She asked whether he meant the average or the worst affected periods.

"Both. They're separate checks."

"Then put both on this page."

He made a note.

"The people staying on the bus are making whole journeys too," she said. "Some of them are going to work. Some are making connections. I need to know where they are in this."

"In the running-time review."

"That's the vehicle. You've just spent ten minutes telling us why measuring the vehicle isn't enough."

He felt the answer forming: their responsibility was to start with a bounded problem; no trial could encompass every consequence. It was correct. It would also permit exactly the omission she had identified.

He looked at the slide. The walkers had destinations. The bus passengers had a line on a chart.

“We need to check the downstream connection at least,” he said.
“And ask passengers about the trips affected.”

“With whose time?” Martin asked.

Daniel stopped. Nina was looking at the estimate, already finding what the addition would displace.

They spent the next twenty minutes making the proposal smaller in one direction so it could become less incomplete in another. Fewer accompanied walks. A transit staff contribution that required approval from someone not in the room. No claim that the result would represent the whole day. The four-week period stayed, though Daniel could see the amount they hoped to learn shrinking around it.

The street-design representative asked about seats and the stop itself. Neither was funded. Those questions would remain in the report, with an owner for the next review, rather than vanish because Daniel’s team could only adjust timings.

Rosa asked who would answer if a problem appeared during the trial period.

Daniel indicated the contact list.

“That’s who gets the email,” she said. “Who decides whether we put it back?”

They worked through that too. The decision could not wait for everybody on the list to be available. There would be defined limits, a named duty contact with authority to end the test, and a checked route back to the existing plan. Rosa wanted that procedure approved before her crew installed anything.

Nobody objected. It still took time to write down.

Near the end, Lidia asked why the broader access review had not accompanied the original stop change.

Daniel had an answer about the scope of the earlier project. He had used it before. He looked at the map, now visible behind him, and said that their review had not followed the trip far enough after people got off.

“We had comments about that,” she said.

“Yes.”

“This isn’t information people only just gave us.”

"No."

The silence afterward lasted long enough that he wanted to qualify his agreement. The changes had helped many people; he had already said so. He left it alone.

* * *

They did not leave with permission to begin.

They left with a smaller scope, a list of required checks, and named people who had agreed to answer by particular days. Martin authorized the preparation time. The funding for participants came from a modest planning allocation that would otherwise have supported another round of counts. Someone would need to be told those counts were postponed.

Daniel sent the minutes that afternoon. He gave Nina credit for the observations and Celia for the linked records. Then he removed a paragraph defending the original timing estimate. It no longer told anyone what to do next.

Lidia replied with a correction before he went home. He made it and sent the updated page.

At the apartment, Mara was working through an inventory from the school. She had put a question mark beside *assorted stools* because nobody could tell her how many that meant.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Useful. Unpleasant in parts."

"Did you get what you wanted?"

"Some of it. There's more to do before it starts."

She closed the inventory while he described the meeting. He began with Lidia's objection, telling it as though the objection had been obvious to him all along. Halfway through, he stopped.

"I hadn't included that properly," he said. "She was right."

Mara nodded. She did not seem surprised that someone else might have improved the proposal.

"And you're doing this instead of the cases?"

"For now. Someone else may take over the lead there."

"Will you miss it?"

"Yes."

He was more certain of that than of how the trial would go.

Mara reopened the inventory to show him a photograph. The assorted stools were stacked in a cupboard in a way that made counting them impossible. One appeared to have no seat.

"Does that one count?" he asked.

"That's what I'm trying to establish."

He looked again. Behind the stools was a roll of paper she had been told was missing.

"Is that what you were looking for?"

She leaned closer, then began a message to the person who had taken the photograph. Daniel went to start dinner while she was still typing.

* * *

The preparation took another week and part of the next.

One candidate plan failed a check before it reached the field. Another offered too little improvement for people who walked more slowly. Daniel wanted to preserve it because it worked well for several of the recorded trips. Celia, reviewing the observations before her time on the project ended, pointed to the ones it left behind.

He put them back into the summary.

They revised the plan. Lidia obtained the transit support for the narrower observation period. Rosa's team checked the installation and the restoration procedure. Martin signed the staffing change after naming a second reviewer for Celia's urgent cases. Two investigations moved down the list. Their dates remained visible in the handover.

The approval arrived in a message whose subject still began with a reply to a reply. Four weeks. Limited hours. The agreed conditions attached. An extension would require another decision.

Daniel read it twice. He felt pleased, though less than he had expected. There were already three questions beneath it from people trying to arrange the first day.

He answered those, then called Irene.

"Will I be able to take the later bus?" she asked.

"I can't promise that yet."

"You keep saying that."

"I know."

He explained what they were changing, when the test would operate, and what they needed to observe. She asked whether the button would still work in the same way. It would. She asked whether she had to do anything differently. She did not.

"I can show them Thursday," she said. "Tuesday I have to get there early anyway."

He wrote down Thursday.

"And I'm not missing the group."

"We've kept that in the instructions."

"Good."

She thanked him for calling, then asked whether he knew where to get another copy of the map. The one he had given her had gone into a library folder and acquired somebody else's notes. He said he would bring one.

* * *

On the first Thursday, the bus was late.

Daniel waited beside the observer who would accompany Irene. Farther along the route, another member of the team was already recording the crossing sequence. The new plan had been checked and was active for the agreed period. There was nothing Daniel could do to make the bus arrive.

His phone showed a message from Celia. The crew had confirmed the fault suggested by the water marks. She had sent it to the people on the handover list and copied him.

He enlarged the photograph. The explanation was visible now that someone had known where to look. He felt the old pleasure and began composing a question about the next check.

Then he saw that the question had already been answered lower in the message. He sent a brief thanks and put the phone away.

The bus came around the corner. Irene stepped down carrying her canvas bag and looked toward them.

"More people this time," she said.

Daniel introduced the observer and gave Irene the map. She folded it once and put it in the bag without inspecting it.

They walked back toward the first crossing. The button acknowledged the request. Across the road, a delivery driver was trying to move a handcart over the edge of a mat. Irene watched him until the signal changed.

At the second crossing they waited. At the third they arrived in time to continue, though Irene paused to let a man with a pushchair pass. The observer recorded the pause as well as the signal times.

"Better," Irene said when they reached the library. "Today."

Daniel nodded. They still had the other journeys, the buses, and the rest of the trial to account for.

Inside, someone had arranged the chairs in rows again. Irene put her bag on a table and sighed. Daniel helped turn two chairs before checking the time. He was due back at the stop for the next observation.

"You can leave those," she said. "I've got them."

He took his folder from the table. On the way out he passed the observer explaining the participant form to someone who wanted to know whether they had to spell out their full name. He waited until she had finished and asked whether she had what she needed.

She did. He went back to the crossings.

19 - The Terms

The box said *kitchen*, though it contained two books, a lamp, and one shoe.

Daniel had written the label before they began filling it. Mara had then discovered that the lamp fitted neatly between the books and that the shoe kept its base from moving. The other shoe was on her foot while she considered whether she wanted to take the pair.

"You can't go out like that," he said.

"I wasn't planning to."

"People will have questions."

She lifted the bare foot toward him.

"Give it back, then."

He removed the shoe and found a folded towel to take its place. Mara put it on, stood, and walked to the window. She had bought the shoes years ago and rarely worn them. He could remember several conversations in which they had been unsuitable for the particular thing she wanted to do.

"Still hurt?"

"Yes."

She took them off and put them beside the bag for donations.

They had been working for an hour. The room looked less organized than when they started. Some things would go with her, some would remain, and a surprising number had become difficult to place only because someone had asked where they belonged.

Daniel looked at the clock. He had a follow-up at the clinic.

"I should leave."

"Take the bag by the door."

He looked at the donations.

"That one?"

"Your bag. You packed it and put it by the door so you wouldn't forget it."

"Good system."

"Very."

She went back to the books. At the door, he turned to tell her he would be home for lunch. She had begun reading the first page of one of them. He waited until she looked up.

"Around one," he said.

"I'll be here."

It was an answer she had given him hundreds of times. He took his bag and left.

* * *

Leah asked whether there had been any problems with the equipment. There had not. She checked the system and confirmed that the program remained as agreed.

Daniel had stopped expecting the check to explain the week. He still liked hearing that nothing unexpected had happened.

His questionnaire scores had settled near the improved range from before the reduction. He was sleeping, working, eating. There were difficult evenings, but they had not acquired the pressure of the Sunday he called Sam. He could describe the difference without making either kind of evening sound harmless.

Chen asked what the treatment was allowing him to do now.

"Pack," he said.

She smiled, then waited.

He told her about the boxes. Mara would leave the following week. He was going with her to help with the move and would return before her first day at work. The furnished studio she had found was available for three months. After that, she would need somewhere else or an extension the owner had not promised.

"How are you feeling about it?"

"Sad. Worried. Sometimes relieved when we stop discussing it."

"Relieved in what way?"

"We can talk about something else. Have dinner. There are still good evenings."

She asked whether he wanted that to change.

"No."

He answered quickly enough to surprise himself.

"I don't want to have to keep being unhappy about it to remember it matters."

Chen made a note. They talked about the move, his support here, and how he would contact the team if the old pressure began to return. Shah knew the arrangements. Luis and Sam knew when Mara was leaving. Daniel had not organized company for every unoccupied hour, though he had made plans for some of them.

"And the work you were considering?" Chen asked.

He described the trial. It was underway, with enough variation in the early results to make him careful about summarizing them. One afternoon had required more explanation than the others. He had spent most of the previous day reconciling records and asking someone to distinguish a missing observation from a journey that had not happened.

"Are you glad you took it on?"

"Mostly. I miss the other work."

"Both can be useful things to know."

He nodded. He had brought the decision to the appointment as evidence that he could act without first making his life unbearable. He did not want it made into evidence that the treatment could no longer cause a problem.

"I could still do what I did before," he said. "Keep finding good reasons to leave something for later."

"Yes."

"Even with a good outcome here."

"Yes."

He looked at the screen beside her. There was room in the record for the project and the move, though he could imagine both becoming brief examples under a heading that said he was doing well.

"Can we change what we ask about?" he said.

* * *

Chen opened the treatment goals they had agreed before surgery.

Daniel recognized his wish to spend ordinary time without needing to escape it. He remembered how carefully he had described an evening at home, as though enough detail would make someone understand that he was not asking to be entertained forever.

He wanted to keep that goal. He wanted to keep the relief, the easier starts, the ability to stay with a meal or a conversation. He had no wish to cross them out because he had since discovered other difficulties.

"What would you add?" Chen asked.

He had written a sentence on his phone while waiting. He read it now.

"Whether I'm living according to what I value."

She let the words sit for a moment.

"What would we ask you next time?"

"Whether I was."

"And how would you answer?"

Daniel looked at the sentence. It had seemed exact in the waiting room. He could already hear himself explaining how almost anything he had done belonged to something he valued.

"I'd need examples."

"Let's start there."

He described telling Mara he would find out what work would be possible from Oakland. He had spoken to Martin and received part of an answer. His present field responsibilities could not be done entirely at a distance. Some analysis and reporting could, but a permanent arrangement would need approval beyond Martin and might involve a different role. Daniel had asked for the next conversation rather than treating the first uncertainty as a refusal.

"That's something I said I'd do," he said. "Whether I actually do it ought to matter."

"To understanding how you're functioning, yes. It won't tell us by itself what the treatment caused."

"I know."

"And if you change your mind about the commitment?"

He considered that. He had almost made keeping a promise into an easier question than deciding what to promise.

"Then I should say so. Before someone has to ask three times."

They wrote a prompt about commitments he had made, what he had done, and what he had renegotiated. Chen asked for an example he had not handled as well.

He told her about a call he had missed with Sam. They had arranged it while Sam was settling into the smaller apartment. Daniel had become absorbed in a work problem, dismissed the reminder, and looked up too late. He had sent a message the next morning and called that evening. Sam had been irritated. The conversation was still good once they got past Daniel's second apology.

"I could report that I'm maintaining friendships," he said. "It would be true. It would leave out the part where I did something he didn't like."

"Would you want us to count the calls?"

"No. I'd become very good at making calls."

Chen smiled.

They kept the question about relationships open enough to require an account: whether he initiated contact, whether there was room for the other person, what happened when he withdrew or missed something. He did not want Mara asked to provide a weekly assessment. If either of them wanted a conversation with the team, they could arrange it. She had other work to do.

The last addition took longer. He wanted to notice when being comfortable had become a reason not to reconsider an arrangement. He also wanted to be able to leave an arrangement alone without regarding every peaceful afternoon as evidence against himself.

"I could put everything under review all the time," he said.

"What would that cost?"

"Most of the afternoon."

He smiled, then became serious again.

"And I'd still have a reason not to decide anything. I'd be reviewing it."

They settled on returning to particular decisions at times he chose, and asking what information he had sought rather than only how strongly he felt. It was a way to bring examples into the room. It would not make the examples impartial.

Chen turned the screen so he could read the additions. There was no new total at the bottom. A completed work task and an honest conversation could not be exchanged for an improved score in a single column.

"What if I keep these commitments and they're the wrong ones?" he asked.

"We can talk about what makes you think that. Following through tells us something about your capacity. It doesn't establish that every choice was good."

He read the note again. The goals looked less elegant than the sentence on his phone. There were places where he would have to describe what happened.

He asked for a copy.

* * *

Before he left, they returned to the question of care in the Bay Area.

There was still work to do before a transfer could be treated as an arrangement. With his permission, the team would send the relevant records to a service that could assess whether it could support his system. Until anything was accepted, this clinic remained responsible for his follow-up. They distinguished the visits he might make remotely from the checks that required him to be there.

Daniel wrote down who would contact whom. He asked when he should follow up if he had not heard. Earlier, the uncertainties would have been useful to him as a single large obstacle. Now they occupied separate lines, some his to act on and some not.

No one changed the program that day.

Outside, he found a message from Mara asking him to get bread. He bought it from a shop near the bus stop and arrived home a little after one. She had stopped packing and was sitting on the floor, sorting a small collection of cables neither of them could identify.

"Any good?" she asked, looking up.

"The appointment?"

"The bread. Also the appointment."

He put the bag on the table.

"I think so."

Over lunch he told her about the added questions. She listened, then asked whether the clinic would now be checking that he did what he said.

"I'm still the one telling them."

"You're quite persuasive."

"That came up."

She smiled. He explained what they had agreed about the referral and the visits he would still need to make here.

"Does that make moving more possible?"

"It makes the next thing I need to find out more specific."

"Okay."

She took another piece of bread. He wanted to tell her that he had also understood something important about follow-through. Instead he asked whether she had time after lunch to finish the calendar they had started.

* * *

They already had a budget. They had made the first version during the week after she accepted the job, sitting at the table with statements and estimates until both began making mistakes. Since then, unknown amounts had become actual amounts, mostly larger.

Keeping this apartment and paying for the studio was possible for a while. Doing it indefinitely would consume savings they had intended for other things. Mara's new salary helped, but it did not turn two households into one expense.

Daniel opened the revised sheet. Travel was the part they had still been treating optimistically.

"Every other weekend isn't going to look like that," Mara said, pointing to the number.

"Those were the cheaper fares."

"At times we can't go."

He changed the estimate. She added the journeys at either end. The total lost its reassuring shape.

They could alternate some visits. She also needed to see her mother and sister when she came down, and she did not want every

visit to Los Angeles to become a test of how much time she spent alone with him.

"I wouldn't ask that," he said.

Mara looked at him.

He thought about waiting at home while she was out, counting the hours of a weekend he had already imagined belonging to them.

"I might feel it."

"So might I, if you came up and had other things to do. We should still be allowed."

They selected his first visit, three weeks after she began. He would arrive Friday evening and leave Sunday. She checked that it did not coincide with the staff preparation day. He checked the trial schedule and the appointments he had just confirmed.

This time he booked the journey while the dates were open in front of them. The confirmation arrived on both their phones.

Her first visit back would be later. They left two possible weekends pending her work schedule, with a day the following week to choose between them. He disliked how quickly a simple plan produced more decisions. She reached for the last piece of bread and asked him to stop moving the calendar while she was reading it.

They discussed calls. He suggested every evening at the same time. Mara said she would like to speak often, but her first weeks might not keep the same hours.

"I don't want to be late for a call before I've even finished work."

"I don't want us to drift into messages about bills."

"Neither do I."

They chose two evenings to keep clear where possible. On other days they would ask rather than assume. If one could not talk, they would say when they could. It sounded both too formal and less burdensome than requiring the other person to guess.

Then Mara scrolled forward.

"And this?"

She pointed to the blank space where they had written a note about deciding what came next.

* * *

Daniel had suggested waiting until she was settled.

It was what he had written in the first version of their plan. He read it now and could see no event that would make the condition complete. There would be a next class, a housing question, a difficult week that was not the right time.

"Eight weeks after you start," he said.

"To do what?"

"Review where we are. Where I'll live."

"Do you mean decide, or talk about when we might decide?"

He leaned back. She was not speaking harshly. That made it harder to defend himself against the question.

"I need to have the work answer. And the clinic answer."

"What if one of them isn't finished?"

"Then I'll know what's still missing."

She waited.

"And I'll need to say what I want to do with what I know."

"Yes."

He moved to the eighth week and selected the Sunday. There would still be time before her three months in the studio ended. They could talk in person; he would come up for that weekend too. They checked the date against the information they had and put it in both calendars.

He named the entry *Where we live*.

"I don't want to promise an answer just so you'll feel better tonight," he said.

"I don't want that either."

"I might still want to stay."

Mara looked down at her hands.

"I know."

"Would you rather know that now?"

"Is it your answer now?"

He thought about his work, his friends, the rooms around them. He wanted to remain in the life he had made. He also wanted to live with her. For a long time he had treated the second wish as something she could satisfy by surrendering hers.

"It's part of it. I haven't done enough to know whether it's the answer."

She nodded slowly.

"Then do the things you're saying you'll do. Come there. Look at it as somewhere you might live."

"I will."

"And if you decide you're staying, tell me. Don't make me work it out from how long everything takes."

He looked back at the calendar.

"I'm putting a date on it."

"Daniel."

He turned toward her.

"I can see the date. I need you to keep it."

He felt an old resentment at being asked to demonstrate something after he had said it. It passed slowly enough for him to notice. She had not deleted the entry or refused his promise. She was sitting beside him, agreeing to wait until a particular Sunday.

"Yes," he said.

She rested her hand on his leg. They stayed there for a while before returning to the cost of the second visit.

* * *

The van was booked for Thursday. Daniel would drive with Mara, help carry things into the studio, and bring it back on Sunday. The place was furnished, so the load was mostly boxes, clothes, work materials, and objects whose usefulness neither could explain to the other without making them sound less necessary.

He wanted her to take the better lamp. She wanted him to keep it because he read in the chair beside it. They argued gently until she said she liked the smaller one anyway, and he let her.

The tall gray-green ceramic piece was on the low table. Daniel picked it up while looking for a place to set a roll of tape.

"This is going?"

"Yes."

He held it a moment longer than he needed to.

"I'll find something to wrap it in."

Mara watched him go to the cupboard. When he returned, she was holding the bowl they used for keys.

"This stays," she said.

He had not asked. He was grateful she had told him.

They packed the ceramic piece in a separate box, then tried to locate the tape he had put down. It was beneath a sheet of paper. He closed the flaps and wrote *Mara—fragile* on top.

"A bit personal," she said.

He looked at the label and laughed. She took the pen, crossed out her name, and wrote *green thing*.

"That's less useful."

"You know which one."

He carried it to the growing row by the door.

That evening, Sam sent a photograph of his desk in the new apartment. It fitted beside the window, though a drawer could open only if he moved his chair all the way back. Daniel asked how the room was at night. Sam replied that he was learning which sounds belonged to the upstairs neighbor and which were his refrigerator.

They exchanged a few more messages. Sam asked about the move. Daniel gave him the dates and said he would call when he was back. He put in a reminder before returning to the packing.

Mara had finished a box of clothes. She was sitting on the floor beside it, trying to close the flaps over one last sweater.

"It could go in another box," he said.

"It could."

Neither moved. He sat down beside her and took the sweater. He folded it differently, tried it in the gap, and found that his version was larger.

She leaned against him, laughing without much sound.

He put the sweater on his lap. There were other boxes. They had time to finish this one after sitting for a while.

20 - Another Saturday

At four, Daniel put the clean sheets on the bed.

He had washed both pillowcases, though only one needed it. He shook them out, found the corners, and worked the pillows into them. Mara's side looked as it had before she left. His looked briefly better than it usually did.

There were still clothes of hers in the wardrobe. They had decided there was no point taking everything to a place she would occupy for three months. A coat hung beside his jackets. On the shelf above it, a bag held things she had meant to sort and then left because they were running out of time.

He shut the door. It caught slightly before closing. He had been meaning to look at the hinge.

In the living room, the low table seemed large without the green ceramic piece. He had put a magazine in the space, then moved it because it looked as though he was concealing something. Now the magazine lay on the couch, where it was in the way when he wanted to sit down.

He picked it up and put it back on the table.

The afternoon had been ordinary. Groceries, laundry, a walk longer than the errand required. He had eaten lunch standing in the kitchen, then sat down to finish it after noticing that he was free to use the table. There had been no reason for the standing. He had simply begun that way.

He was tired of noticing.

For much of the week he had recorded the apartment's small differences as if someone would ask him to account for the move. One glass beside the sink. No bag waiting for her near the door. The absence of a second person deciding whether a window should be open. He could describe these things to Mara, but she had an unfamiliar stove, keys that looked alike, a room whose light switches

she still reached for in the wrong places. She was doing her own noticing.

He sat down and opened the magazine. There was an article about a man who had restored a house. Daniel read two pages before discovering that he disliked the house and had no interest in how it had been restored.

He closed it.

The next several hours were his. There was food to cook, a book he could read, a film he might watch. None of them seemed particularly desirable. He could feel the old habit of examining the possibilities for the one that would change his condition most decisively.

He looked at the time, then put the phone down.

It was an unpromising stretch of afternoon. He did not yet know what the evening would be.

* * *

They had driven north on Thursday of the previous week.

The van made a sound at higher speeds that Daniel initially thought was an unsecured box. They stopped, checked the load, and discovered nothing loose enough to explain it. Mara found the same complaint in a discussion about that model and read it aloud while he stood beside the open rear doors.

"So it's meant to do it," he said.

"It's known to do it."

She was smiling. They bought coffee and continued.

The studio was up a flight of stairs narrower than either remembered from the photographs. A corner of the box marked *kitchen* struck the wall on the way up. The lamp survived. One book acquired a bent cover. Mara put it beneath a heavier book and went back downstairs.

For two days, Daniel had work to do that put him beside her. He carried, unpacked, checked what they had forgotten. He found the grocery store while she went to collect something from the center. They ate from the plates supplied with the studio, which were larger than the cupboard shelf and had to be stored at an angle.

On Friday evening they walked to the old school. The doors were locked. Mara showed him the side entrance she would use and the route from there to the little office he had seen in photographs.

He could not see the office from the street. He could see the high windows and a length of hose coiled beside a gate. She stood with one hand on the railing, looking at the building as though she had an appointment with someone inside.

On Sunday, leaving had taken longer than the packing.

He had checked the studio for his charger three times. Mara had asked whether he wanted something to eat before the drive. Neither was hungry. At the door he kissed her, stepped back, and then kissed her again.

"Call when you're back," she said.

"I will."

He had called. He had also called Sam, as he said he would. Luis had met him for dinner on Tuesday. Work had occupied the days without removing what happened at their edges.

Now it was Saturday. The charger was plugged in beside his bed. Mara had sent a photograph of the bent book beneath a large volume about local birds. He had replied that the treatment seemed appropriately supervised.

She had not answered yet. That did not tell him what she was doing.

* * *

He put on music while he folded the towels.

One of them had shrunk unevenly and would no longer make a rectangle. He turned it over, tried again, and then folded the loose edge inside. He could hear himself approaching a satisfactory account of the scene: a man able to fold towels in an empty apartment. He put them away before making more of it.

Under his shirt, near the collarbone, the controller remained a shape he could find with his fingers. The system was active. He had done nothing to its settings since the clinic restored the program. There was no moment that afternoon when he felt it intervene. There

had been many moments he could remain in without the work that remaining once required.

He was grateful for that. He also wanted Mara to come through the door.

The music ended. He left it off and made tea.

He had almost finished the cup when she called.

"You look very serious," she said.

He moved the phone farther away from his face.

"I was trying to work out where to put you."

"Somewhere flattering."

He propped it against a book. On the screen, she was sitting at the little table beneath the studio window. He could see the lamp he had carried and the corner of the cupboard with the plates. A cloth he did not recognize covered part of the table.

"You bought something," he said.

"A tea towel. The table's sticky."

"We cleaned it."

"I know. It recovers."

He laughed. She moved the phone to show him an envelope stuck briefly to the surface before she pulled it free.

"How was today?" he asked.

"I went in for an hour."

"Was it an hour?"

"No."

She had meant to find one file and had stayed to help label cupboards with two of the instructors. One had objected to the labels because they named materials rather than the people allowed to use them. Mara had thought that was an advantage until he showed her the box of tools he had paid for himself.

"So we took some of them off," she said. "Then we had to find somewhere else for the things that actually belong to everyone."

"Did you?"

"Mostly. I've spent a surprising amount of my first week carrying tape."

He wanted to tell her she was good at this. He had told her on Monday, on Wednesday, and again after she described a difficult

conversation on Thursday. She knew his opinion. He asked whether the instructor had found a cupboard that locked.

"Yes. Unfortunately, nobody knows where the key is."

She smiled, then looked away from the screen. Someone outside had said something. Daniel heard her answer and saw a hand appear at the edge of the open window, holding a small parcel.

"Sorry," she said when she returned. "For the owner. It was left downstairs."

"Who was that?"

"The woman next door. I met her yesterday. She has a cat she says doesn't come in here."

"Does it?"

"I found it on the bed."

He tried to picture the woman from the hand. It was strange to have missed the introduction and ordinary that he should have. Mara put the parcel on the floor.

"What else?" he asked.

She told him about lunch with Ruth, the coordinator's paperwork, a walk home in which she had followed the wrong street far enough to find a shop she liked. She was tired. She had cried one evening after dropping a pan lid, and the person downstairs had knocked to ask whether everything was all right. She had said she was fine, then cried again because someone had asked.

"You didn't tell me."

"I'm telling you now."

He nodded. He wanted the delay to mean she had protected him. It might mean she had gone on with her evening and was now describing it.

"I wish I'd been there."

"So do I."

They were quiet for a moment.

"Do you want me to come sooner?" he asked.

"I want you to come when we planned. I've been looking forward to it."

He had too. There were two weeks until the visit. The date was still in the calendar, along with the later Sunday on which they would need to say more than that they missed each other.

"What about you?" she asked.

He told her about the laundry and the house in the magazine. He described a conversation with Nina that had begun as a question about the trial and ended with a video from her father. Mara laughed at the part about the subtitles, which now included corrections to a date printed on the original recording.

"And being there?" she asked.

He looked around the apartment.

"Sometimes it's all right. Then I remember you aren't about to get home."

Mara lowered her eyes. He could see the top of her head and the loose part of her hair that would not stay behind her ear.

"I miss you," he said.

"I miss you too."

For once he did not ask the sentence to tell him anything else.

* * *

She had arranged to meet Ruth for dinner. When it was time to go, she picked up the phone and carried him to the mirror while she found an earring.

For a minute he saw only a patch of ceiling and the top of a cupboard. Then her face returned, closer than before.

"There."

"Both?"

"Both."

He told her to have a good dinner. She said they would speak the next day and ended the call while he was still looking at her.

The screen showed his own face for an instant before it went dark.

He carried the cup to the kitchen. The tea had gone cold. He drank the last of it anyway, rinsed the cup, and stood looking at the cupboard where the plates were.

He had enjoyed the call. He felt worse after it.

He opened the refrigerator and closed it without taking anything out. Then he checked his phone, though he knew she would be getting ready to leave. He could spend an hour doing this: moving through the apartment, waiting for a second conversation to repair the end of the first.

He sat down.

There was no sharp change. His chest felt heavy. He could hear the refrigerator and a pair of shoes crossing the courtyard below. He wanted the evening to advance to a point at which he would be tired enough for bed.

After a while he got up and washed the few things left in the sink. When he finished, he was still sad, and the dishes were clean.

He took out the vegetables he had bought. He was considering what to make when a message arrived from Sam.

Are you around tonight?

Daniel called him.

* * *

"I don't need anything dramatic," Sam said.

"What do you need?"

"To be somewhere I haven't been all day."

"You could come here."

There was a pause.

"That would be good."

Daniel asked whether he had eaten. He had not. He asked whether anything had happened, and Sam said he had spent the afternoon reading a draft agreement from his wife's lawyer.

"Nothing surprising," he said. "I thought that would make it less unpleasant."

"Are you all right to get here?"

"Yes. I haven't used. I'm miserable and extremely well informed about which things belong to me."

Daniel looked toward the living room. It was already untidy. There was no need to prepare it for company beyond moving the laundry basket from the chair.

"Come over. I'm making food."

"What?"

"I haven't committed to anything yet."

"Then you're ahead of me."

They ended the call. Daniel took out another plate and began cutting an onion. He had enough food for two. Until that moment, the quantity had seemed like evidence that he had shopped badly.

Sam arrived while the rice was cooking. He brought oranges in a paper bag and said he had no explanation for them.

"You don't need one."

"Good. I thought you'd ask."

He set them down and looked toward the living room. Daniel saw him notice the empty part of the table.

"How is she?"

"Tired. I think she's liking it."

"Good."

Sam took off his jacket. He had been to the apartment often enough to know where to put it. He laid it over the back of the chair and followed Daniel into the kitchen.

"Can I do something?"

"Those."

Daniel pointed to the carrots. Sam washed them, asked how small to cut them, and then cut them larger than Daniel had meant. Daniel adjusted the heat under the pan.

* * *

They ate with the window open.

Sam began by telling him about work. A client had sent him an old version of a video with instructions to make it match a newer version the client had also sent. He had asked whether they wanted the newer version and received a long reply beginning with the word *simply*.

"That's never good," Daniel said.

"It means I'm about to be told how easy my job is."

They talked about that for a while. Daniel could feel how pleasant it was to be annoyed by something that belonged to neither his

marriage nor the clinic. Sam ate quickly, then slowed when he reached the carrots.

"These could have used longer," he said.

"The pieces were large."

"Unfortunate."

Daniel smiled. Sam put down his fork.

"I keep thinking there's a mistake in it."

Daniel waited.

"The agreement. A number, a thing we forgot. Something I can point to so we have to talk again."

"Did you find anything?"

"A spelling mistake in my middle name."

He looked at his plate.

"I got quite excited."

Daniel began to smile, then saw that Sam was not smiling.

"Sorry."

"It is funny. Just not much."

There were still questions Sam needed answered. He had made a list for his own lawyer and then a second list that consisted mostly of things no lawyer could answer. He had kept the two documents open beside each other all afternoon.

"We were going to do this without making it awful," he said. "I think we are. I can't complain about anything she's asked for."

He moved his glass away from the edge of the table.

"I thought there would be more of a difference between doing it well and doing it badly."

Daniel wanted to tell him that there was, that he would be glad later. He did not know how Sam would feel later. He knew how little a description of a worse afternoon would improve this one.

"What was on the second list?" he asked.

Sam looked at him for a long moment.

"Whether she ever misses it."

"Being together?"

"Things about it. I don't mean she should come back. I know I say that and then talk as if that's what I mean."

"You can mean more than one thing."

"Apparently I can mean about twelve."

He picked up his fork, then put it down again.

Daniel thought of telling him about the end of the call with Mara. There was something familiar in the desire to ask an absent person what they had retained. He could offer the resemblance, but Sam had just begun describing his own afternoon.

He asked whether they had spoken.

Sam said they had exchanged messages. She had asked him to take his time reading and to send any questions through the lawyers for now.

"Which is sensible," he said. "I'm having a terrible time with sensible people."

This time he smiled. Daniel smiled back.

* * *

After dinner, Daniel made coffee and Sam chose an orange.

He peeled it in one long, ragged strip, leaving pieces of pith on the fruit. Daniel found a small plate for the peel. They sat in the living room with their cups beside the magazine.

For a while they discussed the novel Sam had lent him. Daniel had finished it during the week. He disliked the ending, which seemed to make the brother's secrecy more interesting than the people who had lived with it.

"That's why I wanted you to read it," Sam said.

"You could have told me."

"You'd have argued without reading it."

"Now I've read it and we agree."

"A waste of everyone's time."

Daniel laughed. Sam held out the plate with half the orange still on it. He took a segment.

The conversation wandered. There were intervals in which neither spoke. Sam looked tired in a way Daniel had not noticed when he first came in. He had eaten, told part of the story, and stopped trying to make each silence end before it became noticeable.

Daniel was tired too. He thought about the clean sheets. It was not late, but he could imagine the pleasure of closing the door after a visitor and having no more questions to answer.

Then Sam said, "She used to leave notes in books."

Daniel turned toward him.

"Your wife?"

"Shopping lists, mostly. Things to remember. Never anything to do with the book. I found one when I was packing. Six things to buy and a phone number with no name."

"Did you recognize it?"

"The number? No."

Sam rubbed a piece of orange pith between his fingers.

"I put it back. Then I couldn't remember which book."

From the courtyard came the sound of the gate, followed by footsteps. Daniel looked toward the window. A neighbor called to someone above them. He returned his attention to Sam, who was asking whether he could have some water.

"Of course."

He took the cups to the kitchen and filled a glass. He left the cups beside the sink. When he came back, Sam had begun gathering the peel onto the small plate.

"I should let you have your evening," he said.

"You can stay a little."

Sam looked at the window. Then he set the plate down.

"All right."

Daniel handed him the water and sat back in the chair. There was a question he had nearly asked before going to the kitchen. He found it again.

"What were the six things?"

Sam frowned, trying to remember. Daniel waited while he counted them on his fingers.