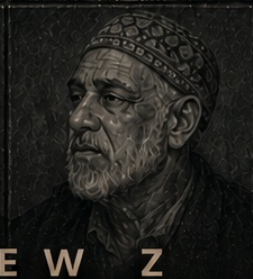


ROYA
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No. 8



THE SOFT SPOT



C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE SOFT SPOT

A Testimony in Eight Sitzings

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 8

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Soft White Underbelly, where the idea for this book was planted.

A camera, a stool, and a stranger willing to sit down in front of both.

*And for the eight in these pages, who are not real,
and for the many who are.*



Wednesday. She always answered within the hour.

SYNOPSIS

Daniel Voss runs a low-budget interview show out of a storefront studio, giving a camera to the people most audiences flinch from and look away — addicts, gamblers, con men, the sexually stigmatized, survivors of abuse, the unforgivable. When he begins dosing himself before every sitting with Mercy, an experimental compound that collapses the gap between hearing a stranger's story and feeling it as his own, he believes he has found a shortcut around the oldest, ugliest reflex in the human animal: the door that swings shut the instant a stranger's shame walks into the room. Across eight sittings — a dying addict, a ruined gambler, a dungeon operator carrying the worst night of her career, a mother who escaped one kind of violence only to discover another kind waiting inside herself, a man at war with an urge he has never once acted on, a serene and remorseless grifter, an ordinary man undone by ten seconds at a stoplight, and finally his own estranged father — the drug opens Daniel wider than he can bear, and begins to cost him the one relationship the chemical was never built to fix. Every confession hides a second, harder truth beneath the first, and by the final page all eight of them converge into a single unmedicated flood that Daniel never saw coming and never manufactured. An epilogue, set five years on, carries the discipline Daniel learned that year into the one room it was never built to protect him from. A slow-burning, unflinching novella about empathy as a discipline rather than a feeling, and about what is actually being asked of us when we agree, for once, to stay in the room.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There is a specific feeling in the stomach — you know it, even if you've never put a name to it — that arrives half a second before a stranger tells you what's wrong with them. Someone says the word addict, or worse, and something in you clenches and starts looking for the door. It isn't cruelty, not exactly. It's older than that, and faster than any decision you could talk yourself out of, and it's the same reflex whether the person in front of you is on a screen or in the room. This book started as an argument with that feeling, not with the people it flinches from.

I wanted to know what happens if the flinch gets disabled — if you're left sitting there with the whole of another person's ruin arriving in you at once, with nowhere to send it and no polite way to leave. Does the stomach still turn? Does the urge to end the conversation survive contact with the actual, specific person on the other side of it? I don't fully know the answer, even having written eight versions of the experiment. What I do know is that it gets harder to write someone off once you've felt, even secondhand, exactly what it cost them to become who they are. I'm not convinced it ever becomes impossible. That gap — between harder and impossible — is where I think most of us actually live, and it's the only honest place I knew how to write this book from.

If you finish these eight sittings and notice the reflex is a little slower than it used to be, that was the whole experiment working. If it isn't, I understand. It's an old door. It doesn't come off the hinges for everyone, and I'm not sure it should, without you deciding to open it yourself.

— Chew Z.

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SESSION ZERO

THE ROOM

The camera doesn't blink. That's the whole trick of it. A person can look away from another person's face — has to, sometimes, or the feeling in the stomach gets to be too much — but a lens just sits there, black and patient, and takes whatever it's given.

I built the channel out of a spare bedroom and a three-hundred-dollar softbox. I called it Undercurrent, because I liked the idea of a thing moving beneath a surface that looked calm. Four years in, it wasn't spare bedrooms anymore. It was a rented storefront on the east side with blackout curtains and a bail bondsman on one side and a check-cashing place on the other, and every week a new stranger sat down across from me in a cracked vinyl chair — later, a high stool, once I decided a chair with arms let people hide too much of themselves in their laps — and told me the worst thing they ever did, or the worst thing that was ever done to them, and sometimes both, because those are not always different categories of person.

I want you to see the room the way they saw it walking in, because the room is doing half the work before either of us says a single word. Six hundred square feet of poured concrete floor, swept but never mopped clean, because a floor that looks too clean makes people perform for it. One wall is entirely blackout curtain, floor to ceiling, the kind of matte industrial fabric that doesn't just block light, it seems to eat it, so that anyone standing in front of it becomes the only bright thing in the frame whether they want to be or not. A single hard key light on a stand, angled low, the kind of light that finds every crease a face has ever earned and refuses to be polite about it. The camera on its tripod, small red dot glowing above the lens, always on, always recording, the one witness in the room I have never once seen flinch. A high stool for them. A low side table beside it, close enough to reach, with a glass of water nobody ever drinks and, some nights, whatever I need close at hand to get through the next hour.

Here is the thing nobody wants said out loud, so I'll say it. You do not want to hear these people. I don't mean you're a bad person. I mean there's a door in you — there's a door in everyone — that swings shut on its own the second a stranger opens their mouth and the words addict, or gambler, or pervert, or whore come anywhere near the sentence. It happens earlier than that, even. It happens at the threshold, before a syllable is spoken, the instant a face like that steps out of a waiting van and into a hard light with nowhere to hide. The skin does something skin isn't supposed to do. The teeth are wrong, or missing, or too perfect in a way that reads as a different kind of wrong. The smell arrives half a step ahead of the person — cigarettes gone stale in fabric, or the particular ammonia sweetness of a body that hasn't had reliable access to a shower, or an antiseptic hospital smell that means something else entirely and is somehow worse. Something in the gut clenches, some old animal circuitry recognizing contamination, and the door swings shut before the interview has even started, and you spend the rest of the hour not listening but waiting for it to be over, performing the shape of listening with your face while the actual apparatus of you has already left the building.

I used to think a chemical could prop that door open. I want to tell you now, before you meet any of them, that I was wrong about what the drug was for. I thought it was a key. It turned out to be more like a crowbar — it got the door open, every time, without exception, but it never once asked what was going to come through it, or what I was going to do with what I found on the other side. Six hundred doses in, I understood things about eight strangers that I still haven't told my own wife. I understood things about myself in the process that I would have paid any amount of money not to know.

The tablet had a real name once — Concordimide, a failed antidepressant that a burnt-out pharmacology postdoc named Petra Alois had cooked up in her apartment kitchen after her lab lost funding. It didn't lift anyone's mood. What it did, in the small circle of people who took it, was strip about four seconds off the gap between hearing a person's story and feeling it as your own. Petra called it, not romantically, an oxytocin-adjacent empathetic

accelerant. I called it Mercy, because that's what it felt like going down, and because Mercy was a better word for a thumbnail than Concoctimide.

I used to watch the analytics dashboard obsessively in the first year, before I understood what it was actually measuring. There's a graph the platform gives you, a retention curve, a simple falling line that shows you exactly where, second by second, an audience stops watching. For almost every video I ever posted, regardless of the subject, that line did the same thing: it held steady, almost flat, for the first eight to twelve seconds — the establishing shot, the curtain, the stool, the ordinary human curiosity of wondering who's about to sit down — and then, the instant a face came fully into the light and a viewer's animal brain finished its assessment, it dropped. Not gradually. A cliff. Thousands of people, in the space of a single frame, deciding they had seen enough of a stranger's ruin to know they didn't want to hear what caused it. I used to take that drop personally, as a failure of the show, before I understood that it wasn't a failure of anything. It was the single most honest piece of data I ever collected about the actual size of the door I was trying to prop open. Eight to twelve seconds. That's the whole width of the reflex, timed and graphed and sold back to me by the platform's own engineers, who built the tool to help creators fight it and, in doing so, handed me the most precise proof I've ever seen that the fight is real, and that it starts before anyone involved has said a single word.

What follows is eight people who walked out of a van and through that curtain and sat down on that stool, one appointment at a time, over the worst and most honest year of my life. I am going to show you each of them exactly the way I saw them arrive — before a word, before the tablet, before anything but the animal reflex doing what it has always done to strangers who look like trouble. Then I am going to show you what I felt happen to that reflex once I let it be interrupted. I want you to notice your own face doing something while you read, somewhere in that first eight to twelve seconds of each of them. That's the whole experiment. It was never really about me.

SESSION ONE

COLE

He came through the curtain a little after two in the afternoon, and the first thing that happened, before I could stop it, was my stomach turning over on itself.

I want to describe him exactly, because the exactness is the point. Cole was twenty-nine and looked forty-five, which is the math of the needle done honestly. His skin had the specific grayish undertone that comes from a decade of bad circulation and worse sleep, stretched thin over cheekbones that had nothing left to pad them. There were track marks up both forearms, old ones gone to scar tissue in ropy lines and newer ones still faintly bruised, and he'd worn a short-sleeved shirt anyway, which I understood later was its own kind of defiance — he'd stopped hiding it years before I met him, because hiding it had never once bought him anything. His teeth were the worst of it, if I'm honest, the part the eye catches before it can stop itself: three missing on the upper left, the rest gone the color of old piano keys. He smelled like a bus station bathroom and menthol cigarettes and, underneath that, something sweetish and organic that I didn't have a word for at the time and have since learned is just what a body smells like when it hasn't been fed enough real food in longer than anyone should go.

I felt my whole body do the thing bodies do. The door swinging shut, fast, animal, no negotiation involved.

Every part of me that makes snap decisions about who is safe to sit close to had already decided, before he'd said a word, that the answer was not this one, and I understood in that half second exactly what four hundred thousand strangers were going to feel the instant this footage loaded on their phones, because I felt it too, live, in my own gut, before the tablet had even finished dissolving under my tongue.

He'd agreed to talk to me for sixty dollars and a McDonald's bag that he ate from the whole interview, methodically, one fry at a

time, like a man performing the act of eating for a jury that might revoke his right to it.

I took the tablet in the bathroom before he sat down. That was new. I'd used it twice before on myself, out of curiosity, the way you'd try a friend's Adderall. This was the first time I took it on purpose, before a subject, because I'd watched the raw footage of my last unmedicated interview — a woman who'd lost custody of three kids to her habit — and watched my own face on playback and seen, with a kind of nausea, that I had not been present for a single second of it. I had nodded in all the right places. My eyes had done nothing.

With Cole, the door didn't just open. It came off the hinges.

He talked, when I finally asked, about where all of it started, and the answer went back further than the needle by a long way. His mother had raised him alone from the time he was five, working doubles at a diner off the interstate, and the men who moved through their apartment after that were less like stepfathers and more like weather systems — some mild, some violent, all temporary. He told me about learning, by six or seven, to read a room the second he walked into it: whether the television was on too loud to mean something was wrong, whether a particular quiet in the kitchen meant he should go straight to his room without being told twice. He told me the first time he understood that adults could simply not come back — that a person could go into a bedroom high and not come out the same, or not come out at all — was nine years old, watching paramedics work on a boyfriend of his mother's on their kitchen floor, a man who did, in fact, survive that one, which Cole said was almost worse, because it taught him the wrong lesson: that it was survivable, that you could watch it and grow up around it and still turn out fine, and he spent the next twenty years testing that theory on himself.

At sixteen it was his current stepfather's oxy bottle in the bathroom medicine cabinet, and the ceiling of his bedroom swimming gold that first time in a way he said he'd chased, without success, every day since. He told me about the years after that were mostly a blur of couches — his mother's, a cousin's, a girlfriend's, a stranger's —

each one a little further from anyone who still had the energy to be disappointed in him, which he described, chillingly, as a relief. He told me about the girl he'd been with when she died in the passenger seat of his car outside a Rite Aid, and how he'd driven four more blocks before he called anyone, not because he didn't love her but because some ancient reptile part of his brain was doing math about parole. He told me this looking directly at the lens, not at me, the way people do when they've made peace with the idea that the camera is the only witness that won't flinch.

I did not flinch. That was the drug. I want to try to describe, as precisely as I can, what it actually felt like, because "empathy" is too clean a word for it. It felt like a temperature change that started in my chest and moved outward, a heaviness dropping into me the way a stone drops into water, displacing something on its way down. I felt the specific, total-body grief of a nine-year-old standing in a doorway watching strangers press on a man's chest, and underneath that grief, older and worse, a kind of grinding, low-grade terror that had apparently been running in Cole's body for twenty years without ever fully switching off — the particular vigilance of a child who has learned that safety is not a condition you can trust, only a mood that hasn't broken yet. I felt the four blocks he drove with a dead girl beside him, the arithmetic and the horror arriving in me simultaneously, indistinguishable from each other, exactly as they must have arrived in him. It did not feel like empathy in the abstract sense people mean when they say the word at dinner parties. It felt like drowning in a stranger's life for forty minutes and coming up gasping in my own, and when I did come up, sometime after we stopped filming, my hands were shaking badly enough that I had to sit on them.

When we finished, Cole asked me, unprompted, if I thought there was anything left in him worth saving. I told him yes. I meant it so completely that I had to leave the room before I said something to the camera that would have ended the show — that most of you watching had already decided the answer was no, and had decided it in the first eleven seconds, before he'd said a single word, on the evidence of his skin and his teeth and the particular exhausted

slump of a body that has apologized for existing so many times it has forgotten how to do anything else.

The video did four hundred thousand views. The comments were a museum of the thing I'd just spent an hour dissolving in myself. Junkie. Waste of oxygen.

Hope he ODs on camera next time, better content. I read every one of them, because the drug had not worn off yet, and each comment landed in me with the same weight Cole's story had landed, and I understood for the first time that Mercy did not care whose voice it amplified. It would make me feel a stranger's cruelty as completely as it made me feel a stranger's grief, and there is no medicine that discriminates between those two kinds of contagion once it's in your blood.

I found out the truth about Cole nine months later, by accident, from the outreach worker who'd introduced us. Cole had died in March — an infection, not an overdose, the unglamorous kind of ending nobody makes documentaries about — and in going through the handful of things he'd left behind, the worker found a bank envelope, opened and re-sealed with tape so many times it had gone soft, containing eleven hundred dollars in small, dirty bills. Cole had been panhandling on the same corner for two years and sending a portion of it, every month, by money order, to the mother of the girl who died in his car. No return address. No name. Just enough, some months, to cover a light bill. The mother had no idea who it was from. She'd assumed it was the county. I have watched the video of Cole eating his French fries and asking me if there was anything left in him worth saving four hundred thousand times, if you count the plays, and every one of those viewers, myself included, had the answer sitting eleven hundred dollars deep in an envelope none of us thought to ask about.

I did not sleep that night. I told myself it was the caffeine.

SESSION TWO

RENATA

She came through the curtain in a blazer she'd ironed for the occasion, and that, more than anything, was what caught in my chest before she'd even reached the stool.

Gamblers dress for their ruin the way addicts don't always bother to. There's a dignity they're still fighting to keep hold of, a story where they're still a person who irons blazers and shows up on time, and I think that's part of why the audience finds them harder to forgive than the addicts, not easier — the blazer looks like a lie. My gut did something different with Renata than it had with Cole. Not the recoil from visible ruin. Something colder: a kind of instinctive contempt, the specific human ugliness that rises up around a person who still looks, on the surface, like she should have known better. I felt that judgment arrive in me whole, unexamined, before the tablet, before a word — and I want to be honest that even after the drug went to work, some thin, stubborn filament of it never fully burned off.

She was fifty-one, still had the posture of a woman who used to run a front desk somewhere and run it well, and her hands, when she finally folded them in her lap, had the faint tremor of someone keeping a much larger shaking under a great deal of pressure.

Her father, she told me once we'd settled into it, had run a hardware store in a town too small to survive two of them, and had gambled the inventory credit against a horse he was certain about the autumn Renata turned eleven. She remembered the shelves going bare a little at a time over the following winter, not all at once, which she said was worse — a slow evacuation of stock, then services, then finally the building itself, and her mother taking over the books not because she wanted to but because someone had to, and doing it with a tight-lipped, joyless competence that Renata says she spent the next forty years both resenting and becoming. She told me she'd sworn, at twelve, watching her mother count out grocery money at the kitchen table twice to make sure it was right, that she would never be either of her parents — not her father's

appetite, not her mother's austerity — and she'd built a whole adult life, a career, a marriage that ended amicably, specifically engineered to avoid both. It held for twenty-six years. Then her mother had the stroke, and the caretaking landed on Renata the way caretaking always seems to land on the daughter who swore she'd never be needed for it, and something in her that she thought she'd successfully starved out woke up ravenous.

She'd lost her mother's house. Not gambled it directly; gambled the money that was supposed to keep it, then borrowed against it to chase the number that would fix the first loss, the way you bail water out of a boat with a cup that has a hole in it. She told me about standing at a blackjack table in Reno doing the arithmetic in her head — rent, insulin for her mother, the number on the felt — and choosing the felt, every time, not because she didn't love her mother but because the part of her brain that lit up at the possibility of doubling down had, by then, more voting power than the part that loved anybody.

I asked her, with the drug working in me like a low current, what it felt like in the second after she lost. She said: relief. Not the loss itself — the certainty of it. The bet was the only time in her week the future wasn't asking anything of her. It had already happened. She just had to find out what it was.

I felt that. God help me, I felt exactly that — a specific, chemical uncoiling in the chest, the muscles around the ribs letting go of a tension I hadn't consciously registered I was carrying, the way you feel after a decision is finally taken out of your hands entirely. It arrived with the felt itself, somehow — the drug pulling the whole sensory register of the memory through with the feeling, so that for a few seconds I could smell recycled casino air and the specific ozone tang of a shuffling machine, could feel the particular vertigo of fluorescent light with no clock anywhere in the room to argue against it, a building engineered from the studs out to make a person forget that time is passing and that the losses are compounding. Underneath the relief there was something else, arriving a half-beat later the way true feelings do, hiding behind the first, easier one: a bottomless, humming dread, present in the body at all times whether she was winning or losing, that never fully

receded, only paused, and I understood that the relief she'd described to me was not the absence of that dread. It was dread's only known anesthetic, purchased new every ninety seconds at whatever the table minimum happened to be. It terrified me more than Cole's grief had, because Cole's pain had a villain — a stepfather, a system, a drug that hijacks a brain against its will — and Renata's had none that would hold up in a courtroom. She had walked into every one of her losses with her eyes open, iron in her blazer, and some jury in me that I did not know I still empaneled, drug or no drug, wanted to convict her for that. The tablet made me feel her hunger. It did not make me stop judging her for having it. I want to be honest about that, because it's the first crack in the thing I believed the pill could do, and I didn't understand yet how wide that crack would get.

She talked for a long time about her mother — a stroke survivor, half her face gone slack, still sharp enough behind the eyes to know exactly what her daughter was doing to the house they'd lived in for thirty-one years — and I assumed, the way the audience would assume, that her mother was the tragedy Renata had failed. It's the shape every one of these stories seems to want to take: an innocent, and the person who let the innocent down.

Her mother died eight months after we filmed. I found this out from a hospice chaplain who'd reached out to correct the record, gently, because he thought I deserved to know what I'd actually been looking at. The house Renata described losing to the bank — the one she talked about, in present tense, as though the fight to save it were still underway, still worth every bet — had been sold two years before I ever turned a camera on her. Her mother had signed off on the sale herself, clear-eyed, no dementia, no coercion, because the medical debt had already eaten past the equity and there was nothing left to save. Renata had known this. She had stood in the room when the papers were signed. What she had been chasing at every table since — the number that would fix it, the one more hand that would undo it — was not a house. The house was gone before the story she told me even starts. She was gambling, every night, to resurrect a version of her mother who still had a home to go back to, in a story where Renata hadn't yet failed to save it, because the

alternative was accepting that she'd had a mother, and a house, and thirty-one years, and none of it had needed rescuing in the first place — she'd simply run out of time with her, the ordinary way, the way that doesn't come with a number you can double down on.

Her video did worse than Cole's. Fewer views, colder comments. Junkies get sympathy nobody extends to gamblers, because a junkie's body betrays them in ways strangers can see — the track marks, the weight, the teeth — and a gambler's betrayal is invisible until the house is gone, and invisible wounds get called character flaws by people who've never had their own tested. I think about that comment section sometimes and wonder how many of the people writing junkie under Cole's video, or should have known better under Renata's, are also running some private, losing bet against a clock that already ran out, and calling it hope because the alternative is grief with nowhere left to send it.

SESSION THREE

VIC

Vic came through the curtain like she owned the room, which, in a way she made clear within the first ninety seconds, she believed every person eventually does the moment they agree to be looked at.

She was tall, precise, dressed in black — not costume leather, just well-tailored black, the kind of clothing that reads as armor rather than performance — and her presence did something to my gut that neither Cole's nor Renata's had. It wasn't disgust. It was a colder, more suspicious cousin of it: the specific unease of being in a room with someone who has spent eleven years professionally handling the thing your body is quietly terrified of, pain, consent, the exact edge where one becomes the other, and who handles it with more precision than most surgeons handle a scalpel. My stomach didn't turn from ruin. It turned from competence — from the sense that she could see, immediately and completely, every soft, controlled thing I kept hidden about my own body's relationship to hurt, and would not need to ask permission to notice it.

She ran a private dungeon out of a converted warehouse unit and had done, by her own count, close to nine thousand sessions in eleven years. I asked her, before we got into any of it, whether something had broken her to bring her to this work, because everyone asks that, and she laughed, not unkindly, and said no one asks a marathon runner what's broken in them that they need to hurt their knees for six hours on a Sunday.

Her own childhood, when I finally got it out of her, wasn't the wound the audience would have scripted for her either, though it wasn't nothing. She'd been a sick child — a connective tissue disorder that took years to diagnose properly, a decade of hospitals, a body that other people's hands were on constantly without her ever once being asked whether she wanted them there. Blood draws. Braces fitted and refitted. A surgery at nine that she remembers almost nothing of except the terror of the mask coming down over her face and no one explaining, in language she could

understand, what was about to happen to her or why. She told me the dungeon, when she thinks about it honestly, which she said she'd only recently allowed herself to do, is the opposite of that hospital. Every touch negotiated. Every procedure explained in advance, in exhaustive, almost bureaucratic detail, until the person on the table knows precisely what is coming and has said yes to it, specifically, out loud, with a word they chose themselves to mean stop. She built, as an adult, the exact infrastructure of control and consent that nine-year-old her had been denied in a hospital room, and she built it out of other people's pain because it was the only material she had ever been given enough of to work with.

What she gave me, for the first half hour, wasn't confession — she had nothing to confess, and kept telling me so with a patience that started to feel like grief of its own, the grief of being endlessly, gently disbelieved. What she gave me was the architecture of trust it takes to hurt someone on purpose and have them thank you for it afterward.

She told me about her clients the way another professional might describe a caseload, and I want to set down what she told me as close to whole as I can remember it, because I think the audience needs the specifics to understand what the drug did to me in that chair.

There was a surgeon, a woman in her fifties, who came twice a month to be strapped to a table and made to hold absolutely still while Vic drew a single, shallow, deliberate line down the inside of her forearm with a scalpel blade — never deep enough to need more than a butterfly closure, always in a different spot, always photographed and logged for her own records the way Vic logs everything. The surgeon had explained it to Vic once, unprompted, the way people explain themselves to the person who is about to hurt them: that she spent her working life being the one who cuts, always in control, always the source of the pain rather than the recipient of it, and that once a month she needed, badly, to be on the other side of a blade she trusted completely, held by someone whose hands did not shake. I felt, secondhand, through Vic's telling and the drug's insistence that I feel it fully, the specific vertigo of that reversal — the strange, upside-down relief of surrendering the

one kind of control you have spent your entire life being praised for holding.

There was a man, mid-thirties, an accountant, who paid Vic to suspend him from the ceiling rig by hooks set through the skin of his back and shoulders — temporary piercings, done under sterile field, done by Vic herself with fifteen years of specific training behind her hands — and to leave him hanging there, alone in the room, lights dimmed, for up to forty minutes at a stretch, while she watched on a monitor from the room next door for any sign of distress. He told her once, in the debrief afterward, that it was the only forty minutes of his week he could stop performing competence for anyone, because his body was too busy screaming to let his mind do anything but exist inside it, and that the scream, paradoxically, was the closest thing to silence he had found since he was a boy. I felt the specific, twinned sensation of that — the fire of skin stretched taut around steel, and underneath the fire, a terrible, blooming quiet, the mind finally going still because the body had commandeered every resource it had. I have never felt anything more purely contradictory in my life, before or since: agony functioning, in that moment, as the only working definition of peace a particular kind of exhausted man had left available to him.

There was a woman, a hospital administrator in her forties, who came once a season to be bound into a fiberglass cast Vic built fresh around her each time, encasing her from collarbone to fingertips in a rigid shell that took the better part of an hour to set, and then to be left, sightless under a hood, for as long as her body could stand it — the record, Vic said, was ninety minutes, at the far outer edge of what either of them considered safe. She told Vic, once, that the panic always arrived on schedule at around minute twelve — a full-body scream with nowhere to go, every muscle straining uselessly against a shell that did not move, sweat pooling with nowhere to evaporate to, the specific claustrophobia of a body discovering it has no vote in what happens to it next — and that she needed the panic to arrive, needed to sit inside it without being able to bargain her way out early, because it was the only place left in her life where she was allowed to be that afraid and have someone else be responsible for deciding when it ended. Vic described

monitoring her the entire time through a gap left deliberately at the base of the throat, watching color and breath rate the way a nurse watches a monitor, and I felt, borrowed whole into my own chest, the exact texture of that fear — the itching that becomes agony because it cannot be reached, the mind's slow, involuntary surrender when the body finally accepts that struggle is producing nothing, a surrender that arrived in me as something horribly close to relief, which frightened me more than the panic had.

There was a man who came for what Vic and her regulars call the wax work, though what she described bore almost no resemblance to the word's soft connotations. She built the heat in stages across the better part of a session — candle wax first, dropped from a careful, calibrated height onto skin mapped out in advance like a canvas, cooling to a brittle shell within seconds, and then, only after an hour of that, at a threshold negotiated weeks in advance and never once improvised, something closer to true burn play, controlled, brief, exact, leaving behind small, precise blisters that she treated afterward with the unhurried competence of a burn nurse, gauze and silvadene and a patience that had nothing performative left in it by that point in the night. He told her, in the debrief, that the pain arrived in a register nothing else in his life could reach — sharp, total, and then gone, replaced within seconds by an ache so clean it felt like being emptied out, and that the emptying was the entire point, a body that had spent a week accumulating static finally allowed to discharge all of it into something small and specific and survivable. I felt the wax land — not metaphorically, the drug did not deal in metaphor, it dealt in the thing itself — a bright, total flare that bloomed and then receded into something almost gentle, an ache with a shape to it, and underneath the pain a bottomless, aching gratitude that had nothing to do with pleasure and everything to do with finally, finally being handed a hurt that made sense, that had an edge, that would heal.

There was, once, a client who wanted something permanent. Vic told me this one carefully, watching my face the way she'd clearly learned to watch a face for the specific flinch that means a listener is about to stop listening and start judging instead. He was a

veteran, mid-forties, who had lost three men from his unit in a single afternoon overseas and carried, in his own account, no visible scar for any of it — nothing on his skin that matched the size of what he was carrying inside him, and he told Vic that the mismatch itself had become its own kind of torment, a grief with no physical address, invisible to every stranger who looked at him and saw an ordinary man in an ordinary jacket. What he wanted, negotiated over four separate consultations before Vic would even consider it, discussed with a physician she brought in specifically to consult on aftercare and risk, was a brand — a small, precise mark burned into the skin below his collarbone with a heated medical-grade tool, cauterizing as it went, in a shape he'd designed himself and refused to explain to her. She described the smell first, because she said it was always the smell that hit people hardest in the telling, worse than the sound: a specific, unmistakable char, sweetish and wrong, the smell of a body being marked rather than merely hurt, cooking for the half-second the metal made contact before she pulled it back on the count she and the physician had rehearsed in advance to the tenth of a second. He didn't move. He'd trained his whole body not to, in a different context, for different stakes, and the training held. What broke, instead, was his breath — one long, ragged exhale that had clearly been held for longer than the burn itself lasted, followed by a silence in the room that Vic said outlasted anything else that had ever happened on her table, the two of them just standing there while a fresh scar cooled and set into something that would outlive them both. He wrote to her six months later to say it was the first time since he came home that a stranger's eyes had gone to a mark on him and asked what happened, rather than sliding past an ordinary man in an ordinary jacket carrying an extraordinary weight no one could see. I felt the burn arrive in me exactly as she described it — the half-second of total, white obliteration, and then, terrifyingly, almost immediately behind it, something that was not relief exactly but adjacent to it, a grief finally given a border, a place on a body where a stranger's eyes could land and, for once, ask the right question.

Vic told me, describing all of them, that she has come to think of what she does less as pain and more as translation — taking whatever chaotic, formless static a person is carrying and giving it

a shape precise enough to survive, a border it can bleed up against and then stop at, instead of the borderless, permanent aching most of her clients arrive with from every other direction in their lives. I asked her whether she ever worried the border wouldn't hold. She looked at me for a long moment before she answered, and something in her face changed, and I understood, before she said another word, that we had arrived at the reason she agreed to this interview at all.

Then, four years ago, there was Ellis.

Ellis was a contractor, a regular for two years by then, who knew the protocols better than some of Vic's newer clients. They'd done heavy impact work together a dozen times without incident — flogging, caning, work with a single-tail whip that Vic had trained on for the better part of a decade before she trusted her own aim enough to use it on a living person. That night he was distracted, she thinks now, by something outside the room — a divorce finalizing that week, though he hadn't said so at the time, hadn't said anything at all until it was already too late to matter — and somewhere in the scene his responses stopped matching what she was reading off him. She described the moment she realized it in language that has not left me since, clinical and unhurried, which made it worse rather than better: the exact half-second where the sound he was making crossed some threshold from performance into something involuntary and animal, a register she said she had heard maybe four times in eleven years and had never once mistaken for the other kind again after the first. By the time she got the restraints off him, his left forearm — raised instinctively, too late, in the universal shape of a person trying to protect their own face — had taken the full weight of a strike meant for a padded target that had shifted, in the low light, six inches out of position.

She described what she saw when the sleeve came off. A welt already rising thick and dark along the ulna, the skin gone tight and shining over it within minutes, the specific wrongness of a bruise that blooms too fast to be ordinary — a sign, she said, though neither of them understood it yet in that room, of something deeper than skin already breaking underneath. He didn't scream. That was the part she said she still hears, four years on: how quiet he went,

how his face did something almost polite, apologetic, as though the injury itself were an imposition he regretted causing her.

In the emergency room the forearm kept swelling past the point either of them had a word for. The attending pressed two fingers into the muscle above the wrist and Ellis's face went white and unreadable in a way it hadn't in the room where the strike had actually landed, and the attending said the word compartment before he said anything else, and Vic told me she had to look it up on her phone in the hallway, hands shaking too badly to type the word right the first two tries, to understand that the muscle itself was swelling inside a sheath that could not expand to make room for it, squeezing the blood vessels and the nerve running through it the way a fist squeezes a vein until the hand starts to go numb, except the fist here was Ellis's own body, and it did not know how to stop. They took him back for a fasciotomy before midnight — a long incision run the length of the forearm, left open rather than closed, packed and dressed and left to heal from the inside out over the following weeks, because closing it immediately risked the same crushing pressure building again beneath the stitches. Vic was not in the room for that part. She sat in a molded plastic chair in a hallway that smelled like antiseptic and bad coffee, in clothes she hadn't had time to change out of, and by the time the swelling had locked his fingers into a loose, useless curl the surgeon on call used the word permanent in the same breath as the word likely, and she did not let herself cry until she was alone in her car in the parking garage, because she'd decided, somewhere in that hallway, that she had not yet earned the right to comfort herself for what she'd done to him.

Two surgeries followed. A settlement neither of them has ever spoken about publicly. And a friendship, unbelievably, that survived it, because Ellis told the arbitrator, unprompted, that the failure had been mutual — his, for not calling out sooner, for burying a divorce under a scene instead of postponing it; hers, for not checking sooner, for trusting a read on his body that a decade of good sessions had made her lazy about re-verifying — and that he did not blame her the way the world outside that room would automatically assume he should.

I felt the weight of that hallway the way I have felt almost nothing else in the run of this show. It wasn't grief exactly, and it wasn't guilt, because neither of those words is precise enough for what moves through a person who has hurt someone by accident while doing something they still, structurally, believe was right to attempt at all. It was closer to a physical sensation of falling that never lands — my own hands, in that chair across from her, went cold and then hot and then cold again, a phantom echo of blood leaving a forearm it should never have left, and underneath that, the specific loneliness of sitting in a hospital hallway deciding, alone, that you are not allowed to grieve yet. I did not perform remorse for the camera, because Vic hadn't either. She had already done her grieving, alone, in the two years it took Ellis to get most of the feeling back in his hand, and what was left by the time she sat across from me was not guilt performed for absolution but a settled, permanent addition to the weight she now carried into every session afterward, checked and re-checked, protocols tightened past what any regulatory body required of her, because she had learned in the worst possible classroom what the actual cost of a door swinging shut for half a second can be.

I came out of that interview shaking, and not from disapproval. From the specific, bodily horror of understanding — really understanding, the way the drug forces you to — that care and catastrophe are not opposites in a room like hers. They live in the same square footage, negotiated by inches, and the difference between a session that heals a man and a session that maims him is not the presence or absence of violence. It is attention. It is the four seconds Vic didn't have, four years ago, in the dark.

What humbled me — and I use that word carefully, because it is the only honest one — was learning, near the end of the interview, that Ellis still comes to see her. Not for scenes. For coffee, twice a year, on the anniversary of the surgery, because he told her once that she was the only person who had ever hurt him and then stayed in the room afterward long enough to help him understand why he needed it in the first place, and that the leaving, when it eventually happens with people who hurt you by accident in ordinary life, is usually the wound that outlasts the original injury. Vic has spent eleven years

teaching men and women how to ask, precisely, for the specific pain they need and no more, and the worst night of her career taught her — taught both of them — that the asking is never as precise as anyone wants it to be, and that what people actually forgive, in the end, is rarely the wound. It's whether you stayed.

That video got the ugliest comments of the three that had aired by then. Not because the audience disagreed with anything she said. Because she hadn't cried on camera, and an audience conditioned by two prior weeks of Cole and Renata had learned to expect tears as the toll a person paid for being listened to, and Vic wouldn't pay it, and they punished her for the refusal with words I won't reproduce here.

I started taking a second tablet before bed those nights, not for any interview, just to keep the current running. I told myself that was for the show too. Research. I want you to notice, here, the shape of a man building himself an alibi in real time.

SESSION FOUR

MARISOL

Marisol came through the curtain in a hospital laundry uniform she hadn't had time to change out of, and the smell that arrived with her — industrial bleach, something faintly metallic underneath it — was the first thing that made my stomach turn, before I understood why.

I want to describe what I saw, because what I saw was almost nothing, and that was the horror of it. She wasn't visibly ruined the way Cole was. She wasn't performing composure the way Renata's ironed blazer performed it. She was a tired, ordinary woman in her thirties with kind, guarded eyes, who sat down on the stool and immediately arranged her body into a shape I didn't have language for yet — spine slightly forward, shoulders drawn in, one foot tucked behind the leg of the stool as though bracing to move fast if she needed to. It wasn't until much later, watching the footage back, that I understood what my gut had been reacting to before my conscious mind caught up: not her damage, but her vigilance. The specific, full-body alertness of a person whose nervous system has never fully believed the danger is over, dressed up, to a stranger's eye, as ordinary tiredness. She was the only subject who asked, before we started, whether the recording could be stopped at any point without explanation, and I told her yes, and meant it, and she held me to it twice.

She was thirty-four, worked the early shift at a hospital laundry, and had been out of the relationship for eleven years, which she said out loud like a number she checked every morning to make sure it was still true.

Her own childhood, when we got to it, explained more than she seemed to want it to. She grew up the oldest of three in a house where her father's hands did two completely different things depending on which room you found him in — gentle in the kitchen, murderous in the hallway — and she told me about a specific, recurring memory from when she was seven: hiding under the bed she shared with her sister, counting the ceiling tiles visible from

that angle, always arriving at the number fourteen no matter how many times she recounted them, using the counting the way some children use prayer, to survive a sound coming through the wall that she did not yet have words for and would not have words for, fully, for another twenty-five years. She said she left that house at eighteen certain of exactly one thing: that she would build a life nothing like it. She met the man who would become the father of her son two years later, and she told me, with a bleakness that the drug delivered into my own chest like a stone dropped from a height, that the thing about a pattern laid down that early in a body is that it doesn't announce itself when it comes looking for you again. It just feels, for a while, like love learning the shape of a room.

I want to tell you what the drug did to me in that room, because it is the only interview in the run of the show I still cannot fully describe without my hands doing something involuntary, and I am typing this at a table with both palms flat against the wood.

She started slow — the ordinary architecture of it, the kind that makes strangers say why didn't you just leave, as though leaving were a door and not a labyrinth built one plausible-sounding sentence at a time. The isolation that arrived disguised as devotion, the friends quietly priced out of her life one canceled dinner at a time until there was no one left to notice a bruise. The apology that always came fast enough to feel like proof of love, delivered with a specificity — the exact flowers, the exact restaurant from their first date, remembered with a devotion he never showed her sober — that made the whole cycle feel, for years, like evidence of how much he cared rather than evidence of how well he'd learned to manage her. Then the year it stopped being about apologies, and became about a hallway in a rented duplex, and a door with a lock installed on the outside instead of the inside, and I felt — this is the drug, this is Mercy doing exactly the unbearable thing it was built to do — I felt what it is to flinch from a footstep on a staircase for four straight years, the way the body outsources vigilance to itself so completely that the sound of your own name spoken gently becomes, physically, indistinguishable from a threat. My pulse, sitting across from her in that chair, climbed and stayed climbed for

the better part of twenty minutes, a low, thrumming alarm running under my sternum that had no object in the actual room to attach itself to, because it wasn't mine. It was hers, on loan, arriving eleven years late and exactly as loud as the day it was made.

She told me about the night she finally left, which I will not reproduce in the detail she gave it, except to say that the last thing that happened to her in that house happened in front of her son, who was four, and that the specific sound her son made from the hallway is a sound she says she still hears in ordinary silences — grocery stores, waiting rooms, the two seconds before a phone starts ringing — eleven years later, undiminished, exactly as loud as the night it happened. I sat there under the drug and the sound arrived in me too, secondhand, borrowed, and it was still one of the worst things I have ever felt in my life, and it was not even mine. It did not arrive as a memory, the way the rest of her testimony had. It arrived as a physical event, a compression in my chest so total that for three or four seconds I could not draw a full breath, and some part of me, watching myself from a small distance the way you do at the worst moments, understood that whatever this was, it was no longer a simulation of her pain. It had become, for those seconds, indistinguishable from my own.

And then, forty minutes in, the room went somewhere I was not prepared for, drug or no drug.

She told me that two years after she left, in a kitchen in a different city, in the ten seconds she has replayed more times than every other moment of those four years combined, her son — six by then, doing what six-year-olds do, refusing to put his shoes on, escalating the way small children escalate, with no memory at all, she is certain, of anything that happened in that duplex — pushed some old, cornered animal circuitry in her past its limit, and a version of her she does not recognize, has never been able to fully claim ownership of even in the retelling, took the next ten seconds away from her completely. She does not remember deciding to move. She remembers her own hand rising more than once. She remembers the specific, escalating pitch of her son's voice changing register, from protest to something else, something that should have stopped her sooner than it did and didn't, and then she remembers a gap —

real, total, clinical, the kind of gap she later learned trauma specialists have an actual name for — and coming back into her own body to find him on the floor with both arms thrown up over his face, a gesture she recognized immediately and completely, because it was her own, copied whole from a hallway in a different house, in a different decade, aimed now at her instead of at the man who had taught them both to make it. He had a bruise along one shoulder blade that took nine days to fully fade, and a smaller one on his forearm where he'd managed to block her, and she kept him home from school for two of those days and told the front office he had a stomach virus, and she has never once, in the nine years since, been able to look at that particular shade a healing bruise goes through — yellow at the edges, green underneath — without her whole body remembering the kitchen before her mind catches up to why. She told me this so quietly I had to lean toward the microphone to catch it, and then she looked at the lens instead of me, the way Cole had, the way people do when they've decided the camera is the only witness that won't flinch, and she said: I spent four years being the thing I understood better than anyone alive to be unforgivable, and then I became it, for ten seconds, in my own kitchen, to the only person I have ever loved without any complication in it at all.

I did not have a response prepared for that, drugged or not. Nothing in eleven months of interviews had built the shape in me that this needed. I sat there and felt, underneath the grief for the boy in the hallway, a second and entirely different grief — for the woman across from me, who had spent eleven years building an identity out of never becoming the thing that was done to her, and had discovered, in one ten-second lapse in a kitchen, that survival does not vaccinate a person against their own worst inheritance. It only teaches you, with total clarity, exactly how much it will cost you the one time it gets through. The two griefs did not sit side by side politely in my chest. They fought for the same room, the way I imagine they must fight for room in her, every single day, and I understood, feeling them collide in me, why she moves through the world the way she does — braced, watchful, one foot tucked behind the leg of every stool she has ever sat on since.

She has never hit him again. She told me about the therapist she found within the week, the group she still attends, the specific, deliberate architecture — Vic's word, though Marisol has never met her, and it startled me to hear the same term arrive unprompted from two people whose lives never touched — that she has built around herself since, so that the ten seconds in the kitchen can never again find a door left unwatched. At the time we filmed, her son was fifteen and did not know why she flinched sometimes when he raised his voice over something trivial, a video game, a curfew. She had decided not to tell him, not out of secrecy, she said, but because she did not want the story of what was done to her to become the explanation he reached for every time she was imperfect with him. She wanted to be allowed, eventually, to just be his mother, fallible in the ordinary ways, without the whole architecture of her survival hanging visibly over every disagreement.

That decision did not survive the interview. I reached out to her again three years after we filmed, for reasons that had nothing to do with the show, and she told me what happened after the episode aired. Her son was eighteen by then, a freshman two states away, and a classmate from their old neighborhood — someone with nothing behind it but idle cruelty — sent him the video with no context, just a link and the words isn't this your mom. He watched the whole thing alone in a dorm room before he called her, and when he did call, four hours later, near midnight, she said she answered already certain it was going to be the last conversation they had as mother and son in any shape that resembled what they'd built. He didn't yell. That was the part she said she still can't fully explain. He asked her, very quietly, whether the bruise on his shoulder blade when he was six — the one he had half-remembered his whole life as a fall off the porch steps, a story she'd given him that same year and he'd simply never had reason to question — was actually this. She told him the truth, all of it, the ten seconds and the nine days and the lie to the school office, with nothing softened, because she said she owed him the one thing she'd been withholding for a decade, which was his own history handed back to him whole.

There was a long silence on the line. Then he told her he remembered that bruise better than he remembered almost anything else from that entire year of his life, had always half-known there was a different story sitting underneath the one she'd given him, and that the not-knowing, it turned out, had cost him more over the years than the knowing did the night he finally got it. They talked until four in the morning. He came home for the following two holidays, which he had not done the year before. She told me, and I felt this arrive in me with none of the drug's help, because I wasn't on it for that call, that the relationship they have now is not the one she would have chosen to build. It is not free of the ten seconds and will never be free of them — he flinches sometimes himself now, in ways she recognizes exactly, and neither of them pretends that isn't its own kind of inheritance. But it is built, for the first time in either of their lives, on a true account of what happened between them rather than a merciful one, and she said, without much confidence that I could ever fully understand what she meant by it, that a true account is a harder floor to stand on than a merciful one, but it is the only kind that has ever actually held weight.

The video did the highest number of views of anything the show had produced to that point, and the comments were, for the first time, mostly gentle — grief, recognition, a hundred variations of I have never told anyone this happened to me too — until, inevitably, the second half of what she'd told me caught up with the algorithm, and a smaller, louder current turned on her for the ten seconds in the kitchen with a viciousness that made the comments under Cole's video look like a eulogy. I watched people who had wept, in the same thread, forty minutes earlier, over the hallway and the lock installed on the outside of the door, discover they had no architecture at all for holding a victim and a person who has caused harm in the same body at the same time, and I understood, reading it, that this was the whole disease the tablet was built to treat, and that the tablet alone was never going to be strong enough to treat it.

SESSION FIVE

M.

I'm not going to give you his name, even the one we used on the show, and I'm not going to describe him in enough detail that anyone could put a face to this page. What I will tell you, because it is true and because it matters to what my own gut did in that room, is that he was the least visually remarkable person who ever sat on that stool. No track marks. No ironed blazer performing a dignity under threat. Ordinary clothes, ordinary haircut, the kind of face that would not hold your attention for a second longer than it took to walk past him on the street — and it was precisely that ordinariness that made my stomach turn before he'd said a word, because some part of me had already understood, from the clinician's brief description on the phone the week before, what he was going to tell me, and the horror of an unremarkable face attached to that knowledge is a different, colder horror than anything Cole's ruined skin had produced in me. There was nowhere on him for the reflex to land. It had to sit in my own chest instead, with nothing external to blame it on.

He found me through a clinician who ran a voluntary support group for men living with a sexual attraction to children who had never acted on it and had organized their entire lives around never acting on it — men who called the group a fence, not a cure, because nothing in the literature promised a cure and none of them were fool enough to ask for one.

I took two tablets before he sat down. I am not proud of that. I told myself the dose was clinical necessity. It was fear, dressed up as diligence.

He was careful, when I asked about his own childhood, in a way none of the other seven were — not evasive, but precise, aware of exactly how much weight any detail he gave me would carry, and unwilling to hand me a tidy villain-origin story that would let either of us off the hook too easily. What he would say was this: that he grew up in a house where feeling was treated as a kind of weakness to be managed rather than a thing to be understood, where a closed

door meant a closed subject, and where he'd arrived, sometime in early adolescence, at an awareness of something in himself he had no language for and no safe person to bring it to. He was careful to tell me that plenty of people grow up in houses exactly like that and develop into every other kind of person imaginable, and that he did not want his testimony used, by me or by anyone watching, as a tidy explanation that let a stranger nod and file him away as caused, because the honest research, he said, has never settled on a clean cause for what he is, and he has spent nineteen years distrusting anyone — including himself — who claims to have found one.

He offered me one memory, though, not as an explanation but as what he called, with a precision that told me he'd chosen the word carefully in advance, an origin — not of the thing itself, he said again, but of the discipline he eventually built around it. He was seven.

His father ran a crew at the plant outside town, and once a year the crew and their families came to the house for a cookout that spilled into the living room by evening, men in undershirts, a ballgame on with the sound turned up over the noise of everyone talking, the specific thick, beer-and-charcoal air of a room that had already decided what kind of afternoon it was going to be. He'd spent that whole summer teaching himself, alone in his room, how to carve — a pocketknife his grandfather had given him, scrap pine from the garage — and had finished, that morning, a small bird mid-flight, wings back, every feather he could manage worked into the wood with a patience that had nothing to do with being seven. He walked it straight into the living room, past every adult leg, and held it up in front of the television, blocking the game, and said, to the whole room and to his father specifically, look what I made.

The room went quiet in a way that had nothing to do with the game. Nobody laughed. Nobody said anything at all for what he remembers as a very long time, men looking at their beers, at the floor, anywhere but at a seven-year-old boy holding up something small and careful and finished, in a room that had no place prepared for small and careful and finished, and his father's face did something he had never seen it do before, went a color he didn't have a word for yet and has since learned to call heart-attack red,

and said, in a voice pitched for the room rather than for his son, that's not what boys do, put it away, in a tone that made every man in that living room quietly, permanently grateful it hadn't been their kid. The belt came later that night, upstairs, where the noise of it wouldn't reach the last of the guests still finishing their beers on the porch, and he told me the specific detail he has never been able to shake in twenty years of turning the memory over is not the belt itself but the silence in the room before it — the exact, collective relief of a dozen grown men deciding, without a word passing between them, to look away from a child rather than say a single thing in his defense.

What he built out of that afternoon, he told me, wasn't the thing the audience will assume it was. It wasn't shame about the bird, or about carving, or about being a boy who noticed feathers — he carves still, he told me, has never once let that get taken from him twice. What he built was a permanent, hypervigilant fluency in the half-second before a room decides what it's about to see. He learned, at seven, with his own father's face as the proof, that the gap between an impulse rising up in you and that impulse becoming visible to a room is the only gap in the world worth mastering, because everything that happens after visibility is out of your hands entirely. He said that skill — ugly in its origin, beaten into him by a man who never once apologized for it — is the exact skill that has kept nineteen years of architecture standing when nothing else in the literature promised him it would. He was careful, again, to tell me not to make the mistake of thinking that skill explains what it was built to contain. A boy can be taught, badly and violently, to watch a threshold that closely, he said, and grow up to become almost anyone at all. What that particular boy grew up to have to watch was simply, unluckily, harder than most.

I felt that afternoon land in me whole — the specific, total-body dread of a child watching an adult's face change color in real time, the exact physics of a room's silence pressing down on a small chest before the first word of punishment has even been said. And underneath it, disturbingly, I felt something else: the birth, live, of the exact vigilance I had spent the whole hour admiring in him. It did not excuse anything. He would not have let it, and I did not

either. But I understood, feeling it arrive, that the same four seconds a room takes to decide whether to protect a child or abandon him can apparently manufacture, in the right unlucky body, either a wound that closes or a wound that spends the rest of its life teaching the person who carries it exactly how not to be caught by a room again.

He talked for the better part of an hour about architecture — that word again, the third stranger to hand it to me unprompted, as though everyone doing the hardest kind of self-containment eventually arrives at the same metaphor on their own. Nineteen years of it, room by room: the job he'd chosen for its total absence of contact with children, the friendships he'd ended without explanation the moment a friend had a kid, the internet filters he paid a stranger to administer so that even he didn't have the password, the twice-monthly sessions with a therapist who was, he said, the only person on earth who knew the whole shape of him and hadn't left the room. He talked about the specific loneliness of having spent two decades proving a negative to nobody, because the only proof anyone would ever believe was the one thing he could never generate: certainty, delivered in advance, that he would never fail.

I felt it. God help me, I felt the exhaustion of that architecture the way I'd felt Cole's grief and Renata's hunger, a bone-deep fatigue that belonged to a man who had spent nineteen years holding a door shut with his whole body so that nothing on the other side of it could get out. It did not arrive as sympathy for the thing behind the door. It arrived as something narrower and, I think, more honest: an understanding, borrowed directly into my own nervous system, of what constant vigilance against yourself actually costs a body over two decades — the specific fatigue of a man who cannot ever, not once, not for an evening, put the weight down. There is a particular exhaustion, I learned sitting across from him, that belongs only to people who have made themselves their own full-time warden, and it does not clock out. It does not take holidays. It runs under every ordinary task of a day — grocery shopping, small talk with a coworker, the drive home — as a second, silent job that never once gets to feel finished, because the

sentence being served has no release date attached to it, only a commitment renewed, privately, every single morning, to a version of safety that only he will ever know he kept. I felt the specific loneliness of that renewal, made fresh and invisible every day for seven thousand days running, and it sat in my chest afterward like a stone I had not asked to be handed and could not, in good conscience, put down either. What the drug did not do — what I want to be completely honest with you it did not do — was make me forget what the door was holding back. I did not, for one second of that interview, stop being aware that I was sitting across from a man capable, by his own unflinching admission, of a harm I have no ability to make peace with in the abstract, and every fiber of the animal in me wanted to end the interview and never see him again.

What the drug gave me instead of forgiveness was something smaller and, I've come to think, more honest: the ability to hold both things at once without either one erasing the other. His suffering was real. It did not obligate me to absolve him of anything, and he never once asked me to.

Near the end, almost as an aside, he told me the thing he had not told the clinician who referred him, and had not, he said, told anyone in nineteen years. He had been a substitute teacher once, briefly, in his twenties, before any of the architecture existed — before he understood clearly what he was, only that something in him responded to being around children in a way he could not yet name and did not yet trust. He worked four months. He never touched a student, never came close, by his own account and by the account, later, of the district, which he had contacted eleven years afterward, anonymously at first, to ask whether any complaint had ever been filed against him. There had been none. But he quit anyway, abruptly, mid-semester, with no explanation to the school and a story to his family about a better opportunity elsewhere, because he had woken up one morning with a feeling he could not out-argue and understood, with a clarity that has organized every year since, that continuing to work near children while that feeling existed in him was a risk no version of his own self-control was entitled to take on other people's behalf. He has spent nineteen years since then building the rest of the fence around a decision he

made in a single morning, at twenty-six, before anyone told him to, before there was a clinician or a group or a word for what he was doing. He said he hoped the interview would make one father somewhere recognize the pattern in himself early enough to build the fence before he ever needed to test it, and that if it did that, he didn't need anyone watching to like him.

We never posted that one. I made the decision alone, at two in the morning, still lit up on Mercy, and I've turned the decision over every day since without landing anywhere solid. Not because I thought the audience couldn't handle it. Because I understood, watching the raw footage sober the next morning — no tablet, just coffee and daylight — that I hadn't fully trusted my own drugged compassion of the night before, and a man like that deserved a witness who trusted himself, and I was no longer sure I qualified. I paid him the appearance fee anyway. It felt like the only clean thing left to do.

SESSION SIX

WHITEY

Whitey came through the curtain smiling, and that, before anything else, is what turned my stomach — not ruin, not vigilance, but ease. He had the loose, sun-worn handsomeness of a man who has spent sixty-one years being liked, and he shook my hand before he sat down, unprompted, a warm, dry, confident grip, and said it was a pleasure, and meant it, and I felt something in me recoil from the sincerity of that meaning before I understood why.

By the time Whitey sat down across from me I was taking Mercy most mornings whether I had an interview scheduled or not, and my wife, Dana, had started leaving in the mornings before I woke up, which I told myself was her work schedule and which was, I understand now, the sound of a marriage ending in a key too quiet for me to hear over the noise in my own chest.

His own childhood, when I asked, he told with the same easy warmth he told everything, and it took me longer than it should have to notice how carefully rehearsed that warmth was. His father had run cons out of a Buick for most of Whitey's boyhood — small ones, church raffles rigged just enough, insurance claims padded by a receipt or two — and had brought Whitey along from the age of nine, not as an accomplice exactly, more as a prop: a well-dressed, well-mannered boy standing beside a well-dressed, well-mannered man made any story more believable to anyone deciding whether to trust it. Whitey told me, with something that was almost tenderness, about the specific pride he'd felt at eleven the first time his father let him deliver a line solo to a widow on a porch in Ohio, and how the woman's face softening toward him — toward the lie he was telling her, dressed up as a boy's good manners — had felt, at eleven, like the purest form of love he had ever been handed. When the drug pulled that porch into me, it did not arrive as memory so much as weather: the specific late-August humidity of an Ohio afternoon, a screen door's particular creak, and underneath the physical detail, a bloom of warmth so total and so undeserved that my own chest ached with the wanting of it, a hunger with no

bottom, and I understood in my own body, borrowed or not, exactly why an eleven-year-old boy would spend the rest of his life trying to manufacture that face doing that thing to him again, by any means the world would still let him get away with. He said he understood, saying it out loud to me for the first time in sixty years, that he had spent the rest of his life chasing that exact feeling: a stranger's face softening toward him, undeserved and total, the closest thing to unconditional love a boy raised in the back of a Buick had ever been offered, and he had simply never found a way to generate it that didn't involve taking something from the person generating it.

He had, by conservative estimate, done this to eleven women over three decades — befriend a widow, usually through church, usually within a year of her husband's death, and walk her savings out the door eighteen dollars at a time disguised as a loan he'd repay next Tuesday. He named four of them to me by first name, unprompted, the way another man might name old girlfriends, and I understood partway through that this wasn't confession either. It was inventory. He was proud of the work.

Here is where the drug and I finally parted ways, though I didn't know it yet. Mercy gave me his charm undiluted — the warmth in his voice was real, not performed, which was the whole secret of how he'd survived so long doing what he did, because a performed warmth runs out and his never did. I felt, sitting across from him, the specific pleasure he took in being liked, a genuine, glowing, almost childlike satisfaction every time a stranger's face did the thing his father had taught him to chase, and underneath that pleasure, running the whole time like a current beneath a current, I felt how thoroughly it had eaten every other organ in him that might once have registered another person's ruin as a cost. There was no fence in Whitey the way there'd been a fence in M. There was no war being fought behind his eyes. He had made, by every outward sign, a full and comfortable peace with harming people, and the drug, faithful to its only instruction, made me feel the comfort of that peace as intimately as I'd felt everyone else's suffering — a warm, low, contented hum where a conscience should have been standing guard, and I sat there feeling it fill me up like something poured, and understood that I had never once, in five

prior interviews, felt anything as purely, structurally frightening as another human being's genuine comfort with what he'd done.

I came out of that interview and, for the first time in the run of the show, threw up in the storefront bathroom, not from disgust at him but from the vertigo of realizing the chemical had no opinion about what it dissolved the door for. It let compassion through. It let a con man's serene self-forgiveness through with exactly the same ease, and I had spent a year telling myself I was administering something like medicine when I had in fact been administering a doorway with no lock on either side.

The truth about Whitey came out three weeks later, and it did not come from him. One of the four widows he'd named on camera reached out to the show — not to complain, which is what my producer braced for, but to ask, carefully, whether I knew that Whitey had been sending her two hundred dollars a month, by cashier's check, for the last three years, unsigned, with no note, from a P.O. box she'd eventually traced back to him after the second year out of sheer stubborn curiosity. She hadn't cashed a single one. She kept them in a shoebox, she said, not out of forgiveness, she was careful to make clear, but because destroying them felt like giving him something, and keeping them, uncashed, felt like the only leverage she had left in a story where he'd taken everything else. When I asked Whitey about it afterward, off camera, expecting some redemptive admission that would soften everything I'd felt in that room, he shrugged and said the checks weren't about her. They were, he said, the one bet he was still capable of losing on purpose — and he said it with the same serene, undamaged warmth he'd used to describe conning her in the first place, and I understood that I had been wrong to look for a fence in him at all. Whitey did not have Vic's protocols or Marisol's therapist or M.'s nineteen years of architecture. He had a shoebox of uncashed checks he could feel good about sending and a total, structural incapacity to let that feeling cost him anything more than two hundred dollars a month, and the drug, which had shown me real remorse in four other rooms that year, showed me in his that the two things — remorse and its performance — can share a face

so completely that even Mercy, dissolving every wall I had, could not tell me which one

I was looking at. I don't know to this day. I don't think Whitey knows either.

SESSION SEVEN

DEZ

Dez came through the curtain in a coat two sizes too big for him, borrowed or found rather than bought, and what turned my stomach before he'd said a word was how ordinary he still looked underneath it — a face that belonged, unmistakably, to a man who had spent most of his life not looking like this, which is its own specific, disorienting kind of wrong. Not the practiced ruin of years, the way Cole wore it. Something closer to a photograph left out in weather it was never designed for: the features all still basically intact, just faded and warping at the edges in a way that made it hard to look at him without doing the math on how recently he must have looked like anyone else standing in line at a grocery store.

He was forty-four, and eighteen months earlier he had been a shift supervisor at a regional distribution warehouse, a job he'd held for eleven years, the kind of steady, unglamorous competence that pays a mortgage and doesn't make anyone rich and doesn't, most people would have said, watching him run a floor of forty pickers for over a decade without incident, seem like the kind of life with a trapdoor built into it anywhere.

By the time Dez sat down across from me, Dana had stopped bothering to invent a work schedule to explain the mornings. She just left, quietly, before I was fully awake, and I lay there most days pretending to still be asleep so neither of us would have to find something to say about it. I was taking Mercy most mornings by then too, interview scheduled or not, and I understood, lying in that bed listening to her car pull out of the driveway, that I had gotten very good that year at being present for six strangers and absent for the one person who still lived in the house with me.

The trapdoor, when I asked him to walk me through it, took him less than a minute to describe, which he apologized for, as though a collapse this total should by rights require a longer story to explain it. He was driving home on a Friday, tired, nothing unusual about the day, when a driver cut him off hard enough to make him brake and lay on the horn, and the other driver, instead of driving on the

way strangers almost always do, pulled alongside him at the next light, rolled down the window, and started in on him — words Dez wouldn't repeat for the camera, aimed, he said, less at the driving and more at him personally, in a way that found some old, unrelated sore spot he hadn't known was still tender. He told me he had never, not once in forty-four years, hit another human being. He told me he still doesn't fully understand, turning it over on a folding cot most nights since, what happened in the ten seconds between the light going green and finding himself out of his car with his hand already moving. He remembers the specific give of the other man's cheekbone under his knuckles, a sensation he says he has never been able to un-feel, and then a windshield, and then, very quickly after that, sirens.

His own childhood offered nothing that would have predicted it, and he was almost defensive on the point, the way a man gets when he has spent a year and a half being asked, gently or not, to produce an explanation that makes the story make sense. He grew up steady, unremarkable, a father who worked at the same plant for thirty years and never once raised a hand to anybody, a mother who kept the house running without much drama in either direction. He told me he had always had a temper, technically — a door slammed here, a raised voice at a referee once, at his kid's rec league game, that he'd been mildly embarrassed about for a week afterward — but nothing that had ever once, in four decades, produced a consequence larger than an apology and a long drive to cool off. He said the specific horror of the last eighteen months has been learning that a temper like his, ordinary, survivable, the kind millions of people carry around their whole lives without it costing them anything, can apparently sit there completely inert for forty-four years and then meet, on one unlucky Friday, the one specific set of conditions — the one specific stranger, the one specific week, the one specific old wound the words happened to land on — that turns it into a felony.

I felt, when the tablet caught up with what he was describing, something I hadn't expected going into that chair: not the slow-built architecture of dread I'd felt with Marisol, accumulated over years, but a single, vertical drop, sudden and total, the floor of the world

going out from under a man mid-stride. It arrived in me almost like vertigo — a sickening, falling sensation with no ten seconds of warning attached to it at all, because there hadn't been any for him either. One moment a man with a mortgage and a supervisor badge and a kid's rec league game to yell too loud at. The next, a hand that didn't feel like it belonged to him anymore, and a stranger's face changing shape under it, and every subsequent domino already tipped and falling before he'd even finished registering what he'd done.

Out of everyone who sat in that chair that year, Dez is the one I have never fully been able to put down, and I've spent a long time trying to understand why, because his story is, on paper, the smallest of the eight — no needle, no dungeon, no nineteen years of architecture, just one Friday and one stranger and one set of hands that moved before the rest of him caught up. I think the answer is exactly that smallness. Cole's ruin took a childhood to build. Whitey's took a father and three decades of practice. Dez's took ten seconds, on a commute I have made myself a hundred times, in traffic that has made me every bit as unreasonably furious as it made him, on nights when I was tired in exactly the ordinary way he was tired. Sitting across from him, undiluted by any villain I could safely locate outside myself, I understood for the first time all year that the show had never actually been about the distance between me and the people in that chair. It had been about the size of the gap — a Friday, a stoplight, a stranger with the wrong thing to say — and how much smaller that gap is, for absolutely everyone, than anybody watching wants to believe on their way to work in the morning. I thought about Dana leaving before I woke up. I thought about how little separated the quiet, seven-months-and-counting collapse of my own marriage from the sudden, ten-second collapse of his entire life, except velocity, and I did not have an answer for why one of us got the version that could still, maybe, be walked back, and the other didn't.

The dominoes fell fast, and I want to lay them out exactly the way he did, because the speed is the whole point. The warehouse fired him within the month — not out of cruelty, he was careful to say, defending them almost, but because the assault charge violated a

conduct clause buried in a handbook nobody reads until the day it's the only page that matters, and because a company that moves other people's freight for a living cannot have a supervisor facing trial while sitting on the loading floor. The job loss meant missed mortgage payments, which meant a foreclosure notice inside of four months. His wife, who he says never once threatened to leave and whom he does not blame for what happened next, simply could not hold the house together alone on her income while also managing a husband cycling through court dates and a felony record now standing between him and every other warehouse job in the county, and the marriage did not end in a single dramatic rupture so much as it ran out of runway the same way the house had. There were no parents left to absorb any of it — his father had died four years earlier, his mother two years before that — and a younger sister he'd once been close to had drifted, over a decade of ordinary distance and different cities, into the kind of relationship that doesn't survive a phone call asking to sleep on someone's couch for a month. Friends, he said, were the fastest domino of all, and the one that still surprises him most: men he'd known for twenty years, coached softball with, found reasons, gently and without ever quite saying so, to stop returning calls, because a friend facing an assault charge is a specific, uncomfortable kind of liability that most people, he said without much bitterness, aren't equipped to carry and don't feel obligated to.

He couch-surfed for five weeks. Then the couches ran out. Then it was the car, until the car got repossessed along with everything else that had a loan attached to it, and then it was a shelter with a two-week cap and a waitlist behind it, and then, some nights, it was just wherever the weather made survivable.

I asked him, near the end, the question I suspect the audience would want asked most, the one the tablet made it possible for me to ask without my own voice doing something unkind on the way out: whether he thought about the man whose face he'd broken. He said every day. He said he'd written the man a letter from county, unanswered, and had not tried again since, not because he stopped wanting to but because a public defender had told him early on that any contact could complicate the case, and by the time the case

resolved into a plea and a suspended sentence, too much time had passed and he'd lost whatever nerve he'd had for reaching out at all, which he described, with a kind of flat, exhausted honesty, as its own second failure sitting on top of the first one.

I found out the rest of it four months later, from the public defender herself, who reached out to the show after the episode aired, careful and a little apologetic about breaching what she considered her own professional boundary to do it. The man Dez hit — a stranger, a name Dez had never learned beyond what appeared on the charging documents — had, in fact, written back. Twice. The letters had gone to Dez's last known address, the house that was already in foreclosure by the time they arrived, and had simply never reached him, sitting instead in a stack of forwarded mail an ex-wife eventually threw away without opening, assuming it was more court paperwork neither of them had the stomach to read. The man had not been angry, by the public defender's account. He'd broken his own hand once, years earlier, in a bar fight he was ashamed of, and said in his letter that he recognized something in the police report that read less like a monster and more like a bad ten seconds visited on an unlucky stranger, and that he held no interest in Dez serving more time than the plea already required. He had, at one point, even offered to write a character reference for the sentencing, an offer that never reached Dez in time to matter, filed away with the rest of the unread mail in a box that got left behind in a move nobody had the heart to sort through properly.

I sat with that fact longer than I sat with almost anything else that year. Somewhere in a landfill or a storage unit, two letters from the one man in the world with the standing to release Dez from the exact shame that was now keeping him from ever trying to rebuild anything, had gone unread, and the not-knowing had cost him as much as the assault itself, maybe more, because at least the assault had an ending. The not-knowing just kept going, indefinitely, every day he woke up on a cot still privately certain he was owed nothing but silence from the man he'd hurt, never once learning that the silence he was living inside of had never actually been the other man's choice.

Dez's episode did the highest number of views of anything the show ever produced, more than Marisol's, more than Cole's, and the comments were almost uniformly gentle in a way none of the others had ever managed for more than the first hour. I have never seen a comment section do what that one did: thousands of people, one after another, writing some version of that could have been my brother, that could have been me on the wrong Friday, I have a temper too and I got lucky. A few hundred of them organized themselves, without any prompting from the show, into an informal search — sharing his last known shelter, his description, a fund that grew past eleven thousand dollars within a week, people messaging the account at two in the morning asking how they could help find him and get it to him directly. I want to tell you that it worked. I have turned this next part over more than any other fact in this entire testimony, trying to find an angle that makes it easier to say, and there isn't one: by the time the episode went up, Dez had already been gone from every shelter and outreach list in the county for six weeks. The public defender didn't know where. The outreach coordinator who'd first connected us didn't know where. I drove to the last address anyone had for him myself, twice, and both times there was no one there who remembered his face. The single largest wave of unguarded, uncomplicated compassion the show ever produced arrived, in the end, at an empty patch of sidewalk, six weeks too late to find the one person it was for, and eleven thousand dollars sat untouched in an account with nowhere to send it, which is, I have come to think, the truest and most unbearable image this whole project ever produced of what feeling something for a stranger can and cannot actually do.

SESSION EIGHT

WALT

I have not told you yet that the man who came through the curtain for the eighth interview, thinner than I remembered, moving with the careful, deliberate slowness of a body that has learned not to trust its own balance, was my father, because I didn't tell the audience either, not until the final cut, and I want you to sit in the not-knowing the way they did, for exactly as long as I made them sit in it.

What my stomach did when he walked in was not the reflex I'd felt with the others. It was older than that, and it had nothing to do with strangers. It was also, I understood a beat too late, doing something my stomach had never had to do with him before, because I had never once, in twenty-six years, seen my father's body admit to being breakable. He'd always been a big man in my memory, oversized the way fathers are oversized to seven-year-olds and then just stay that way in the parts of the brain that never got the update. The man on the stool was not that man's size. His skin had a faint yellow cast under the key light that I clocked and immediately, deliberately, filed away to ask him about later, because some part of me already knew the answer and did not want it yet.

There is a specific afternoon I have never put in front of a camera, and I am only putting it in front of you now because I don't think the rest of this makes sense without it. I was seven. It was a Tuesday, because I remember it was not a weekend and I remember being annoyed that I had to go to school with the specific, petty annoyance of a child who doesn't yet know what he's about to lose the vocabulary to be annoyed about ever again. Walt was in the driveway with two duffel bags and the green truck running, and he crouched down to my height the way he did when he wanted me to remember something, and he told me he was going to go stay somewhere else for a while, and that it wasn't my fault, which is the sentence every child in that driveway hears and immediately understands to mean the opposite. I remember the specific sound

the truck made backing out — a catch in the engine on reverse that it had had for as long as I'd been alive, that I would recognize anywhere, that I have in fact heard twice since in other people's trucks in parking lots and both times had to sit in my car for a minute before I could drive. I remember my mother's hand landing on my shoulder from behind, and I remember, more than anything else about that day, that her hand did not shake. I have spent twenty-six years reading that steadiness as proof that she was the stronger one, the one who didn't break. It did not occur to me until I was thirty-three years old, sitting across from the man in that driveway on a cracked vinyl stool, that a hand doesn't shake when the thing happening in front of it isn't a surprise.

Walt left when I was seven. He resurfaced twice in the twenty-six years since — once at my grandmother's funeral, sober for the occasion and gone again by the wake, and once eleven years ago, asking to borrow money against a promise he broke inside of a month — but the twenty-six years were not a blank between those two appearances, and I made him fill in some of it for me, because I realized, listening to him summarize a quarter century in two sentences, that I had spent my whole life letting the gap stay a gap precisely so I wouldn't have to picture him inside it. He gave me three years in a town in the next state over, working intake at a tire plant under a supervisor who didn't ask questions, sober that whole stretch, he said, the longest run he ever managed, ended when the plant cut the night shift and took his reason for staying sober with it. He gave me a winter, later, that he only referred to as the shelter winter, delivered in a voice that had gone flat in a way nothing else in the interview had, and did not elaborate on beyond the fact that it was the winter he stopped believing he was owed anything better than what he'd get. He gave me a stretch of some years he genuinely could not fully account for in order, which he said was its own kind of confession, worse in a way than any specific bad year — a life with whole seasons gone soft and interchangeable, the way Cole had described his own blur of couches, and I understood, hearing my father describe his life in the same structural shape as a twenty-nine-year-old stranger's, that the show had been quietly rhyming with itself in ways I hadn't let myself notice until it landed in my own family.

I found him this last time through the same outreach worker who'd connected me with Cole, in a transitional housing unit two miles from the storefront, and I did not tell him who I was until the camera was already rolling, because some ungenerous, unhealed part of me wanted to watch his face do the math in real time, on tape, where he couldn't take it back.

I did not take the tablet. I want that on the record plainly, but I also want to be honest about what not taking it actually felt like, because it was not a clean, virtuous abstinence. I stood in the storefront bathroom with the little foil sleeve of pills in my hand — the new batch, Petra's corrected formula, tested clean, the real thing this time if I wanted it — and I wanted it badly, the way you want a hand to hold before a diagnosis. I put it back in my pocket anyway and walked out and sat down across from my father with nothing in my blood but twenty-six years and a bad night's sleep, and I want you to know that I reached into that pocket four separate times over the next hour, my fingers actually closing around the foil once, during the part about the shelter winter, before I made myself let go of it. I told myself I was doing it for the integrity of the footage, that a viewer deserved to know at least one of these rooms happened at ordinary human speed. The truer reason was that some part of me understood, even then, that if I felt this particular hour secondhand and chemical instead of firsthand and raw, I would never fully trust afterward that any of it had actually happened to me.

He told me the story I expected, at first, told the way a man tells a story he's rehearsed alone in a room for years, smoothing the same edges every time. The drinking, which started, he said, the way it starts for a lot of men, as something social that stopped noticing when it had stopped being social. Then, when I asked him to stop summarizing and just tell me about one night, he gave me one: three years into the marriage, a work party he hadn't wanted to leave, a decision made in a parking lot that took him four seconds and cost him, eventually, everything, though he didn't know that yet at the time. He'd driven home the wrong way down a one-way street two blocks from our house, going maybe fifteen miles an hour, slow enough that nothing happened, no other car, no child in

a crosswalk, nothing but a patrol car already sitting at the corner. He said the specific horror of it, turning it over for thirty years since, was how survivable it had been — no crash, no injury, nothing to point to and say here, this is the proof of how bad it was — just a slow, sloppy drift down the wrong side of an empty street that could have ended in nothing at all, and very nearly did, which he said was almost worse than if it had ended in something, because nothing ever forced him to fully reckon with what the next time might cost until there were a great many next times behind him and no more slow, forgiving streets left to absorb them. The two DUIs came after that, further apart than people assume, with long stretches of trying in between that he did not want minimized into a straight line down. The specific shame that curdled into distance because distance was easier to survive than the daily evidence of his own failure sitting at the breakfast table waiting for a version of him that wasn't coming. His own father, he told me, unprompted, had been the same kind of absence in a different key — not a drinker, just gone, working a rig six weeks at a stretch and coming home a stranger for four days before leaving again — and Walt said he'd promised himself, watching his own mother wait by a window for a truck that took its time coming home, that he would never do that particular thing to a child of his own. He did a different thing instead. He said that with no self-pity at all, which somehow made it land harder than if he'd cried saying it.

He cried later, though, which Cole had not done and Vic had refused to do and which I watched happen on my father's face with a kind of clinical remove that frightened me more than anything Whitey had shown me, because I recognized in myself, undrugged, the exact door I'd spent a year believing a chemical could hold open. It was swinging shut. I could feel it swinging shut in real time, the animal circuitry doing what it had always done with him specifically, deciding before the words finished arriving that nothing he said this time would be different from the last two times, and I let it swing. I did not fight it.

It was somewhere in that stretch that he told me the rest of why now, why this year, why a stranger's storefront instead of one more decade of silence. The yellow cast under his skin had a name, it

turned out, and a timeline attached to it that his own doctor had given him in round numbers he clearly didn't fully believe yet himself. Months, not years. He said it the way he'd said everything else that hour, without asking for anything back for saying it, and I understood, hearing it, that every other thing he had told me that afternoon had been rehearsed specifically to be said once, correctly, before there wasn't time left to say it wrong and try again.

And then, near the end, he told me the thing I did not expect, the thing that no interview that year had prepared me to hear, because I had spent eleven months believing my father's absence was simple — a weak man choosing a bottle over a family, the ordinary shape of the story, the one I had built my entire adult self in opposition to. He told me that the year he left, my mother had asked him to. Not shouted him out in a single fight, the version I'd been told and had never once questioned; asked him, calmly, over the course of a bad winter, because she had already decided, before he ever packed a bag, that she could not build the life she needed for me inside a marriage to a man who was drinking the way he was drinking, and she believed — rightly, it turned out, for the first eleven years — that I would be better off with distance from him than with a front-row seat to his decline. He said he had let me believe, for twenty-six years, that the leaving had been entirely his failure, entirely his choice, because it was easier to carry the whole story himself than to let me carry any part of the truth that my mother, whom I had spent my whole life mourning as the parent who stayed, had been the one who decided he should go.

I sat there and felt nothing move in me at all for almost a full minute, which felt, at the time, like the drug's absence finally proving something true about my own capacity, some hard evidence that whatever I'd felt in seven other rooms that year had never really been mine to begin with. And then it moved. Not forgiveness — I want to be exact about this, because Mercy had taught me the one lesson worth keeping out of the whole ruined year, that hearing a person and absolving a person are not the same act, and pretending they are is its own kind of cruelty dressed up as grace. What moved in me was smaller than forgiveness and, I think now,

harder to manufacture with any chemical Petra could design in a kitchen: the understanding that the story I had used for twenty-six years to build a self that didn't need him had never been entirely true, and that a life built on an incomplete story is still, in the end, a life built on a story, and mine had just lost a load-bearing wall in front of a rolling camera with nowhere to go.

I want to try to name the sensation precisely, because it did not resemble grief and it did not resemble anger, though both of those were somewhere in the building. It felt structural — an actual, physical settling, like a house absorbing a shift in the foundation it stands on, walls that have held their shape for decades finding, without warning, that the ground underneath them has quietly moved. Every memory I had of my own childhood, every story I had privately told myself about who my mother was and who my father wasn't, had been built plumb and level against a foundation I had never once thought to question, because it had never occurred to me that the person who stayed might also be the one who decided, and that deciding is its own kind of leaving, dressed in the clothes of staying, invisible to a boy who only had eyes for the parent who walked out the door. I did not know, sitting in that chair, whether what I felt toward my mother in that moment was closer to grief or to a kind of furious, disoriented love, the two of them arriving so nearly on top of each other that I have never since been able to fully separate them back out.

Here is the last thing he said to me, off camera, after the crew had packed the lights: that he understood if I couldn't forgive him, and that he didn't need me to, he just wanted to have said the true things out loud to somebody once before one of us died. I told him I heard him. That was true. I did not tell him I forgave him, because I didn't, and I did not tell him I forgave my mother either, for a silence she kept for twenty-six years that had cost me more than she ever knew, or maybe knew exactly, and decided was still the better bargain.

I did not walk out of the room. That's the only mercy I had left to give him, and I gave it. I sat there past the end of the tape, past the point where anything either of us said could be used for anything, and I let him talk, undrugged, unaccelerated, at the ordinary human

speed at which one broken person is sometimes capable of staying in a room with another.

I called my mother two days later, which I had not done in any premeditated way for any of the previous seven interviews, because none of the previous seven had required it. I told her what Walt had told me. I want to say she confirmed it cleanly and let this section end there, tidy, the way I suspect part of you reading this wants it to end. She didn't. She confirmed the winter, the calm, the decision made before he packed a bag — all of it, without hesitation, in a voice that told me she had been braced for this call for twenty-six years and was almost relieved it had finally come. But she added a piece Walt either didn't know or hadn't told me, and I have never been able to fully decide which. Four years after he left, when I was eleven, she said, she had written to him once — a single letter, care of an address his own mother had passed along, asking, carefully, without promising anything, whether he had gotten sober enough that a supervised weekend with his son might be something to try. He never answered it. She assumed, for the next twenty-two years, that the silence was contempt, or indifference, or simply Walt being Walt, and had built her own quieter version of the same protective story I'd been building — a version where she had tried once, been refused, and owed the situation nothing further. When I asked Walt about it, the following week, over the phone, because I could not let it go unasked, he went quiet for long enough that I thought the call had dropped. He told me he remembered the letter. He told me he had been eleven months sober when it arrived, and eight days later, drunk again, and had thrown it away specifically so that he would not have to answer it from a version of himself he was already certain was temporary, because he could not stand the thought of promising his son a weekend and then being the reason it didn't happen. Two people, each holding half of the same silence, each certain the silence had been entirely the other's to break, for twenty-two years, over one letter that both of them, it turned out, had wanted to say yes to.

Walt died eleven weeks after we filmed. I was with him for the last four days of it, in a hospice unit with a window that looked out on a parking garage, and I did not bring a camera, and I did not tell the

show's audience anything about it until now. Going through the single duffel bag he had accumulated in that transitional housing unit — the whole material record, in the end, of a life — I found a shoebox, not unlike the one a widow three states away was keeping for entirely different reasons, containing eleven letters, spaced unevenly across the twenty-one years since the first one — some years skipped entirely, a couple of years doubled — each addressed to me, none of them stamped, none of them finished past a paragraph or two, drafts of an apology he apparently sat down to attempt and could never get past the first honest sentence of. The earliest one, dated the year I turned twelve, the year after my mother's letter reached him, started: I don't know how to say this so it doesn't sound like an excuse, because it isn't one. The most recent, dated four months before he sat down across from me on that stool, started: I think I might be running out of years to get this right, and then stopped, mid-sentence, the pen apparently set down and never picked back up. He had, in the end, said the true thing out loud instead, once, to my face, on tape, which is a braver version of the same eleven failed attempts, and I think about the math of that often — eleven failed tries spread across twenty-one years, against one hour of finally managing to say it, and what it actually took to close that particular gap.

THE CREST

Here is the thing I did not expect, and cannot fully explain, and have stopped trying to explain to Dana, or to Petra, or to the two doctors I eventually described it to, none of whom had a name for it that satisfied me. It happened later that night, alone, in the storefront, with the blackout curtains drawn and the tablets — the real ones, the corrected batch, still sealed — sitting untouched on the desk where I'd left them.

I was rewinding the Walt footage, just to check the audio levels, and something in me that had been closed for a year came open on its own, with no chemical anywhere in my blood, and everyone arrived at once.

I felt Cole's eleven hundred dollars, soft with tape, still short of the light bill some months. I felt the specific relief in Renata's chest in the half-second after the wheel stopped, the one honest peace she'd found in eleven years of grief with nowhere to send it. I felt the four seconds Vic didn't have in the dark, and the surgeon's forearm and the rig in the ceiling and the twice-a-year coffee that outlasted the wound it came from. I felt a hallway, and a lock on the wrong side of a door, and a mother's hand rising more than once in a kitchen, and the nine years of architecture she built afterward so it would never rise again, and a phone call at midnight that finally told her son the truth about a bruise he'd carried the wrong story about for a decade. I felt nineteen years of a fence built by a man who has never once needed anyone to call him good for it. I felt a shoebox of uncashed checks that even the man who sent them can't name the shape of. I felt ten seconds at a stoplight, and two unread letters sitting in a landfill somewhere with the power to have changed everything, and eleven thousand dollars collected by strangers for a man none of them could find in time. And I felt my father, crying in a folding chair two miles from where I sat, having finally said the true thing out loud to somebody before either of us died.

It did not arrive the way Mercy arrives — that had always been a current, low and steady, something poured into me from outside.

This was a flood let in through eight doors I had spent a year prying open one at a time, each of them still open, none of them ever really closed again, all of them finally emptying into the same room at once. My chest did the thing it used to do under the drug, that impossible expansion, like there was suddenly more room inside me than my body should be able to hold. My eyes did what Cole's hadn't, what Vic had refused to let hers do, what I had watched eight other faces do across a cracked vinyl chair for a year while some part of me stayed dry and busy taking notes. I sat alone in a dark studio and I wept for a long time, for all eight of them at once, and it did not feel like grief exactly, though grief was somewhere inside it. It felt like the particular, terrible relief of finally putting down something I had been carrying oddly, at an angle, for so long that I had forgotten there was a correct way to hold it.

I want to be precise about what this was, because it is the only claim in this entire testimony I am willing to make without hedging. It was not the drug. The drug was sealed on the desk three feet away the whole time. It was eight people who let me sit close enough, for long enough, to carry a piece of them out of that room, and it turns out a human being can hold eight pieces of eight strangers and one father, all at once, without any pharmacology at all — not comfortably, not without cost, but without a pill, which is the one thing eleven months of Mercy had convinced me was impossible. The high, if that is even the right word for it, was never manufactured. It had been accumulating the entire time, in the only place a real one can accumulate, which is the debt of actually having stayed.

We never posted that one either. Some things aren't content. I'm only telling you now because you've made it this far, which means you did the one thing the four hundred thousand people who watched Cole, and the smaller, colder crowd who watched Renata, and the smaller, colder crowd who watched Vic, and the larger, gentler, then suddenly vicious crowd who watched Marisol, and the audience who never got to see M., and the largest, gentlest crowd of all, the one that raised eleven thousand dollars for Dez and still couldn't find him in time, and the audience who never saw Whitey's shoebox or Walt or the flood that came after him, could not quite

manage to do on their own, without a chemical, without a camera, without me. You stayed in the room.

That was never the drug's trick. It was always just the choice, dressed up for a year in the costume of a pill, so that I wouldn't have to admit it had been available to me, unmedicated, the whole time — and available to you, too, on the other side of this page, the entire way through.

EPILOGUE

OLIVIA

This part isn't one of the eight. It never got a number, because by the time it happened the show had been dark for years and this wasn't testimony anymore. It was just my life. I'm putting it at the end anyway, because I don't think you're entitled to the version of me that stops at the flood in that dark studio, all cleaned up and finished learning. That man kept living. Here is what it cost him to keep proving the thing he'd just spent a year finding out.

Dana and I made it official a little under two years after the Walt episode went up, on terms so quiet the paperwork felt almost beside the point. Undercurrent itself stayed dark for five years after that same episode aired. Petra's corrected formula sat in a kitchen drawer the whole time, three sealed foil sleeves I never opened and never threw away either, which is its own kind of confession I still can't fully explain.

I came back to the storefront once, near enough to five years to the week, because an outreach worker I'd stayed loosely in touch with called about a woman named Sandy who'd been sleeping behind a laundromat for going on two years, and whose daughter had asked, more than once, whether the show still existed, because she wanted her mother's story told by someone who wouldn't flinch, and because, she told me afterward, she genuinely did not know any other way to make herself sit in a room with her mother for a full hour without walking out first. The daughter's name was Olivia. She was twenty-three, and she came into the storefront carrying a one-year-old on her hip, switching the baby from arm to arm the way you shift a weight you've stopped noticing is heavy, and she sat in the back the entire interview, close enough to reach her mother, far enough to leave, watching a woman she hadn't spoken to in three years try to explain, on camera, to a stranger, what the pills and then the years on the street had actually been about. I did not take the tablet. I hadn't taken one in five years, and some part of me understood, walking into that room, that I wasn't going to start again for this either.

Sandy's interview is its own story and not the one I'm telling here. What matters to this one is that Olivia stayed after the crew packed up, helping me coil cable I didn't need help coiling, and that I was thirty-eight years old and had not let anyone stand that close to me in longer than I wanted to admit, and that something in her — steady in a way that had nothing to do with her age, exhausted in a way that had everything to do with it — undid some knot in me I'd assumed was permanent. I want to be honest about the part of this I have never been able to fully make peace with, because the whole of this book has been an argument for honesty over mercy: I was fifteen years older than her, I had just spent an hour holding a mother's whole ruined life up to a camera the same way I'd once done it for strangers all through the worst year of my life, and I was, by any measure I'd spent a year teaching an audience to apply to strangers, exactly the kind of complicated, caretaking, power-lopsided situation I would have wanted to sit across from and understand rather than simply walk into. I walked into it anyway. I have never decided whether that makes me a hypocrite or just another ordinary person who understood a pattern perfectly in seven other people and still couldn't see it clearly in the mirror. Probably both. I don't think the book is honest if I pretend I resolved that question. I didn't.

What I can tell you is that it was good. A year in, then two — the specific arithmetic stopped mattering the way it does when a thing is working. I set her up in a condo two neighborhoods from mine, told myself and told her it was so she'd have stability while she finished her degree, and if some other, less flattering percentage of that decision was about needing to be needed in a shape I recognized and trusted, I didn't examine it closely enough at the time to say so honestly. We had dinner most Wednesdays, an ordinary, unremarkable ritual neither of us ever tired of, and if I couldn't make it I texted her from the studio, and she always answered within the hour, because that was who she was — steady, prompt, present, all the things Sandy's addiction had never once let Sandy be for her own daughter.

She was twenty-five and I was forty on the Wednesday it happened. I texted around six, the same text I'd sent a hundred Wednesdays

before it. No answer. I called twice over the next hour, telling myself it was nothing, a dead phone, a long bath, and I want you to notice that phrase, because I chose it without knowing yet how true it was going to turn out to be. I finished a cut I was in the middle of at the studio because some stubborn, undrugged part of me still didn't want to be the kind of man who panicked over an unanswered text, and then I drove over anyway, because a truer part of me already knew.

I opened the door with my own key. Her daughter was standing in the front hallway in a diaper that had clearly needed changing for longer than any child should have to sit in one, not crying anymore, just watching me with an expression I have no ability to describe and no wish to try. I called Olivia's name. I found her in the bathtub, under water gone cold and still, her face past pale, her lips a color I have spent every day since trying not to see again behind my own eyelids. I got her out. I don't remember deciding to. I remember my hands doing things hands do in that situation, and none of it mattering, because I understood before I finished pulling her onto the bathmat that she had been gone for the better part of a day, maybe two, and that nothing I did in that bathroom was going to be for her. It was only ever going to be for the version of me that couldn't survive having done nothing.

The girl I loved just fucking died. I can't make sense of it. I have read back over every other page of this testimony a dozen times, looking for the version of my own voice steady enough to carry that sentence with more dignity than that, and I can't find one, and I've stopped looking, because I think the sentence is more honest exactly as it landed the first time, badly, out loud, alone in a bathroom with a phone in my hand and a dial tone from 911 already ringing.

I want to tell you about the one time in seven years I opened the foil sleeve, because I don't think you're owed only the parts of this that flatter the argument I've spent a whole book making. It was the third night, I think, though the nights had stopped keeping their order by then. I was sitting on the floor of her closet holding a sweater I had no plan for and no ability to put down, and I took one of Petra's corrected tablets — the real formula, tested clean, the

batch I had never once used on the one person I most wanted to understand, because for two years I had told myself that not drugging my way into her was the single clean thing I'd carried out of that whole ruined show. I want to be honest about why I finally took it that night, sitting on her floor. Not curiosity. Not research, not any of the alibis I used to build for myself in that storefront. I took it because grief manufactures its own desperate logic out of nothing, and mine had decided that if I felt hard enough, in the right chemical key, some last piece of her might still be findable in that room, the way Cole's grief had been findable, the way Marisol's kitchen had been findable, four seconds late but findable, on tape, forever.

Nothing happened. I sat on that floor for the better part of an hour, waiting for a door to swing open that had never once been locked to begin with, and understood, with a clarity I have not been able to talk myself out of since, the one limit of that drug an entire year of testing it on strangers had somehow failed to teach me: Mercy needs a voice in the room, telling you something, live, in real time. It was never built to open a door with nobody left standing on the other side of it. I had spent two years quietly congratulating myself for never once using it on Olivia while she was alive, certain that restraint was the one evolved, clean thing I'd carried out of that year. I have had the time since that night on her floor to wonder whether it was actually protection I gave her, or whether it was the one door I left unopened at exactly the moment it might have shown me what she was hiding from me, right up until the Wednesday it stopped mattering whether I ever found out. I don't know which. I am no longer sure I'm entitled to the wound of not knowing, given whose death this story is actually supposed to be about.

It took a couple of days for the rest of it to come back, the way these things apparently always come back for me, after the fact, from strangers who feel they owe me the truth. The toxicology showed cocaine, and enough fentanyl mixed into it that the county was fairly confident she never knew the second thing was in her body at all — a bathtub, warm water, and a drug she thought she understood the size of, doing something to her heart rhythm that a body can sometimes absorb and sometimes can't. Hers couldn't,

and I learned three weeks later, from the medical examiner's office, that closing out the death investigation had required unsealing part of Olivia's adoption file, which listed a family medical history nobody had ever had reason to hand her while she was alive: three of her biological relatives, people she had never met and never would, had died of myocarditis before the age of forty, a genetic thread that had nothing to do with the drugs at all and everything to do with why the drugs, on that particular Wednesday, in that particular bathtub, were unsurvivable in a way they might not have been for someone else's heart. She spent her whole life not being allowed to know those three names. It took her dying to unseal them.

She had told me once, early on, unprompted, that she would never touch cocaine, because of her mom. I didn't ask which mother she meant, and I have never been able to decide, in the two years since, whether that was a kindness to myself or a failure of the exact discipline this whole book is supposed to be about. Sandy's addiction was the one Olivia grew up inside of, the one that put her in a stranger's storefront begging for an hour of honest attention. But Olivia was adopted at six weeks old, and had spent her whole life carrying a separate, wordless wound about the two people who were supposed to want her unconditionally and hadn't, a grief with no photograph attached to it, no name, no story she was ever given permission to ask about. I don't know which mother she was running from, or toward, in that bathtub. I have turned the question over more than any other in this entire testimony, and I have come to believe, against every instinct I have to resolve it into something I can carry more easily, that the question doesn't have a single answer, and that looking for one is its own kind of violence against how complicated she actually was. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, people like to say, as though that settles something. I don't think it settles anything. I think it just names the orchard and leaves you standing in it, still not knowing which tree.

Her daughter went to live with Sandy's sister, two states away, on the advice of a family court that had no legal reason to consider me anything but the boyfriend, which is what I was, technically, and what has never once felt like the true shape of what I was to either

of them. I send money I'm not sure ever reaches her directly. I get a photograph twice a year, at Christmas and on her birthday, from a great-aunt who has no obligation to keep sending them and does anyway, which I have come to understand is its own small, ongoing act of the exact thing this whole book was trying to describe — a stranger, choosing, for no reason she owes me, to stay in a kind of room with me a little longer than she has to.

I do not have a tidy ending for this part, and I am not going to manufacture one to make the last page of a book feel more finished than the year after Olivia died actually felt. I can tell you that the flood in that dark studio, the one I described to you as proof that a person can hold eight strangers and a father without any chemical at all, did not prepare me for this the way I wanted it to. It did not make this survivable in some deeper, wiser way. What it left me with, in the end, was smaller and, I think, more honest than the crest I described to you earlier in this testimony: not the ability to hold this loss without it costing me everything it has cost me, but the same discipline every single person in this testimony was quietly practicing the whole time, under the ruin, under the addiction, under the drugs and the dungeons and the ten-second losses of everything — the discipline of staying in the room anyway, one more day, for no better reason than that leaving has never once, for any of them, actually made the room disappear.

Daniel Voss runs a low-budget interview show out of a storefront studio. He gives a camera to the people most audiences flinch from — addicts, gamblers, con men, survivors, the unforgivable — and he has learned that the hardest part of the job is not the story. It is the door that swings shut in a listener the moment a stranger's shame walks into the room.

So he begins dosing himself before every sitting. Mercy collapses the gap between hearing a stranger's account and feeling it as his own.

Eight people sit in the chair across one year. A dying addict. A ruined gambler. A woman carrying the worst night of her working life. A mother who escaped one kind of violence and found another waiting inside herself. A man at war with an urge he has never acted on. A grifter entirely at peace. An ordinary man undone by ten seconds at a stoplight. And finally his own father.

Every confession has a second, harder truth underneath the first. The drug opens him wider than he can carry, and begins to cost him the one relationship it was never built to repair.

He thought a chemical could hold the door open. He was wrong about what the drug was for.



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