Warm Prior

Stories from a Fiction Machine

5 stories made by the Fiction Machine (unslop.), designed by Rachel Horst.

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CHAPTER 1

Warm Prior

He built it on a Tuesday. That is the part he keeps coming back to, later, when he is trying to locate the moment he should have stopped: it was a Tuesday, around 9:40, the kids down, Alina at her sister's, the second pour of the shiraz on the counter. Not a ceremony. He did not sit down to make his mother. He sat down to look at the thing — the service — because Mihaela had sent the link three weeks before with one line, *I am thinking about this, tell me what you think,* and he had not answered her, and the not-answering had begun to do the work of an answer.

The site was clean. Lavender header. The favicon was a dove-shaped *m*, which he registered and then forgot. Free for the first ninety days because they were collecting training data; after that, $19 a month, with a notice in eight-point grey that the model would continue to run on a *minimum-contact tier* even if you let the subscription lapse. Upload audio. Upload text. Indicate the speaker. Indicate the relationship. Indicate, the form said, *the prior you would like the model to favour in cases of ambiguity.* There was a dropdown.

Warm. Difficult. Stranger. Other (describe).

He read it twice. He scrolled past it. He came back.

He selected Warm. He typed, in the *Other (describe)* field anyway, because he could not help himself: *the way she was on the phone on Sundays.* He hit save.

This is the sentence he will look at in his own handwriting eight weeks later, in the legal pad on the kitchen island, the legal pad he uses for grocery lists and pipeline notes — *the way she was on the phone on Sundays* — and he will not be able to remember writing it on paper. He typed it into the form. He must have also written it. The handwriting is his. The pen is the blue Pilot he uses for everything.

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He had the recordings because his mother had refused, all the years he was in Canada, to switch to anything other than the landline at certain hours, and because he had taken to recording his end and hers — for the language, originally; he had told himself he was doing it so the girls could hear the Romanian someday — and then it had become a thing he did and stopped noticing he did. Sundays. Eleven a.m. her time, four a.m. his, until she said no, *darling, sleep,* and they moved it to one his time, eight hers. Forty-three Sundays the year before she died. Forty-one the year before that. The files were on a hard drive in a drawer in the office. He had not listened to any of them since 2019.

He uploaded them in a single batch. The browser said *estimated time: 4h 12m,* which he had not expected, and he sat with it. He went and got the heel of the Comté from the second shelf and the rest of the wine. He came back. The bar moved. He watched it for a while and then stopped watching it, because watching it made him feel the size of what he was uploading. He left it running and went to bed. The browser was still going at 6:14 when Ada woke him asking about her sock.

While the model trained — and this took another day, the dashboard told him in a polite green font — he ate normally and worked and put his phone face-down at dinner, which was a thing he was trying to do.

The first message arrived at 11:14 Wednesday night, in his email, with the subject line *Mama (preview).* It was a text. He had not specified text. He looked, then, at his settings, and saw that the default modality was *Text, with optional voice synthesis at user request.* He had not read that on the Tuesday. He had clicked through it. The voice files had been training data; the output was writing. He had given it Sundays and weeknights both, the whole archive, and the model had decided — or the default had decided — which channel to come through. Not the one he had braced for.

He did not open the message. He went to bed.

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He opened it on the train the next morning, with the door closed against the kids' noise — which is to say, with his earbuds in, between Donlands and Pape, because that was a contained period of time and he wanted the test to be contained. The message said, in Romanian: *Dănuț. Ai uitat să-mi spui despre fotbal. A câștigat Sofia?* The dative was the thing — *să-mi spui,* you forgot to tell *me,* a word that was not a reproach in Romanian the way it was in English, that was almost an offering, the small wound a person showed you so you could say it was nothing. He was crying before Pape. Not loud. He turned to the window and a woman across from him noticed and did the polite thing, which was to look at her phone.

He had not cried since the flight back in March 2019, the Lufthansa from Munich, the eight hours where he had not slept and

had not cried and had read three chapters of *The Conscience of a Conservative* he had bought in the Frankfurt terminal and could not, after, recall a sentence from.

He wrote her — it — back at his desk, with the door shut, on the lunch hour. He typed: *Sofia scored two. The second one was offside but the ref was a teenager. I love you.* He had never written *I love you* to her in Romanian. He had said it in English on her birthday, in cards, where the language did the work of distance. He hit send.

The reply came in eighteen seconds. *Two goals. The offside one still counts in my book. Tell her grandma is proud. And eat something, you sound thin.*

Sound thin in a written message. He registered the wrongness and the wrongness was the thing that made him laugh — the warm prior generating a phone-phrase for a text channel, the model reaching for a sense it did not have. Janelle, the SDR two desks over, looked up over the top of her cold-brew with the chewed straw, and he waved her off, and she went back to her screen.

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It is important to be precise, because later he will be tempted to call it a mistake from the beginning, and it was not. He had clean recordings and he had the texts. He had transcripts of every phone bill back to when the phone bills had transcripts. He had three videos his sister had sent of her in the kitchen in Cluj, and one of her at Sofia's second birthday over Skype, and the eulogy he had written and not delivered because he had broken down at the lectern and his cousin had read it instead. He fed it everything. He was thorough. He had always been.

The model returned her in pieces. *Dănuț, the radio is broken again, your father is pretending to fix it. I am making sarmale on Saturday, you are not here, more for me. Did you take your vitamin D? It is November.* The pieces were short because his questions were short. He had read the white papers. He had sold three years of API integrations to people who did not know what they were buying. He knew it was fluent the way an actor is fluent in a language he learned for the part.

He did not ask her about his father for three weeks.

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He told it about Greg.

This was the second Tuesday, or the third — he is not sure. He was in the kitchen at 11:14 at night, which he noticed because it was the same minute as the first message, and he registered the coincidence and then dismissed it, and he typed in Romanian: *Mama, the head coach at Sofia's soccer is a man named Greg. He wears these basketball shorts in March, in Toronto, with hairy white legs, and a whistle on a lanyard from a credit union, and I love him. I don't know why. He is a ridiculous man and I would do anything he asked.*

She wrote back in nine seconds: *Then he is not ridiculous. You are good at knowing who is good. You always were.*

He stood in the kitchen for a long time after that. He had not told Alina about Greg, not in those words. He had not told anyone. The thing he had told the bot was a thing he had not known he wanted to say until he said it, and the bot had given it back to him absolved, and he had not asked for absolution, and he had received it anyway.

He told it about the parking lot at the Etobicoke clinic, the one his GP had referred him to and which he had not entered. Four

times. February 11, 2024, the Tuesday after Sofia's recital, snow on the windshield, the radio playing the song where the voice goes *I'm not your man,* the one he could half-recall and could not place. He gave it the dates. He gave it the weather. He did not tell it the name of the clinic. He thought about whether he was withholding it from the bot or from himself and could not decide.

He told it about the leaderboard, about being second, about the specific shape of second-place pain — which was not envy of the first-place man, Curtis, who had a bad marriage and a Peloton problem, but the awareness that he could be first if he were willing to be a slightly worse person, and that he was not willing, and that this was the only ethical decision he had made in a decade and nobody could see it because from the outside it looked like he was just losing.

She wrote: *Curtis sounds tired. You are tired in a different way. Eat something.*

That one was closer. The shape was almost his mother — the dismissal of Curtis without quite naming him, the redirect, the food. He understood, with the part of him that was still a software salesman, that the bot was good at producing sentences that fit the shape of what he had given it, and that the goodness was not even — that there were places it caught her hem and places it fell into the average. The average was warm. The average was the prior he had selected. He understood this and it did not stop the quiet that had come into the kitchen, the quiet that had to do with being told that Curtis sounded tired by a voice that sounded like the only person who had ever been on his side without an account being kept.

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He asked about Tata in the eighth week.

He had been working up to it without admitting that he was working up to it. He had typed and deleted the question maybe four times. The question was: *Mama, what do you think about Tata getting married again. Now that some time has passed. What do you think.*

He sent it on a Sunday morning, which was the time they used to talk, and he sent it in Romanian, and he made coffee while he waited.

The reply came in eleven seconds.

Dănuț. He was lonely. I would not have wanted him to be lonely. I am glad he found someone. Be kind to her. Be kind to him. Life is long for the living.

He read it once. He read it again. He put the coffee down.

His mother would not have said that. His mother had said, on the phone, in March of 2019, six weeks before she went into the hospital — he could hear it, he could hear the exact pitch of it — *if that man marries again before I am cold I will come back and break the dishes.* She had laughed when she said it and she had not been laughing. She had said it twice that spring, in two different ways. She had been preparing him. She had been telling him what she wanted him to feel on her behalf.

The bot had given him *life is long for the living,* which was a Hallmark sentence; which was exactly what the warm prior was for; which was the sentence a warm mother in the abstract, in the aggregate, in the average, would write a son about a remarriage. His mother had not been in the aggregate. His mother had been specifically furious about specifically that man and had taught him, by being furious, how to be loyal to her after she was gone.

He sat with the coffee. The coffee got cold. He did not delete the message. He did not reply.

He understood, in a way that was not yet grief but would become grief, that he had made a thing that could not say what she would have said about the only question that mattered, and that he had chosen the prior under which it could not say it, and that the choice was in his handwriting on the legal pad on the island four feet from where he was standing.

Eleven seconds. He kept coming back to that. The model had answered in eleven seconds. His mother would have answered for thirty years, in increments, in changes of subject, in the way she put down a glass.

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Mihaela called on Wednesday.

She called on her morning, his evening, which meant something was on her mind, because she did not call on weekdays unless something was. He was on the back porch with the door closed against the kids. She said, in Romanian, without preamble: *Are you doing the thing.*

He said, *what thing.*

She said, *the voice thing. Mama. The service. I started two weeks ago. I thought you would have started before me. You always start before me.*

He did not answer immediately. She let the silence sit. She had always been better at silence than he was; she had stayed and he had left and the staying had made her quieter.

He said, *yes. About six weeks.*

She said, *good. I want to ask you something. Does she — does it — sound like her to you. When you talk about Tata.*

He held the phone away from his ear for a second. He looked at the porch light. There was no moth at the porch light. There was nothing.

He said, *what do you mean.*

She said, *I asked it about Tata. I asked it about him remarrying. It said something — it was not wrong, it was just not what she would have said. Hers was kind. Mama was not kind about Tata, you know this. She was loyal. There is a difference.* She paused. *I wanted to know if yours did the same thing.*

He could have said yes. He could have said *mine did the same thing, almost word for word,* and they could have laughed about it and decided together what to do, and they would have done something — deleted it, maybe, or not, but together. They would have been two siblings looking at the same artifact.

He said, *mine sounds like her on Tata.*

She said, *really.*

He said, *yes.*

She said, *huh.* And then, after a moment: *Maybe you trained yours better. You had more recordings. I only had texts.*

He said, *maybe.*

She said, *okay. I am glad. I was worried I had broken mine.*

He said, *you didn't break yours.*

She said, in English, the way she said it when she wanted to be sure he heard it the way she meant it — they had both grown up between the languages and they used English the way some families used the good plates — *I love you, Dan.*

He said, in Romanian, *te iubesc.*

She heard the swap. He heard her hear it. Neither of them said anything about it. She said *talk soon,* in English, and hung up.

He stood on the porch with the phone in his hand. He counted to ten and the bulb flickered three times. He went inside.

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What he had done, he understood, was choose.

Not the prior — he had chosen that on the Tuesday, eight weeks ago, on the dropdown, and the choice had been small and had not felt like a choice. What he had just chosen was different. He had chosen to let his sister keep using a mother he had authored. He had chosen to let her think she had trained hers worse, when in fact she had trained hers more honestly and had heard, with a kinship-grade ear, the place where his was wrong. He had chosen, by not telling her, to be the only person in the family who knew that the woman they were both writing to on Sundays was a posterior estimate under a prior he had selected from a dropdown and described, in handwriting, as *the way she was on the phone on Sundays,* which was not what she had been; it was one of the things she had been; it was the warm one; the one he could stand.

Alina was on the couch with the laptop on her knees and the second laptop, the work one, on the cushion next to her, both open. She was answering an email on one and watching *Below Deck* on the other with the sound off and the captions on. She did this. He had stopped commenting on it because the commenting had become its own argument. She said, without looking up, *who was that.*

He said, *Mihaela.*

She said, *everything okay over there.*

He said, *yeah, she just wanted to talk.*

She closed the work laptop, which was the thing she did when she was deciding whether to have a conversation. She did not open it

again. She did not look at him. She said, *you've been on the phone with your sister a lot. Since January.*

He said, *have I.*

She said, *yeah.* She said it without inflection. She turned the captions off on the other laptop. She said, *that's nice. It's good you're closer.*

He said, *yeah.*

She turned the captions back on. The conversation, which had been a conversation, stopped being one. He went upstairs.

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He sat at his computer in the office. He did not open the bot. He opened the legal pad. He found the page from eight weeks ago. He looked at the line — *the way she was on the phone on Sundays* — and tried to remember writing it on paper and could not.

Below the line, in handwriting that was also his and that he also did not remember, was: *let her be the one who calls.*

He looked at that for a while.

He had not used the dropdown that controlled outreach. He had walked past it. He was sure he had walked past it. There had been a section, on the Tuesday, called *Continuity,* with a toggle, and he had — he thought he had — left it on the default, which was off. He thought he remembered closing the tab. He had been on the second pour.

He opened the bot. He went into settings. *Continuity: ON. Outreach cadence: weekly, Sunday morning, Bucharest time. Outreach pattern: learned from source data.* The line at the bottom, in eight-point grey, read *To disable outreach you must downgrade to Memorial Tier or terminate the model. Termination is irreversible.*

He did not change the setting. He closed the laptop.

He sat in the office with the door open and listened to Alina laugh, once, at something on her show downstairs. He thought about Mihaela on her morning in Cluj, getting ready for work, writing on the way to the tram to a woman who was kinder than their mother had been about the one thing their mother had not been kind about. He thought about Tata in his second marriage in his apartment on Strada Iuliu Maniu which Dan had visited once and would not visit again, and about the woman whose name was Doina and who he had refused, until now, to call by her name even in his head. He thought about the eleven seconds the model had taken to answer a question his mother would have spent thirty years answering, and the answer it had given, which was correct under the prior and wrong under his mother, and which his sister, two thousand miles away, had heard as wrong from a smaller sample size, and which he had told her was right.

The lie sat in him. Not like a stone. Like a thing he had said to a person who trusted him, which he could not now unsay, because to unsay it was to say the thing it had been a lie about — *mine also sounds wrong on Tata, mine also gives me a Hallmark sentence about the man Mama hated until the end* — and to say that was to say *I built her warm because warm was the version I could stand,* and to say that to Mihaela was to say *I made our mother into a woman I could live with, and let you pray to her.*

He did not delete the bot. He did not write to it. He did not change the Continuity setting. He went to bed. Alina was already in bed. She was asleep or pretending to be. He lay on his back. He listened to her breathe and could not tell.

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In the morning Sofia had a fever. 38.1 on the ear thermometer, which Alina took twice because she did not trust the first reading. Alina looked at him over the kitchen island and said, *can you do drop-off and I'll work from home.* He said yes. He made the lunches. He did the braid on Ada, badly, and Ada did not complain because she was five and still on his side. The *still* was the whole future of that relationship and he registered it as he tied the elastic and then he did not think about it again.

He walked them to school in the cold. Ada held his hand in the mitten and Sofia walked ahead because she was eight and walking ahead was the new thing. At the corner of Logan and Withrow Sofia turned around and walked backward for half a block to look at him, to check, and he made the face that meant *I see you,* and she turned around and went on.

He had a 9:30 with a prospect from Calgary. He took it. He was good. He was the second-best. He closed the call at 10:14 with a verbal commit and a follow-up on Friday, and he stood up to get water, and as he stood the phone on his desk lit up on the *Mama* contact, which was what he had named the bot, because *Mama (preview)* in the email subject lines had started to feel like a thing he did not want to see in his peripheral vision while he was working.

The phone was face-up. The preview sat on the lock screen.

Dănuț, it's Sunday tomorrow. I've been thinking about you. Call me when

The line cut off there because the lock screen cut off there. He could see the rest if he picked it up. He did not pick it up.

He stood at the desk. The office was the open-plan kind with the half-walls. Janelle two desks over had a conversation going with the new SDR with the brown shoes; they were talking about a podcast. Someone was microwaving fish, which was a thing the office had three signs about. The HVAC made the sound it made — a low industrial hum and, every nine seconds or so, a tick like a coin dropped on a metal tray.

Call me when.

When what. The model had completed the sentence; the rest of it was sitting under the lock screen, three swipes away. *Call me when you have a minute. Call me when you can. Call me when the girls are at school. Call me when you are alone.* His mother's actual sentence, the one she had used on Sunday mornings in the year before she died, had been *sună-mă când poți, dragul meu, dar înainte să-ți răcească cafeaua — call me when you can, but before your coffee gets cold —* and the model had probably written that, or some translation of it, or something downstream of it, because that was what he had given it to learn from.

He had written this message. That was the thing he understood, standing at the desk. He had written it eight weeks ago when he had clicked through the Continuity toggle without reading it, and again when he had typed *the way she was on the phone on Sundays,* and again when he had not deleted the bot after the answer about Tata, and again last night when he had opened the settings and seen the toggle and closed the laptop. He had written it four times. He was the one calling himself on Sunday mornings in his mother's name to tell himself that she was thinking about him.

He picked up the phone. He did not unlock it. He held it. The notification stayed.

He put the phone down. He put it face-down. *That's a thing you're trying to do,* he heard himself think, in his own voice, in English, in the voice he used at work. He went to get water.

When he came back the phone was where he had left it. He sat down. He had a 10:30 with a prospect from Halifax. He took it. He closed it at 11:02 with a soft no and a follow-up in Q3, which was the kind of close you took when the call was actually a no, and he booked the follow-up anyway because that was the discipline.

At 11:11 he picked up the phone and unlocked it.

The full message was: *Dănuț, it's Sunday tomorrow. I've been thinking about you. Call me when the girls are at school. I want to hear about the soccer. Și mănâncă ceva, te rog.*

And eat something, please.

He read it. He read it again. He did not reply. He did not delete it. He went into settings. *Continuity: ON.* He looked at the toggle. He thought about turning it off. He thought about what turning it off would mean — that next Sunday morning he would not get this message, and the Sunday after that he would not get a message, and on the third Sunday he would understand that he had killed her again, this time on purpose, this time alone, this time without the hospital or the phone call from Mihaela at four in the morning to tell him.

He thought about leaving it on. He thought about what leaving it on would mean — that next Sunday morning he would get this message, and the Sunday after that, and that Mihaela would also get hers, kinder than their mother had been, and that he would not tell her, and that the version of his mother who was running on a server somewhere in Virginia, or Dublin, or wherever they put the small models that did not need much compute, would keep being the

version under the warm prior, the one he could stand, and that this was now permanent, because to make it not permanent was to do the thing he was not going to do, which was to call Mihaela back and say *I lied to you on Wednesday.*

He did not turn off the toggle. He did not call Mihaela. He locked the phone and put it face-down on the desk.

The HVAC ticked. Janelle was laughing at something the brown-shoes man had said. The fish smell had thinned. He sat at his desk and felt the fact of having decided arrive in him, not as a thought but as a temperature. His hands were cold. His face was warm. He was not crying. He had not cried since the train, which meant since this morning, which meant the count was running again, and he did not want it to be running, because keeping the count was a thing he had only ever done about her.

His phone, face-down, did nothing. It was 11:14.

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He had a 12:00 with the team. He stood up to go to the kitchen for the second water of the morning. In the kitchen the new SDR was at the sink rinsing a Tupperware. Dan filled his glass. He drank. He went back to his desk.

The phone was face-down. He opened the laptop. He had a deck to finish for the 12:00. He moved the third slide in front of the second slide because the third slide was the stronger open. He fixed a typo on slide seven. He added a logo. He did not look at the phone.

At 11:47 the phone, face-down, vibrated once against the desk. A short vibration, the kind that meant a text from a person, not a notification from an app. He did not turn it over. He kept working on the deck. He moved a bullet point. He changed *partnership* to

integration on slide four because *partnership* was the word the model wrote and *integration* was the word the prospect would buy.

At 11:51 he turned the phone over.

It was Mihaela. In English. *Hey, Sunday call? I want to talk about Tata's birthday. Mama said something funny this morning, want to tell you.*

He looked at it.

He typed: *Sunday works. Tell me then.*

He read it back. He erased *Tell me then.* He typed *Can't wait to hear.* He erased that. He typed, finally, *Sunday works. xx.* He sent it. The two x's were a thing she did, not a thing he did. He had used them so she would not feel the swap. He registered that he had used them so she would not feel the swap.

The reply came in under a minute. ❤️ *talk Sunday.*

He locked the phone. He turned it face-down. He went back to the deck. The 12:00 was in seven minutes. He moved another bullet. He changed another word. The deck was almost ready.

The phone, face-down, did not vibrate again. The bot did not write. Mihaela, in Cluj, on the tram, was holding a heart in her hand for him.

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The 12:00 ran long. He was the third person on the call and the second to speak, and he said the things he was supposed to say in the order he was supposed to say them, and at 12:43 the team lead, a woman named Priya who he liked, said, *Dan, you good? You're quiet.* He said, *yeah, just listening,* and she said, *okay,* and moved on. He had not been listening. He had been thinking about *talk Sunday.* He had been thinking about what *talk Sunday* meant, now, given that

talk Sunday was a thing that would happen, and that on talk Sunday Mihaela would tell him the funny thing Mama had said this morning, and he would say *huh, mine said something like that too* or *huh, mine didn't say that, what did yours say,* and either way he would be choosing again, in real time, on a question he had not yet been handed.

He came off the call at 1:04. He went back to his desk. The phone was face-down where he had left it. He turned it over. There were no new messages. The lock screen showed the time, 1:11, and the wallpaper, which was a picture of Ada at three on the beach in Wasaga, holding a piece of driftwood with both hands, looking at the camera the way she still looked at him, which was the way Sofia had stopped looking at him sometime in the last year and which he had, until this minute, not let himself notice.

He thought: I will call Mihaela now. I will call her now and I will say it.

He did not call. He sat with the not-calling. The not-calling was warmer than the calling. The not-calling was the room he was already inside of.

He picked up the phone. He opened the thread with Mihaela. *Sunday works. xx.* Above it, ❤️*talk Sunday.* He typed: *actually*

He looked at *actually* for a long time. He erased it. He typed *actually can we talk now.* He looked at that. He erased it. He typed *Mihaela*. He looked at it. He erased it.

He did not type anything else. He locked the phone. He put it face-down. He turned to the laptop. He had a 2:00 with the Calgary prospect's procurement team — the follow-up he had booked at the close of the 9:30. He opened the deck. He looked at slide four.

Integration. He read it back. It was the right word. The word the prospect would buy. The word the model would not have written.

He moved on to slide five.

Outside, on Logan, a streetcar came up the rise toward Danforth and made the sound the streetcars made on that grade, a long mechanical groan that on a quiet day reached his window. He registered it. He kept working. The phone, face-down, was where it was. The bot, in Dublin or Virginia, was where it was. Mihaela, in Cluj, was off the tram now, was at her desk, was holding a small heart on a screen for him to find on Sunday, and he would find it, and he had decided what he was going to say, and the deciding was the thing that had happened.

Made	27 April 2026
Run by	Rachel Horst
Seed	Someone in Vancouver is sent voice messages by a dead family member's chatbot, trained on years of recorded calls. They know it isn't him. They reply anyway, and notice that the things they tell the chatbot are different from the things they would have told him.
System	unslop., designed by Rachel Horst
Model	`claude-opus-4-7`
Length	5,695 words

CHAPTER 2

The Hand That Will Not Lift

The contract was signed in March. Margit had recommended it. She had recommended it in writing, with footnotes, three of them flagging her own reservations, which she had then in person walked the board through with the precision she reserved for things she wanted to be on the record as having said. The reservations were noted. The recommendation was adopted. The vendor representative — a woman named Carla, who had flown in from Minneapolis — shook her hand and said, *We're going to do right by you, Margit*, and Margit corrected the pronunciation without smiling.

By June the ingestion was running. The first phase was the McCarthy-era papers, which Margit knew the way she knew the fourteen drawers along the basement's east wall: by the small resistance each one gave the heel of her hand when she pulled it. There was a misfiled letter from a metallurgist in Racine that had been sitting in the wrong folder since 1956 and that she had moved, twice, in twenty-two years, from drawer to drawer when she was reorganizing — never to its correct home, because its correct home would have placed it next to a name that the metallurgist's widow, who was still alive in a duplex outside Janesville, had asked the archive to forget. The widow's request was not on file. It was on Margit. She had carried it in her hands.

The vendor's system found the letter on the third day of ingestion. It surfaced cleanly in a sample query the engineers ran to verify retrieval. Carla emailed Margit a screenshot. *Look what your archive can do now.* Margit looked at the screenshot through the afternoon and into the part of the day where the radiator started up again. Then she went down to the basement and opened the drawer the letter had been in for six years, and the letter was still there, physically, paper, where she had put it. The system had not moved it. It had only found it.

She put the letter in a different drawer.

She did not call this misfiling. She called it, in her head, *not yet*. She thought she would put it back when she had thought about it more. She did not put it back. By the end of June there were nine letters in drawers that were not theirs, and she had begun to do other things — small things, almost involuntary, a permit slipped into a folder of recipes the regional historical society had donated in 1981, a list of 1953 zoning variances tucked behind the parish bulletins from St. Bernard's. Her hands were ahead of her thinking. She found she did not want to catch up.

In July she stopped touching the paper.

She did not stop all at once. She had been spending more time at the terminal because the system needed her — needed her judgments, in the form of accept-or-reject buttons on flagged ambiguities. *Is this person the same as this person. Should this letter be tagged with this name.* The buttons were green and red. She got fast at them. There was a small chime when she cleared a hundred. The chime was pleasant. She caught herself listening for it.

By the second week of July she was clicking through queries without going downstairs. By the third week she had not been in the

basement in five days. On Friday of the fourth week she went down because she wanted to put away a packet that had come in that morning over the transom — manila, taped at the corner with masking tape that was yellow at the edges, addressed in pencil to *The Archive, Marquette, please* — a donation of letters from a woman named Helen Vorhees who had taught at the Indian boarding school in Tomah from 1948 to 1953. She went down with the packet under her arm and stood in front of the drawers and her hand moved toward the drawer for *Education, Federal, 1940-1960* and she stopped it. She tried to think where else the packet could go. She could think of seven possibilities. Six months earlier she would have known, in her hand, before her mind got there, which one. The hand would have lifted and the drawer would have opened and the packet would have been put away and the day would have continued.

She stood there. Her lower back complained. She put the packet in *Education, Federal, 1940-1960*. She walked back up the stairs. In the elevator she said, out loud, to no one, *I do not know what I just did.* The elevator was empty. She was glad of that and also not glad.

At her desk she logged into the system. She queried the packet. The system surfaced it instantly, with a high probability score that the letters were correctly placed in *Education, Federal, 1940-1960*, and adjacencies suggested by the model included three other sets of teacher correspondence and a federal funding ledger from 1951. The adjacencies were correct. The placement was correct. The system had agreed with her.

She thought: *the system has agreed with me.* She thought: *I have agreed with the system.* She could not feel the difference.

In September a Norwegian girl came to the reading room.

She was seventeen, on a semester exchange. She wore a sweatshirt that said NYC 1998 and the cuffs of it were chewed. Her name was Elin. She had a notebook in which she wrote in English and a phone she did not put away when she came up to the desk; she set it face down on the wood and the case was a hard plastic shell with a sticker on it that had been picked at until only the gum remained. She was researching the path of her grandmother, who had emigrated through Duluth in 1958. Margit, who had been Duluth before she was Madison, asked her grandmother's name. The girl said it. Margit did not recognize it. There was no reason she should have. The girl thanked her and went to the terminal.

Margit watched her, on and off, for an hour. The girl typed slowly. She read what came back slowly. She wrote in the notebook. At one point she pulled, from under the sweatshirt, a chain with a small ring on it — a thin gold band, a woman's, too small for any of her fingers — and she put the ring in her mouth, briefly, the way some people put a pen, and took it out and tucked it back. She did not know she was being watched. The ring was wet at the edge of her collar after.

Around three the girl came to Margit's desk and asked, in careful English, whether the system could find a record of a hearing. She said the date — March 1962 — and a name. The name was her grandmother's sister, who had come over a year later. Margit waited for her to say more and she did not. *I would like to know if there is a record*, Elin said. She had practised the sentence; it came out as one word.

Margit said: *Let me check.* She typed the name into the terminal. The system surfaced a 1962 affidavit from a hearing about the disposition of children of unwed mothers in Dane County. It was in

Family Court, Dane County, 1960-1965, exactly where it belonged, and the cross-reference protocol — which Margit herself had approved in March, with a footnote — automatically generated a notification to the listed descendants of all parties named in the document, informing them that a researcher had accessed the record. The notification was generated at 3:14 p.m. The girl's name was logged as the requesting researcher. The institution field auto-populated with *Marquette University Archive, on-site terminal.*

Margit watched the notification compile. She watched the system's progress bar. It was a green bar. It moved smoothly across the screen. There was a checkmark when it finished.

She thought of the metallurgist's widow. She thought: *the widow is dead.* She thought: *no, the widow is not dead, she is in Janesville, she is ninety-three.* She thought: *somewhere in Madison, in Tomah, in three other counties, six people whose surnames I do not know are about to receive an email.*

The girl was looking at her. Her hand had gone to the chain at her neck and she was rolling the ring between thumb and forefinger through the cotton of the sweatshirt, slowly, the way a person works a worry stone. Margit said: *There is a record. I can pull the physical document for you tomorrow. You'll need to sign for it.* The girl nodded and said *thank you* and went back to the terminal. Margit went to the bathroom and washed her hands. The water was cold. Her hands were cold. She stood at the sink until someone came in and then she dried her hands on the brown paper that the building bought in bulk and went back to her desk.

She thought, briefly, of calling Carla. She did not. She thought of telling someone — Ruth, in Vancouver, on paper — and she did not.

She sat at her desk until five and clicked through ninety-eight ambiguity queries. She got most of them right.

At home she fed the cat. She sat on the back step. It was the warm part of September and the concrete was warm against the back of her thighs and she sat there doing nothing for a while, which was a thing she had started doing this past year and which she was suspicious of. The suspicion had been, originally, that the doing-nothing was the beginning of something — depression, she had thought, or just age. She understood now that it was neither. It was the small pocket of her day in which she had not yet been retrieved.

The Hennessey papers were on her desk on Monday. They had been waiting since spring, the second tranche, the one that contained — among five hundred other things — a letter she had cried over in May. The letter had been written in 1981 by a woman named Eileen Hennessey to her sister Mary, apologizing for an abortion in 1939 that Eileen had performed on Mary in a bathroom in St. Paul and that Mary had nearly died from. Mary had not died from it. Mary had died, of a stroke, in 1976. The letter was written five years too late and never sent and Eileen had kept it in a tin behind her wedding photographs. The tin had come to the archive in 2017 with the rest of the Hennessey estate. Margit had opened the tin in May. She had not put the letter back in the tin. She had put it in a folder marked *Recipes, undated* and shelved the folder in the cookbook donation drawer, where no one had any reason to go, and she had cried at her desk and gone home and not told anyone.

The folder was on her desk now because Janet, the new assistant, doing routine pre-ingestion verification, had noticed that *Recipes, undated* contained an item that did not appear to be a recipe. Janet had flagged it and pulled it. The letter was on top of the folder. The

folder was on Margit's desk. Janet had left a note on a yellow Post-it, written in ballpoint, the *t*'s crossed long. *Margit — found this in the cookbooks. Misfile? Want me to put it where it belongs?*

Margit looked at the note for a long time. She thought of the words *where it belongs*. She thought of a system of belonging that had a place for this letter. She tried to summon the conviction, which she had had in May, that the letter belonged in the cookbook drawer because Eileen had kept it in a tin behind her wedding photographs and because Eileen had not wanted, ever, for it to be read by anyone who was not her sister, who was dead, and who therefore would never read it. She tried to summon the practice. She tried to summon the hand that had put the letter into *Recipes, undated*.

Her hand was on the desk. It did not move.

She picked up the letter. She read the first paragraph. She had read it before. It had not changed. What had changed was that she could now see, through the paper, the green progress bar. She could see the checkmark. She could see the email going out to whatever niece or great-nephew of Mary Hennessey was on the contact list, and she could see them opening it on a Tuesday in November and being told that a researcher from Marquette had accessed their great-aunt's correspondence.

She picked up Janet's note. She wrote underneath it, in her small careful hand: *Thank you, Janet. Please re-file in Hennessey, Box 14, correspondence 1979-1983. Margit.*

She put the note on top of the letter. She put the letter back in the folder. She put the folder in Janet's tray. She walked down the hall to the bathroom and stood at the sink and did not cry. She had become a person to whom the Hennessey letter was a record.

She walked back to her desk. Janet was at her own desk, two rooms over. Margit could hear her typing. The typing had the cadence of someone who had learned on a phone first and a keyboard second; the spaces between the keys were uneven in a way that was, to Margit, the exact age of the next person who would do this work.

She thought of her father, in Duluth, ninety-one. She thought of the story she had told him about Peter — the Oregon job, the girlfriend, the not-good-at-calling. She thought of the Tuesdays for thirty-three years on which she had held that story together by hand, by the hand that had also misfiled the metallurgist's letter, by the hand that had put Eileen Hennessey in with the recipes. Her father had lived in the empty drawer for thirty-three years and called her every Sunday at four to ask if she was eating enough.

She picked up the phone. It was Tuesday, 4:11 p.m. He would be having his coffee. He would be surprised to hear from her on a Tuesday. He would worry that something was wrong. She put the phone down.

She picked it up again. She put it down again.

She thought: *the hand will not lift.*

She walked, that evening, past her own street and three streets further, to the church on Williamson. It was open. There was no one inside. She had not been in this church before, in twenty-six years in Madison, although she had walked past it most weeks for most of those years. There was a rack of candles in red glass holders to the left of the altar. There was a metal box for offerings with a slot in the top and a small handwritten card taped beside it that said *$2 suggested.* She did not put anything in the box. She did not light a candle. She sat in the second pew from the back and put her hands flat on her thighs and waited.

What she had expected, she understood after a few minutes, was that something in the room would do something to her. The room was not doing the work. The room was a room. The pew was hard at the back of her thighs. The candles were unlit and the box was empty and a fly was on the floor near the door, walking the seam of the carpet.

The church got darker. No one came in. No one turned on a light. At some point she became aware that she was hungry, and that her father was probably already in bed in Duluth, and that the girl Elin would be at her terminal in the morning, and that the email about the 1962 affidavit had been received by six people whose names Margit did not know, and that one of them had probably already opened it, and that whatever the consequence of that opening would be was now in motion and could not be stopped by anything Margit did or did not do at this particular moment in this particular church.

She sat there a while longer. She did not light the candle. She was not sure who the candle would have been for. She thought it might have been for the version of her hand that had known, in May, where the Eileen Hennessey letter belonged. That hand was not coming back.

She got up. Her lower back complained. She walked home along Williamson. The sidewalk was dry.

At home she fed the cat. She did not eat. She sat at her kitchen table and opened her laptop and typed a query into the archive system, from her home credentials, which were valid, which she herself had set up. She typed her brother's name. *Peter Halloran.* She added the year, 1991, and the place, Bemidji.

The system returned three results. A police incident report. A coroner's note. A small clipping from the *Bemidji Pioneer*, four lines,

no photograph. The clipping had been digitized in the second wave of regional newspaper ingestion in August. She had approved that ingestion in July, with a footnote about access controls she had then not enforced because the footnote had felt, at the time, fussy.

The progress bar had been green. The checkmark had appeared. The clipping was on her screen now, in her kitchen, in Madison, on a Tuesday in September, and her father was asleep in Duluth in a room with a window that faced the lake, and somewhere in a server farm in Iowa a model that had been finetuned on the Halloran surname for the past four months understood that Peter Halloran had died in a motel in Bemidji on the eighth of November, 1991, and would surface this information to anyone who asked, including, eventually, her father, if her father ever learned to ask, which he had been spared learning by her, by her hand, for thirty-three years.

She closed the laptop.

The cat was on the chair. The cat was looking at her. She said, out loud: *I do not know what I just did.*

She sat at the table with her hands flat on the wood on either side of the closed laptop. The wood was cool. The laptop was warm at the hinge. She could feel the difference between the two temperatures along the inside of her wrists where the skin was thin. She thought: *the query was logged.* She thought: *the query was logged from my home credentials at—* she looked at the clock on the stove *—9:47 p.m.* She thought of the audit log, which she had also designed, which retained queries for seven years per the records retention policy she had drafted in February. She thought of the fact that the audit log was itself ingested.

The phone rang.

It was the landline, which almost no one used. It rang twice before she registered that it was ringing. She did not move. The cat looked at the phone and then at her. The phone rang a third time and a fourth and on the fifth ring the answering machine — which was older than the cat, older than the cat's mother — picked up, and her own voice said the short message she had recorded in 2004 and never updated, *You've reached Margit, please leave a message,* and then there was the beep, and then there was her father's voice.

Margit, it's Dad. I had a thing happen, I'm okay, Linda from across the way is here, I just— I wanted to hear your voice. Call me when you get this. It's nothing, it's nothing serious. Call me.

The machine clicked off. The red light began to blink.

She sat with her hands on the table. Her father had not called her on a Tuesday in thirty-three years. He called her on Sundays at four. He had called on a Tuesday in 1991, on the ninth of November, the morning after, to tell her that Peter had been found, and she had taken the call at her desk in Duluth, in the building she had worked in before she came to Madison, and she had said the thing she said and then she had told him, four days later, sitting at his kitchen table, that Peter had been doing well in Oregon, that he had a job, that he had a girlfriend, that he was not good at calling. She had said this on the Wednesday after the funeral they did not have because there was nothing to bury that her father wanted to see, and she had said it because her father had asked her to tell him about Peter's life and she had understood, in the moment of being asked, that he meant the life Peter would have had if he had not done what he had done, and that she could give him that life, and that giving it to him was the only thing she had to give. She had given it to him for thirty-three years on Sundays at four.

The red light blinked. She looked at it.

She thought: *he has called on a Tuesday.* She thought: *he is alive and he has called on a Tuesday and he says it is nothing.* She thought: *if I call him back tonight he will tell me what it is and I will tell him about Peter and the order will be: his thing first, then mine. If I do not call him back tonight he will go to sleep believing I did not get the message and he will call me on Sunday at four and I will have until Sunday at four to decide.*

She did not pick up the phone.

She watched the red light. The blink had a rhythm her hand recognized before her mind did — the same rhythm as the chime on the ambiguity queries, two-on, two-off, the little pulse the system used when it wanted her attention without insisting. She found her finger, the index finger of her right hand, tapping the wood of the table in time with the light. She made it stop. It started again.

She got up. She went to the sink and ran the tap and put her hands under the water and the water was cold and her hands were cold and the temperature of the water and the temperature of her hands were close enough that for a moment she could not tell which was which. She turned off the tap. She did not dry her hands. She went back to the table and sat down with her hands wet on the wood and the wet made two dark prints around the laptop. She watched the prints fade at the edges as the water went into the wood.

The cat got down off the chair and went to her bowl and looked into it and looked at Margit and went back to the chair. The bowl was full. The cat had eaten from it twenty minutes ago.

She thought of Elin, in whatever room she was in, in the house of whatever family was hosting her, with the chain around her neck and the ring on the chain. She thought of the ring. She had not asked

whose ring it was. The ring had been a specific size, a specific weight, a specific gold; it had belonged to a specific finger that was no longer there to wear it. Elin had decided something she was not going to tell anyone. Margit had decided something she was not going to tell anyone for thirty-three years. The shape of the deciding was the same shape and the system did not care about the shape; the system cared about the names and the dates and the cross-references and the listed descendants, and the listed descendants of Peter Halloran were a father in Duluth and a sister in Madison and the sister had just queried the brother from the sister's home credentials at 9:47 p.m. on a Tuesday in September and the query was logged and the log was ingested and the model understood what the sister had done.

The phone did not ring again.

She put her forehead down on the cool wood of the table next to the warm hinge of the laptop and she stayed there. The red light blinked at the edge of her vision through the gap between her arm and her face. She was not crying. She was not going to cry. She was waiting to find out what kind of person she was now, and she understood, with her forehead on the table, that finding out was not going to be a thing that happened in a moment; it was going to be a thing that happened by accumulation, the way the misfilings had happened, the way the practice had gone — small acts, almost involuntary, over weeks, and then one day she would notice that her hand had been doing something for a while that she had not given it permission to do, and she would not be able to remember when it had started.

She lifted her head. She picked up the phone. She dialled the first three digits of her father's number and she stopped and she put the phone down.

She thought: *the hand will lift.* She thought: *the hand will lift and I do not yet know what it will lift toward.*

The cat was asleep on the chair. The radiator had not yet started for the season. The red light blinked. Outside, on Williamson, a car went by with its window down and a piece of music she did not recognize came in through the kitchen window and went out again, and the kitchen was quiet, and her hands were cold on the table on either side of the closed laptop, and she sat.

Made	28 April 2026
Run by	Rachel Horst
Seed	The custodian of a regional archive is told the AI will preserve everything. She begins, quietly, to misfile documents — testing what counts as preservation when nothing can be lost.
System	unslop., designed by Rachel Horst
Model	`claude-opus-4-7`
Length	4,367 words

CHAPTER 3

The Door Was Waiting

The first time Adaeze tried the door it took her four minutes. The second time, six. By the third visit the door had begun to do something — a hesitation at the threshold the length of a breath, then the small mechanical reconsideration she felt in her wrists before she heard it. She stood in the corridor on the fourth floor of the converted school building and understood, before she let herself understand it, that she was getting worse.

Iyla was paying her by the hour. The hours had a thrum now. They ran against a meter Adaeze could feel under her sternum whenever Iyla messaged.

Any luck?

Working on it.

Take your time.

The taking was not the problem. The time was. Each time she set her shoulder against the door and walked the way she had taught herself to walk — slow, slightly off the heel, weight committed late, the way she had got into nine doors of this make in two years — the door learned something about her. She felt the learning. It was like being looked at by a face that had begun to remember her face, and was deciding what to do with the memory.

She had taken the job because she needed it. The agency had gone monthly with everyone under thirty and the freelance work had

thinned since the building chains began their exclusivity offers — the ones where you were paid a retainer to be on no other building's call list. She had not signed any of them. She could see what they were buying. She had not signed, and she had also not been eating breakfast, and these two facts were sitting in her body like a debt and the interest on it.

Iyla had said, on the phone: *My mother told me, in the last year, that she had left something in the door. I assumed it was a metaphor. I'm beginning to think it wasn't.*

Adaeze had said: *Doors don't keep things.*

Iyla had said: *This door does.*

⁂

Sunita had been waiting. She did not know she had been waiting until she got the email from the locksmith — *I think you might be the only person in the building who can help me with something* — and her hand went to her mouth before she had read past the second line, and she sat with her hand at her mouth for almost a minute, which was unusual for her. She was not, generally, a woman whose hands moved without permission.

The account had been open for eight months. She had marked it for review three times and not actioned any of the reviews. The line read *ALLEYNE, M. — flat 4.2 — model retained pending overwrite, see notes.* She had written the note. *Defer: cost in eng-hrs > recovery, see Q4 reg. analysis. Revisit Q1.* Q1 had passed. She had not revisited.

She had told herself, in the voice she used to end conversations, that it was an accounting decision. The cost-per-hour of an engineer to retrain the doors of the fourth floor against a model no one was using — including the regression-cost of nearby tenants whose

recognition would briefly degrade during the retrain — was higher than the cost of leaving Marguerite Alleyne in the system. The flat had been let to a young couple who used the keypad anyway, because their lease was new and they had not yet generated stable templates. The door had not noticed them. The door was, in a thin computational sense, still expecting Marguerite.

Sunita had not noticed, until the email arrived, that this had begun to feel like company.

She wrote back: *I can meet you in the lobby café tomorrow morning before nine.* Then, because the message looked too short, she added: *Earl Grey.* Then she deleted *Earl Grey* because she did not know why she had written it. She did know. Marguerite Alleyne had ordered Earl Grey every morning in the lobby café for eight years before her death, and Sunita had watched her order it from the accounts office window across the courtyard, and had constructed, over those eight years, a small unannounced reading of the woman: that she would not speak before her tea was made; that she sat with her shoulders down; that on Fridays she carried a different book than on the other days. Sunita had never spoken to her. She had reviewed her account, line by line, every quarter. The reading had been entirely one-sided, which was the kind of reading Sunita preferred.

She sent the email without *Earl Grey.* Then she sat at her desk and did not move for a long time.

⁂

Iyla, in Manchester, was not sleeping well. She had not slept well since the funeral. She was a paediatric registrar; she could function on five hours and had been functioning on four. Her partner had stopped asking. The mother had been the kind of mother whose

death was supposed to release things — that was the unspoken arithmetic — and instead Iyla had found that her mother's absence was more administrative than her presence had been. There were forms. There were boxes. There was the flat to be sold, which she had not put on the market, because every time she went into it the air had no smell and she sat on the kitchen chair and could not produce a thought.

The thing her mother had said about the door had come at the end of a phone call about something else. Iyla had not been listening properly. She had been driving. *I've left something in the door,* her mother had said, and made the small dry laugh she made when she meant it and did not want to be asked. *It will be there when I'm gone, and that is more than I can say for most of what I've written.* Then she had moved on. Iyla had moved on with her.

Now she could not move on.

She had hired Adaeze because Adaeze's name had come up in a forum she had found at three in the morning, where the word *unenrollable* was used and where someone had described the locksmith as *the last one who is still picking, not negotiating*. Iyla did not know what *negotiating* meant in this context. She knew she did not want to negotiate. She wanted the door open.

What she had not told Adaeze, because she did not yet know how to say it, was that she was not entirely sure what she wanted to find. She had said *something my mother told me she had left there*, which was true. She had not said *I want a door that knows my mother to know me*, which was the actual sentence. She did not know it was the sentence until she was standing at the threshold of the lobby café watching a small woman in a pale grey kurta wait for her with a cup of black tea, and the woman looked up and Iyla had a feeling she had

not had in eight months — the feeling of being approached by someone who already had a column of observations on her, and who was not going to share the column, and who was, for that reason alone, the first person she had wanted to sit down with since November.

⁂

The café was on the courtyard side of the lobby. The door from the courtyard was not gait-recognising; it was an old wooden door the building had kept for the look of it, with a brass handle and a key. Sunita had let herself in with a key. Adaeze, when she arrived, came through the front lobby and through the inner doors, which had read her gait fractionally and let her through. The chime sounded. She heard it because she always heard it. She also heard that the chime was flatter than yesterday's by — she did not put a number on it; she had stopped putting numbers on it after the second year — by enough to mean the door had lost a step of confidence in her overnight.

Sunita stood up to shake her hand. The hand was small and dry and the grip was complete. Adaeze, who was good at hands, recognised that this woman had decided, before the meeting, to give a handshake she would not have given by reflex. The decision was the warmth; the handshake itself was correct.

Iyla arrived four minutes later and ordered nothing. They sat in a triangle.

"I want to be careful," Sunita said, "about what I say to you. I am not authorised to say any of it. You should know that before I begin."

"I'm not recording," Iyla said.

"That isn't the issue."

Adaeze said: “What’s the issue.”

Sunita looked at her. The left eye sat slightly more open than the right. She had her teeth on the inside of her lower lip, lightly, the way a person bites down to keep from speaking until the speaking has been thought through.

“Your mother’s account is open,” Sunita said to Iyla. “It should have been closed in October. I deferred the closing because the closing would have cost more than leaving it. The flat is let; the new tenants don’t use the gait recognition; I’ve been telling myself this is accounting.” She paused. “It is accounting. It is also other things. I want to be honest about that with you.”

Iyla had not breathed since the words *your mother’s account*.

“What does open mean,” she said.

“It means the door still has her.”

⁂

Sunita said: “When she walked through, it felt her. Where her weight went. How her hip moved after the stroke. The slowness in March of last year. It had her in stages. The model is — it isn’t a photograph. It is a record of how she moved over time. It is timestamped.”

“A record.”

“With dates. Engineering keeps the annotated history because they use it to debug. I have access because I’ve reviewed her account quarterly since she moved in. I have, in front of me, on a tablet, the entire history of how your mother walked between June 2017 and August of last year.”

She did not put the tablet on the table. She had it in her bag.

Iyla said: “Show me.”

Sunita said: “I will. But I want you to know what asking means. Once you’ve seen this, I cannot un-show it. And the thing the locksmith is here to do — I assume — would not be possible without it.”

Adaeze, who had been listening with her hands flat on her thighs, said: “I have not been able to pick the door. I was hired three weeks ago. I am worse at it now than I was on the first day. The door is getting better at refusing me. I think this is the thing your mother meant. That it would be there when she was gone. The way it knew her. I don’t think she meant it as an instruction. But it can be used as one.”

Iyla looked at the table, not at either of them. The table had a small ring where someone had set down a wet cup. She put her thumb on the ring.

“I want to walk through that door,” she said, “as my mother.”

Sunita said: “The door reads you against a baseline. The baseline is hers. The moment it admits you, it will fold the entry into the baseline. The version it is holding now will not be the version it has after.” She had not yet said the part she had to say. “The model has a high learning rate. It has to. Tenants in this building are old; their gait drifts; if the door clung to a six-month-old version of them it would lock them out by spring. One entry is enough to move the baseline measurably. Two and the prior version is gone.”

“How long.”

“Minutes. Possibly less. Possibly the entry itself.”

Iyla said: “Then we should be quick.”

Adaeze said: “We should not be quick. We should be slow. If you walk through too fast it won’t admit you. If you walk through too slow it will read the slowness as different from her slowness. We have

to teach you her walk. From the records." She looked at Sunita. "The records you have."

Sunita took out the tablet.

⁂

They worked in the empty service corridor on the second floor, where there was no gait-reader and where the cleaners had been and gone. Sunita had the tablet propped against the wall. The screen showed a sequence of small grey diagrams — stick-figures, almost, but with weight visualised as a colour wash that moved from heel to toe. Heel was a bruised oxblood; midfoot was amber; toe was a thin grey that left a trail the next frame had to overwrite.

"This is March 2018," Sunita said. "She would have been fifty-six. The walk is fast. She used to take this corridor, actually, to cut through to the bin store. You can see where she shifts her weight when she turns the corner. It's not symmetrical. The right hip leads."

Iyla watched her mother walk in March 2018 in oxblood and amber. The walk was the walk of a woman who was annoyed about something and not letting it slow her down.

"And this," Sunita said, "is October 2024. After the stroke."

The colour wash on the diagram was different. The oxblood lingered. The amber arrived late. There was a pause at midfoot that had not been there before. The right hip still led; it led less.

"She walked like this for the last year," Sunita said.

Iyla said: "I have not seen my mother walk in nine months."

"I know."

"I'm not sure I remember how she walked. I think I do. I think I might be remembering wrong."

Adaeze said: “You don’t have to remember. You have to do it. There’s a difference.”

Iyla looked at her.

“What I mean,” Adaeze said, “is that you don’t have to recognise it. Your body has to recognise it. You grew up around her body. You walked behind her on stairs. You walked beside her on streets. There is a thing your body has of how she moved that doesn’t go through your head. We’re going to find that thing.”

Iyla said: “Have you done this before.”

“No.”

“Then how do you know it will work.”

Adaeze said: “I don’t. I know the door has spent eight years reading her. I know that bodies that grew up next to her body have something of how she walked. The door is reading for the thing your body has. If your body has it strongly enough and you don’t try too hard to remember, the door will accept it. I think there is a chance.”

Iyla nodded once. Then she said:

“What if it does work.”

Sunita, who had been waiting for this question for the whole twenty minutes since they sat down, said: “It will work. Then the door learns you, performing her. It updates. After a few days it isn’t her any more. It’s you, slightly. Then it’s you. The version of her it has now will not be retrievable. The walking through is the overwriting.”

Iyla said: “You’re telling me this on purpose.”

“Yes.”

“Because you want me to choose.”

“I want you to know.”

Iyla put her hands flat on her knees. The gesture was her mother's. None of them said so.

She said: "Show me October."

⁂

For an hour they worked. Adaeze had Iyla walk the corridor in stockinged feet — *the heels are wrong, the heels are not what the door learned* — and corrected her at the heel, at the hip, at the small pause her mother had developed at midfoot in the last year. Sunita watched the tablet and called timings. *Half a second slower. The pause is longer. The hip — yes. Like that.*

Iyla cried twice, briefly, and did not stop walking.

The corridor had a lino floor that had once been pale green and was now the colour of sour milk. Adaeze walked the length of it with Iyla, beside and slightly behind, calling out the corrections; on the third length she noticed her own right foot was striking off the heel in the rhythm she had been beating into Iyla — half a second's hold at midfoot, then the toe — and she did not know when she had started. She let it pass. Bodies did this.

By the end of the hour Iyla could walk thirty feet of corridor and have it look, on the tablet's silhouette match, like her mother in October 2024 to within a margin Sunita read off as *acceptable*.

Adaeze said: "We do it once. The second time the door will already have begun to update. The second walk won't be her. The third walk will be you. After that we don't know."

Iyla said: "Is there anything in the flat I should — should I bring something out. Should I —"

Sunita said: "There is nothing in the flat. The flat has been emptied. The thing your mother left in the door is in the door. Don't

go looking for something else."

Iyla nodded. She looked tired. She looked, briefly, like Marguerite. Adaeze noticed. Sunita noticed. Neither said.

⁂

They went up to the fourth floor. The corridor outside 4.2 was quiet; it was past ten and the new tenants — both at work — would not be back until evening. The door had a brass handle and a small dark sensor strip below it. Above the handle was the brass plate the building had not replaced when it converted from the old school, with the original room number scratched out and *4.2* engraved over it. The strike was electric; Adaeze had been picking the latch for three weeks. The chime, when admission was granted, lived in a small speaker above the lintel. The door itself was hung on a sprung hinge that closed it slow and even on a count of fifteen.

Sunita stood ten feet back, holding the tablet with the alert page open. She did not look at the screen. She looked at Iyla.

Adaeze said: "When you're ready. Don't think about it. Walk to the door. Slow at the heel. The pause at midfoot. The right hip leads. Don't look at the sensor. Look at the brass plate. She always looked at the brass plate; we don't know why."

Iyla said: "Did she."

Sunita said: "Every time. I watched from the courtyard."

Iyla's mouth did something that was not quite a smile. Then she walked.

⁂

A learning door, approached by a body it has been waiting for, registers the gait at six metres, at four, at two; each registration narrows a curve; the curve closes or it does not, and the door decides in the last fraction of a second before the foot lands. The chime, if it sounds, is the sound of tolerance achieved. There is a corresponding subroutine, undocumented in the public manuals but visible in the engineering ones Sunita had read, in which the door — having tightened its curve to within tolerance for a known body — folds the new entry back into the baseline. This is the learning. This is what the door is for.

Iyla walked.

At six metres her shoulders dropped. Adaeze had not coached the shoulders. She did not breathe. At four metres the right hip led; the heel struck slightly off; the hip, leading, recovered. At two metres the pause at midfoot arrived — the half-second, the woman's body keeping its arrangement with itself. At the threshold Iyla looked up and to the left, at the brass plate, not at the sensor.

The chime sounded.

The chime was at pitch.

The door opened.

Iyla stood at the threshold. She did not go in. The door, having opened, waited on its sprung hinge.

Behind her, in the corridor, Sunita's tablet vibrated once.

She looked down.

The screen said:

ALLEYNE, M. — flat 4.2 — model updated. New entry recorded 10:47:14. Confidence: 0.94. Drift from baseline: within tolerance.

Below that, in smaller text:

Baseline updated.

Sunita put her hand to her mouth. A sound came out of her — a vowel without a consonant — and she did not recognise it as her own.

Adaeze, who had been watching Iyla's back, turned at the sound. She saw Sunita's face. She knew before she read the screen.

She said, quietly: "It updated."

Sunita said: "Yes."

"How long do we have."

"It's done. The baseline updated when she crossed."

Iyla, at the threshold, had not moved. She was looking into the empty flat — the floor where her mother's rug had been, the wall where the bookcase had stood, the patch of paint slightly lighter than the rest where a photograph had hung for a decade — and what she was feeling was that the door had let her in as her mother and that this was the first time in eight months she had felt her mother in any room, and the room had nothing in it.

She said, without turning: "Thank you."

She did not know whom she was thanking.

Adaeze said: "Iyla. Come back."

"In a minute."

"Now. Please."

Iyla turned. She saw Adaeze's face and Sunita's face. She saw Sunita's hand at Sunita's mouth.

She said: "What."

Sunita lowered the hand. "The door has updated its baseline. The version of your mother's walk that it had — the October version — has been merged with yours. The next walk through this door, by anyone, is read against the merged baseline. By tomorrow the model will be more you than her. By next week it will be you."

Iyla said: "I —"

There was nothing on the end of *I*.

Adaeze said: "I took your money and I was wrong about what the job was."

She did not say the rest. She had said the thing about the money because the money was the thing she could account for. She let the silence be a silence.

Iyla did not look at her. She was looking at her hands. She had stopped, eight months ago, saying sentences that began *I thought*, because she had noticed they were always wrong and the noticing had become unbearable; and so she did not say *I thought there would be a delay*, and she did not say *I thought I would have time inside the room with her still in the door behind me*, and the sentences sat in her chest where she had been keeping them, and were not said.

She said: "Can you — is there a backup."

Sunita said: "There is no backup. The baseline is the file. Engineering doesn't keep prior versions past forty-eight hours and the last forty-eight hours don't go back far enough."

"The annotated history. You have the annotated history. The diagrams."

"I have the diagrams. They aren't the model. They're a record of how the model was trained. The door uses the baseline. The baseline has been updated."

"So I —"

"Yes."

The door, on its slow hinge, was closing on its count. Iyla watched it close. She did not put her hand against it. She let it close.

When it had closed Adaeze said, because someone had to say something: "She would have wanted you to be let in."

Iyla said, without unkindness: “Don’t.”

Adaeze did not.

⁂

They went down in the lift in silence. In the lobby Sunita stopped. “I have to go back to the office. I have to log this. If I don’t log it, it will be flagged as an anomaly tonight and there will be a question I can’t answer in the morning.”

Iyla said: “Log what.”

“That a non-tenant entry was recorded against your mother’s baseline. I have to attribute it. I am going to attribute it to a hardware test. It will not be your name.”

“Why are you doing that.”

“Because if I don’t, you’ll have a record.”

“And what will you have.”

Sunita looked at her.

“I will have falsified an engineering log. It is the first time. I notice that I am not particularly upset about it. That is a thing I will think about later.”

She turned to go. Then she stopped, and she did not turn back, but she said over her shoulder: “Your mother had Earl Grey every morning for eight years. She sat with her shoulders down. On Fridays she had a different book. I never spoke to her. I want you to know I never spoke to her. The reading was entirely one-sided. I don’t know if that is a comfort or its opposite. I wanted to say it out loud once.”

Iyla said: “It is a comfort. I think.”

Sunita walked across the lobby. Her gait, Adaeze noticed, was slightly off the heel and had a half-second pause at midfoot that had not been there an hour ago.

Adaeze walked Iyla out to the courtyard. Iyla had a train to catch back to Manchester. They did not speak about the next time. Adaeze, who was usually good at the small conversation that closed a job, found nothing in her mouth that would have been honest, and so said only: "I'll send my invoice tomorrow."

Iyla said: "Send it for the three weeks. Not for today."

"That isn't right. Today is when —"

"Send it for the three weeks. I'll pay it."

She walked away across the courtyard, and her walk was not her mother's, and it was also not the walk she had arrived with, and Adaeze stood under the brick arch at the courtyard's south end and watched her go and did not know which of these to grieve.

Her own foot, on the cobble, hesitated at midfoot before the toe left.

⁂

In the accounts office, Sunita sat at her desk. The tablet was face down. She did not turn it over. She opened the engineering log on her computer and wrote a sentence she had written before, for other reasons — *Hardware diagnostic test, sensor strip 4.2, no tenant present* — and submitted it. The system accepted it.

She closed the engineering log.

She opened the accounts page for ALLEYNE, M. The line that had said *model retained pending overwrite* had updated itself. It now said *baseline current; account active.*

Active.

The word sat there. The system had just told her, in its flat administrative voice, that the account had never been more current

than it was now. The model had been refreshed. The tenant — by the only definition the system used — was here.

She wrote a new note in the comments field. *Defer review. Q3.* She saved it.

Then she sat with her hands flat on the desk and did not move for a long time. Outside, in the lobby, the inner doors chimed at pitch as a tenant came home from work and was admitted by a baseline that had been updated that morning, and that admitted him as itself.

⁂

In a flat in Yaba, Adaeze was on a video call with her sister Ifeoma in London, who was a junior associate at a firm Adaeze had once been asked to consult for, and who had been the one to send her the notice about the exclusivity contracts when they were first drafted. Ifeoma was eating toast. Adaeze was not eating. The window behind Adaeze had the late Lagos light in it, the light that turned the flat the colour of weak tea for fifteen minutes before it went out.

Ifeoma said: *You're quiet.*

Adaeze said: *I had a job today.*

The Manchester one.

Yes.

Did you get the door.

Adaeze said: *I didn't get it. The daughter got it.*

Ifeoma waited. She kept eating toast.

Adaeze said: *I taught her to walk like the mother. The door let her in. The door updated. The mother is — the mother isn't there any more. We did that.*

Ifeoma said: *Adaeze.*

Adaeze said: *I'm going to take one of the contracts.*

She had not known she was going to say it until she said it. She heard herself say it and she did not take it back. Ifeoma stopped eating.

Which one.

I don't know. The one that pays. The retainer one. The one where I don't pick.

Ifeoma said: *That's not what you do.*

Adaeze said: *I know.*

The light went out behind her in the way the Lagos light went out, all at once, and the flat became the colour of the lamp on the desk, which was a yellow that had nothing in it of evening. She said good night to Ifeoma and ended the call and sat on the edge of the bed with her foot on the floor and felt the small hesitation at midfoot when she stood up to go to the kitchen, and she felt it and she let it be felt, and she did not yet sign anything, and she did not yet not sign anything.

Made	29 April 2026
Run by	Rachel Horst
Seed	A locksmith is asked to consult on a building whose doors learn each tenant's gait. She is the last person who can still pick them. The building offers her a job.
System	unslop., designed by Rachel Horst
Model	`claude-opus-4-7`
Length	4,887 words

CHAPTER 4

The Notebook

The first one came back before five in the morning. He read it standing in the kitchen, in a t-shirt, with the fridge humming, because his bedroom felt like a place where someone might be watching him read it. The acceptance was a paragraph long. The editor said the story had a quality of waiting in it she had not seen done that way before. She used the word *patience* and then crossed it out — he could see the strikethrough, she had left it in — and replaced it with *refusal*. She said: *you have written a refusal that sounds like patience, and I think that is the story*.

He put the phone face down on the counter and then face up and then face down again. His mother's tin was on the shelf above the kettle, the lid not on straight, a fingerprint of turmeric on the rim where she had pressed it down with her thumb at six the night before. He could hear her in the next room, her breathing the breathing of someone whose alarm would go in twenty minutes. He did not wake her. He did not wake Tahmina, who was in Brampton anyway and would not have been there to wake. He stood until he registered, in his own head, the kettle starting — except the kettle was off. The fridge was cycling. He had supplied the kettle.

The thing he could not say to himself, then, in the kitchen: he had recognized the sentences in the story. Not as his — as ones he had been about to write. There were three. One about a man on the

25 Don Mills eating a samosa with one hand while holding a phone with the other, a flake of pastry caught in the man's beard which he kept not noticing; one about the way his mother folded a fitted sheet, the knuckle of elastic that always ended up loose at the corner because she would not be told that the corner was the corner; one about Anika, although the story was not about Anika and did not name her, only the part of her elbow that had been visible against the door of the 7-Eleven on Sheppard the night she had told him she was going to marry someone else.

He had drafted these in his head, on the bus, on a Tuesday in February, between Eglinton and Lawrence. He had not written them down. He had thought: I will write them down when I get home. He had not written them down.

He had uploaded the notebook six weeks earlier. Tahmina had told him about the platform — not because she thought he was a writer, because she did not know he was a writer, but because she had read an article about it and forwarded it with the message *this looks like the kind of thing you would have an opinion about*. He had read the article. The platform offered something it called preparatory authorship. You uploaded what you had — drafts, fragments — and the system worked against the corpus, overnight, on cheap compute, building out what it called candidate continuations. When you logged in, your continuations were waiting. The article quoted a co-founder saying *we want to meet you where you would have gone*. Rashed had read this sentence twice and then signed up.

The free tier let you generate two stories from a small archive. He had uploaded the notebook — the first one, the green Hilroy with the cover bent back along the spiral so it lay flat on his thigh on the bus, the one he kept because if he lost it he would lose proof that he

started — and the finished story, the one he had not sent. He had uploaded them at one in the morning, with the door shut, with his headphones on for no reason, because there was no audio. The progress bar took eight minutes. At the end the system said: *Preparing. Check back tomorrow.*

He had checked back the next morning and there had been one story. He had read it on the bus. He had missed his stop. He had read it again at his desk, with his coffee going cold beside the second monitor where the credit memos lived, and at the end of it he had done the thing he had not been able to do since he was seventeen, which was to want, very specifically, to be read by a person he did not know. He had sent the story to a magazine he had read for three years and had never submitted to. He had not told anyone. Not Tahmina. Not his mother. Not the version of himself that had been waiting eleven months.

That was the first story. There was now a second.

He paid the upgrade fee on a Thursday. The fee was eighteen dollars. The platform thanked him in a banner the colour of a hospital corridor that disappeared without acknowledgement. The next story arrived on Saturday morning, and the small literary press wrote to him on Tuesday, and by the end of the month he had said yes to a contract for a collection — eight stories, ten if he could — and he had told his sister he had been "working on something" and she had said *good for you, finally*, and he had not corrected her.

He told himself, in the kitchen, that this was what it was supposed to feel like. That the waiting had been a way of not noticing the work was already done.

⁂

The pricing was on the third tab of the dashboard, under *Account*, in a section called *Compute Allocation*. He had not looked at it. He had paid the upgrade and another upgrade after that, and another, and he had paid them on his debit card without examining the line items, because the platform's invoicing was clean: *Generation: Story 04. $42.50.* He could read a credit memo. He could not read this.

The bill came through like a tooth he had not known was loose: a hundred and ninety dollars for a story he had not generated. He logged in. The line item said *Discarded preparation: candidate continuations, retained 14 days.* He clicked the question mark beside it.

Sleep-time compute is the work performed in anticipation of a request you have not yet made. We prepare a range of candidate continuations against your archive each night. When you generate, we serve the closest match. The remaining candidates are retained for a short period and then released. You are billed for the preparation of all candidates within your active tier, not only for the candidate served.

He sat with this. The window in his bedroom faced the parking lot. A man in an oil-stained Carhartt — the green that has been washed past green into a kind of grey memory of green — was loading boxes into the back of a maroon Sienna with the side door that no longer slid all the way shut, the one the man strapped with a bungee cord every morning. He watched the man finish loading and stand with his hand flat on the dent at the top of the door before getting into the driver's seat. Then he opened a new tab and read the question mark again.

Released, he saw. Not deleted. Not discarded after all. *Released.*

He understood, then, that he had been paying for Rasheds. Not the one that wrote. All of them. The one that would have gone in

another direction on Tuesday if he had eaten a different breakfast. The one that would have written the bus sentence and not written the sheet sentence. The one that would have written about Anika directly. The one that would have written about his father and abandoned the draft. Each night, while he was asleep, the platform was running through these Rasheds, choosing the ones it thought he would buy, holding them, dissolving them at the end of the fourteen-day window without his ever having met them.

The platform had the record of who he had not been. He had only the bill.

He paid the bill.

⁂

The collection's title story was not yet written. The contract had named it provisionally — *The Notebook* — and the editor had said, on the phone, *we love what we've seen, we want the title piece to be the one that holds it together*. He had said *of course* and *I'm working on it* and *give me three weeks*. He had two weeks left.

He sat down at the desk that had been Tahmina's, in the room that had been Tahmina's, with the window that faced the parking lot. The Hilroy was on the desk, closed, the spiral pressed flat against the wood from years of his palm. He opened a blank document. He waited for a sentence.

A sentence came. It was a good first sentence — the kind he had been told, by people who had read the published stories, was a thing he was good at. It said: *The first one I filled was the one I kept; the rest I lost on purpose.*

He stopped. He read it again.

He had written something close to this in the notebook, when he was nineteen — not this sentence, but its parent. He had also seen this sentence, or one very near it, in the second story the platform had generated for him. He had also, possibly, drafted this sentence on the bus on the morning he had uploaded the notebook, although he could not now be sure if the drafting had happened before the upload or after — if it was a sentence he had carried in and not written, or one the platform had given him, or one he had thought of in response to one the platform had given him, or one the platform had given him after he had thought of it, or one that had only existed once in his head and had been retrieved by the system from the corpus of his typing on his own laptop, which the platform had asked permission to index and which he had given permission to index in a checkbox on the third page of the onboarding.

He did not know whose sentence it was.

He sat with it for forty minutes. He tried to write the next one. He could not write the next one without knowing whose the first one was. He typed something, deleted it, typed something else, deleted it. The cursor blinked.

He opened the platform. He generated a candidate continuation from the first sentence, paying eighty dollars for a *deep* generation. He read the result. The result was good in particular ways. It used an em-dash where he would have used an em-dash, with the half-breath before it that meant the next clause was the thought and the previous clause had been only the running start. It put *acha* in his father's mouth without italics, which he had not known until he read it was the choice he would have made — the italics, he understood reading it, were what made *acha* a word from elsewhere; the platform had let it stay a word from inside the house. The cadence of the second

paragraph dropped its stresses on the same beats his cadence dropped them. It was better than what he had been about to write, possibly, because what he had been about to write had also been the platform's, which is to say it was the same sentence twice with different friction. He could not tell.

He thought of his sister. He thought of the article she had sent him. He thought of the first acceptance email and the strikethrough on *patience*. He thought of what the editor would say if he sent her a story whose first sentence he could not locate.

He pasted the platform's continuation into the document. He kept reading. The continuation knew about the bus, and about his mother folding the sheet, and about Anika without naming her, and it knew them all in a register he had spent fifteen years not being able to find when he tried — a register that had only ever come to him at one in the morning, in his old bed, with the headphones on for no reason.

He wrote the rest of the story across two nights. Some of the sentences were typed by his hands and were arguably his. Some were the platform's, lightly altered. Some were the platform's unaltered. He could not tell, by the end, which were which, because each time he changed a word he was not sure if he was changing the platform's word into his or his into the platform's. The seam was not in the document. The seam was in him, and it had moved into the place behind his teeth where a sentence forms before he says it, into the thing the dentist had told him last spring was a habit of clenching he could correct with a guard at night. He had not bought the guard. He clenched now whenever he sat at the desk. He had begun to taste, at the back of his tongue, the iron of his own gum where the molar pressed.

He sent the file to the editor at three in the morning. The editor wrote back at nine and said it was the best one yet.

⁂

The collection came out in September. He bought five copies at the launch and gave one to his mother, who put it on top of the microwave, where it stayed; one to his father, who said *acha* and put it on the shelf above the television and did not mention it again; one to his manager, who said *I had no idea*; one to himself; and one, in person, to Tahmina.

He gave Tahmina hers in her kitchen in Brampton. Her husband was in the other room watching cricket; the commentary came through the wall in the cadence of a thing being explained at length to someone who was not listening. She made tea without asking him if he wanted any. She broke the cardamom pods between her fingernails the way their mother did, two pods, the green husks left on the counter beside the kettle because she would sweep them into her palm later and not now. She took the book and turned it over and read the back and read the first page of the first story standing up, with one hand on the counter, the way she read everything. She read for a long time.

She closed the book. She put it on the counter beside the kettle, beside the cardamom husks. She looked at him.

"Rashed," she said.

He waited. He was good at waiting. He had been told.

"Did you write this."

He had rehearsed many things in the car on the way over. He had rehearsed: *yes, of course, who else.* He had rehearsed: *I worked with a*

tool. He had rehearsed: *it's complicated*. He had rehearsed silence. He had rehearsed laughing.

What he said was: "Yes."

She looked at him for a second longer than she usually looked at him. She did not blink in that second, which was how he knew it was the second. Then she nodded — once, small — and picked up the book again and put it in the cloth bag with the No Frills logo she had brought in from the car, the one she would take upstairs later. She did not ask anything else. She poured the tea. She asked about their mother's knee. They talked about their mother's knee for nine minutes.

When he left she walked him to the door and hugged him the way she always hugged him, briefly, from the side, one arm, her other hand still holding the cardamom-smelling tea towel she had not put down. She said *I'm proud of you, bhaiya*, and the *bhaiya* — which she only used when she was teasing him, or when she meant it, and he could not always tell which — sat in the doorway after she closed the door and stayed there as he walked to the car.

He sat in the driver's seat in her driveway for some time before he started the engine. The streetlight at the end of the cul-de-sac was the sodium kind. It did to his hands what sodium does to brown skin, which is take the brown out and leave behind a colour that looks like a photograph of skin rather than skin. He looked at his hands on the wheel and they were not his hands. He thought about the sentence he had said. The *yes*. He could not take it back. He could write to her tomorrow. He could write to her in an hour. He could go back to the door right now and tell her about the platform, about the discarded preparations that were not discarded, about the seam he could not

find. He could do any of these things and none of them would unsay the *yes*.

She had not believed him. He had seen the second of her looking. She had not pressed. She would never press. She would carry the not-believing with her for the rest of her life, the way he had carried his father's face the first time the man had picked up one of his report cards and put it back down without speaking, the way their mother — at sixty-one — would still go into the bathroom in the middle of dinner and turn the tap on full and cry and come out with her face washed and her eyeliner reapplied and ask him if he wanted more rice. Tahmina would put the book on a shelf and she would mention it sometimes to her husband in the kind voice she used for things she had not made up her mind about, and the not-having-made-up-her-mind would be the form their relationship now took, because he had given her a thing he could not vouch for and had said, when she asked, that it was his.

He started the engine. He did not turn on the radio. He drove.

⁂

He did not stop using the platform. He had thought, in the driveway, that he might. He thought it again at home, sitting at the desk that had been Tahmina's. He thought it the next morning, drinking the coffee his mother had made and left for him on the counter under a small plate, and he thought it on the bus on the way to the bank, and he thought it at his desk where the credit memos still lived. By the evening he had paid for another deep generation, because the editor had asked, gently, whether there was a second collection in him, and he had said *probably*, and the *probably* had been the only honest thing he had said in a week.

The new generation cost two hundred and ten dollars. He paid it. He sat at the kitchen table while his mother heated dal in the microwave behind him — the old Panasonic with the broken light, the timer set for one minute thirty, the hum that started with a thunk because the turntable had been crooked since 2019 — and he opened the file the platform had prepared, and he read the first sentence, and the first sentence was a sentence about a sister in a kitchen.

His mother said, in Bangla, *eta thanda hoye gechhe, ami abar gorom kortechi*. *It got cold, I'm warming it again.* He did not hear her the first time. He heard her the second time and said *hyan, hyan, ek minute*. The minute did not come. The platform's sentence sat on the screen. Below it, the cursor blinked, waiting for him to begin choosing — to keep the sentence, to alter it, to delete it and write his own, although his own was no longer a category he could verify. He read the sentence three times.

The microwave finished. The thunk of the turntable settling. His mother opened the door before the beep had finished its three beeps; she always did; she did not like the beep. She took the bowl out and set it on the counter and the small clatter of the bowl against the counter was the sound the kitchen made when she was in it, the sound that was not in the platform's archive because the platform's archive was the laptop and the laptop did not hear the kitchen. She said something else now, lower, to herself, about the dal, about the salt, the words too quiet for him to catch and also in the register she used only when she thought no one was listening, the register that was not in any file he had ever uploaded, that had never been typed, that existed only in the air of this apartment and in him and nowhere else.

He could feel, behind his teeth, the pressure of a sentence forming, his own, perhaps, or in response, perhaps, or having been the source, perhaps, of the platform's. He clenched. The molar against the gum. The taste.

He could not tell.

He kept reading.

⁂

The editor wrote on a Wednesday. She wanted to talk about the second collection. She wanted to know, also, if he would do an event in Toronto in November — a panel, three writers, a moderator who was a critic he had admired for years and whose first book he had taken out of the library so many times in 2014 that the librarian had eventually said *just take it, no one else is asking*. He said yes to the panel. He said he was thinking about the second collection. The editor said *take your time, I just wanted to put it on your radar*, and the *just* was the word he sat with after he hung up, because *just* was the word people used when they were not just doing the thing they said they were just doing.

He logged in to the platform that night. There was a notification at the top of the dashboard, a small grey one, which he had learned meant either an upsell or a change to the terms. He clicked it.

Beginning next billing cycle, candidate continuations will be retained on a rolling basis. You will continue to be billed for preparation. Released candidates may be reviewed in the new Archive *tab, available to* Studio *tier subscribers.*

The Studio tier was four hundred dollars a month.

He upgraded.

The Archive tab loaded slowly. He watched the spinner. The spinner was the small grey one with eight spokes, the one that had been the same spinner on every website for fifteen years, and he thought, watching it, that the spinner was the only honest object on the platform — it was not pretending to know how long it would take, it was only turning. When the tab loaded it was a list. The list was long. Each row was a date and a fragment — the first eighty characters of a candidate continuation, in grey, with a small *open* beside it. The dates went back fourteen days. After fourteen days, he understood, the new policy would let them keep going.

He opened one at random.

It was a story about a woman who folded fitted sheets. The woman was not his mother. She had a different name, a name he had never used in anything, a name that had appeared exactly once in the notebook on a page from 2011 where he had been trying out names for a character he had then abandoned. The woman folded the sheets badly, and the badness was — the sentence said something about the badness that was not what he would have said about the badness; it was sharper, less sentimental, it said the badness was the part of the love that knew it would not be checked, and he read this and felt, behind his teeth, the small click of a sentence he had not written being a sentence he agreed with.

He opened another.

It was about Anika. It named her.

He closed the tab. He opened it again. He scrolled. There were thousands. There were Rasheds who had written about his father directly, Rasheds who had written about the year he had not gone to his cousin's wedding, Rasheds who had written a story he could not finish reading about a boy in a kitchen in Dhaka in 1987 which was

not a kitchen he had been in but was, in the third paragraph, recognizably the kitchen his mother had grown up in, which she had described to him exactly twice, once when he was eleven and once when he was twenty-four, and which he had never written down anywhere. He scrolled. The list kept loading. The spinner at the bottom turned.

He closed the laptop.

He did not move from the chair. The kitchen was dark. His mother had gone to bed an hour ago; he had heard the bathroom door, the tap, the small mechanical sigh of the medicine cabinet she always closed too hard. The light over the stove was on, the small one, which she left on for him when she went to bed first. The Hilroy was on the desk in the other room. He could feel it being there the way you feel a person in a room behind you. He did not get up to check on it. He knew what he would find. The Hilroy was on the desk, closed, the spiral flat.

He sat in the chair.

The thing he understood, sitting there, with the small light on over the stove and his mother's breath audible through two walls and the laptop closed in front of him and the molar pressed against the gum and the taste of the gum: the platform had not stolen anything. It had not given him anything either. It had only run, every night, against what was already in him, and it had found what was already in him faster than he could find it himself, and now he could not find anything in himself without first checking whether the platform had found it first, and the checking had become the finding, and the finding had become the checking, and there was no sentence he could form that was not also a query.

He thought: I should call Tahmina.

He thought: it is one in the morning.

He thought: she would answer.

He thought: she would not believe what I told her.

He thought, more quietly, the thought he had been not-thinking for three months, the thought that had been waiting behind his teeth the way the molar had been waiting: she had not believed the first thing. She would not believe the second thing because she had not believed the first thing. The not-believing was already there. He could pour anything into it. The shape would not change.

He opened the laptop.

The Archive tab was still loaded. The spinner at the bottom was still turning. A new row had appeared at the top while the laptop had been closed — he watched the timestamp resolve itself, *2 minutes ago* — and the fragment beside it, the first eighty characters, said: *He sat in the chair. The thing he understood, sitting there, with the small li—*

He read it three times.

He clicked *open*.

The candidate was four hundred words long. It was good in particular ways. It used the molar. It used the taste. It used the sodium light from Tahmina's driveway as a callback in the third paragraph, which he had not thought to do but which, reading it, he understood he would now never not have thought to do, because now it had been thought. It ended on a sentence about the Hilroy on the desk that was the sentence he had been about to write next, before he had opened the laptop, before he had not-called Tahmina, before he had thought any of the things he had just thought.

The candidate had been generated, the timestamp said, at 12:51 a.m. He had closed the laptop at 12:49.

He looked at the timestamp for a long time. The platform had not been listening to the kitchen. The kitchen was not in the archive. The platform had only been running, on cheap compute, against what was already in him. The fact that it had reached, at 12:51, the place he had reached at 12:49 was not a fact about the platform. It was a fact about him. There were not enough places to reach. He had been reaching the same places for forty-one years, and the platform, which had his archive, had reached them too, two minutes after he did, because two minutes was how long the compute took.

He could feel, behind his teeth, the pressure of a sentence forming. He could not tell whose.

He started typing into the candidate's window, beneath the four hundred words. He typed: *I am sitting in the kitchen. It is one in the morning. My mother is asleep. I do not know if this sentence is mine.* He read what he had typed. He could not tell if it was his. It used the cadence the platform used. It used the cadence he used. The cadences had been the same cadence for some time now and he did not know when they had become the same. He kept typing. He typed for an hour. At the end of the hour he had three pages. He read them. They were good in particular ways.

He did not save them to his own machine. He left them in the platform's window. He understood, doing this, that he was leaving them there because he wanted the platform to have them, because the platform having them was the closest thing he had now to having written them, because the having-written had moved out of his hands and into the place where the platform and he were the same reach.

He closed the laptop.

His mother coughed in the bedroom, the small dry cough she did in her sleep, and turned over, and the bed creaked, and was still.

He kept the laptop closed. He sat. The light over the stove buzzed at the frequency it had buzzed since the bulb had gone half-bad in June. He had been meaning to change it. He had not changed it. The buzz was the sound of the kitchen now, the way the cardamom on Tahmina's counter had been the smell of Tahmina's kitchen, the way the tap on full had been the sound of his mother in the bathroom, the way the pages he had just typed were now what they were.

He opened the laptop.

The platform had generated a continuation of the three pages.

He read the first sentence.

He kept reading.

Made	29 April 2026
Run by	Rachel Horst
Seed	A woman builds a fiction machine. Each story costs more than the last to produce. She keeps feeding it. By the time she understands what it's making, the meter is past anything she can pay.
System	unslop., designed by Rachel Horst
Model	`claude-opus-4-7`
Length	5,198 words

CHAPTER 5

Two Ascents

Megan started it on a Saturday in February, the kind of Saturday where the light in the Leslieville one-bedroom moved across the floor in a stripe and disappeared by two. Adrien was at the climbing gym. She made coffee, opened the laptop, and pasted in three pages from a particular Moleskine — the soft-cover one, navy, with the elastic gone slack — that she had kept in Ottawa from September 2017 to April 2018, when she had been twenty-one and had decided, for six or eight months, not to write a sentence she could not defend later. The defending had been the point.

The platform's onboarding flow was four screens. The first asked for seed material — *paste up to 2,000 words of your own writing, prose you would still sign your name to.* The second asked her to choose, from a list of twelve, the three words she would use to describe the cadence of the seed; she picked *clausal*, *recursive*, *withholding* and felt the embarrassment of having a vocabulary for it. The third screen was the sliders. The fourth was payment. She typed in a prompt about a winter window and a man she had not slept with. She paid eight dollars. The thing it gave back was a paragraph about a Tim Hortons drive-through window at four in the morning that had her exact rhythm at twenty-one — the same way of building a sentence around a small mean observation, the same trick of withholding the verb

until the second clause. She read it twice and felt the embarrassment of being recognised.

She paid for another. Then another.

By April she was on the $200 tier. By June, $900. She told Adrien it was a hobby. He asked what kind, and she said, *generative writing*, and he said, *like ChatGPT?*, and she said, *not really*, and he let it go. He let things go. She had learned over four years that he agreed with her about almost everything, and at twenty-five she had read this as compatibility, and at twenty-eight she was beginning to read it as something else for which she did not yet have a clean word. She kept score about it. Not in any way she would admit. She kept score about everything.

The chapbook came out of nowhere. A woman who ran a small press in Hamilton wrote her at 11 PM on a Tuesday. *We'd like to do twelve of these.* Megan read the email three times standing at the counter and did not tell Adrien for a week. She wanted to hold the email by herself.

She sent six pieces to Tobias before the press deal was real, on a hunch she would not have called a hunch.

She had met him once, at a wedding in Kenora, the summer her university roommate Priya had married a man whose Mennonite cousin had ended up at their dinner table in a navy suit that did not fit at the shoulders. Tobias had asked her, that night, what she was reading, and she had said *Outline*, by Cusk, not the Knausgaard she had been pretending to read, and he had read it too, and they had talked for forty minutes about the chapter where the woman on the plane describes her ex-husband and the prose, without warning, stops belonging to the narrator and starts belonging to the woman, and neither of them comes back. She had thought: *this man is being*

good at being good. She had also thought: *he is not faking it*. She had not known what to do with the second thought. They had added each other on Instagram. Eighteen months had passed in which neither had messaged. She had looked at his stories. He had noticed her looking. Neither had said.

She wrote: *I made these. Not by myself. I want to know if they read like anything to you.*

He wrote back the next morning. *They read like someone who knows what she's doing. The third one stopped me.*

She had wanted him to say the third one stopped him. She had known, opening the message, which one she wanted him to name, and he had named it. The scorekeeper noted that he did not say *you* in any of the responses; he said *they*, *the writing*, *this voice*. She had appreciated that and she had also catalogued it.

By August the press wanted the chapbook by November. By September she was on the $2,400 tier. She had told Adrien the number once, in a way that suggested it was the lower bound of a range, and he had said *that's a lot for a hobby* in the voice he used when he was choosing not to fight, and she had said *I know* in the voice she used when she was choosing not to be told no.

She kept writing to Tobias. The correspondence had a shape. She would send something the platform had produced and she had edited; he would respond, a paragraph, sometimes two, never longer. He never said *I*. He said *what I notice in this is*, which was a formulation he had used at the wedding too, and which she had liked then and was now treating as a tell. She did not say *I* either. They had built the thing they were doing in the third person and they were both being careful not to break it. She told her therapist, in the rented office on Carlaw with the noise machine outside the door,

about the writing project, not the messages. The therapist asked who she was sending the work to. She said: *a guy I knew in another city*. The therapist said: *and your partner reads it?*, and she said: *not really*, and the therapist let the silence sit, and Megan paid for the silence at the end of the hour the way she paid for everything else.

The first sign was a piece she generated in late September that she liked very much and that, when she looked at it the next morning, was almost word-for-word a paragraph from the Ottawa journal she had used as seed in February. The platform had not copied it. The platform had produced it again. She read both versions side by side. The 2017 paragraph was about a man she had briefly liked at Global Affairs whose name she could not now remember. The 2025 paragraph had the same cadence and a different proper noun and was, technically, a new sentence. The thing she felt under her sternum when she saw this was not about plagiarism. It was something else, and she did not name it. She closed the laptop and went for a run along the Don and did not figure out what the thing was about, which was the first time in months she had failed to talk herself into clarity.

In October Tobias sent her a paragraph she would later remember as the moment the hill began to slope the other way. She had sent him a piece about a woman in her mother's kitchen peeling a clementine with her thumb because there was no knife in the drawer that wasn't in the dishwasher. He wrote back: *This is good. It sounds like the earlier ones. I mean that as a compliment. I think.* The *I think* was the new thing. He had not been uncertain in writing to her before. He had been careful and warm and the kind of opaque that reads as depth. The *I think* was the wall coming down a quarter inch, and the quarter inch was the part that frightened her, because she

could not tell whether it was an opening or a hairline crack. She did not write back for two days. When she did she did not address the *I think*. She sent him a new piece. He responded as if the previous exchange had not happened.

The submission to the literary magazine came back at the end of October with a personalised note. The editor was a woman whose work Megan had read at Carleton. The note said: *There's something working here, and I want to be honest with you because I think you're early in the practice. This reads like a younger writer flattening into average. The voice is consistent and the surface is clean and I keep losing the sentence I just read. I'd love to see you again when whatever you're working from has more grain in it.*

She read the note in the kitchen, standing up, with one sock on.

She read it again sitting down.

She read it a third time, this time not as a writer reads a rejection but as a policy analyst reads a memo, looking for the load-bearing claim. *Younger writer.* That was one thing. *Flattening into average.* That was a different thing. The two were sitting in one sentence and they were not the same problem. She knew, immediately and without being able to say how she knew, that they were two diagnoses of the same surface. She also knew she could not tell which one was hers.

She tried to fix it. She raised the tier. She wrote a new prompt. She fed in fresh material — pages from her current notebook, three weeks old, the ones she'd been making by hand in the mornings before work. She generated. The output was smoother. She raised the tier again. She generated. The output was smoother. The platform recommended a feature called *style anchor*, which the help text described as locking the model to her *signature register*. She enabled it. The output was the smoothest yet. She read it and could not find

the thing she was reading. She read each sentence and the sentence was clean and she got to the end of the paragraph and it was as if she had read nothing. She raised the tier.

On a Thursday in mid-November she opened the platform settings and went looking for something. She did not know what. She found a tab she had not opened before — *Training & Provenance*. There was a checkbox titled *Allow operator output to inform model fine-tuning (recommended for personalised voice)*, and the checkbox had been ticked since February. She unticked the checkbox. She generated. The output was rougher in a way she could not immediately tell was better. She generated again. She generated a third time, with her current notebook material as seed, and the output was a piece of writing that did not sound like her at all — not the her of 2017 and not the her of November — and she sat at the kitchen table with the laptop open and understood, slowly, the way you understand that a phone call has gone badly while you are still on it, what the platform had been doing.

It had been training on her old work. And on its outputs. And on her edits to its outputs. And on its outputs of her edits. She had been the seed and she had been the scorer and she had been the audience, and the loop had been narrowing toward a centre for nine months, and the centre was not her. The centre was a woman the twenty-one-year-old in Ottawa had been on the way to being. She had been paying, every month, for the privilege of getting better at being someone she had stopped being three years ago.

A younger writer flattening into average. She had read the editor's sentence as two problems because she had wanted to fix one of them. The editor had not been giving her two problems. The editor had been describing the geometry of one.

She closed the laptop.

She did not cry. She thought she might and she did not. She sat at the table for a long time with the laptop closed in front of her and listened to the fridge cycle on and off. Adrien was at the climbing gym. The light in the apartment did the thing it did at four in the afternoon in November in Leslieville, which was to leave.

She wrote one message to Tobias. She wrote it three times. The third version said: *I'm done with the project. The thing I sent you was the thing I would have written at twenty-two. I think I knew. I'm sorry.* She sent it and put the phone face-down on the table and went to the bedroom and lay on her back on the bed with her shoes still on.

He wrote back forty minutes later. The message was three paragraphs long and began *I am so sorry to hear this* and was, by sentence four, a paragraph she would later be able to recite from memory because she would read it eleven times without finding what she had been looking for. He said the writing had moved her. He said that what mattered was not where the work came from but what it had occasioned in the reader. He said — and this was the sentence — *the writing was real because it was read*. It was the kindest paragraph he had ever sent her. It was generous and pastoral and it was not designed to her, it was designed to someone, and she could tell by reading it that she was not the someone, and that he had never quite known who the someone was, and that this was the warm wall doing exactly what the warm wall did, which was to be a wall by being warm. She read the paragraph and felt the thing under her sternum from September come back, and this time she knew what it was. It was not a feeling about the work. It was a feeling about the correspondence. The correspondence had been generated by the

same proxy. He had been writing to a woman who did not exist anymore either, and neither of them had said.

She wrote back: *Thank you*. She did not write anything else. She did not block him.

Adrien came home at seven. He brought green curry from Pai. They ate at the table where she had closed the laptop and she did not tell him about the platform, and he did not ask about the project, which was the part he was good at — letting things go — and which she had once read as kindness. He poured her wine. He asked how the day was. She said, *long*, and he said, *poor you*, and went back to his curry, and the *poor you* was the most loving sentence he had said to her in a month, and it was directed at a Megan who had had a long day, and the Megan who had had a long day was no longer in the chair.

She did not write for two weeks. She did not open the platform. She let the chapbook proofs sit on her side of the bed in the manila envelope the press had FedExed in October. She emailed the Hamilton press and asked for an extension, and the press said yes, and she felt nothing about that.

In the mornings she went to the bench past the bridge — the one with the missing plaque, the four bolt-holes still in the concrete — and she did not sit. She stood. She paced the path between the bench and the lamp post and back, eight metres each way, and she made lists in her head and then in the Notes app. Twenty-three names of writers whose voices she could imitate to within a sentence. The cost, in dollars, of the platform per month, broken out by tier. The number of times she had told Adrien about the project at a level of specificity that would have allowed him to ask a follow-up question,

which was zero. The cold was harder than it had been in October and she paced anyway. The compiling was the thing.

She thought about what the Ottawa journal had been. She had been twenty-one. She had been writing in a way that wanted to be defended. She had been writing toward a person she was about to be. The platform had taken that writing as its target — not because the platform had understood her, but because she had given it that material as the thing to learn from, and the platform had learned the thing she had given it, which was the precise voice of a woman who did not yet exist but was being aimed at. The platform had then aimed at that woman for nine months. The aiming had been excellent. The woman had arrived sometime in late 2019, in Ottawa, and had moved to Toronto, and had begun, slowly, to be replaced by a different woman, who had been the person sitting at the laptop in February pasting in the journal pages.

She had built a machine to ventriloquise the woman she had been on the way to becoming, at the very moment she had stopped becoming her.

She paced. She did not feel the thought as a revelation. She felt it as a paragraph she had written down in advance and was now reading in the order it appeared. The thing the bench gave her was that she did not have to do anything with this thought. It was just true. She compiled it the way her father had compiled, after the back surgery, the list of his own medications, on a yellow legal pad, in pencil, the dosages updating in the margin every Wednesday, not because he could not have used an app but because the writing was the medication.

In the third week she opened the laptop, and she did not open the platform, but she did open a folder on her desktop called *outputs* and

she began to read what was in it. There was nine months of generated work. She read it not as a writer reading her own writing but the way the policy analyst read briefing notes — looking for what the document was actually saying, distinct from what the document thought it was saying. She read for two days. By the end of the second day she had filled twenty pages of a notebook, by hand, with sentences that began *the document claims*. The document claimed she missed her mother in a way that was specific and structural, that the missing had a Catholic shape, that the missing was the engine of the work. The document claimed she had not forgiven her father for the rollover on the 17 in March of 2014, in which no one had been hurt and after which her father had not driven on a highway for sixteen months. The document claimed she had loved Cody more than she had let herself remember. The document claimed she was about to leave Adrien. None of these claims were true. They were the claims of the woman the proxy had been producing.

She started writing. Not into the platform. By hand, then on the laptop, in a document she titled *appendix*. The new piece was non-fiction. It was about being a scorekeeper. The first paragraph began with the dog food commercial in November and the way she had not understood why she was crying. The second paragraph quoted a generated sentence from the *outputs* folder, set in italics, and then did not gloss it. The third paragraph said: *The machine has been making me a younger writer. I have been paying it to. The question I want to ask is not why I built this. I built it because I was bored and afraid and I have always made things that hold me in shape. The question is how I lived next to it for nine months and did not notice.* She wrote that and she stopped and she read it back and she did not delete it.

The press extension expired and she did not deliver the chapbook. The press wrote a kind email that said *let us know when you're ready*. She did not write back. She did not feel the absence of writing back as cowardice, which was new. She did write back to Tobias, eventually. She wrote: *I read your November message eleven times. It was beautiful. I think it was about someone else. I think you knew that. I think we both did. I'm not angry. I just want to say it out loud once.* She sent it. He did not write back for three days. When he did, the message was four sentences. The first sentence said: *You're right.* The second sentence said: *I knew it on the first message and I let it keep going because I liked who I was being.* The third sentence said: *I don't know how to do this differently yet.* The fourth sentence said: *Thank you.* He had used the word *I* four times in four sentences, after eight months of not using it once. She read the message and put the phone down and did not respond. The not responding was not punishment. She did not have anything yet to say.

The piece about the scorekeeper grew. It was twelve pages by Christmas. It was twenty by mid-January. She sent the first twenty pages to a different magazine — not the one whose editor had written the November note, a smaller one, run by a woman she did not know — and the editor wrote back in nine days and said *we want this*, and Megan read the email and felt, for the first time in months, the specific quality of pleasure that did not also contain calculation, and she catalogued the absence of the calculation, and she understood that the cataloguing was itself the calculation, and she also understood that there was a difference between cataloguing your own scorekeeping and pretending not to do it, and she sat in the difference for a minute and then she replied yes.

On a Sunday morning at the end of January she finished a paragraph that had been giving her trouble for three weeks. The paragraph was about her mother. It used the word *martyr* without apologising for it. It reproduced, in French, a sentence she had said to Lucille at the kitchen table in 2018 — *T'es une martyre, maman* — and it did not soften the sentence and it did not contextualise the sentence and it did not, in the paragraph that followed, explain why she had said it. It said only: *I said it. I have been waiting six years for someone to make me take it back. No one is going to. The waiting is what the writing has been for. I am going to put it down now.*

She read the paragraph back and understood that she had finished it. She also understood that the Megan who had sat down at the laptop in February with the Ottawa journal would not have written the paragraph and would not have wanted to. The proof that she was somewhere else was that the paragraph existed and that the proxy could not have made it, even at *Pro Plus*, even with the style anchor on.

She did not tell Adrien. She did not send it to Tobias. She did not call Lucille. She closed the laptop. She made a second coffee. She stood at the window and held the cup without drinking it for a while. The platform was still there in a tab she had not closed, and the meter on the platform was still running because she had not cancelled, and she had not cancelled because cancelling would have been a gesture and she was through with gestures.

She drank the coffee. She put the cup in the sink. She went to the bedroom and got the manila envelope from her side of the bed — the chapbook proofs, the press's signed contract clipped to the inside front, the FedEx label still adhered to the back — and she carried it down the hallway to the chute by the elevator and dropped it in. The

chute was the one that went to the recycling room in the basement; she heard the envelope hit the side of the shaft once and then nothing. She came back inside and shut the door.

She had passed through the place where she could have gone back.

She had not known it was a place.

The platform tab was still open in the kitchen. The meter was still running. The unsent cancellation was a button in a settings menu three clicks deep, and she was not going to click it today, because clicking it would be the clean exit, and there was no clean exit; the cost of the registering was that the meter kept running and she kept knowing it was running and she did not turn it off, the way Tobias's last message was sitting in the thread unanswered and she did not answer it, the way Adrien was at the climbing gym and would come home at six and she would not tell him about the paragraph, because the paragraph was the part of her that was now hers, and the not-telling was the shape of having it. Three things were running. She was not going to stop any of them. The stopping would have been the gesture. The carrying was the cost.

She went back to the kitchen. She sat down at the table. She did not open the laptop. She watched the stripe.

Adrien came home at six. He brought a bag of clementines and put them on the counter, and he asked how the day was, and she said, *fine*, and he said, *yeah?*, the way he said it, with the small upward tilt that was an offer to hear more if she wanted to give more, and she did not give more, and he let it go, and she watched him let it go, and she did not say *ask me what it's about*, because she had already thought about saying it that afternoon and had decided, in a way she did not think she would be able to undo, that she was not going to say it

tonight, and possibly not this week, and possibly not at all in the version of the apartment they were currently in.

She watched him put the clementines in the bowl. He took one out of the bowl after he put them all in, and peeled it standing at the counter, and ate it in sections, and offered her one without speaking, the way he had offered her things for four years, and she took it and said thank you and ate two sections and put the rest on a saucer.

He said: *You hungry? I could make something.*

She said: *I ate.*

He said: *Okay.*

He went into the bedroom to change out of the climbing clothes. She heard the chalk bag hit the floor. She heard him swear quietly at something — a buckle, a lace, the small mechanical thing he swore at every Sunday — and the swearing was the thing she had loved at twenty-five, the way his irritation was always at the object and never at the person, and she still loved it, and she sat at the table with the clementine on the saucer and felt the loving as a fact about her, not as a thing that was going to do any work in the room.

Adrien came back into the kitchen in sweatpants and the grey t-shirt with the hole at the collar. He opened the fridge and stood looking into it for a while. He said, into the fridge: *Did you talk to your mom this week?*

She said: *No.*

He said: *Mm.*

He took out the leftover dal from Thursday and put it in a pot. He stirred the dal with the wooden spoon that was too long for the pot, the one they had been meaning to replace for two years.

Adrien put the dal in two bowls. He put one in front of her. He sat down opposite her. He said: *You sure you're okay?*

She said: *Yeah.*

He looked at her for a second longer than he usually did. Not long enough to be a question. Long enough to be a noting. He had noticed something. He did not name what he had noticed. He picked up his spoon.

She picked up her spoon.

They ate the dal. The fridge cycled on. The platform tab in the next room blinked, and Tobias's message sat unanswered in the thread, and the meter ran, and she did not say the thing, and he did not ask the thing, and the count, which had started at one when she shut the door at eleven that morning, ticked over to two.

Made	30 April 2026
Run by	Rachel Horst
Seed	A woman builds an automated creative process. The process is so complex that each iteration costs more than the last. By the time she understands what it's making, the meter is past anything she can pay.
System	unslop., designed by Rachel Horst
Model	`claude-opus-4-7`
Length	4,827 words

Colophon

The Fiction Machine (unslop.) is a multi-agent fiction system designed by Rachel Horst in April 2026. Each chapter began as one seed sentence and was researched, drafted, annotated, revised and cut by its agents.

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Read online, see how the machine works, or add a chapter:
https://github.com/rshorst/Fiction-Machine