18+

CARMELLA LIVIA



SECOND TAKE

Carmella Livia

Second Take

«Издательские решения»

Livia C.

Second Take / C. Livia — «Издательские решения»,

Elliot Hall has twelve nights to record a book that will outlive his voice. And he doesn't know that the reader he's looking for is Nora Callahan, right behind the glass.Confess to him — and Nora will lose her job, the money to care for her mother, and any chance that he'll look at her the way he looks at the recording. Stay silent — and spend twelve nights watching him fall in love with someone else's voice.

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Second Take

Carmella Livia

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He fell in love with a voice before he saw her face

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Chapter One

NORA

The microphone is live before I am.

I know because I can hear myself breathing in the left cup — a small, stupid sound, half a second behind the real thing. Room tone does that when the channel is open and nobody's talking. The room listens back.

"Again," I said. "From 'the river was high.'"

On the screen, a cartoon otter opened its mouth. The actor's voice came through flat and cheerful, a man in Burbank who had never seen a river and never would. I nudged the clip a frame and a half to the left, watched the otter's jaw line up with the vowel, and let it go.

"Good," I said. "Next."

It was 11:40 at night. The studio was a converted floor in Long Island City with a view of a parking garage and a smell I'd stopped noticing years ago: foam, old carpet, the ghost of somebody's burnt popcorn from the microwave downstairs. In the summer the radiator clanked for no reason. In November it was just cold, and the cold had a sound too, a low hum in the walls that you couldn't record out, only around.

I took off my watch and set it face down on the console, left of the fader bank, the way I always did. Twelve minutes to go on this reel, six minutes of notes from the client, and then the night was mine.

That's the thing nobody tells you about this job. You spend ten hours a day listening to other people be people. Their pauses. The little wet click before a hard consonant. The two seconds where an actor forgets what accent he decided to do and has to pick one again. You hear all of it, and you fix all of it, and by the end of the night you have heard more human beings than you spoke to all week.

I opened the channel to check the room. My own breath went into the headphones — in, out, a pause too long to be natural — and I sat there listening to myself the way I listen to everyone else.

That's what you sound like, I thought. *That's what people get.*

Then I closed it and went back to the otter.

* * *

Margot knocked on the glass at 11:58 with a coffee in each hand and her coat still on. She never took her coat off after six. She said it was because the heat was unpredictable, which was true, and because she liked to be able to leave, which was also true.

"Wrap it," she said. "We've got a real one at midnight."

"We've got a real one at eight tomorrow."

"Midnight." She put a cup on the guest chair. "Elliot Hall. Twelve nights. He reads his own books."

I knew the name the way you know a building you've never been inside. There was a novel, five years ago, a green cover with a white line on it, and it was everywhere for about eighteen months — on the subway, on the tables outside cafés, in the hands of a woman at my mother's nursing home who read the last page first and cried anyway.

"Twelve nights," I said. "That's a lot of book."

"He's slow." Margot said it the way she said most things about clients: without judgment and without pity. "And there's a thing."

"There's always a thing."

"He doesn't want to talk about anything except the pages. Not where you're from, not how long you've been doing this, not what you think of the book. Nothing. Can you do that?"

“I can do that.”

“Also.” She looked at the console instead of me. “He pays for the whole block. If this goes wrong, it’s not him who eats it.”

“Meaning it’s me.”

“Meaning it’s the studio, and the studio is me, and I’m telling you so you’re careful.”

She left. The door sighed shut. I put the coffee down without drinking it and turned off the monitor speakers, because for the next twelve nights this room was going to be a place where a man’s voice came out of two speakers and I was supposed to have no opinion about it.

I checked the clock. Eleven fifty-nine.

I should say here that I knew the voice before I saw the face. That was the whole problem, and it had been the problem for five years, and it was about to become a problem I couldn’t put back in a drawer.

But at eleven fifty-nine I didn’t know that yet. At eleven fifty-nine I was a woman with cold hands and a watch face down on a console, waiting for a client.

* * *

He came in at 12:04 with snow on his shoulders and a manuscript under his arm.

“Sorry,” he said. “The 7 was doing the thing where it stops between stations and pretends it isn’t.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’m Elliot.” He didn’t offer a hand. “You’re the engineer.”

“Nora.”

“Nora.” He said it once, flat, like a word he was filing. Then he sat down in the guest chair without taking off his coat, put the manuscript on his knees, and looked at the glass.

Nobody looks at the glass. Everybody looks at the person behind it, or at the mic, or at the screen. He looked at the glass itself, at the smear where I’d wiped it that morning with the wrong cloth, as if the glass were the thing he had come to talk to.

“Twelve nights,” I said. “Margot says you read your own books.”

“I do.”

“Do you want headphones, or would you rather hear yourself off the speakers?”

“Headphones.” He pulled them off the hook himself, adjusted them, put them on, took them off again. “Actually — is there a way to hear it the way it’ll sound? In the car, in somebody’s kitchen. Not this. Not the good ones.”

“There’s a pair of old Sony’s in the drawer that make everything sound like a parking garage.”

“That’s the one.”

I found them. They smelled of the inside of a drawer. He put them on and something in his shoulders came down half an inch, and he said, “Okay,” to nobody, and then he opened the manuscript.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I said.

And he started to read.

* * *

Here is what I knew about his voice before midnight, and I want to be honest about the order of things, because the order matters.

I knew it was low. I knew it did something on the ends of sentences — not up, not down, just a place where the air stopped and the thought kept going. I knew it could hold a pause longer than any actor I’d ever worked with, and that when it did, you leaned in. I knew that it had read me to sleep in a closet in Sunnyside in the winter of my twenty-third year, when I had sixty dollars and a laptop and a borrowed microphone, and that it had made me feel, for about nine hours, that being broke and alone in a city was a thing that happened to people who were interesting.

I knew all of that, and it still wasn’t the same as hearing it live.

Live, it was worse. It came into the booth and bounced off the foam and came back, and there was a breath at the start of every paragraph that I had never heard on the file, because on the file the breath had been compressed out. The breath made it real. The breath made it a man in a chair with a manuscript on his knees and a cold, and I sat behind the glass with my hands on a fader that I was not touching.

" — the river was high," he read, "and my father said that in the spring it always was, and that this was not the river's fault."

I did not move.

On the client monitor, the level sat at minus eighteen and did not need me. On the desk, my watch ticked, face down, and I could hear it, which is not possible, because a watch that far away on a soft surface is inaudible. I heard it anyway.

"Nora," Margot said in my headphones, from the office. "You're not on the record."

I pressed the button. "I'm on it."

"Take two."

"Take two," I said, and the words came out clean, and that surprised me more than anything else that night.

* * *

He read for forty minutes. I did nothing. That's not modesty, it's the job: when it's right, you do nothing. You watch the waveform and you let a man breathe.

At 12:52 he stopped mid-sentence, took off the Sonys, and said, "This is going to be a stupid question."

"Those are usually the ones I can answer."

"Can you hear when someone is lying about their voice?"

I looked at him through the glass. His thumb was on his throat, pressing, like a man checking his own pulse and finding it there.

"What do you mean," I said.

"I mean, when I read the passages where the guy is fine — » he tapped the manuscript — "can you hear that I'm not?"

The room tone filled the pause. Outside, a truck went down Vernon with its brakes squealing, and the sound came through the wall at about the same level as a thought.

"No," I said. "Not yet."

"Not yet," he repeated, and something in his face moved. "Okay." He picked the headphones back up. "Let's do it again. From the top."

"From the top of what?"

"The whole thing," he said. "If I'm going to fall apart, I'd like to do it on the record."

I opened a new session, named it, and hit record.

At 6:10 in the morning, when he finally put the manuscript down and said "thank you" in a voice that had lost the top of itself somewhere around four, I had eleven minutes of him breathing and one complete chapter.

I took off the headphones. I sat still. Then I looked at my watch, face down on the desk, and realized I had not thought about the time once since midnight, and that this was going to be a problem.

Chapter Two

ELLIOT

The thing about a voice is that you don't hear it. You hear what it does to a room.

Mine used to fill one. Not in a theatrical way — I was never the guy who could hold a dinner party with a story — but when I read, people stopped moving. I noticed it first at a bookstore in Chelsea in the winter the book came out. Forty chairs, standing room at the back, and somewhere in the middle of the second page a woman put down her cup because the sound of it going back onto the saucer would have been louder than me.

That was six years ago. I have thought about that cup more than I have thought about most people.

* * *

The clinic is on Ninety-eighth, between Madison and Park, on the fourth floor of a building that also has a dermatologist and a place that sells medical lamps. Dr. Lin sees me at eight. I take the first appointment because by eight my voice is at its best, which is a sentence that used to be a joke and is now a schedule.

She puts the scope in and asks me to say *ah*.

I say it. She holds up one hand before I finish.

"Again."

I say it again.

"Does it feel like it catches?"

"It feels like the first syllable is a door with something behind it."

She takes the scope out and writes for a while. She has a pen with a cracked clip. I have been in this room eleven times and the pen has been cracked all eleven.

"Read me a paragraph," she says. "Anything. From a book."

I take out my phone, open the file, and read the first paragraph of chapter one, the one about the river. At the fourth sentence the word *spring* comes out with a small break in the middle of it, like a radio losing signal for a quarter of a second.

Lin doesn't stop me. That's how I know it's worse.

* * *

"Spasmodic dysphonia," she says. "Adductor type. We've been through this."

"We have."

"The Botox will help for six weeks and then it won't. You know the schedule."

"I know the schedule."

"You're recording a book."

"Twelve nights."

She looks at me the way she looks at the diagrams on her wall.

"Twice a week," she says. "Three hours, with a break. Not six, not twelve."

"I'll try."

"Don't try. Do it, or come back in February and we'll talk about writing."

There it is. She says *writing* the way other people say *hospice* — not cruelly, just accurately. There is a version of my future in which I type words for a living and hire someone to say them, and every time I come to this office that version sits down in the chair next to me and waits.

* * *

I don’t tell her about the nights. I tell her the truth about the hours, which is that I read from midnight to six because the studio is cheap then and because the city is quiet and because my voice, for reasons nobody can explain, is better at two in the morning than at two in the afternoon.

That last part is not a lie. It’s just not the whole reason.

The whole reason is that at two in the morning I can hear myself the way other people hear me. Not the way I hear me in my own skull, where the bone fakes the low end. In the dead of night, in a room with foam on the walls, my voice comes back through the headphones and I can tell what’s left.

* * *

The studio is in Long Island City, on Vernon, past the parking garage and the place that rents party chairs. It’s a floor of a building that used to make something, and now it makes cartoons and, this month, me.

The engineer’s name is Nora. She doesn’t offer a last name and I don’t ask. She has cold hands and a habit of setting her watch face down on the console, which I noticed in the first thirty seconds because I notice things in rooms; it’s the only part of being a writer that has ever been useful in real life.

She also has the wrong headphones in a drawer, and when I ask for them she doesn’t ask why. That’s rarer than it should be.

“They make everything sound like a parking garage,” she says.

“Good.”

She hands them over. They’re grey, flattened, with a strip of gaffer tape on the left cup where somebody stepped on them in a previous life. I put them on and the room goes small and cheap and real, and something in my chest lets go half an inch.

“Okay,” I say, to nobody.

* * *

I have a routine before the first line. It’s stupid and I do it every time, and if anyone ever filmed it I would have to move countries.

I put my thumb against my throat, just under the jaw, and press until I feel the pulse, and I say one word in my head — *river* — and if the word comes out whole, I start. If it doesn’t, I drink water and wait and try again.

Tonight the word comes out whole. I open the manuscript and read.

“ — the river was high, and my father said that in the spring it always was, and that this was not the river’s fault.”

* * *

Here is what happens when it works.

The room disappears. Not literally — I know where the mic is, I know the glass is four feet in front of my face, I know there is a woman on the other side of it with her hands on a fader — but the words stop being marks on paper and start being a thing I’m doing with my body, the way you don’t think about your legs when you’re walking downhill.

I read four pages. Then six. Somewhere around the eighth page I hear a click in the headphones and realize she’s opened the talkback and then closed it without saying anything.

I stop.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.” Her voice in the cans is flat and close. “You had a break on *spring*. I fixed it.”

“You can fix that?”

“I can fix almost anything except the weather.”

* * *

I laugh, which is a mistake, because laughing is the worst thing for it. It comes out in two pieces.

“Sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean to make you laugh.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s been a while.”

I pick up the manuscript again. And then, because the room is dark and the hour is stupid and she is on the other side of glass where nothing counts, I ask the question I have never asked an engineer.

"Can you hear when someone is lying about their voice?"

There's a pause long enough that I hear the room tone change.

"What do you mean," she says.

"When I read the parts where he's fine. The parts where the guy in the book is thirty-four and healthy and has a whole life. Can you hear that I'm not?"

Another pause. Then, evenly:

"No. Not yet."

Not yet. Two words, and she has just told me the truth in the only way that doesn't require either of us to be kind about it.

"Okay," I say. "Let's do it again. From the top."

"From the top of what?"

"The whole thing. If I'm going to fall apart, I'd like to do it on the record."

* * *

She doesn't argue. That's the other thing I notice about her: she doesn't argue with the work. She opens a new session, types a name, and says, "Whenever you're ready," and the red light comes on.

At some point around four I stop for water and she comes into the booth without knocking, which nobody does, and puts a paper cup on the stool next to me.

"It's tea," she says. "The coffee machine makes it taste like a radiator."

"Thank you."

She stands there for a second, looking at the mic rather than at me.

"You're dropping your ends," she says. "The last word of every paragraph. You're running out of air on purpose so you don't have to hold the note."

I look at her.

"Yes," I say. "That's exactly what I'm doing."

"I can work with that," she says. "But you have to stop doing it in the parts where he's happy."

* * *

She goes back behind the glass. I sit with the tea and the manuscript and the red light, and for the first time in five years I feel like a person who is being listened to rather than a person who is being handled.

I read for two more hours. At six I stop, and the red light goes off, and she says, "That's a chapter and a bit," and I say thank you, and she says, "Same time tomorrow," and I put on my coat.

Then I do the thing I always do, which is check whether the take has anything in it that wasn't me.

I ask her to play back the top of the session, the first thirty seconds before I started, when she had the channel open and didn't know it.

There's nothing on it but room tone and, underneath, very faint, someone breathing.

In for four. Hold. Out for six.

I stand in the doorway with my coat half on and listen to a stranger breathe, and something in me — some old, tired, sensible part that has been managing this situation for five years — sits up and says: *pay attention.*

* * *

I don't say anything. I say good night. I take the stairs instead of the elevator because the elevator has a hum that gets into my jaw.

In the car, on the bridge, I play the old file. The one I've had for five years, the one with no name on it, the one I have never been able to find again since the account went down.

Four million plays. A reader I have never met, reading my book in a closet somewhere, breathing at the start of every paragraph.

At 1:14:11 there's a chair creak. It has been there for five years.

Tonight, in a studio in Long Island City, I heard a woman hold her breath so it wouldn't land on the track.

I pull into the garage, turn the engine off, and sit there for a while with my hands on the wheel.

Twelve nights, I tell myself. It's a job.

I get out of the car. I don't believe myself, and I have never been good at lying, which is a strange thing for a novelist to admit.

Chapter Three

NORA

He said good night at 6:14 and took the stairs, and I listened to him go down two flights, and then the street door went, and the building was just the building again.

The booth kept him for another minute anyway, the way rooms do. The chair a few degrees off square. The paper cup on the stool with the tea dead in it. The Sonys on the desk, tape strip up, still warm in the pads. I gave the room ten seconds of being a room he was in, and then I started the wrap, because the wrap is four steps and I know all of them.

Before he left, he'd asked to hear the top of the session. The first thirty seconds, before the first word — the gap between when I hit record and when he started, which has a name on no form I've ever seen. Room tone, and under it, me: in for four, hold, out for six, the sound I'd already met once that night, at 11:40, on purpose, and hadn't liked. He stood in the doorway with his coat half on and listened to all thirty seconds of it. Then he said good night, and the stairs took him, and I did not think about it for four entire minutes, which is how long the wrap takes when you do it by the list.

The wrap is four steps. Save the session. Back it up twice, one drive for the client and one for the shelf, because Margot doesn't trust the cloud and the cloud hasn't earned it. Write the pickup notes. Kill the red light over the booth door.

The pickup list came to four words, all of them his, all of them small. I wrote them anyway. Lists are how the morning lets you go. On the screen the session read five hours and six minutes, one chapter and a bit, thirty-eight takes. My watch was face down on the console where I'd left it at 11:40, left of the fader bank, and I could hear it ticking, which is not possible at that distance on that surface, and I heard it anyway.

The red light had been on for five hours, a small red sun nobody had looked at directly. When I killed it, the booth went back to being what it is, which is a closet with expensive foam.

With the door shut and the monitors dark, the studio smelled of cold radiator and old foam, the dust the heat had given up around four, the carpet going damp where the wall meets the floor. In the daytime this room smells like coffee and other people's perfume. At six in the morning it smells like what it's made of.

Across the street the top ramp of the parking garage had taken the sunrise in a stripe, grey going pink. The building had its night sounds on: the fridge downstairs, the wall hum, the radiator deciding against it.

I made tea and didn't drink it. It sat on the console and went cold at the same rate as his cup in the booth, two of the same thing in two rooms. Then I put the Sonys back in the drawer. The pads still had the shape of his head in them, which is not a thing headphones can have. I knew that. I shut the drawer anyway.

Margot's rule for the twelve nights was that the book was the only subject. At 6:30 in the morning the rule was easy to keep. There was nobody left in the building to break it with.

* * *

The way I run a session, the channel never closes between takes. That's a habit from cartoons. The sound you need is always two seconds before the line — the chair shifting, the breath before the yell, the door that shuts too early — so I let it run all night and sort the wreckage in the morning.

Punching in and out is discipline. Letting it run is faith in the wreckage. Most engineers get the same result either way, and then there's a night like this one, and the two ways stop being the same.

At 6:40 I went down the timeline looking for the gaps. Every place where the chapter stopped and the man didn't. The breath before the first word of every take, thirty-eight of them. The page

turns, most of them quick, one of them slow, the kind you do when the scene on the other side might be worse. The five seconds at 2:19 where the pages went over backwards, checking something he'd already read. The water at the top of the four o'clock break: the cup off the stool, the swallow, the cup going back down. At 4:44 he lost his place, and the pages went quiet for two seconds and then found each other, and there's a small paper sound in the middle of it that I'd have sworn was nothing, back when I thought I was only housekeeping. And the long sit at 3:12, where the waveform lay down flat and then rose and fell, rose and fell, for four whole minutes, a man alone with his own air in a room where nobody wanted anything from him.

And at 4:02, me, coming through the booth door with the tea. Our whole conversation is on the track. The radiator line. His "that's exactly what I'm doing." My list of instructions, delivered to a man sitting inside a red light as if it were weather. I didn't pull any of it. Talk between an engineer and a narrator is scaffolding. It comes down when the book goes up. That's the rule, and I have never broken it once.

I pulled the rest out one gap at a time and laid it end to end on a new timeline, breath against breath, silence against silence, and when it was done the new session read eleven minutes and four seconds.

Eleven minutes of him breathing. Not reading. Not performing. Not rationing. Breathing in a dark room, recorded by a microphone that had no opinion about any of it.

The professional reason to keep it: room tone is the most valuable thing in any session and nobody bills for it. You patch a narrator's own air under his pickups and the seams don't show. A year from now, when somebody wants a line warmer, the breath underneath will be his breath and the edit will be invisible. Stock is not sentiment. Stock is a line item. That's the reason I gave myself, and I want it on the record that it's a real reason.

I turned the monitors off and put my own cans on.

First pass, I listened like an engineer, which means I listened to the walls. The hum at sixty cycles under everything, the oldest voice the building has. The radiator ticking once at the top of the hour and then quitting. His breath quick in, long out, and the outs running longer than they should — seven seconds, eight — the starvation he does on purpose so he never has to reach for air in front of anyone. You could hear it in the gaps too. He does it to himself in the silences. In the 3:12 sit he ran eleven breaths a minute, which is asleep or pretending, and the file doesn't say which, and I didn't add a note. The booth chair never made a sound in five hours. Good chair.

Nothing needed fixing. That was the report. I marked two pulls for stock, and then I sat there with the file open and my hands in my lap, and I played it again from the top.

There's no professional name for the second time.

With the monitors off, the room was so quiet that the building hum sat under his breathing like a second instrument. I listened to a man breathe for eleven minutes with my eyes on a waveform that didn't need me, and somewhere in minute six my own breath took his shape: quick in, long out, a small hold at the top. I straightened it out, and it went back to mine, and by the end of the file it had gone back to his, and I stopped correcting it. That's a thing bodies do with a rhythm in the room. You can hear a crowd do it on a subway platform, everyone landing on the same step. I know the science. The science wasn't in the room.

Twice in the eleven minutes he exhaled and then, half a second later, exhaled again, the second one bigger, the way you do when the first one didn't finish the job. At 2:58 and 4:41. I know the timestamps now. I'll know them in a year.

At 5:47 there's a sound I would have cut out of anyone else's session. A small wet click, the kind that sits in front of a hard consonant. There's no consonant after it. There's a word he almost said to a closed booth at six in the morning, and the track kept it, and I kept the track. I zoomed in on it until the click had walls, and then I zoomed back out, and it went back to being four pixels of a word nobody said, and I did not write *do not use* next to it.

Then it was done twice. The first time had a purpose, and the second time had me, and the assignment had come from nobody, which is the kind of assignment this studio is bad at.

* * *

The cursor was still blinking in the name field.

I typed *hall_breaths_nightone* and looked at it for a while. Then I deleted it, and the screen went dark except for the cursor, which sat in the middle of it like a pulse. Then I typed it again, letter for letter, the same twenty-two characters, because there is no other name for it, and because the honest name for it is not a name a drive gets to have.

I don't name things twice. I have never named a file twice in six years. The delete key was under my left hand the whole time. I hit return, and the session went to the shelf drive with everything else nobody listens to.

The manuscript was still on the guest chair. He'd set it down when he stood, and he'd gone without it, and I hadn't reminded him, and now it was a fact of the room. The spine is cracked in three places, and none of them is chapter one, and the corners have gone soft from reading. Somebody loves this book in the ordinary way, with thumbs.

The pickup sheet wanted page numbers. That's why I picked it up — a reason with a form attached, a reason I could show somebody if anybody ever asked why I had a client's manuscript in my hands at seven in the morning in an empty studio.

I opened it at random. Really at random. I have spent enough of my life pretending a fall-open is a coincidence to know the difference.

Page 141. The line at the top was the guy's, and it ran off the edge of the page, so I got her answer with the question missing, which I suspect is how most of this is going to go. The heroine was in a kitchen with a man's coat on a chair by the door, and she was rinsing something, or not rinsing it, and she said:

"I didn't," she said. "I didn't ask you to stay."

I read it with my breath attached, which is how I read everything. The first *I didn't* comes out fast, a door shutting on the way past. The second one is slower, and between the two of them there's a gap, and my breath went into the gap before I had any say in it, the way water goes into a channel it cut itself.

I read it again. Same place.

I read it a third time, out loud, actually out loud, in an empty studio at seven in the morning, and the pause sat where my pause sits: before the true part, after the part that gets you off the hook. I have a breath I take in front of the thing I mean. Same slot, same size, every time, and there it was on page 141 of a book he finished before either of us knew the other one existed.

It could be a coincidence. Sentences bend in a limited number of places. Every narrator I've ever worked with breathes in commas.

Not in that slot, though. That's my pause.

I closed the manuscript and set it face down on the console next to the watch, and took the cans off, and the room was so quiet that my own breathing came through like a track somebody had recorded a long time ago and never put a name on.

Chapter Four

ELLIOT

I have had the file for five years, and in five years I have never once played it in daylight.

Daylight would make it a document. Daylight has a way of asking what you're doing. In the car, in the dark, with the city going by, it's a thing I do, the way other people check their mirrors twice. The Volvo knows the route by now. Greenpoint is ten minutes from the studio if you go straight over the creek. I go the other way — up the ramp at Queensboro Plaza, over the bridge, around the bottom of the island, back across the river — because the file runs nine hours and forty minutes and the drive is the only appointment it gets. I stopped calling that reasonable in year two.

The ramp lights were still on, sodium yellow, doing their best for nobody. The Silvercup sign had lost another letter since November. Past the guardrail the water lay flat and grey in every direction, and Manhattan sat off my left shoulder the same way, flat and grey, printed rather than built, like a photograph of a city somebody was keeping on file. The tires found the deck grates and hummed a note I have never once found in any other car.

Radio off. There's room in here for one voice.

My thumb found my throat at the first light on the ramp and pressed until the pulse showed up. Habit. Fifteen years of first lines, and the thumb still thinks it runs the schedule.

The filename is a string of digits a machine gave it the day I saved it. Since then it has moved through four laptops and two phones. It's the only file I back up on purpose. The account it came from is gone. The internet keeps everything, and it didn't keep her, and I've never known whether that was an accident or somebody's whole point.

I don't start at the top. I never start at the top. I cued it to 1:13:40 and let her run.

The recording is a ruin by any standard I pretend to have. A hundred and twenty-eight kilobits. The esses smear like ink left out in the rain. The noise floor rises and falls under everything like something breathing behind a wall. Somebody gated her breaths, and every so often one gets through anyway, half a breath cut off at the knee. I've lived with the ruin so long that if a clean version existed it would sound wrong to me now, like a hotel corridor.

" — and my father said that in the spring it always was — "

I read that line six hours ago into a microphone worth more than my first car, and it took me two tries and an edit. She does it in one take. And she does a thing on "always" I have never managed to describe to anyone without sounding insane: she reads it like she's heard a father say it. I invented the father. She makes me believe him.

The first winter, I played that chapter for people I knew and watched them do the thing with their faces. Nobody ever did it for me reading live. That's a sentence I've had five years to make peace with, and we're not there yet.

The comparison I do out loud. There's no audience, and after a six-hour night my voice has maybe four blocks of credit left in it, so I spend the credit.

"Hers," I said, and played the line again.

"Mine," I said, and gave the car my version, which broke on "spring" in the same place it broke tonight, behind the glass, in front of a woman who fixed it in one keystroke and didn't make a conversation of it. On the bridge, with nobody to fix it, the break sat in the passenger seat like a third person.

"Consistency," I said.

Her “river” sits flat, the way the actual river sits flat in winter. Mine arrived in two pieces with a seam in the middle. I played hers again at the far side of the bridge and sat through a red light putting my pieces against her whole, and behind me a cab started deciding about its horn.

She reads descriptions faster than dialogue. Almost nobody does that. Actors slow down for scenery like it’s a crosswalk. Running the landscape fast makes the book sound like it’s happening instead of being reported, and there’s a line in chapter two I spent a week on — “She waited for the ferry the way some people wait for weather” — and the reader gives “weather” half a second of room and then closes the door on it. I spent a week building that half-second into the sentence. She spent it like it was nothing, which is what I had built.

Once, in chapter four of the file, she loses a word and you hear her find it again, a small stumble, kept in. Whoever cut the file left that in, and I have spent five years being grateful.

At 1:14:11, there is a chair creak.

I know it the way other people know the crack over their bed. I mouth it coming in — now — and there it is: a cheap swivel taking somebody’s weight sideways, one lean, half a second, somebody checking a level or a page before they go on. It has been there for five years. I have heard it more times than I have heard my own name.

I know people who could master that creak out for the price of lunch. I have never wanted it gone. Take the creak out and the room goes with it, and then it’s just a book being read, and I can get that anywhere.

Out of that one creak I have furnished an entire room. You can hear the size of a room, if you’ve spent your life listening to them, and this one is small. The walls are soft with something, blankets maybe. The chair has one bad wheel. There’s a heater with a tick in it, and a lamp with a switch you can hear across the space. Somewhere near the mic there’s a mug; once an hour, careful, it touches down on cloth. I know that room better than any apartment I’ve ever paid rent on, and I have never been inside it, and whoever lives there doesn’t know I exist.

I used to think that was the saddest sentence I owned. Then the voice started going, and the field got competitive.

Down the ramp at the bottom of the island, the file ran on toward chapter three. The FDR was empty enough to make time with, trucks only, everybody’s headlights still burning in the grey. Through the vents the river got into the car, diesel and cold iron. Here is the part I did out loud twice, once at the Delancey light and once on the Williamsburg, both times to the windshield.

At 12:52 tonight, through the talkback, the engineer said, “No. Not yet.”

Three words, and she put a full second between “not” and “yet.” You could park a car in that second. The woman on the file carries the last word of every paragraph the same way: takes it over the line instead of landing it, sets it down instead of snapping it shut.

“Hers,” I said, and played a paragraph ending.

“Hers,” I said, and did the engineer’s three words in my wreck of a whisper, honoring the gap.

A bike rolled up beside me at the light, a delivery bag the size of a mattress on the rider’s back. He looked in at a grown man in a grey Volvo talking to nobody. I gave him the nod of a man on a phone. I was not on the phone.

Two women who treat a silence the same way. I said that out loud too, and then I said the rest of it, because saying things out loud is how I check them. It’s a city of eight million. Pauses are the cheapest tool in the box. Everybody who listens for a living talks like a person who listens for a living. Coincidence is sample size; I’ve put that line in two books, and it was true in both. It means nothing.

The sentence held up about as well as “spring.”

I let it go. The FDR ran me south past the cranes and the fish-market smell, and the file took her into the chapter where the woman finally leaves, and for a while the two of them went on without me while I drove.

By the second bridge I was down to a whisper myself. That's the arithmetic of a night: the voice spends what it spends, and the whisper is the balance. The file ran on over it, full size, unbothered. She had the road and the river and the grey to herself.

And somewhere over the water, with both rivers behind me the same noncolor, I noticed what I had already decided.

The book gets made in that room, with that engineer, or it doesn't get made. Not a preference. A fact with no visible means of support, and I write fiction, so I know the type on sight. It's the kind of fact you build a novel on, because it won't hold anything lighter. I checked it the way I check a plot, turning it over, looking for the load-bearing wall. There isn't one. The thing stands up anyway, the way my table at home stands up, on trestles, no craftsmanship anywhere in it.

Twelve nights is a schedule. Somewhere between the two bridges I had turned it into a plan: the same engineer, every night, all twelve.

I ran the reasons out loud, like a man keeping his books. She fixed the break without making it a conversation. She handed over the bad headphones without asking why a client would want the world to sound like a parking garage. She let me start the whole take over after one in the morning and never once looked at a clock in my direction. At four she told me what I was doing with the last word of every paragraph, and she was right, and she said it the way you tell a man his fly is down. Every reason was true. Every reason was professional. The reasons were not the reason, and out loud, alone, at forty miles an hour, I could hear the difference the way you hear a bad edit. Everything's there. Nothing lines up.

* * *

Greenpoint does its best work at this hour. The egg place on the corner vents steam into the street. The metal shop's gate is up eight inches, somebody already grinding behind it, one long note with morning in it. I found a spot two doors from my building and didn't turn the engine off, because the file was still playing and I don't cut her off mid-sentence. That's the only rule I have about the file. I keep it like it's law. In the apartment, the neighbor's television will start through the wall by noon, like weather. The car is the only room where I own the quiet, so I stayed in it.

In five years I have never played the last chapter of the file. I know how my book ends; I wrote the ending twice. How she reads the ending is the one thing I've left sealed. Some men collect stamps.

Engine idling, I picked up the phone, opened a note, and typed one line:

Same engineer. All twelve nights. Ask Margot.

I looked at it for a while. Then I typed the reason underneath it, one word:

Professional.

It looked like the kind of thing a professional writes. It looked fine. I left it there.

The file reached the end of a chapter and went quiet for two seconds, and in the gap I turned the engine off. Under the hood something started ticking as it cooled, one small regular sound, patient, like room tone, like somebody counting something out in the dark. I sat in the parked car and listened to it tick down to nothing.

Chapter Five

NORA

My mother keeps the television on with the sound off and the captions on, and she reads faster than actors talk, so she spends half of every movie waiting for the cast to catch up to her.

"They're slow," she said when I came in. "The whole show."

"Maybe your captions are fast."

"Nobody's captions are fast, Nora."

She was in the chair by the window with the good blanket over her knees, the one I'd carried up from Sunnyside on the train. The blanket smelled of our detergent, the one from the bodega on 46th, because I do her laundry at the place on 46th on Saturdays, and she pretends the home does it, because there's a version of this arrangement where the home does it, and neither of us lives in it.

The room ran hot the way institutions run hot, and the radiator had a hiss with a periodicity to it, four seconds on, two off. I caught myself counting it while I hung up my coat. Four on, two off. You can take the engineer out of the booth.

There's a photograph of me at twenty-two, in a graduation gown, propped against the lamp so the room has a witness to something. Next to it, a card Toby made in the fourth grade, kept so long it's more fixture than paper.

The hallway outside had been all families at three o'clock, everybody pretending they were visiting a hotel. A call light chimed somewhere every forty seconds, small and patient, somebody's needs getting filed in order. Down the corridor the med cart went by on one wheel with a flat spot in it, tick tick tick, and a woman's door was open to a game show with the volume up, and none of it was a sound you could record out. Only around.

On the whiteboard by the door, the aide had written the day's names in blue marker and drawn a sun wearing sunglasses. On the nightstand, under the lamp, next to the pill organizer and the lidded cup, was a paperback with a green cover and one white line down the middle.

I looked at it the way you look at someone in a restaurant you weren't expecting to know.

"Sit," my mother said. "You look thin."

"It's the coat."

"The coat's not thin. You are." She looked at me for a moment, doing whatever arithmetic mothers do. "You're on nights again. You get a look. Your grandmother had the same look, and she worked nights her whole life and liked it, which nobody has ever explained."

"I'm fine, Ma."

"Did you eat? Don't eat here. The food is bad and the coffee is a rumor. There's a woman down the hall whose daughter brings her a thermos, and I have thought about that thermos at three in the morning, which I'm telling you so you know my standards are low."

"There's a letter," she said, "on the dresser. For you. They sent me one too. I didn't open mine, because it isn't mine. It's yours. They just use my address."

I got the envelope off the dresser. The return address was the business office. The letter inside was one page, and I read it standing up, with my coat still half on.

Effective December 1, the monthly rate for her room would increase from eight thousand two hundred dollars to eight thousand six hundred.

Four hundred dollars.

I folded the letter into thirds and put it inside my coat, and my hands were steady on the folds, which is the family gift. Nobody in my family has ever had a shake in a crisis. We save it for Tuesdays, for no reason, in the wrist.

“It’s handled, Ma,” I said.

“Four hundred,” she said. “For what? The jello is the same jello.”

“Everything went up this year. Have you seen eggs?”

“I have money,” she said, which was true the way a drawer with two folded tens in it has money.

“Your money stays where it is. It’s handled.”

She let it go, because she’s my mother and not a lawyer, and there was a silence, and in the silence the radiator did its four and two, and the game show down the hall gave up a burst of applause like weather in another county.

“You know what your father would have — » she started, and stopped, the way we all do, and I got her the lidded cup off the nightstand and held it while she drank, which in my family is an entire conversation.

Then she nodded at the nightstand.

“Did you read that one? The floor’s been passing it around since the summer. The woman in 12 read the last page first and cried anyway. I don’t hold with that. If the end is good enough to cry at, you should have to arrive at it.”

“I’ve read it,” I said.

“Is it true he never wrote another one?”

“It’s true.”

“What a shame. It was a good book.” She looked at the window, at the parking lot and the trees going bare. “It’s a book you can hear. Even with your eyes. You can hear how it’s supposed to sound, reading it. Not everything does that. Most things you read and they stay on the page, and that’s fine, they’re paper. That one wants a voice on it.”

“The man can’t have run out,” she said. “A person who hears like that has more in him.”

“Maybe,” I said.

There is one true answer to where that voice has been all this time. Five years ago, in a closet in Sunnyside, with a borrowed microphone and money I needed, I put a voice on it, and no name went on the voice, and that’s the whole of it.

“You do the talking books,” she said. “At your studio. Did you do that one?”

“Paper only,” I said. “They never did the sound for it.”

“They should. Half this floor can’t hold a book anymore. The eyes go before the ears do. The woman in 12 would love it read to her. She’d cry all over again, in the right order this time.”

“So what are you doing all night,” she said, “that you can’t call on Sundays anymore?”

“Cartoons,” I said. “There’s an otter.”

The lie sat down in the room and got comfortable.

“What channel is it on, the otter?”

“It’s not on yet. It comes out in the spring.”

“We’ll watch for it,” she said, which is what she says about everything I do. The date never comes and she never brings it up again, and I believe that’s her version of mercy.

“An otter,” my mother said. “Well. Somebody has to.”

Her left hand did the small thing it does now on the blanket, a two-inch tremor we have all agreed not to see. I put my hand over it for a second, and it came through both of us like a signal on a bad wire, and then the aide knocked, shift change, blood pressure, and the visit was over the way visits end there, in the middle of something.

* * *

My brother was in the cafeteria with a vending machine sandwich and his hood up, which is how he watches television, waits for trains, and lives. Nineteen. A freshman. He stood when he saw me, the way he always stands, like a man at a hearing.

“She beat me at checkers twice,” he said. “She cheats. She moves my pieces when I go for the coffee.”

“She’s not cheating. She’s directing.”

“Same thing, in checkers.” He pushed the sandwich wrapper around. “How mad is she about the letter?”

“She’s not mad. She thinks the jello should be four hundred dollars better.”

“That jello isn’t four dollars better.” He ate the last of the sandwich. The machine behind him had taken his dollar on Friday. He’d kicked it once, with the caution of a man who has met machines before, and the machine had kept the dollar. Then he did the thing where he talks around something, the way the rest of us talk around everything, because we are a family of people who arrive at the end last, on principle. “Books are a scam, by the way. Have I told you about books? They change the edition every year. They renumber the pages so you can’t buy used. It’s a racket with a syllabus. My econ book is three hundred dollars. Three hundred. And the ninth edition is two-eighty used, and you know what they changed in the tenth? The dates. They changed the dates.”

“How much?” I said.

He looked at the wrapper. “Three hundred.”

“It’s handled.”

“I can take a shift at the library in the spring. They pay work-study, it’s — ”

“It’s a loan,” I said. “Zero percent. You’ll pay it back when you’re an economist.”

“Undeclared,” he said. “But thank you.”

He walked me out through the lobby, past the sign-in sheet, past the family that was signing in with a balloon, which is a thing people bring to nursing homes, balloons, as if the problem were a shortage of festivity. At the door he looked at me sideways.

“You look like the night shift,” he said. “Ma said the same thing at checkers. Between you two I’m getting a complex.”

“Otters,” I said. “Go do your reading.”

“Otters,” he said, and believed me, because he’s nineteen and I’m his sister, and in that order.

He went back in to lose at checkers a third time, hood up, two dollars for the coffee in his fist. At nineteen, three hundred dollars is a wall. At twenty-eight, apparently, you’re the person who tells your brother there’s no wall. The doors closed behind him and the lobby went back to being a hotel.

* * *

The Corolla was at the bottom of the lot under a sodium light. The passenger window hasn’t moved since July. Press the button and the motor groans once and quits, the sound of a decision that’s already been made, and I’ve stopped pressing the button, but I sat in the car for a minute without starting it, because from the top of the lot you can see the river, and up on its hill the prison, and I grew up in this town and nobody here looks up, and it was almost five and the town was doing its Sunday thing, closing.

The rest of my family works the same way. Handled is what we say instead of help. Nobody has ever said help out loud in a kitchen we own, and I’m including the Corolla.

At the ice cream place on the corner a man was putting the patio chairs in, one stack at a time, and Sunday was ending in real time, not all at once.

I did the math out loud.

“Four hundred by the first of the month. Three hundred for the books. That’s seven hundred. Checking is nine hundred and change, and the fifteenth came and went on Friday, and the home wants the first, not the fifteenth, and nobody prorates November.”

The numbers came out in order and stood there in the cold car with me.

So I did it again, out loud, slower, the way you play a bad take back at half speed to find where the noise is getting in.

“Four hundred by the first. Three hundred for the books. Seven hundred.”

Same numbers. Same order. Same silence in between them. It's the one thing in my line of work that never lies and never fixes itself either. You can't gate it, you can't ride the fader on it, you can't patch room tone under it. It's just arithmetic, sitting there at minus eighteen, not needing me.

Out the windshield, the prison lights came on over the town, all at once, the way they do.

What are you doing all night. She'd asked it in a room with a book on the nightstand that I know better than my own hands, and I'd said an otter, and she'd said somebody has to, and every part of that was true, which is the whole trouble with lies. You build them out of true parts.

"It's handled," I said to the windshield. It came out in my mother's voice.

I turned the key.

Chapter Six

ELLIOT

Monday, my voice had a floor under it again.

Friday's session had taken the top off it, and the weekend had given back some of the floor, and that's the arrangement now. The voice is a loan. The interest is collected in advance.

I tested it on the walk from the car, one word, "river," at a red light on Lexington with the windows of nobody else's morning all around me. It came out in one piece. First tries are always better. Everything after the first try is statistics.

At ten to eight the lamp shop next to the clinic was still dark, all its sun-lamps burning in the window for nobody. I stood outside with my collar up and listened to a man across the street argue with his parking app, a whole marriage in one direction, and then I went up.

The receptionist had the crossword folded to the grid and didn't look up. She slid the clipboard across. Same line for the same insurance, same box for the same complaint, my initials where my initials go. At that hour the waiting room is mine: one plant that has been dying since the previous administration, four chairs bolted to a rail, and a television that plays clinic hours with the sound off, which is the correct amount of sound for clinic hours.

On the wall by the diploma there's a photograph of her medical school class, forty faces, three of them women, and she's the one not smiling. I look at it every visit. It doesn't change either. Lately I like rooms where nothing changes.

"Four across," the receptionist said, to nobody. "Six letters. Lament."

She filled it in before I had it. There's a joke in there about the professionals. I didn't make it.

I'd made the Monday appointment when I made the Friday one. A baseline before, a check after. Two data points and one weekend between them. Lin didn't ask why. She's been in this trade long enough to know her regulars keep their own charts, in the margins, where she can't bill for them.

* * *

The room smells of the numbing spray, bitter, like a banana that's given up. She sprayed, counted to thirty under her breath, and slid the scope in. Cold wire behind the soft palate, a tickle like a sneeze that reports to somebody else. Her laptop woke up, and there I was on the monitor, blown up to the size of a cave.

The folds came together to make a sound and shook instead. Two pieces of machinery arguing over one job. This was the twelfth time I've watched it, and it doesn't get easier, watching. It's like a page of your own handwriting. You know exactly what it says. You read it anyway.

She advanced the scope a centimeter and the world went narrow. There's a point where you stop feeling the wire and start only seeing the picture, and I've learned to live at that point. She typed. The keyboard sounded like rain on a skylight.

She taught me the vocabulary years ago, the way you teach a patient to read his own chart. Adduction. Break. Effort. Now there's a sentence in my head running the whole time: the folds are not approximating. It sounds like what it is, a report from a country I hold citizenship in against my will.

"Say 'ah.'"

I said it. Half a second in, the vowel went into its two halves, both of them straining, a sound with a fence down the middle of it.

Her hand came up fast.

On Friday the hand had been a question. This one was a full stop.

"Again."

I said it again and let it break where it breaks. There's no audience in that room. That's the only reason I can.

"Worse than last month," she said, to the screen, not to me.

She said it the way she says everything, short and filed and already true. She turned the laptop a few degrees, in case I wanted to check her work. On the monitor the spasm grabbed and let go, grabbed and let go. A fist learning to wave.

"Read me the paragraph," she said. "The river one."

I took out my phone, opened the book, and read the first paragraph of chapter one into a microphone the size of a coat hook, at eight on a Monday morning, in a room that smells of banana spray. Reading in there is not reading. There's no page and no weather and nobody's father. It's a hundred words on a treadmill, and every one of them shows you its cost.

" — the river was high, and my father said — "

The break used to live in "spring." It's moved. It's in "river" now, the first word, at the very front of the sentence, like a man checking the locks before he says anything.

"Again."

I read it again. Same place.

"Same place," she said, and wrote.

She has me read the same paragraph every visit. Somewhere on that laptop there are three years of me reading the same hundred words, once a month, getting worse in order. An archive nobody asked for.

Reading it for her is the third version of that paragraph I own. There's the one I wrote, which is made of paper and memory. There's the one I record at night, which costs me something every time. And there's the one on the file, which belongs to a stranger and is better than both. Same hundred words. Three different paragraphs. I've stopped pretending that's a small thing.

* * *

Then the questions, and the lie, which I'd had all weekend to prepare. I didn't use the prepared one. I used a smaller one. It's the easiest lie I tell all week. It has a clipboard and a co-pay.

"How much did you record this weekend?"

"One session. Friday into Saturday. Six hours."

That was true. I waited for the next question.

"And this week?"

"Twice a week," I said. "Short sessions. Three hours, a break in the middle."

She looked at the screen. Then at her pad. Then she wrote down "twice a week" the way a woman writes down what a man says so it can be wrong later.

"Hours per night?" she said.

"Some. With breaks."

"Water?"

"Warm."

"Steam?"

"At home."

"The straw?"

"Sometimes."

"The straw," she repeated, and wrote something that was not the straw.

"Sleep?"

"Some."

"Sleep," she said, and underlined something that already existed.

"There's a mark on the left fold," she said. "Small. That's not three hours."

"It's a big book."

"It is a big book," she agreed, and put the pen down.

There's a version of this visit where I tell her the rest of it. The bought block, the engineer, the thirty seconds at the top of the session that I've neither deleted nor explained to myself. She treats vocal folds. The rest isn't within reach of her instruments.

She pulled the pad toward her and drew a week. Seven ticks. Two boxes.

"Twice a week," she said. "I said it Friday. I'll be saying it in January. Not twelve nights."

"I'm pacing it."

"Pacing," she said. Not a question. She let it sit on the air between us, misspelled.

"Four nights," I said. "Four hours each."

She crossed out nothing, because she hadn't written anything but the two boxes.

"Twice," she said.

I could have bought less. That's the part I didn't say. Nobody stood in my kitchen with a gun to a calendar. In October I stood at Margot's desk and asked for the whole block, and she said, "Careful," which from Margot is a complete sentence with a verb in it, and I signed anyway. Midnight to six is the cheap room, and twelve is how many nights a big book takes at the speed my voice can afford, and I said all twelve the way you order a whole pie so nobody else can have a slice. Twice a week would mean finishing in April. April is for people whose instruments heal.

"You're due," she said. "The injection."

"I know."

"The needle goes through here." She touched the cartilage below her jaw, her own jaw, matter-of-fact, the way a mechanic points at a belt. "Into the muscle. The machine tells me when I'm in it. A crackle, like a bad connection. You've heard it."

"I've heard it."

"If we do it today, the top of the range goes breathy. Ten days. Ten days of whispering, or ten days of not at all."

"Eleven nights," I said.

"I know what you have."

"And if I whisper through the bad stretches?"

"Whispering is not rest," she said. "People think it's rest. It's a different muscle doing the same job, in the dark, without pay."

She is forty-eight and tells the truth in short sentences, and each one arrives like furniture. It comes into the room and it stays.

"The longer you wait," she said, "the less it gives back. It's not a savings account. There's no interest."

"I heard you Friday."

"You'll hear me in January," she said. "It'll be more true by then."

I looked at the diagram on her wall, the one of the larynx, labeled in her own handwriting thirty years ago or so, a map of a small country I've been annexed by. The labels don't change. That's what I like about that diagram.

"Then book me after," I said. "After the nights. The second Monday in January, first appointment."

She looked at me for exactly as long as it took me to stop looking at her. Then she printed a page of exercises I have had eleven times, and I took it, because taking it is part of the liturgy. Then she pressed the intercom and said numbers to the front desk, and the intercom said something tinny back, and she said, "Eight o'clock. He takes the first slot," and somewhere out there a pen moved across a card, and that was the transaction, complete: eleven nights of a book now, and January pays the balance.

* * *

At the desk, the receptionist wrote the date on a card and slid it across. The second Monday in January. 8:00. Under it, in the small print they give everybody, a list of things to bring.

A man came in while I was pocketing the card. My age minus ten, holding a coffee he wasn't drinking, and I knew his job from across the room: morning radio, the burnt edge on the end of every sentence. He looked at the dying plant the way you look at a plant. I held the door for him with my shoulder, and neither of us said anything. There's nothing in that building to say anything with.

Behind the wall the elevator started its hum, right on schedule, the hum that gets into my jaw and sets up housekeeping. I took the stairs instead, four flights, one hand on the rail, and counted them the way I count everything now. On the third landing the window gives onto an airshaft, and out there a pigeon was having the same argument it always has. I came out on Ninety-eighth into the smell of the bagel cart and the cold.

Down the block, the lamp shop had opened. Every lamp in the window was on and pointed at the street. Sun for anybody who wanted it.

At the bagel cart the radio was on, something with horns in it, and the man behind the steam was doing the bass line with his mouth while he built somebody's sandwich. There was a time I did that. I walked to the car.

Chapter Seven

NORA

The watch came off at 11:38 on Monday, two minutes ahead of Friday's time, and I wrote the session name and did not think about what the two minutes meant.

The cartoon crew had wrapped on the second floor at eleven. Margot's coat was off the hook by the time I ran my line check, and after Margot leaves, the building belongs to whoever's still standing in it. Me, the fridge downstairs, and the cold. Monday nights the radiator quits around eleven and doesn't come back until the morning crew complains, and the control room gets that smell, foam and dust and metal going cold, and I set the heat gun — no. That's not what happened. What happened was I turned on the desk lamp and did the line check and left the monitors alone, and the room tone on the meter sat at minus sixty-something, which is the sound of a building holding its breath.

His manuscript was still on the console, face down, where it had been since Friday. I had not moved it. It had the weight of somebody else's property, which it was, and every time I reached past it for a pen I did a little geometry around it, and by 11:55 I was sick of the sound of my own geometry.

He came in at 12:03 with a shoebox of loose pages under one arm and a cardboard tray with two coffees in it.

"The 7 behaved," he said, like a man reporting on a dog.

"Noted."

The pages were printed one-sided, I saw when he set the box down, so he could write on the backs. Through the glass, later, I'd watch the margins fill up with pencil while he read, a whole correspondence with himself conducted below the level of the microphone.

"I didn't know what you took," he said, "so I got them both black. Which was a guess. You had the studio coffee Friday, and it looked black."

"It's black," I said. "Milk in a control room is a smell you can't get out of the foam."

"That's the most convincing thing anyone's said to me all week."

"Dunkin'?"

"The place on Jackson. The one with the cat."

"There's no cat."

"There's a cat," he said, with the certainty of a man who has fed it.

He took the bad Sonys off the hook himself this time, no theater, no question about them. Two nights is enough for a ritual to lose its first half. He set the shoebox on the stool, squared it, put the cups on the corner of the console away from the fader bank, the way a person does who has been told once, by somebody, sometime, what liquid does to a desk. Or the way a person figures it out alone. I don't know which, and I didn't ask, because of the rule, which was his rule, and it was holding at twelve minutes past midnight, and I wanted it to hold.

Then he took his coat off. He'd kept it on all of Friday, six hours, snow going to wool. Tonight he hung it on the back of the booth chair like a man planning to stay past the weather. I have no theory about that I'm willing to write down.

"Pickups first," I said. "Friday's sheet has four words."

"Four."

"You broke 'spring' twice, you dropped the end of 'always,' and there's a page turn sitting on top of 'father' that I want again."

"Okay."

We cleared it in nine minutes. That's the thing about pickups with him. No warmup complaint, no philosophy. I'd tell him the word, he'd give me the word back fixed, and the fixed version would

have something in it, a kind of attention, like a man signing his name on the line instead of scrawling it. On the fourth word he did it once, perfect, and I said, “That’s the one,” and he said, “Huh,” quietly, like the word had surprised him on its way out.

Then he opened the shoebox and started reading where Friday had stopped, and I settled in behind the glass and put my hands in my lap, which is what the fader wants from me when everything’s fine.

Loose pages have a different sound than a bound book. A bound book whispers when it turns. Loose pages decide. His pages decided all night, crack, crack, a metronome for the paragraphs, and I learned inside an hour to ride the fader around them, and then I learned to stop hearing them, which is the same thing as loving them, in this business.

Everything was fine for about forty minutes.

* * *

The break came at one. He drank his water, stood, did the thing men do in booths, stretching a back that has been sitting in a judgment it agrees with. I scrolled the timeline, marking nothing. Through the glass I could hear him humming, one low note, half a second, the way you check a tire with your thumb.

At three minutes past one he sat back down and picked up the pages, and then he didn’t read. He looked at the glass the way he looks at it, at the glass itself and not at me, and he said:

“Where did you study?”

The rule collapsed so quietly I didn’t even hear it land.

“New Paltz,” I said.

It came out flat and on time, because it’s the answer I keep for that question. Two syllables of town, four years of program, cold winters, good rooms. I have never been there. The lie is five years old. It has a commute. The school I actually went to was a closet in Sunnyside with a duvet nailed over the door and a microphone I had to give back in March, and the final exam was sixty dollars in a checking account and a winter that read like it was never going to end. Nobody asks follow-ups about New Paltz. It’s a degree-shaped answer. It has parking.

“Cold up there,” he said.

“Gorgeous in October.”

“Is it,” he said, and it wasn’t a question, and then he picked the pages back up and read the next paragraph.

That was all. That was the entire investigation.

Once, an hour later, he started one. “Do you — » and then the page turned, and the sentence went wherever unfinished sentences go in that booth, and neither of us looked at the place it had been standing.

There were ten follow-up questions any normal person would have asked, and I stood there holding answers to all of them, and he asked none. Which year. Who’d I study under. Did I go back for the alumni thing. Do I still talk to anybody from the program. Nothing. He took “New Paltz” the way you take a boarding pass at a gate, one glance, and moved down the jetway, and left me standing there with my pockets full of answers to questions nobody asked, and my heart going like the fridge downstairs.

I could have handled being pushed. Pushing has a physics. You lean back, you deflect, you turn it, the way you turn a take. I have been pushed by clients, by lawyers, by my mother, by a woman in 12, and I’m still standing. My mother pushes head-on. Toby pushes sideways. Even the otter pushes. Not pushing is worse. Not pushing is a man leaving a space on the table the exact size of the truth and then not looking at it, and the space sits there in the room getting larger every minute nobody puts anything in it. Pushing says: defend yourself. Not pushing says: whenever you’re ready. Whenever-you’re-ready is the most dangerous sentence in the English language, and he didn’t even say it out loud.

He read. I engineered. The levels were fine.

* * *

At two-forty he was into the storm chapter, the one where the river comes up over the road and the father decides about the boat. It's good pages. Even on my side of the glass, even in a job where I'm not supposed to have opinions, it's good pages, and the reading was on it tonight, better than Friday in the low register, worse at the top, where the sound thinned out and something new moved in.

The break had moved, is what I'm saying. Friday it lived in "spring." Tonight, twice, I watched the word "river" come apart in his mouth like a barge with a bad coupling, the r and the est going in two directions. I fixed the first one with a keystroke while he was still saying the next sentence. I let the second one stand, because it was in a place where the sentence could afford it, and because a thing you fix every time starts to sound fixed.

I didn't ask about it. There's a version of the job where the engineer says, Long weekend? and the client says something, and something leads to something else. I don't run that version. I run the version where the wave-form is the whole conversation.

At three-ten he was four pages from the end of the chapter when he read the paragraph about the woman.

He read it straight, no extra weight, the way he reads the load-bearing ones, the ones holding up the roof, so you feel it in the floor before you know it's a wall:

"She was better at this than anyone knew," he read. "Most of what she said was true. She had learned, early, to say the true things in an order that added up to something no one could check. People called it composure. It went into her file as calm. At night she took the work out and looked at it, and the work was good, and no name went on the work, and she slept fine, mostly — "

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