Beyond the Words

Stories of Life, Love and Everything In Between

A collection of stories to read, feel and remember

Amor. E.

A Dedication

This book carries a little piece of me.

My thoughts, my ideas, my emotions and fragments of my life — all woven into stories and placed in your hands.

I hope you find something of yourself between these pages. Perhaps a feeling, a thought, a memory or a lesson. I hope you smile, laugh, reflect, and maybe even shed a tear or two.

Most of all, I hope these stories leave something meaningful with you.

And to that one girl who once crossed my path and taught me one of life's biggest and hardest lessons:

You may never know it, but you did me a great favour.

Some people come into our lives for reasons we only understand much later.

Amor. E.

A Few Words Before You Begin

Some stories entertain us. Others remind us of someone, take us back to a moment we thought we had forgotten, or help us see our own lives from a different angle.

The stories in this book are little journeys through ordinary and extraordinary moments: unexpected meetings, quiet acts of kindness, missed trains, new friendships and the choices that shape us.

They are written to be enjoyed first. Along the way, I hope they also give you new words, useful expressions and opportunities to practise your English. You do not have to understand every word to feel a story. Read, imagine, question and let the characters take you somewhere.

Most of all, remember that life is not only about what we achieve. It is also about the people we meet, the moments we notice and the feelings we allow ourselves to experience.

I hope you enjoy the journey.

Amor. E.

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The stories are arranged from A1–A2 to C1. Read at your own pace, enjoy the stories first, and let the language grow with you.

Story One

The Map in the Old Book

A1–A2



It is a sunny Saturday morning. Emma loves adventures. She loves travelling, taking photos and discovering new places. Today, she visits a small **bookshop** in an old village. The shop is full of books, old maps and interesting things.

Emma finds a beautiful old book. It has a brown **cover** and a small golden star on it. “How much is this book?” she asks the **shopkeeper**. “Only two pounds,” he says with a smile.

Emma buys the book and sits outside the shop. She opens it **carefully**. Suddenly, a small piece of paper falls out. It is a map! There is a picture of a tree, a river and a little bridge. At the bottom, someone has written: Follow the river. Find the old tree. Your surprise is waiting.

Emma smiles. “This looks like a

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bookshop · *книжный магазин* — a shop that sells books
cover · *обложка* — the outside part of a book
shopkeeper · *продавец* — a person who owns or works in a shop
carefully · *осторожно* — in a way that avoids damage

treasure hunt!" She takes her backpack and starts walking.

First, she finds the **river**. The water is clear, and little ducks are swimming in it. She follows a small path next to the river. After twenty minutes, she sees an old wooden **bridge**.

"One more **clue**!" she says excitedly. She crosses the bridge and walks into a beautiful green field. There are flowers everywhere.

Emma sees a big tree near a small hill. It is very old, with a wide **trunk** and long branches. She looks around its **roots**. Nothing. She looks behind the tree. Nothing.

Then she sees a small red box under a pile of leaves. Inside, there is a photograph, a little silver key and a note. The photograph shows two children standing next to the same tree, smiling and holding a red box.



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treasure hunt · *поиск сокровищ* — a game where you look for hidden things
river · *река* — a long area of flowing water
bridge · *мост* — a structure you cross over water or a road
clue · *подсказка* — a piece of information that helps you
trunk · *ствол* — the main thick part of a tree
roots · *корни* — the parts of a tree under the ground

Emma reads the note: Dear **explorer**, if you find this box, you are part of our adventure! We **hid** it here many years ago. We hope you are having a wonderful day. Now, take the key to the little house at the end of the field.

Emma laughs. “An adventure inside an adventure!” She follows a **narrow** path and finds a tiny wooden house. The door is open. Inside, there is a table with a basket of apples, biscuits and another note.

Congratulations! You found our **secret** picnic place. Please enjoy the food! Emma looks around. Then she hears someone laughing outside. Two older people are standing near the door.

“Hello!” says the woman. “Did you find our treasure?” Emma looks at them. “Wait! Are you the children in the photograph?”

The man laughs. “Yes! That was a long time ago. We made this treasure hunt when we were children. We sometimes leave the map in the bookshop for someone to find.”

Emma can’t believe it. “So you planned all this?” “Of course!” says the woman. “Would you like to **join** us for a picnic?”

Emma smiles. “That would be **lovely**!” They sit together, eat apples and biscuits, and **share** stories. Emma tells them about her travels. They tell her about their **childhood adventures**.

Before she leaves, the woman gives Emma a small notebook. “Now it’s your turn,” she says. “Make your own treasure hunt. Someone else might find it one day.”

Emma looks at the notebook and smiles. She came to the village to buy a book. But she found something much better: a wonderful adventure and two new friends.

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explorer · *исследователь* — a person who discovers places
hide · *прятать* — put something where it cannot be seen
narrow · *узкий* — not wide
congratulations · *поздравления* — words said when someone has done well
secret · *секрет* — something not known by everyone
join · *присоединиться* — take part with others
lovely · *чудесный* — very nice or pleasant
share · *делиться* — give or enjoy something with others
childhood · *детство* — the time when someone was a child
adventure · *приключение* — an exciting or unusual experience

A Note from the Author

Adventure isn't always about travelling far away or discovering something valuable. Sometimes, the best adventures begin with a little curiosity — and end with new friends.

Questions to Reflect On

1. Where does Emma find the old book?
2. What falls out of the book?
3. What does Emma find under the old tree?
4. Who are the two people in the photograph?
5. What do they invite Emma to do?
6. If you could create your own treasure hunt, where would you hide the treasure?

Story Two

The Woman at the Bus Stop

A1–A2

It is a cold Friday evening in London. The sky is grey, and it is raining. Daniel is walking home from work. He is **tired**. He wants to go home, make some tea and watch television.

At the **bus stop**, he sees an old woman. She is sitting **alone**. She has a small blue bag and a red **umbrella**, but she is not using it. Daniel looks at her. She looks sad.

"Excuse me, are you all right?" he asks. The woman smiles a little. "Yes, thank you. I am just **waiting for** the bus." Daniel looks at the road. There are no buses.

"Which bus are you waiting for?" he asks. "Number 24," she says. "I want to visit my husband."

Daniel smiles. "That's nice. Does he live near here?" The woman looks down at her hands.

"No, dear. He died last year. But I visit his **grave** every Friday. Today is our wedding **anniversary**." Daniel doesn't know what to say.

He looks at the woman again. She is holding a small **photograph**. In it, she is young and beautiful. A man is standing next to her. They are both laughing.

"That's my husband, Arthur," she says. "We were very happy." Daniel sits down next to her. "How long were you **married**?" he asks.

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tired · *уставший* — needing rest
bus stop · *автобусная остановка* — a place where buses pick up passengers
alone · *один* — without other people
umbrella · *зонт* — something used to keep rain off
wait for · *ждать* — stay until someone or something comes
grave · *могила* — a place where a dead person is buried
anniversary · *годовщина* — a date remembered every year
photograph · *фотография* — a picture taken with a camera
married · *женат / замужем* — having a husband or wife



“Fifty-two years,” she says. “He always waited for me at this bus stop after work. Every Friday, he was here with flowers.” She looks at the photograph and smiles. “Sometimes, I still **expect** to see him.”

Daniel feels a little sad. He thinks about his own life. He is always busy. He works late, forgets to call his parents and often says, “Maybe tomorrow.”

The bus arrives. Daniel stands up and **offers** the woman his arm. “Would you like some **company**?” he asks. “I can come with you.”

The woman looks **surprised**. “Are you sure? You must be tired.” “I am,” Daniel says, “but I have time.” They get on the bus together.

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expect · *ожидать* — think something will happen
offer · *предлагать* — say you are willing to do something
company · *общество* — being with another person
surprised · *удивлённый* — feeling something unexpected

During the **journey**, the woman tells him about Arthur. She talks about their first date, their little house and the music they loved. Daniel **listens**. He doesn't look at his phone. He doesn't think about work.

When they arrive, the rain stops. The woman gets off the bus and turns to Daniel.

"Thank you, young man. You **remind** me that there are still **kind** people in the world." Daniel smiles. "And you remind me that I should **make more time for** the people I love."

The woman **waves goodbye**. On his way home, Daniel takes out his phone. He calls his mother.

"Hello, Mum. It's me. Are you free on Sunday? I'd love to **visit**." And for the first time in a long time, he doesn't say, "Maybe tomorrow."

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journey · *поездка* — a trip from one place to another
listen · *слушать* — give attention to sounds or words
remind · *напоминать* — help someone remember
kind · *добрый* — caring and helpful
make time for · *найти время для* — find time to do something for someone
wave goodbye · *махать на прощание* — move your hand to say goodbye
visit · *навещать* — go and spend time with someone

A Note from the Author

Sometimes, a small moment with a stranger can remind us of the biggest things in life. We don't always need to do something extraordinary to make a difference. Sometimes, we only need to stop, listen and be there.

Questions to Reflect On

1. Where does Daniel meet the old woman?
2. Where does the woman want to go?
3. How long were she and Arthur married?
4. What did Arthur do every Friday?
5. Why does Daniel decide to go with her?
6. Have you ever had a moment that changed the way you think?

Story Three

The Other Side of the Window

B1

Mia had lived in the same **block of flats** for nearly three years. She knew the familiar groan of the lift, the smell of the bakery downstairs and the woman who came in to clean the stairwell every Monday. Yet she barely knew any of her neighbours.

Her days were **packed**. Work, **errands**, messages, deadlines — one thing followed another until evening arrived and she could hardly remember what she had done with the day. She was building the career she had always wanted, but lately she had begun to wonder whether a successful life was necessarily a happy one.

Every morning, while drinking her coffee, Mia **glanced** through her kitchen window. Across the courtyard, in the opposite block, an elderly man sat beside his window. Some mornings he read the newspaper; on others he watered a small plant or watched the world **go by** with a faint smile.

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block of flats · *многоквартирный дом* — a building divided into separate homes
packed · *плотный, забитый делами* — very full or busy
errands · *мелкие дела, поручения* — short journeys to do necessary tasks
glance · *взглянуть* — look quickly
go by · *проходить мимо* — pass (people, things or time)



Without ever speaking to him, Mia had started to recognise his presence. He had become a small, familiar part of her mornings.

Then, one rainy Tuesday, she noticed that his curtains were drawn. The plant on the windowsill looked **neglected**, and the old man was nowhere to be seen. The following morning, the window was still empty.

She found herself glancing across the courtyard several times that day. It was odd, she thought, to feel **concerned** about someone whose name she didn't even know.

At lunch, she mentioned him to her colleague Sophie. "Why don't you **pop over** and knock on his door?" Sophie suggested. Mia laughed. "Me? I don't even know the man." "Well, you won't get to know him by **staring** at his window."

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neglected · *запущенный* — not given enough care or attention
concerned · *обеспокоенный* — worried about someone or something
pop over · *зайти ненадолго* — visit briefly and informally
stare · *пристально смотреть* — look for a long time

The **remark** stayed with Mia longer than she expected.

That evening, she crossed the courtyard and climbed the stairs to the third floor. Outside the man's flat, she **hesitated**. She had almost convinced herself that the whole idea was ridiculous.

What if he found her **intrusive**? What if he simply wanted to be left alone? Before she could **talk herself out of** it, she knocked.

After a moment, the door opened. A small, grey-haired man stood in the doorway, looking rather surprised.

"Hello. I'm Mia. I live in the building opposite yours. I hope you don't mind me asking, but I haven't seen you at your window for a few days. I just wanted to make sure everything was all right." For a second, he studied her face. Then his expression softened.

"That's very **thoughtful** of you. Do come in." His name was Peter. He explained that he'd been **laid up** with a nasty cold and had spent several days resting.

Inside, Mia noticed photographs covering one wall. In one, Peter stood beside a pretty seaside **cottage**, holding a fishing rod and laughing.

"Do you travel much?" she asked. "I used to travel whenever I could. I've been to twenty-three countries, although I still **reckon** the little village where I grew up is **hard to beat**."

He pointed to another photograph. "I was an absolutely hopeless fisherman, mind you. I once spent six hours by a lake and came home with an old shoe. My wife still **takes the mickey** out of me for that."

Mia laughed. There was something **refreshing** about his way of telling a story. He didn't seem to be in a hurry to get anywhere. "I'd love to hear more about your adventures," she said. "Then you'll have to pop round again." She stayed for twenty minutes and promised to visit again.

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remark · *замечание* — something someone says
hesitate · *колебаться* — pause because you are unsure
intrusive · *навязчивый* — too involved in someone's private life
talk yourself out of · *отговорить себя* — persuade yourself not to do something
thoughtful · *заботливый, чуткий* — kind and considerate
laid up · *слечь из-за болезни* — unable to go out because of illness
cottage · *домик* — a small house, often in the countryside
reckon · *считать, полагать* — think or believe (informal British)
hard to beat · *трудно превзойти* — very good; difficult to improve on
take the mickey · *подшучивать* — make fun of someone (British informal)
refreshing · *приятно необычный* — pleasantly different or new

The following Sunday, Mia returned with a small cake. Peter was delighted. Before long, their Sunday visits became a **regular** thing. Sometimes they chatted over tea; sometimes they listened to music or sat quietly while the afternoon light moved across the room.



Peter told her about his travels, the mistakes he'd made and the people he'd met along the way. Mia, in turn, spoke about her work, her **ambitions** and the hobbies she had gradually **given up** because she was always "too busy".

One afternoon, Peter put down his cup and looked at her. "Mia, can I ask you something?" "Of course." "Are you happy?" The question **caught her off guard**. "Why do you ask?"

"You talk a lot about your work, your plans and all the things you need to get done. But I don't hear you mention the things you actually enjoy." Mia stared into her tea. Her first **instinct** was to **laugh it off**, or give him the easy answer. Instead, she found herself telling the truth.

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regular · *регулярный* — happening often or at fixed times
ambition · *стремление* — a strong desire to achieve something
give up · *бросить* — stop doing something
catch someone off guard · *застать врасплох* — surprise someone
instinct · *инстинкт* — a natural feeling or reaction
laugh something off · *отшутиться* — treat something serious as a joke

“I’m not sure. I think I’ve been so busy trying to build a good life that I’ve forgotten to enjoy it.” Peter nodded. “That happens to more people than you might think. We spend so much time **chasing** the next thing that we **fail to notice** what we’ve already got.”

Mia smiled **faintly**. “So how do you find the balance?” Peter considered this for a moment. “I don’t think you have to choose between a successful career and a happy life. Your work can be important without being the only thing that **matters**. Don’t let it take up every bit of space.”

“And what if there isn’t enough time?” Mia asked. Peter **chuckled**. “Then perhaps you need to stop giving all your time away!” They both laughed.

On her way home, Mia stopped at the bakery, bought some fresh bread and took the longer route through the park. She called an old friend she had **been meaning to catch up with** for months.

That evening, she stood by her kitchen window again. Across the courtyard, Peter was in his chair. He raised his hand, and she waved back. For the first time **in ages**, the city seemed a little less lonely.

She had spent nearly three years looking through windows, watching other people’s lives. It had taken one knock on a door to realise she could be part of them. Perhaps the most important thing she had learned was that she didn’t have to wait until she had **achieved** everything she’d dreamed of before enjoying the life she already had.

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chase · *гнаться за* — try hard to get something
fail to notice · *не заметить* — not see or realise something
faintly · *едва заметно* — slightly or quietly
matter · *иметь значение* — be important
chuckle · *усмехнуться* — laugh quietly
be meaning to · *давно собираться сделать* — have planned to do something for some time
catch up with · *пообщаться после долгого перерыва* — talk after not seeing someone for a while
in ages · *целую вечность* — for a very long time (informal)
achieve · *достичь* — succeed in doing something

A Note from the Author

We often spend years building the life we dream about, promising ourselves that one day we'll slow down and enjoy it. But life isn't waiting for that day. Work hard. Dream big. Build your future. But don't forget to enjoy the little moments along the way. Your career is part of your life. Don't let it become your whole life.

Questions to Reflect On

1. Why did Mia feel lonely despite having a busy life?
2. What stopped her from visiting Peter at first?
3. What did Peter teach Mia about balancing work and life?
4. Do you think professional success and personal happiness can go together?
5. Have you ever been so busy that you forgot to enjoy the little things?
6. If you could change one thing about your daily routine to make your life happier, what would it be?

Story Four

One Day, No Plans

B1



Oliver was the sort of person who liked everything to be organised. His work calendar was **colour-coded**, his shopping list was divided into categories and even his weekends came with a schedule. His friends regularly **took the mickey** out of him, claiming he probably planned his holidays six months in advance. They weren't far off.

On Saturday morning, he was due to attend an important meeting in another town. He got up early, put on his best shirt, checked his documents twice and **set off**. He arrived at the station with twenty minutes

colour-coded · *обозначенный разными цветами* — marked with colours to organise information
take the mickey · *подшучивать* — make fun of someone (British informal)
set off · *отправиться в путь* — start a journey

to spare. For once, everything seemed to be going exactly to plan. Then he glanced at the **departure board**. His train had been cancelled.

"You're having a laugh," he muttered, staring at the screen. He checked the notice again, just in case he had read it wrong. He hadn't.

Oliver **rang** the office. The meeting had been **rearranged** for Monday, which meant there was no longer any reason to travel that day. He stood on the platform, ticket in hand, wondering what to do next. He could head home, **catch up on** emails, tidy the flat and get a **head start** on Monday.

Or he could do something he would never normally consider. Across the platform, a train to Brighton was due to leave in five minutes. He had never been there, despite living only an hour away. Before he had time to **overthink** it, he bought a ticket and jumped aboard.

"Well," he said to himself, "that's not in the diary." An hour later, he stepped out into the fresh sea air. The sun was shining, children were playing on the beach and people were lingering outside cafés. He bought a coffee and found a bench overlooking the sea. For the first time in weeks, there was nowhere he had to be.

Just as he was beginning to relax, a small dog **dashed** towards him and **snatched** a biscuit from his bag. "Oi! That's my breakfast!" A woman hurried over, clearly embarrassed.

"Charlie! Come back here. I'm so sorry — he's friendly enough, but he hasn't got the slightest idea of personal boundaries." Oliver laughed. "Don't worry. I think we've just been introduced."

The woman introduced herself as Lucy. She was a photographer and had come to Brighton for the day with Charlie. They **got chatting**, and Lucy mentioned a little street market nearby where local artists sold handmade

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to spare · *в запасе* — extra time available
departure board · *табло отправлений* — screen showing train times
ring · *звонить* — phone someone (British English)
rearranged · *перенесённый* — changed to a different time or date
catch up on · *наверстать* — do something you have not had time to do
head start · *фора* — an advantage from starting early
overthink · *слишком много обдумывать* — think about something too much
dash · *мчаться* — run or move quickly
snatch · *схватить* — take something quickly
get chatting · *разговориться* — start talking informally

gifts, paintings and jewellery. “You should **have a look**,” she said. “It’s just round the corner. There’s usually something going on.”

Oliver glanced at his watch **out of habit**. Then he slipped it into his pocket. “Why not?”

The market was **buzzing**. Musicians were playing guitars, children were weaving between the stalls and the smell of freshly baked bread filled the air. Oliver stopped at a table covered with postcards. One showed a mountain lake surrounded by tall trees.

“I’ve always **fancied** going somewhere like this,” he said. “What’s stopping you?” Lucy asked. Oliver shrugged. “Work, responsibilities, money. The usual excuses, I suppose.”

Lucy smiled. “We all do it. We keep **putting things off** until the timing is perfect. The trouble is, perfect timing has a habit of never **turning up**.” Her words **struck a chord** with him.

They wandered around the market, bought ice cream and watched a street performer juggling three bright orange balls. Charlie tried to steal a piece of someone’s sandwich and was politely told off.

Later, Lucy invited Oliver to join a small group **heading out** on a boat trip along the coast. Oliver **hesitated**. He didn’t know anyone, hadn’t planned to spend money on a boat trip and had no idea when he would get back. The sensible thing would have been to say no. He could almost hear his usual excuses lining up.

But he surprised himself. “All right. **I’m in**.” The boat was small, the sea a brilliant blue and the wind stronger than he had expected. Everyone laughed as the boat rose and **dipped** over the waves.

Oliver took off his jacket, closed his eyes and **let the sunshine warm** his face. He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so free. For once, he

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have a look · *взглянуть* — look at something
out of habit · *по привычке* — because you usually do it
buzzing · *оживлённый* — full of activity and excitement (British informal)
fancy · *хотеть* — want or like the idea of something (British informal)
put something off · *откладывать* — delay doing something
turn up · *появиться* — arrive or appear
strike a chord · *найти отклик* — make someone feel emotionally connected
head out · *направиться* — leave to go somewhere
hesitate · *колебаться* — pause because you are unsure
I’m in · *я согласен / я в деле* — I agree to take part (informal)
dip · *опускаться* — move down
let the sunshine warm · *дать солнцу согреть* — allow the sun’s warmth to be felt

wasn't checking the time or thinking about what came next.



In the late afternoon, Oliver and Lucy sat on the beach. "Do you know what's funny?" he said. "Go on." "This morning I was **fuming** because my train was cancelled. I thought the whole day was **a write-off**." "And now?" "Now I **reckon** it was the best thing that could have happened."

Lucy smiled. "Maybe you needed a day with no plans." They **exchanged numbers** and agreed to meet again. On the train home, Oliver looked out of the window. His phone was full of work messages, but he **resisted the urge** to check them straight away.

Instead, he took out the postcard of the mountain lake and **turned it over**. He wrote: Dear future Oliver, stop waiting for the **perfect moment**. Book the trip. Call your friends. Try something new. Life is happening now, not when your

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fuming · *в ярости* — extremely angry (British informal)
a write-off · *полный провал* — something considered a complete failure
reckon · *полагать* — think or believe (British informal)
exchange numbers · *обменяться номерами* — give each other phone numbers
resist the urge · *удержаться от желания* — stop yourself from doing something
turn over · *перевернуть* — move something so that the other side is up
perfect moment · *идеальный момент* — the ideal time for something

calendar is finally empty.



He smiled and **slipped the postcard into** his bag. When he got home, he opened his calendar. For the following Saturday, he wrote just three words: DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT. And, **for once**, he decided not to plan what that meant.

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calendar · *календарь* — a system for organising dates
slip into · *положить, сунуть* — put something into a place easily
for once · *на этот раз, в кои-то веки* — on this occasion, unlike usual

A Note from the Author

Sometimes, the best moments in life are not part of the plan. We spend so much time organising tomorrow that we forget to enjoy today. You don't have to give up your ambitions or responsibilities. Just leave a little room for the unexpected. Sometimes, a wrong turn can take you exactly where you need to be.

Questions to Reflect On

1. Why was Oliver upset at the beginning of the story?
2. What made him decide to travel to Brighton?
3. How did meeting Lucy change his day?
4. Why do you think Oliver found it difficult to enjoy his free time before?
5. When was the last time something unexpected turned into a good experience for you?
6. If you had one completely free day with no responsibilities, how would you spend it?

Story Five

The Price of Being Someone

B2

1

Seen

On Tuesday morning, Thomas Whitmore sat at his desk with his phone in his hand, staring at a message he had not dared to answer properly.

It was from his daughter, Hannah, and it was three days old.

Dad, my graduation is on the 14th. Can you come? It would mean a lot to me. x

Beneath it was his reply, typed in ten seconds between two meetings:

Will try! Busy week.

That had been three days ago. It was a new week now, and it was every bit as busy.

He put the phone face down. Beside it lay a thick cream envelope that had arrived with the morning post. Inside was an invitation from his old friend Richard Hale: *Dinner at Ashcombe House, Saturday, 7.30. Twenty years of ambition, achievement and friendship.*

Twenty years. Thomas allowed himself a small smile. He had started the company in a rented room above a travel agency, with one telephone and **a great deal of nerve**. Now Whitmore & Partners was among the best-known consultancy firms in the country, and three hundred people depended on it for their salaries.

He had missed a great deal along the way: birthdays, holidays, parents' evenings. But that, he had always told himself, was the price of being someone.

He picked up the invitation. By lunchtime, he had stopped thinking about the message.

2

Ashcombe House

Ashcombe House stood at the end of a long avenue of old beech trees, its windows glowing gold against the darkening Cotswold hills. Inside, a fire crackled in a fireplace big enough to stand in, and somewhere out of sight a pianist was playing something slow.

Thomas arrived ten minutes early, as he always did. Being early gave him time to **read a room** before the room could read him.

"Thomas!" Richard opened the door himself. He was nearly sixty, with silver hair and the easy manner of a man who had never needed to wonder whether he belonged. "You're the first. I was sure you'd be late for once."

"I don't like wasting time."

"No. You never did." Richard laughed, a fraction too long.

The other guests turned up over the next half hour. There was a loud, funny man from public relations, who had a story ready for every silence. There was Claire Bennett, a former teacher who now ran a small charity for children, and who had brought chocolates for Richard's wife. She said little, but she listened so closely that people tended to tell her more than they meant to.

The last to arrive was Michael Reed.

Thomas had not seen him for seven years. Michael had once been his best analyst: careful, quietly **stubborn**, the kind of man who checked every figure twice. He looked older now, and calmer, as if he had spent those seven years deciding what to do with something heavy. "Michael," Thomas said. "What a surprise."

"Hello, Thomas."

They shook hands. Michael's face **gave nothing away**.

"I think you two know each other," Richard said quickly, and he went off to find more wine. Thomas noticed that. Richard never did anything quickly.

Dinner began easily enough: travel, work, old friends. Then Richard stood, glass in hand. "Twenty years," he said. "To friendship."

His smile did not move, but his eyes went to Michael and quickly away again. Thomas noticed it, and **promptly** decided that he hadn't.

Later, Richard asked how Thomas had built the company, and Thomas put down his fork. This was his favourite question.

"Sacrifice," he said. "Most people talk about their dreams. Very few are willing to give something up for them."

"That's interesting," Claire said. "Though I think people sometimes give up the wrong things, and then feel proud of their discipline."

Thomas smiled. "That sounds like experience."

"It is."

Under the table, his phone buzzed. A work email. He glanced at it and slipped it away. Across the table, Michael was watching him. He did not look angry. He looked sad, and Thomas found that far harder to bear.



3

One Year Became Five

"Tell us," Richard said to Claire, a little too eagerly. He wanted the subject changed.

Claire looked at her hands. "I loved teaching. When my son was born, I took a year off. Just one. Then it was three, then five." She gave a small laugh. "Nobody decided anything. It simply happened, the way weeds happen in a garden."

"And now?"

"I don't regret my son. Not for a second." She hesitated. "But I do wish someone had asked, *Claire, what do you want?* I forgot to ask myself."

Nobody spoke. In the fireplace, a log shifted and sent up a small shower of sparks.

Thomas heard the words *I don't regret it, but...* and felt **a flicker of unease** he could not explain. Without wanting to, he thought of a school hall many years ago. Hannah, aged eight, had been a tree in the school play, wearing a brown costume covered in paper leaves. He had promised to be there. He arrived when the play was over and the parents were already looking for their coats.

She hadn't been angry. She had walked up to him in her costume and said, "It's OK, Dad. I was only a tree."



He had laughed at the time. He did not feel like laughing now.

"Everyone makes choices," he said, too loudly, in the **evasive** tone he used with journalists. "We can't have everything."

"No," Claire said gently. "But we can know what we're choosing."

4
Northbridge

"Thomas," Michael said. "Do you remember the Northbridge report?"

The room went very still.

"Of course."

"It promised that the factory would save four million pounds and keep its workers for at least five years."

"That was the **forecast**."

"I told you the numbers were wrong. I showed you the figures. You **brushed me off** and told me to make the language commercially appropriate."

"We were under pressure," Thomas said evenly. His hand had tightened around his glass. "That's business."

"Commercial reality," Michael said. "It's a useful phrase. It makes almost anything sound reasonable."

"Michael," Richard said quietly. "Please."

"No, Richard. You invited me. Let me finish." He turned back to Thomas. "The factory closed within eight months. A hundred and forty people lost their jobs. One of them, a woman called Margaret Doyle, had worked there for twenty-six years. She wrote to the company and asked one question: *Did anyone know?*"

Thomas said nothing.

"Nobody answered her," Michael said. "Not you. Not me."

"You walked away," Thomas said. "You couldn't handle the pressure."

"I couldn't live with it. That's different." Michael breathed out slowly. "And I'm not **blameless**. If I had gone to the newspapers then, things might have turned out differently. I didn't. I was afraid. I found another job and told myself it was over."

"Then why come tonight?"

"Richard sits on the board of the Northbridge Foundation. They're investigating what happened, and I'm helping them." He paused. "But I also wanted to know whether you had changed."

Thomas stood up. His chair scraped loudly across the wooden floor.

"I need some air."

Nobody tried to stop him.

5

Words That Cost Nothing

Outside, the air was cold and perfectly still. Thomas did not go to the garden. He walked to his car and, sitting in the dark with both hands on the wheel, he tried to be angry. Anger was easier than the other feeling.

He took out his phone. Hannah's message was still there. *Can you come? It would mean a lot to me.*



And beneath it: *Will try! Busy week.*

He looked at those four words for a long time.

Will try. He had been saying them for twenty years, in different forms: *I'll look into it. Let's talk soon. I'll try.* They were excellent words. They cost nothing. They kept people waiting, and the waiting felt like hope.

Somewhere, he thought, there was a woman called Margaret Doyle who had waited for an answer to her letter. If anyone had written back, even one **clumsy**, honest line, she would at least have known that she had been heard.

He thought of the tree costume. He thought of how Hannah had stopped telling him things, a little at a time, so slowly that he had never noticed it happening.

He did not cry. But his eyes ached.

After ten minutes, he went back to the house. Richard was waiting in the hall, one hand on the banister, as though he had been standing there for some time.

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "I should have warned you."

"You invited us both."

"Yes." Richard looked at the floor. "Do you remember how you won the Northbridge contract?" Thomas did. "You introduced me to their chairman."

"And I was paid for it. A **finder's fee**. Quite a large one." He gave a short, dry laugh. "For eleven years I've told myself it was only an introduction. Then, last spring, the Foundation asked me to join its board, and I read the file on the flight home. I'm very good at giving money away, Thomas. I'm much less good at **owning up to** the things that money was made from."

"So you arranged a dinner."

"A dinner for friendship. It was the only kind of honesty I could manage." His voice dropped. "My toast sounded **hollow** even to me. I'm not sure a good meal counts as **making amends**."

Thomas had expected to feel angry. Instead, he felt something closer to recognition. He knew exactly what kind of man Richard was. He shaved him every morning.

"It doesn't," he said, not unkindly.

"No." Richard nodded slowly. "I didn't think so."

Michael was alone on the terrace with a cup of coffee going cold in his hands. He looked up as Thomas came out.

"Tell me about Margaret Doyle," Thomas said.

Michael studied him, surprised. "It's late."

"I've got time."

It was the first time in twenty years that Thomas had said those words and meant them.

6

Midnight

He got home after one o'clock. The house was dark. He stood in the kitchen with his coat still on and called Hannah, though he knew she would be asleep.

The phone rang and rang. Then he heard her voice: *Hi, this is Hannah. Leave a message!* "Hi, it's Dad," he said, and found that he did not know what came next. "Sorry. It's very late." He closed his eyes.

"I got your message. I wrote *will try*, and that was a bad answer. It's the answer I always give. I don't want to give you that answer any more." His voice shook a little. "I'll be there. I'll be in the front row, if they let me. And I'm sorry about the tree."

He stopped. That was too strange, he thought. She wouldn't understand.

"Anyway," he said. "I love you. That's all."

He put the phone on the kitchen table and sat there for a long time.

At seven in the morning, it buzzed.

Dad??? You remembered the tree???

Then, a minute later:

See you on the 14th. 🌳❤️

Thomas read it three times. Then he put his hand over his mouth, and he laughed and cried in his empty kitchen, a little of both.

7
What Cannot Be Repaired

He did not become a different man overnight. He still checked his emails too often. He still found it hard to say *I was wrong*.

But on Monday he phoned Michael and asked for every document on Northbridge, and over the next three weeks they met five times. It was not a comfortable process. Thomas had to sit and listen without defending himself, and what he heard was worse than he had imagined. The forecast had not simply been optimistic. It had been built on a promise the client was never going to keep, and the warning that might have stopped it had been removed from the final report on Thomas's own instruction.

If he had listened to Michael, the factory might still have closed. But the workers would have had two years to prepare instead of eight months.

Whitmore & Partners opened an independent review of its old projects. Richard paid his finder's fee, with interest, into a fund for former Northbridge workers, and Thomas matched it. Then the company agreed to hold a public meeting in the town, so that it could be **held accountable** by the people it had **let down**.

Fifty-three people came, out of a hundred and forty. A man in a faded blue jacket stood up and said that his son had left school at sixteen because the family could no longer afford to keep him there.

"A fund doesn't give me back four years," he said.

Thomas had prepared a speech. He put it away.

"You're right," he said. "It doesn't."

Nobody applauded. Several people walked out. Thomas stayed until the last chair had been **stacked**.



The letter from Margaret Doyle arrived two weeks later. It was short.

Dear Mr Whitmore,

Thank you for your letter. My husband died the year after the factory closed. I will not pretend the two things were unconnected, and I will not pretend to forgive you. I do not need you to be sorry in my kitchen. If you want to do something useful, make sure the next person who writes to you gets an answer.

M. Doyle

Thomas read it standing up. Then he read it again sitting down. He put it in the top drawer of his desk, where he would see it every day.

Of the hundred and forty people he wrote to, thirty-one replied. Some of the addresses were out of date. Some people had moved away. Some did not want to hear from him, and he could not blame them. He could not make anyone listen. He could only keep the door open.

It was not enough, and it would never be enough. He did it anyway.

8

The Fourteenth

On the 14th, Thomas arrived at the university an hour early. He sat in the front row with his phone in his pocket, and he did not take it out.

When the names began, he sat very straight. When he heard *Hannah Whitmore*, he was on his feet before he knew he was standing.

She walked onto the stage in her black gown. She looked out at the crowd quickly, the way people do when they are not sure someone will be there.

Then she saw him.

She put her hand over her mouth. Then she waved, a small, shy wave, and she was smiling so much that she nearly forgot to walk.



Thomas clapped louder than anyone in the hall.

Afterwards, she ran across the grass with her hat in her hand.

"You came."

"I said I would."

"You said you'd *try*."

"I know." He smiled. "I'm trying harder."

She laughed and hugged him, and for a moment neither of them said anything at all.

That night, in a hotel room, Thomas opened his phone and scrolled up to the old message.

Dad, my graduation is on the 14th. Can you come? It would mean a lot to me. x

Will try! Busy week.

Under it, he typed two words.

I came.

Then, for the first time in many years, he put the phone away and did not look at it again.

Words from the Story

a great deal of nerve · *много смелости, дерзости*
a lot of courage and confidence

read a room · *оценить настроение людей вокруг*
quickly understand people's mood and attitudes

stubborn · *упрямый*
refusing to change your mind or give up

give nothing away · *ничем себя не выдать*
show no sign of what you feel or know

promptly · *тут же, незамедлительно*
immediately, without delay

a flicker of unease · *мимолётная тревога*
a brief feeling of worry

evasive · *уклончивый*
avoiding a direct answer

forecast · *прогноз*
a statement of what is expected to happen

brush someone off · *отмахнуться от кого-то*
refuse to listen to someone

blameless · *ни в чём не виноватый*
not responsible for anything wrong

clumsy · *неуклюжий, неловкий*
awkward, not skilful

finder's fee · *комиссия за посредничество*
money paid for introducing a business to a client

own up to · *признаться в чём-то, признать вину*
admit that you did something wrong

hollow · *фальшивый, пустой*
without real meaning or feeling

make amends · *загладить вину*
do something to correct a wrong

hold someone accountable · *призвать к ответственности*
make someone take responsibility

let someone down · *подвести кого-то*
disappoint someone who trusted you

stack · *складывать стопкой*
put things on top of one another

Coach's Corner

Most of us do not lose the people we love in one big moment. We lose time with them in small ways: a late reply, a postponed call, a *maybe next week*. Some damage can never be repaired, and the story does not pretend otherwise. But a person can still choose to stay, to answer, and to keep the door open.

One small action for this week: Think of one message you have not answered, or one person you keep saying "soon" to. Reply today. It does not have to be perfect. It only has to be real.

Think About Your Own Life

1. Which "will try" or "soon" have you been saying for too long? Who is waiting?
2. Claire says she forgot to ask herself what she wanted. When did you last ask yourself that question?

Story Six

The Days I Had You

C1

I

Discipline

By the age of forty-one, Jack Lowe had organised his life with the same **austerity** he brought to his sentences: nothing was permitted to remain that could not justify its presence. He woke at half past five without an alarm, wrote until one, ate standing at the kitchen counter, and spent the afternoons walking briskly and alone, hands in the pockets of a coat older than some of his readers, until the light failed and he could decently stop. His telephone lived in a drawer. His seven novels lived in thirty-one languages, had won him two major prizes and a third shortlisting that he pretended not to remember, and had made him, in the faintly embarrassing phrase of one Sunday supplement, "the conscience of his generation". He did not feel like anyone's conscience. He **felt** like a man who had been very good at one thing for a very long time.



People who met him at festivals described him afterwards as **formidable**, a word he had learnt to recognise as the polite form of cold. It was not quite fair, but it was not quite wrong either. He listened with such concentration that his companions began to hear their own sentences too clearly and to wish they had chosen better ones; he rarely smiled and almost never laughed; and he had a way of leaving parties that involved neither a farewell nor, as far as anyone could establish, a door. There had been women, naturally: a literary editor with a laugh like a dropped tray, a barrister from Notting Hill who informed him after eight months that living with him was like living with a very handsome locked room. He had been sorry about each of them in a mild, abstract way, as one is sorry about weather elsewhere.

The curious thing was the letters. They arrived by the sackful, from strangers in Lisbon and Lagos and Leeds, and nearly all of them concerned the same passage in *The Salt Year*, in which a man sits beside his sleeping wife and listens to her breathing for an hour because there is nowhere he

would rather be. How did you know? the readers asked. He never replied, because the honest answer was that he hadn't known. He had observed, assembled and invented. He wrote about love as a skilled **forger** paints a masterpiece, flawlessly and from a distance, without ever having stood in front of the original.

He had begun lately to suspect that something was missing. He treated the suspicion as he treated most things, which was to say as material, and filed it away in a notebook for later.

II

Two Parks

It was a Tuesday in April, and he was sitting on a bench near the rose beds in Regent's Park, in the middle of a sentence, when she walked into it.

She came along the path beneath the plane trees at the unhurried pace of someone with nowhere she was required to be, a canvas roll tucked under one arm, and the afternoon did what afternoons occasionally do for people who have no idea they are being watched: it arranged itself around her. For one absurd instant she seemed less like a woman crossing an ordinary London park than a figure from some forgotten painting, a Greek goddess who had wandered away from her proper century and found the place perfectly satisfactory. It was not simply her beauty, though that was difficult to ignore. It was the ease with which she occupied the world, as if she had made an agreement with it that neither of them needed to explain. Her hair moved in the breeze; her face held the promise of a smile; and even before he heard her speak, Jack had the strange impression that the air around her was warmer. Light fell through the new leaves in coins. Her hair, which was brown in the way that strong tea is brown when held up to a window, reached almost to her waist and lifted sideways in the wind, and she put up a hand to restrain it without any real conviction that it would obey. Jack had once written she moved like a goddess in a first draft and struck it out as lazy. He understood now why people were lazy. The accurate sentence did not exist; there was only the older, stupider one, and it happened to be true.

She stopped ten yards away, because a blackbird on the railings had begun to sing, and she tilted her head and listened with a small frown, as if it had sung a wrong note and she was deciding whether to forgive it. Then she turned, and for perhaps two seconds she looked straight across the grass at nothing in particular, and he saw her eyes. They were grey-green, the colour of an olive leaf when the wind turns it over, and so unexpectedly alert, so thoroughly amused by something he had not been told, that he forgot the sentence altogether.



She walked on.

She vanished behind a bank of lilac, reappeared further along the path, vanished again behind the bandstand railings, and was gone through the gate. When he looked down, his pen was still resting on the page, and the ink had bled into a small, black, accusing dot in the middle of the word *inevitably*.

He wrote nothing more that day, which was alarming enough. It was his behaviour over the following fortnight that frightened him. He returned to the same bench at the same hour, notebook open, pretending to work with the **vigilance** of a man waiting for a train, and he did this for eleven afternoons. On the twelfth, standing in his hallway with his coat on and a sudden, clear view of himself (a forty-one-year-old man of some reputation, hunting a stranger through a public park like a character from one of his weaker books), he took the coat off, hung it up and told himself that the matter was closed.

It stayed closed for nearly five weeks.

Then, on a bright morning in May, he was cutting through Postman's Park on his way to the borrowed room above an accountancy firm on Aldersgate Street where he did his writing, and he saw her. The park is a small, hidden garden behind St Paul's, and along one wall runs a long shelter of glazed tiles commemorating, in the plain prose of the Victorians, ordinary people who drowned or burned or were crushed while trying to save somebody else. He passed it every morning and, being a man who preferred his sorrow in well-made sentences, had never stopped for long. She was sitting on a bench beneath the tiles with a paper cup of coffee, her face lifted to the sun and her eyes closed, the canvas roll across her knees like a sleeping cat. Jack stopped so abruptly that a pigeon reconsidered him.

His heart, which had always been a reliable and rather dull organ, began to behave erratically. Over eleven afternoons and several sleepless nights he had rehearsed a number of openings, all of them dignified. He walked up to the bench and said, "I beg your pardon."

She opened her eyes. "You're the man from Regent's Park."

He had not prepared for this. "I'm sorry?"

"Bench by the roses. Green notebook." Her voice was low and slightly rough at the edges, with flat northern vowels that made even a plain sentence sound as though it had been left out in the sun. "You stopped writing in the middle of a word. I know because I watched your pen. It just sat there for about four minutes, and I thought, either that man's having a stroke or there's something on my face."

"I wasn't having a stroke."

"No, I could see that. You looked very much alive. It was quite worrying, actually."

"I was distracted," said Jack, with the dignity of a man going down with his ship. "By the light."

"By the light."

"It was exceptional light."

"It does that, in April." She took a sip of coffee, and over the rim her eyes regarded him with open, uncomplicated delight. "I'm Rose. Not Rosie, unless I've known you a year."

"Jack."

"Jack what?"

He hesitated. In his experience the second half of his name was followed by a flicker of recognition and then by a change in the other person's post-

ure, a slight lean towards or away. “Lowe.”

“Jack Lowe.” She turned it over, as she had considered the blackbird. “Should I know that? Because I’ll feel dreadful if I should.”

“No,” he said, and to his considerable surprise he was relieved.

“Sit down, then. You’re making the pigeons nervous.”

He sat. She told him that she tuned pianos for a living, and that the roll across her knees held the tools of her trade, and when he asked, with genuine curiosity, what exactly there was to do to a piano, she said, “I make them stop lying.”

“Pianos lie?”

“Constantly. Little lies, mostly. A few cents flat here, a bit sharp there. People get used to it and think that’s what a piano sounds like.” She took a small steel fork from her pocket, struck it against her knee, and before he understood what was happening she had touched its stem to the bone behind his ear. A pure, steady note filled the inside of his skull, as though someone had opened a window in a room he had not known was shut. “That’s A. Four hundred and forty vibrations a second. It’s the only completely honest note I know. Everything else I have to argue into place.”



He sat very still with the sound in his head, and discovered that he did not want it to stop.

He would remember that first conversation in fragments: the dry humour in her voice, the quick intelligence behind her teasing, the way her smile arrived before her laughter and seemed to invite the rest of the world to join in. Her voice was lovely not because it was perfect, but because it was unmistakably hers: warm, slightly rough, musical in unexpected places. When she spoke, he found himself listening not for the next sentence but for the sound of her saying it.

When the clock on the cathedral struck, she stood and shouldered the roll. She had a solicitor in Gresham Street, she said, with a Broadwood that had been sulking since 1987. Then she paused and studied him with her head on one side. "Do you ever smile, Jack Lowe? It's all right if you don't. I only ask because you've got the face for it, and it looks wasted."

He smiled, as an experiment. It was stiff and brief and felt like moving furniture.

"Two," she said **judiciously**. "Possibly a one with ambition. Listen: I do Kentish Town on Thursdays. There's a pub on Leighton Road with a piano that's been out of tune since the Falklands, and I've **been itching to** get my hands on it for years, but the landlord won't pay. You can come and hold my felts, if you like, and buy me a drink afterwards."

"Hold your felts."

"It's more romantic than it sounds." She took the pencil from behind her ear, opened his notebook without asking, and wrote her number under the black dot, beside his unfinished sentence. Then she walked away down the path, and he stood in front of the tiles with the note still humming faintly behind his ear, and found that he was smiling at a memorial to the drowned. He stopped, ashamed. Then he started again.

III

Thursdays

The Wheatsheaf had brown walls, a carpet that remembered every pint spilt since the Falklands and, in a corner beside the fruit machine, an upright piano whose lid had served for so long as a shelf for beer mats that the wood bore a permanent rectangular pallor. Rose greeted it as one might greet an elderly relative who has been left in a draughty room. She spent an hour and a half with her head inside its case, her hair pinned up with a pencil, plucking and muting and tapping in a rhythm Jack found hypnotic and was reprimanded for interrupting.

"Felt strip. No, the red one. Jack. It's a different shade, it isn't a different language."

He had not been told off for incompetence since school, and discovered, with some embarrassment, that he enjoyed it. He sat on a stool with a glass of mediocre red and a packet of cheese-and-onion crisps and watched her work, which was permitted because she wasn't looking at him. He watched the small crease that appeared between her eyebrows when a string refused her, and the way she hummed each note under her breath to hold it in her head, always very slightly flat, before correcting it with the lever. He watched her forget that the pub existed. By the end, the landlord, a vast man named Terry who had sworn the instrument was beyond help, was standing with his arms folded and his eyes suspiciously bright.

She played one thing before she left. It was not impressive, only a slow, unshowy tune that her grandmother used to hum over the washing-up, but the room went quiet in the way that pubs seldom do, and when she finished somebody at the bar said "Bloody hell" with such feeling that she burst out laughing. Jack heard that laugh properly for the first time: abrupt, unguarded, a little too loud, like someone astonished by her own good luck. It went through him like a draught.

"Argue with me," she said later, walking up Leighton Road with the roll on her shoulder. "You looked as if you wanted to, in there. When I said a piano couldn't lie once it was in tune."

"A chord can be a perfectly constructed lie."

"Only if the person playing it is lying."

“Which is usually the case. You can have the purest fifth in the world and use it to tell someone you’re fine.”

“That’s not the fifth’s fault.” She glanced at him sideways. “Words are worse, you know. Words can pretend to be anything. That’s why I do pianos.”

“Words are what I do.”

“I know. It’s the only thing I’ve got against you.”

The rain began without warning, in the sudden, committed manner of an English summer. She seized his sleeve, said “Come on, **daft**,” and towed him into a bus shelter, where they stood a little out of breath, listening to the water drum on the roof. “That’s a B-flat,” she said. “Near enough.”

“It’s a bus shelter.”

“It’s a B-flat in a bus shelter.” And she kissed him, in the way she did everything, as though she had been listening for a while first. Jack, who had written forty kisses in seven novels and been praised for several of them, discovered that he had known nothing about any of them. He had not known that the rain would sound like that. He had not known that it was possible to forget one’s own hands.

“Well,” she said, drawing back. “That was a six.”

“I thought you only rated smiles.”

“I rate everything. Don’t be vain.”

The summer arranged itself around Thursdays and then, almost at once, around every other day. Jack began to measure the week by the distance between seeing her. He found himself finishing work earlier, taking unfamiliar streets, and checking his phone with an impatience he would once have considered undignified. A message from her could alter the whole temper of an afternoon. If she said she might come round, he caught himself listening for the lift before she had even left her flat.

It was not that Rose made every difficulty disappear. She did something more convincing: she made life feel inhabited. Around her, he became less careful with his words and less concerned with how he appeared. He teased her, allowed himself to be teased, and discovered that laughter did not diminish him. It brought him nearer to other people, and most of all to her. The man who had once treated a smile as an unnecessary movement now found himself smiling before he knew why. The first evening she came to his flat in Highbury he announced that he would cook, and produced an omelette with the solemnity of a man defusing a bomb. She ate it

standing at the counter and delivered her verdict in the flat tones of a Sunday critic. “Ambitious,” she said. “Overlong. The middle section collapses, and the ending, though undeniably brave, doesn’t quite earn its salt. Two stars.” It became a ritual. Every meal he attempted was reviewed, and he began to dread the notices like a man with a genuine career, which gave her immense pleasure: a marked improvement in plotting; the characterisation of the mushrooms remains thin. On the evenings when it went well she would turn the radio up and dance in her socks, badly on purpose and then well on purpose, and drag him from the cooker with the spatula still in his hand. He had never danced in a kitchen. It turned out to be largely a matter of not minding.



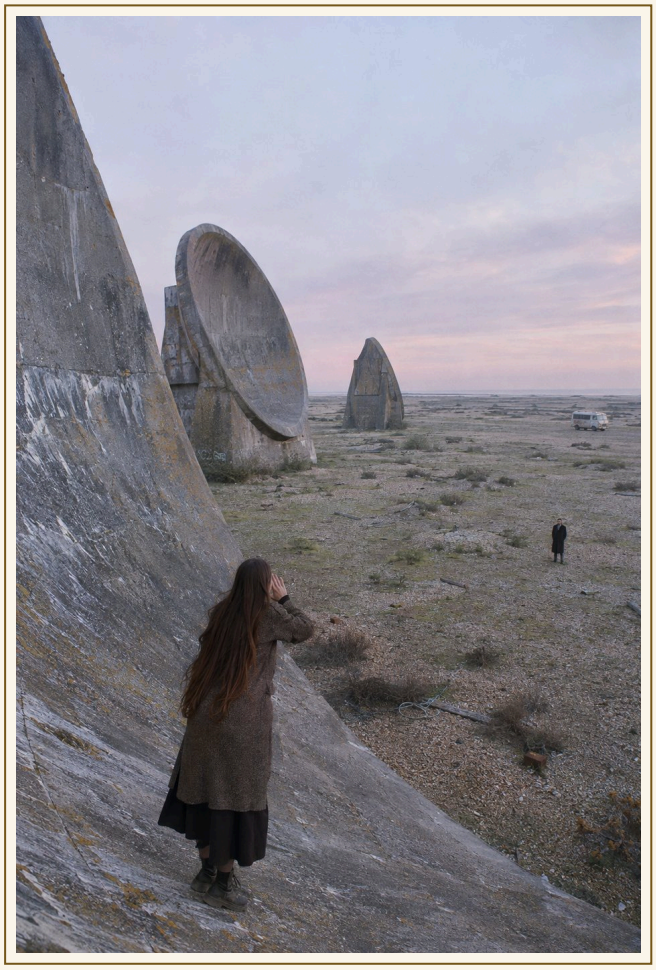
Sometimes, when she was talking and moving about the room, he would stop whatever he was doing simply to watch her. It might be the way she pushed her hair behind one ear with the back of her wrist, or how she sang a line of a song and invented the next one when she had forgotten it. She was beautiful, certainly, but beauty was only the first thing one noticed. What stayed with him was her appetite for the small absurdities of a day, her kindness without performance, and the happiness she seemed to leave behind her wherever she went.

One night in June she appeared at his door at eleven o'clock with the keys of her van in her fist. "Get your coat. Don't bring a notebook." The van was called Dolores. It was a Citroën with a gearbox like a bad temper, and they drove it through the dark into Kent, Rose singing badly and with total conviction, Jack discovering that he knew every word of a song he had always claimed to despise. At dawn, among the **shingle** and tarred fishermen's huts of Dungeness, she led him to Denge, where three enormous concrete dishes stood in the pale light like the ears of some buried animal. They had been built after the First World War, she said, to catch the sound of aircraft crossing the Channel.

"They gave about fifteen minutes' warning, if the wind was right. Then radar came along and nobody needed them. They've just stood here ever since, listening."

"For what?"

"Whatever's coming." She climbed into the shallow of the nearest dish and looked back at him. "Say something."



“This is absurd.”

His voice came back to him from the concrete, very slightly delayed, like a thought arriving. She laughed so much that she had to sit down in the gravel. “That’s the most honest thing you’ve said in a month.” Afterwards he lay on the shingle, cold and tired and inexplicably happy, and fell asleep with his head on her ribs, and woke an hour later to find her awake and looking at him with such frank tenderness that he wanted to look away and could not.

“You snore,” she said, “like a man who disapproves of the night.”



There were the late conversations, too, in her flat in Kentish Town and in his bed and in the van with the heater ticking. She told him about Whitby, where she had grown up above the harbour, and about her father, who had been **coxswain** of the lifeboat for twenty years and died at fifty-eight in an armchair, “which was an insult to a man who’d spent his life pulling people out of the sea”. She told him about her mother Maureen, who had responded to the funeral by repainting the whole house. In return he told her, **haltingly** at first, about the house in Reading where no one ever said anything they could do instead: where his mother’s love had arrived as

ironed shirts and his father's as a lift to the station, and all right? had meant everything from hello to I am proud of you.

"So you became a writer," she said, "so someone would finally say it properly."

"I became a writer so that I would never have to say it at all."

"Well, that's gone brilliantly, hasn't it?" And he laughed, genuinely, with his whole chest, so that she propped herself up on one elbow to watch.

"That's a six. Maybe a seven."

"What's ten?"

"Ten I'm saving. For when you're not trying." She lay back down. Within minutes she was asleep, mid-sentence, as she always was, and her voice in its last moments dropped half an octave and lost its consonants, so that his name became a long warm vowel in the dark. He lay beside her, awake, listening to her breathe, and understood with a kind of vertigo that he had written that scene already. He just hadn't known it was a description.

IV

What She Wanted

In July he took her away for a weekend. He planned it, as he planned everything, like a military campaign, and she was handed three printed **itineraries** in the van outside her flat, with the times of the tides, a map of the footpaths and a list of restaurants ranked according to criteria he did not disclose. She read them with a grave face for forty miles of the A303. Then, at the first fork in the road beyond Ilminster, she turned left, and left again, and by early afternoon they were lost in a Dorset lane with the windows down and the hedgerows brushing both sides of Dolores like an audience.

"You didn't laminate anything," she said. "I'm disappointed."

"I thought it might look excessive."

"Jack. You've made a spreadsheet of my weekend."

"It has a **contingency** column."

She laughed so much that she missed a gear.

The cottage, when they eventually found it, stood at the end of a track above Lyme Regis, with a slate roof, a kitchen the size of a wardrobe and a view of the bay that the owner's note described as "weather-dependent". It rained for most of two days. They walked the Cobb in a downpour and found one fossil between them, a coiled ammonite the size of a coin, which she held up to the grey light as though it were a sentence from a better book than his. They came back soaked to the skin, laughing at nothing, and steamed in front of a gas fire that smelled of burnt dust. He cooked a fish stew that she pronounced "a sprawling, brave failure, but with real flashes of lyricism". That night they did not go out. Afterwards he lay awake for a long time, with the rain on the roof and her hair spread across his arm like something poured, and thought that this was the part he had always faked. He had written it, the quiet afterwards, the weight of a head on a shoulder, and the writing had been accurate in every particular and wrong in all of them, because nobody had told him that happiness would feel less like fire than like being put down gently somewhere he had been trying to get to for years.

On the Sunday morning the weather broke, and they sat on the shingle with a flask of tea and a squashed sandwich, while she **skimmed stones** with an offhand technique learnt on a harbour wall.

"What do you want?" he asked. "I mean from it all. I've known you for two months, and I realise I know your opinion of every omelette I've ever made and nothing about what you'd put in the middle of your life, if you could."

She considered it seriously, which was one of the things he loved about her. She never answered a real question with a quick one. "Nothing grand," she said. "I used to think I wanted something grand. I wanted to play at the Wigmore, but I'm not good enough, and I found out I didn't mind. I'd settle for tuning that Steinway once, and nobody knowing." She turned a pebble over in her fingers. "What I like is arriving in a room where something's wrong and leaving it right. A village hall in Orkney with a piano nobody's touched since the war. A school. A church with damp in it. It's the nearest thing I've got to magic, and it doesn't need an audience. And I want to notice, Jack. Most people spend their lives waiting for the good bit, don't they? The promotion, the holiday. But I think most of it is Tuesdays. I want to be properly there for the Tuesdays." The stone bounced four times and sank. "And a dog with appalling manners, and to be an old woman who's rude to bank managers. That's it. That's the list."

"It's a very good list."

"It's a very modest list. Your turn."

He had not intended to answer truthfully. He had intended to say something polished. But the sea was grey and enormous and gave nothing back, and she was waiting with her whole attention, and he heard himself say, without any of the sentences he had prepared, "I want to stop being afraid that I'm a fraud."

She said nothing, which was why he went on.

"I'm afraid the books are an extremely elaborate way of hiding. That if you took the sentences away, there'd be nobody in the room." He looked at his hands. "I've never told anyone that. I've never been anyone's first call, either. I've been people's second opinion."

"I've been in the room," said Rose. "It's quite nice. A bit draughty. Needs a sofa." She leaned her shoulder against his. "And you're my first call, you daft man. You have been since the Thursday I rang to say the pub piano had gone flat again, and you answered on the first ring."

"I had the phone in my hand."

"I know. It was pathetic. I loved it." She found another stone. "Seven. That's for the confession, not the laugh. It was a very serious confession."

V

A Page for Rose

The jealousy, when it came, took him entirely by surprise. He had assumed it to be a feature of other people's lives, like football.

It arrived in August, in the form of a man named Julian Marsh, a conductor with beautiful hands and the easy, sunlit charm that Jack had spent a career describing and never possessed. Marsh owned a Bechstein in Hampstead that needed tuning before a recording. Rose came back from the first visit amused and slightly pink. On the second she was late. On the third, Marsh insisted on walking her to her van, and Jack, who had arranged to meet her there, stood across the road in the shade of a plane tree and watched the man laugh at something she had said, one hand resting for a moment on the roof of the van beside her shoulder. It was an entirely innocent moment, he told himself, and then told himself again.

He was aware of an emotion so primitive that it embarrassed him: a hot, narrow, wholly unliterary wish to cross the road. He did not cross the road. He waited until Marsh had gone, then walked over with great composure and remarked that it was a lovely evening, and he was silent all the way back through Camden, in the brittle way she had by now learnt to read. On the stairs to her flat he stopped, two steps below her, and said before he could prevent himself, "I need to tell you something unflattering."

"Go on."

"I was jealous. I stood under a tree like a lunatic." He kept his eyes on the banister. "He's the sort of man who has never wondered whether he was allowed in the room. He has those hands, and he can play, and he makes everything look easy, and I thought: she'll see it. Sooner or later she'll see what he is and what I am, and she'll do the sum."

A neighbour's television went on and off behind a door.

"Jack Lowe," said Rose slowly. "You've won two prizes. People write to you from Lagos."

"That isn't the sum."

"No. I know it isn't." She came down the two steps and took his face in both her hands, the way she sometimes did, with a look he would later

learn to read. “I’m going to tell you what the sum is, and you can rate it. Julian Marsh talked to me for forty minutes about phrasing. You talked to me for four minutes on a bench and made me forget I was supposed to be at a solicitor’s in Gresham Street. That’s the sum. It isn’t close.”

“How would I rate that?”

“Badly. You’re a terrible judge of your own work.”

He could not sleep that night. At three in the morning, in her kitchen, with the fridge humming and a mug of cold tea at his elbow, he finally wrote something. The novel on his desk in Aldersgate Street had stalled in the spring, a heap of competent pages; for weeks he had been trying to write a love scene, and every draft had read like a well-made obituary for something he never possessed. This was not a love scene. It was a woman on a path in April, stopping to listen to a blackbird, and it ran to about four hundred words. He wrote it in longhand, quickly, without crossing anything out.

On the Saturday he read it to her. He did it badly, standing in her kitchen in his socks, with his notebook held in both hands like a man about to sing at a funeral and his voice unsteady by the second sentence. She sat on the counter and did not move. When he finished, there was a long pause, and the fridge went on humming, and he thought: I have made a terrible mistake.

“Read it again,” she said. “Slower.”

He read it again.

“You’ve made me sound nicer than I am,” she said at last.

“I haven’t.”

“I swear. I swear all the time. There’s no swearing in it.”

“I’ll put it in.”

“And you’ve gone on about the hair.” She pulled a face, and for the first time in his experience she looked slightly shy. “It’s my least interesting feature. It just sits there. It gets caught in the van door.” She took the page from him and looked at it for a long time without reading. “But the blackbird. I never told you I thought it had sung a wrong note.”

“You frowned at it.”

“You noticed that?”

“I notice everything about you. It’s become something of a problem.”

“It isn’t a number,” she said, almost to herself.

“What isn’t?”

“This. I can’t rate it. It’s the first time anyone has described me and I’ve recognised her.” She wiped her eyes briskly with the heel of her hand and slid down from the counter. “Right. That’s enough of that. Put the swearing in, and then I want it on the fridge.”

He put the swearing in, and it went on the fridge. It stayed there until the day she left London, curling a little at the corners beneath a magnet in the shape of a pineapple, and it was the first thing he had written in his life that he would not have exchanged for any of the others.

VI

Ordinary Light

By August, the people who knew him had begun to compare notes. His agent, Priya Nair, a woman not easily alarmed, took him to the place in Soho where she always took authors who needed something, and found him laughing, twice, at nothing in particular. “He asked about my holiday,” she told his editor afterwards, in the tone of someone reporting a sighting. He began to leave the room on Aldersgate Street at three o’clock rather than six, took the long way home through Postman’s Park, sat for ten minutes on the bench beneath the tiles for no reason he cared to examine, and checked his telephone, which he had begun keeping out of its drawer, eleven times an hour. He sent her photographs of ordinary things (a dog in a waistcoat, a shop sign offering Fresh Fruit and Vegtables) and she replied with ratings. He arrived forty minutes late for a prize dinner because she was making soup and it had seemed more important to taste the soup. His elderly neighbour on the stairs, Mrs Adeyemi, said that he looked about thirty-five and what on earth had he been eating.

The remarkable thing was that she never tried to improve him. At a publishers’ party in September he fell silent in the middle of a conversation and stood by a window for twenty minutes, gripping a glass, the old locked door sliding shut behind his eyes. When she came to find him she did not ask what was wrong, or tell him to make an effort, or look hurt. She said, “Do you want to go or stay?”

“Go.”

“Right. Come on, then.” She took his hand and walked him out past the canapés as though it were the most natural exit in the world, and in the street she asked whether he fancied chips, and that was all. It was the first time in his life that retreat had not been treated as a failure.

He began to understand that he was not merely happier when she was near. He was becoming someone he recognised only in glimpses: more patient, more open, capable of delight without first searching for its cost. He had spent years believing that a life could be made meaningful by arranging it correctly. Rose had shown him that meaning could arrive unannounced, carrying a canvas roll and a paper cup of coffee. She had

brought life to his soul and given his life a soul. The door, he realised, had opened an inch, because nobody was pushing.

He did notice, in the way one notices a slow drip in another room, that she tired easily. She stopped halfway up the stairs to his flat and laughed about it ("I carry a piano's worth of felt, Jack, on a diet of crisps"). She slept in the van with her head against the window. She took two small white tablets with her morning tea and said they were iron. Once, reaching for a high shelf, she went quite white and sat down on the kitchen floor and said it was the heat. He accepted every explanation, as one accepts explanations from someone one trusts completely, with the weak part of the mind that wants to be reassured. And she talked constantly about the future: the Orkneys next June, a piano in Lisbon she had always wanted to see, a scheme to teach him to drive the van. It did not once occur to him that a person can make plans for the same reason a person whistles in the dark.

VII

The Drawer

In the second week of October she went north for three days, for her mother's seventieth birthday. He had a key, and a Post-it note of instructions: water the fern, ignore the cactus, don't let the fern know you're nervous. On the second evening he let himself into the flat in Kentish Town, carrying a bottle of wine to cheer the emptiness, and went to look for the corkscrew.

It was in the second drawer down. Beneath the takeaway menus and a ball of string lay an envelope with a hospital crest on it. He was not searching. That was what, for years afterwards, he would find hardest to forgive: that he had not even been searching, that the thing had simply come into his hand, and that, being a man to whom printed words had always been irresistible, he had read it before his conscience had finished putting on its shoes.



The letter was three paragraphs long, addressed to her GP, and it was written in the dry, careful register of medicine, which has a talent for making the unbearable sound like administration. Ovarian cancer, first treated two years earlier. A **recurrence**. A scan in March showing that the disease had progressed despite treatment. The intention of any further treatment now being "**palliative** rather than curative". A frank discussion with Miss Calder, and a **prognosis** "likely to be a matter of months rather than years". He read it twice, with the odd double vision of someone reading in a foreign language, where each word is individually known and the sentence refuses to mean anything. He, who could dismantle a paragraph in his sleep. Then it meant something all at once.

He sat down on the kitchen floor, because his legs had made the decision for him. The fridge hummed. The fern on the windowsill held up its small green hands. And in the quiet, other things fell gently into place: the stairs, the dozing against the van window, the iron, the white face on the kitchen floor in August, the way she sometimes took his face in both her hands and looked at it for a moment too long. He did not cry. That would come later, in bathrooms, with the taps running.

He put the letter back exactly where it had been, at the same angle, beneath the same string. It was the first lie of his adult life that he could not file under research. Then he went home and discovered that he no longer remembered how to be alone in a flat.

Somewhere around midnight he decided not to tell her. If she had chosen not to speak, she must have her reasons, and the least he could do was be worthy of the waiting. When she was ready, he would be there, composed and useful. He would be, he thought, so good at this.

VIII

The Future Tense

The trouble with being good at it was that he was no good at all.

Over the weeks that followed, Jack did what he had always done with a large problem, which was to make a plan. He telephoned an old friend on the board of the Wigmore Hall, and on a grey Tuesday morning in late October Rose found herself alone on its stage with a concert grand, a quiet technician named Gerald and permission to do whatever she liked to the instrument for two hours. She had mentioned this ambition exactly once, in July, on a wet shingle beach, between a mouthful of sandwich and a skimmed stone. She touched the keys as one touches a sleeping animal. Afterwards, on the pavement, she turned to him, laughing and white-faced and wet-eyed, and said, "What was that for?"

"Nothing."

"It's a Tuesday."

"I know what day it is."

Other gifts followed: a weekend in Venice on a whim, a night in a hotel in Aldeburgh with the sea outside the window, a hundred small attentions. He cancelled a book tour, to his publisher's horror, and left Aldersgate Street at noon, and then at ten. And the effort showed. He knew it did, because he could feel the muscles of his face working at ordinariness, like a man holding a heavy door open with his foot while pretending to admire the weather. He caught himself watching her laugh as though he were memorising it, and looking away too quickly. He lay awake counting her breaths. In the bathroom he ran the tap to cover the other noise, and afterwards washed his face with the thoroughness of a man scrubbing out a stain.

She noticed, naturally. She noticed everything; it was her whole trade.

"You've gone flat," she said one evening in her kitchen, without turning from the stove. "Something in you. A few cents. I can hear it, but I can't find the string."

"Damp, probably," said Jack. "It's been a wet autumn."

She turned and looked at him for a long moment, spoon in hand, and said nothing at all, which in her was more alarming than anything she

might have said.

It was a Sunday in late November when she found the string. They were washing up. She handed him a plate and said lightly, rinsing a mug, "Orkney in June, then? I've looked at the ferries. We could take Dolores."

"We'll see," said Jack.

She put the mug down. Somewhere outside, a car alarm started and stopped. "That's eleven."

"Eleven what?"

"Times you've said we'll see since October. I've been counting. You used to say obviously. You said it about everything. I found it unbearable." She dried her hands slowly on the tea towel, finger by finger. "You've stopped using the future tense, Jack."

"Rose—"

"What do you know?"

He had written dozens of scenes in which people were confronted with the truth, and had given every one of them something eloquent to say. He now discovered that eloquence is a faculty that deserts you at precisely the moment you require it. "The ninth of October," he said. "I was looking for a corkscrew."

She did not move. He watched the information cross her face like weather crossing a field: first a flinch, then a kind of stillness, then something harder. "The letter."

"I didn't mean to—"

"Six weeks."

"Yes."

"Six weeks." She laughed, one dry, horrible note, and set the tea towel down very carefully on the counter, as people do when they would rather throw it. "You've been looking at me like a house you're about to sell. Walking through every room. Thinking, last time, last time."

"That isn't—"

"Don't. Don't you dare dress it up as kindness. You were frightened."

"Yes," he said.

"So was I!" It came out louder than she had intended. She shut her eyes and pressed her knuckles against her mouth, and when she spoke again her voice was low and unsteady. "I've been frightened for two years, Jack. I've been frightened in front of my mother, and my consultant, and a woman on the chemo ward who told me about her cat for three hours.

After the scan I went to Postman's Park every day for a fortnight, because it was the one place I wasn't anyone's patient. And then a man comes up with his stupid green notebook and says I beg your pardon, who says that, and I thought: here's one person. One person in London who doesn't know. And for five months I forgot. Do you understand? I forgot. I was just me. And all that time you knew, and you let me go on thinking I was still her. That's a lie, Jack. You of all people, with your truth."

"I thought you would tell me when you were ready."

"I should have told you in May." She opened her eyes. The words were quite flat. "I know that. I'm not stupid. I should have told you that very first Thursday, and I didn't, because I wanted one summer of being the person you were looking at. That was selfish." She breathed. "But I was selfish for me. You were quiet for you."

It was the most precisely aimed sentence anyone had ever directed at him, and he had no defence. "I know," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I've no excuse, except that I couldn't—I've never—" And then the thing he had been holding behind his teeth for six weeks came out of him in a single ugly sound, and he sat down at her kitchen table and put his hands over his face.

She let him. For some time the only noise was the tap she had not quite turned off. Then she said, in a very different voice, tired and reluctant and almost practical, "I am furious with you. I want that on the record. And I'd quite like a cup of tea. Is that allowed?"

A sound escaped him that was not quite a laugh.

"That's a two," she said. "Don't push it." She stood with her back to him while the kettle filled, and when she spoke it was clear that she had been rehearsing in the dark for weeks. "I'm going to say some things and you're not to interrupt. Dr Okafor has offered me a trial in the new year. It might buy three months. I'd spend them being sick into a bucket in Sutton. I've said no. I'm not saying it's the right answer for everyone, mind. Half the women on that ward would take every day they were offered, and I'd cheer every one of them on. It's only the right answer for me. I'll still have the nurses and the pain people; I'm not mad. But I'm going home to Whitby, to Mum's. Her piano has been rotting in the front room since Dad died, and I'm going to fix it. That's my decision. It isn't up for discussion, and you're not to look at me like that."

"I wasn't—"

"You were. And I don't want a list. No Venice, no Orkney, no last anything. I don't want a final summer, Jack. I want a Tuesday. Do you see? I want ordinary days with you in them, being rubbish at omelettes." She turned round. "That's the offer. If you can't do it, say so now, and I won't hold it against you." A pause. "I'll hold it against you a bit."

"I'd like to come," said Jack.

"Not out of duty."

"Rose, I have never done anything out of duty in my life. It is my least attractive quality."

She laughed, wetly and unwillingly, and wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. "Four," she said. "Oh, you daft man." And she crossed the kitchen and put her arms round his head, and he held on to her waist, and that was how it was settled, with the kettle clicking off behind them and neither of them able to say anything at all.

IX

Whitby

They drove north in the first week of December, in Dolores, with the tools on the back seat and a box of books Jack never opened. Whitby in winter was all slate and **sea-fret**, the abbey a grey rumour on the cliff, the harbour full of boats that looked as though they were waiting for someone. Maureen Calder, small, brisk and grey-permed, met them at the door of the narrow house above the water, held her daughter at arm's length like a woman checking a parcel for damage, and then shook Jack's hand with the firmness of someone who had already decided to like him and had no intention of letting him know.



The piano was an old upright Broadwood in the front room, its lid warped by thirty years of radiator. Rose began on it the following morning, a few strings at a time, and Jack soon learnt to read her strength by the length of her sessions: two hours in December, one in January, twenty minutes by the end of the month. On the third day she called him over. "Listen. Two

strings, same note, not quite together. Hear it? Wah, wah, wah. That's the beats. They're arguing." She turned the lever a fraction. "Now—slower. Hear that? Slower. Slower still—" The throb in the sound loosened and widened and then, as the two strings came into agreement, simply stopped, and the note stood in the room, clean and steady and entirely still. "There," she said. "That's all tuning is, really. Waiting until two things stop arguing." He stood with his hand on the piano lid and, for no reason he could name, could not speak.



Not everything was peaceful. Maureen had not been able to accept the decision, and she did not pretend otherwise. Jack overheard it one evening in the second week, through the kitchen door: not shouting, which would have been easier, but the low, level voice of a woman who has been rehearsing a sentence for days.

"Three months, Rose. I'd have given you my kidneys for three months."

"I know you would."

"You'd rather have a piano than three more months."

"I'd rather have the three months I've got." A chair scraped. "Mum. Listen. I'm not saying it's the right choice. If you were me, you might take

every day they offered, and I'd be cheering you on from the car park. It's just that I've done the sums, and the sums are mine."

There was a long silence. Then Maureen said, in an entirely different voice, "Your dad would have wanted you to try everything."

"Dad would have wanted me to try everything for about a week," said Rose gently, "and then he'd have taken me out on the boat and not said a word for a day. You know he would."

Maureen did not answer. But the next morning she was sitting on the stool in the front room, still in her **pinny**, while Rose worked, and for an hour she said nothing, and listened; and when a note came true, the beats slowing and then stopping, she put a hand over her mouth. After that, the baking began.

They had, for a while, the ordinary days she had asked for, and within a fortnight he understood what she had meant. There was a marvellous poverty to them. Toast. The crossword, which she completed in ink and he sabotaged. Rock cakes from Maureen, who baked in moments of emotional pressure. Rain on the slates and gulls quarrelling in the chimney pots. He wrote nothing, and found that he did not want to; the sentences had gone quiet in him, like a house when someone is asleep. By February she had moved to the front room, where the bed stood by the window, and she kept the steel fork on the table beside it, "in case the dreams go flat". Her hair, which she could no longer manage, became his task. He learnt to brush it, a hundred strokes, as she liked, and she complained that he was too slow and too gentle, and then one morning stopped complaining and closed her eyes.

The illness had no interest in being a story. It was mostly logistics: the pharmacy bag beside the kettle, the chart of tablets pinned to the kitchen door, the visits from the hospice team, led by a brisk, warm woman named Carol, who took no nonsense from anyone and had decided within an hour that Jack was the weakest link in the household. There were good days, when Rose was almost herself and ate toast and was rude about the neighbours' garden gnomes, and there were bad days, when she lay with her face to the wall and could not bear the sound of the kettle. She hated being called brave. "It's a word for people who've been given a choice," she said on one of the bad days, with her eyes shut. "I'm not brave. I'm tired and I'm cross, and I keep wanting to scream at people on the harbour for walking up the hill without noticing their knees." Jack, who had no idea what

to say, said nothing, and sat beside the bed, and found that this was what was wanted.

He was no better, in his own way. One afternoon in the bad weeks of January he went out to the yard to put out the rubbish and did not come in again for forty minutes. Rose, who had been listening for his footsteps with her extraordinary ear, asked when he returned what had happened to the bins. "I stood in the shower this morning for an hour," he said from the doorway, before he knew he was going to say it, "because I realised I don't know who I'm going to ring. Afterwards. I've never been anyone's first call, and you've been mine for eight months, and I don't know whose number I'm supposed to dial." His voice was perfectly level, which made it worse. "I'm not asking you to do anything about it. I just didn't want to hide it in the yard."

She looked at him for a while. "Come here," she said. "Not there. Here." He sat on the edge of the bed. "Ring Priya. Ring that dreadful editor who asked how you were. Ring Mum. She'll be insufferably good at it." A pause. "And leave the bins. I never liked them anyway."

One night in January, when the wind was working at the window frames, she said into the dark, "I'm not that frightened of dying. Not most of the time. I'm frightened of being a story."

"A story."

"The sad thing that happened to someone. People are already going quiet round me. I can see them thinking, poor girl. I'd much rather be remembered as annoying."

"You are extremely annoying."

"Good. Keep it that way. And don't write me."

"I wouldn't dare. You'd review it."

"Two stars." He could hear her smiling. "If you do, make me a bit rude." There was a long silence, filled by the sea. "It's you I mind, you know. I know that's vain. I keep picturing you in that flat in Highbury with your ambitious omelettes. I want you to be annoyingly happy one day. I mean it. I'll be furious if you're not."

"I can't imagine it."

"No. You couldn't imagine this, either, and look at you."

"I don't know how to do it," he said, and his voice cracked in the middle. "Be left."

“Nobody does. You’ll do it badly, like the omelettes. Then you’ll get better.” She found his hand in the dark. “Ambitious but overlong.” And he laughed, with his face wet, and she held on until it was over.

X

The Beats

On the last Thursday in February the sea-fret came in at noon and stayed. The harbour disappeared; the abbey became a rumour of a rumour; the foghorn spoke every minute or so, patient and low.

Rose had slept for most of the day. The district nurse had come at ten and again at three, quiet and kind, adjusting something beside the bed with practised hands, and on the landing she had said to Maureen, in the careful voice people use when they are mindful of what a house can hear, that it might be tonight or it might be a few days. Maureen had nodded and gone down to the kitchen and shortly afterwards begun to burn some toast, as though the world had to be kept in working order.

Jack sat by the bed in the chair he had occupied for most of three weeks. He had brushed her hair that morning, a hundred strokes, and plaited it loosely over her shoulder; its length still astonished him, still brown as strong tea against the pillow. Her face had grown thin and very fine, as if the illness, having taken nearly everything else, had been careful to leave the bones. But her eyes, when they opened, were exactly as they had always been. They were the one thing that had not been edited.



“Is Mum burning the toast?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” said Rose. “Consistent.” Her voice was small and sleepy, half an octave down, its consonants gone soft, so that the word was little more than breath around a vowel.

He tried to look at her properly: not as one looks at someone one loves, which is so often a way of not seeing them, but as an engineer looks at a bridge he will have to rebuild from memory. The dark ring around the grey-green of each iris. The single freckle below the left eye. The thin white scar through her right eyebrow, where she had fallen off the harbour wall at nine. The way the window lay in the corner of each eye, small and square and bright. He set the details in order, one after another, as he had once learnt poems at school, with the bleak conviction that he would be examined on them.

“You’re doing the face,” she said.

“What face?”

“The one where you’re filing me.”

“I’m not—” He was. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s a good face.” She paused for breath. “Just not a very cheerful one.”

He looked at her, at the eyes still watching him with that old, alert amusement, as though he were a small and mildly interesting piece of news, and something in his chest gave way, and what came out was not a speech or a vow, because he had none left, but a smile. It was an inexpert thing, lopsided and wet. It was, he suspected, among the worst he had ever produced.

She considered it for some time, her eyes narrowed in professional judgement.

“Nine,” she said.

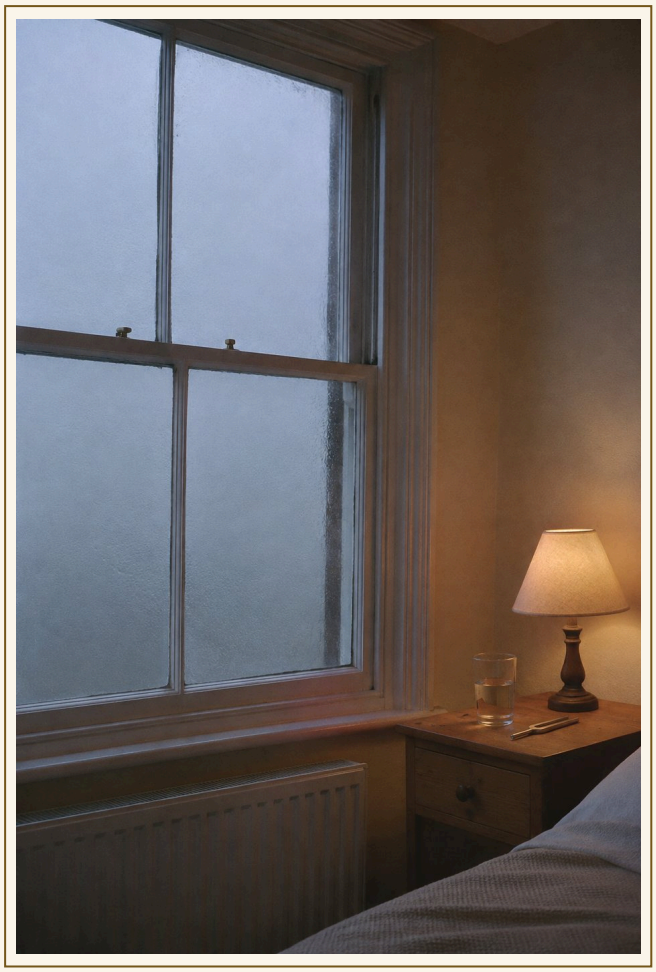
“Nine?”

The corner of her mouth moved, the ghost of the old laugh. “Still saving ten.”

“I know you are,” said Jack.

He moved from the chair to the edge of the bed, where he could see her without turning his head, and took her hand. It weighed almost nothing. Her fingers closed round his, very slightly, in the way of a person who is

nearly asleep, and he felt the old faint **callus** on the tip of her forefinger, from thirty thousand strings.



She went on looking at him. For some time neither of them said anything. The fog moved against the glass, and downstairs a spoon touched the side of a cup. Then, slowly, her eyelids began to lower, like a curtain drawn by someone who does not wish to wake the house. He watched the grey-green narrow to a line. He did not look away, not for a second, though everything in him wished to; he thought that if he was the last thing she saw, he should at least be paying attention. The line thinned, and then there was no line. Her lashes lay against her cheek, dark and ordinary. It was the quietest thing he had ever seen.

He waited for her to open them again. They stayed shut. Until that moment, he had still been looking at her as though some part of the world might be persuaded to remain ordinary. He wanted to remember the exact shade of her eyes, the shape of her smile, the voice that had made even a complaint sound affectionate. He wanted to hear her laugh at his cooking,

correct his pronunciation of a place name, call him a daft man and ask whether he was listening. He could not make those things belong to the past. They were too present in him. He waited as he had waited for her on benches and in doorways and outside a solicitor's office in Gresham Street, with his heart going, for the sound of her coming round a corner. He listened to her breathing, as the man in his novel had once listened to his wife's, and he thought, without wishing to, of two strings coming together, the throb in the note loosening and widening, each wavering a little less than the last. Slower. Then slower still. He waited for the next breath, and it did not come.

"Rose," he said.

Nothing. The foghorn sounded and, in the long silence it left behind, the room remained exactly as it had been: the lamp, the glass of water, the little steel fork on the table. Only something he had been listening to since a bench in Postman's Park had been withdrawn, and with it the very idea of listening.

"Rosie," he said, very quietly, because there was no one left to enforce the rule. He had known her for two hundred and eighty-eight days. She had said a year.

He lay down beside her. He did it carefully, as one lies down beside someone sleeping, on top of the covers, and drew her against him, one arm beneath her shoulders and the other across her ribs, and pressed his face into the side of her neck, where her hair smelled of the chemist's soap and, very faintly, of the sea. At first he held her too hard, as if the grip itself could be an argument; then, realising, he loosened his arms until they were only a cradle, the way one holds something that has been asleep a long time and must not be woken. She was warm. That was the thing he would never be able to explain to anyone: that she was still warm, and that he lay in that warmth and felt it begin, imperceptibly, to go, from the hands first, then the arms, as a house cools after the heating has been switched off, not at once but by degrees so small that no single moment could be called the one. The foghorn spoke again. On the landing Maureen's footsteps came and stopped; a hand rested on the door and stayed there; and the door, out of some great wordless courtesy, did not open.

He held her while the warmth left her so slowly that, for a long time afterwards, he could not have said at what moment it had gone.

Words from the Story

austerity · *строгость, суровая простота*
extreme simplicity, with nothing extra

formidable · *внушающий трепет, грозный*
impressive and rather frightening

forger · *фальсификатор*
a person who makes illegal copies

vigilance · *бдительность*
careful, constant watching

felt · *войлок*
thick soft cloth, used inside a piano

judiciously · *взвешенно, рассудительно*
after careful thought

be itching to · *сгорать от желания*
want very much to do something

daft · *глупый, дурачок*
silly (British informal, often affectionate)

shingle · *галька*
small stones on a beach

coxswain · *старшина спасательной шлюпки*
the person in charge of a lifeboat

haltingly · *запинаясь*
slowly, with many pauses

itinerary · *маршрут поездки*
a detailed plan of a journey

contingency · *запасной план*
a plan for something that might go wrong

skim stones · *пускать «блинчики» по воде*
throw flat stones so that they bounce on water

recurrence · *рецидив*
when an illness comes back

palliative · *паллиативный*
easing pain without curing the illness

prognosis · *прогноз болезни*
a doctor's opinion about how an illness will develop

sea-fret · *морской туман*
cold mist coming in from the sea (northern English)

pinny · *фартук*
an apron (British informal)

callus · *мозоль*
an area of hard skin

A Note from the Author

Some stories stay with us long after we have finished writing them. This is one of those stories.

Rose's life was not defined by the way it ended, but by the way she lived: her humour, her courage, her music, her stubbornness, and her ability to find beauty in ordinary days.

I wanted to write about love without making it perfect, and about loss without allowing it to erase everything that came before. Because sometimes, loving someone means learning to carry their absence while still finding a reason to live.

Perhaps the most precious moments are not the extraordinary ones, but the Tuesdays — the cups of tea, the familiar voices, the unfinished conversations, and the people who make an ordinary day feel like a gift.

If this story leaves you thinking about someone you love, perhaps that is enough.

Amor. E.

About the Author

The writer is an English teacher, and a language coach who loves creativity with a passion for words, human connections and the stories that shape our lives. Through Beyond the Words, he brings together his love of storytelling and language, inviting readers to explore emotions, discover new perspectives and find meaning beyond the words themselves.

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Thank You for Reading

Thank you for spending part of your journey with these characters. I hope you found a little laughter, a little courage, a new expression or a thought worth carrying with you.

This is only the beginning. There are more stories, more voices and more worlds waiting between the pages.

Amor. E.